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The Colorful World of Student/Teacher Collaboration

On a bright morning in 1999 Sarah stopped by Denise's office excited about a new idea. Both of us had spent the school year exploring the use of constructive toys as aids in writing. We had formulated ways for students to fashion papers into tangible three-dimensional structures using Legos, Bright Builders, Zoobs, and other building sets. We had presented these techniques at conferences around the country and used them to explore our own composing processes. "I'm thinking of writing something about the toys," Sarah said. "Me too," said Denise. "Do you want to work together?" "Yeah, that sounds fun," Sarah responded. And so began a project that continues beyond the publication of this text.

We began by brainstorming connections among the toys, education, fun, and writing. Then we read about those topics while also writing about the various connections. Since Denise had actually already started an article, we decided that we'd each write a solo piece first and then collaborate on a longer, more theoretical article.

Denise: Nothing in my world is ever black and white. Or at least it hasn't been since I gave up black and white photography. In a black and white world, faculty publish, students don't. Faculty have the drive to read and write; students work only when there's a grade involved. Faculty present at conferences; students go to public lectures when assigned. Faculty teach students, never the other way around.

But I don't live in a black and white world. I write with my students, and we publish together. I offer them my knowledge, and they offer me fresh visions. I bring the food, and they bring the enthusiasm. In this colorful world, fun and writing and work and laughter all come together. Movie images replace black and white still photography.

Sarah Hochstetler graduated from GVSU this spring. She earned a B.A. in English with a minor in Psychology. Denise Stephenson is coordinator of the GVSU Writing Center.
Early on, Sarah sometimes had trouble producing much text. We discussed how to make this project fun and easy. She said the writing she enjoyed most was journaling, so I encouraged her to make this as much like that method as possible. I wanted to give her permission to write without anyone looking over her shoulder.

Some weeks when we'd meet, I wouldn't have accomplished what I'd set out for myself. I'd meet with Sarah and that week she'd have exceeded her writing goals. We'd read what she'd written, and I'd get excited by the new ideas she'd come up with. Then the moment she left, I'd sit down at the computer and write, write, write. Other weeks we'd switch roles. There was even at least one time when neither of us had been very productive apart. But when we got together we'd revise our goals so we could achieve them.

Sarah: My favorite part of the “Wizard of Oz” was when color was introduced. For half an hour Dorothy had lived in a black and white world. Then suddenly she opened the door to a whole new world of color. Imagine what it would be like if writers could open a similar door where they would be introduced to a world of new and colorful ideas.

Nobody had to push Dorothy through the door. But sometimes I felt like I had to be pushed to a greater variety of writing colors. My academic writing has always had one structure, one voice which was acceptable in my classes. But there's more than that to writing, and it took a summer of exploration for me to meander down the yellow brick road.

As I started, I had to face my fear of the unknown. Just like Dorothy, I was afraid. I had no guidelines for what was expected, what was “right.” It was almost as if Denise had given me permission to write in a different way. Now I could use sentence fragments for effect and put my thesis anywhere I pleased. I was given a new writing freedom. I owned it. I owned language and had the ability to manipulate it in a way that expressed me; no critical eyes looming over my shoulder, no red pen in the margin. I had been waiting for this chance, but now I wasn't sure what to do with my new writing privileges.
One of our best writing ideas was born out of circumstance. Living half an hour from each other in combination with busy summer schedules meant we were lucky to meet once a week. In our time together, we were busy working to combine writings and develop our project. Meeting to brainstorm was a rarity. As a solution, we maintained several ongoing conversations on paper. Each of us would write something new when apart and give it to the other when we met. That person would respond to the new writing before our next meeting and so on. This dialog gave us the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other, pose and answer questions and throw out random comments. Several of the concepts discussed through the dialogs became major components in our article.

The first step for me in exploring this world where almost anything goes, was to talk to Denise about my ideas. The first few attempts at writing were still following the standard “student” structure and voice. Denise suggested I try the methods I use when journaling. This slight reminder that I didn’t have a grade to perform for, or a pressing deadline, made the transition easy. Sarcasm and smart remarks were woven between anecdotes and supportive points. I was able to recognize myself in a new writing dimension. I had found a voice I was comfortable with, one that was less confining and more confident.

It was obvious from the start that the two of us had very different writing processes. Sarah tended to gather information and then write when there was a pressing deadline. I remember doing that as a student, but I gave it up long ago. For me, that was too black and white, too cut and dried. So I insisted that we write something individually each time we were apart. We’d leave each session with tasks: adding to something we’d started, developing a metaphor, trying an idea from a different angle, and of course, reading various materials. Many of those texts, however, remained isolated. It took weeks and weeks of work before we began to figure out which pieces were worthy of being stitched into our co-authored whole.
Early in the composition process, we sat down with the toys in an attempt to connect our writing. Of the pieces we had produced, many were small sections discussing divergent issues. We were frustrated with their lack of flow and uneven structure. Pens were put to rest and replaced with blocks. We each built what we saw as the main issue. Sarah used the kitchen table as a base and built upward with Legos. Soon the model had developed arms to symbolize the points extending from our experiences. Denise, working on the floor with flexible rods, developed a round design. Its interlocking structure illustrated the connections from our main focus to the varied ideas. The two of us came together with our separate structures and compared notes. Although different in size and shape, our creations shared a common focus.

Through playing with toys, we were able to clarify the flow, physical form and direction of our project. It was difficult at times to remember which draft was most current. And even harder to keep track of changes we'd made to the same draft when we were physically separate.

For Sarah, it was a new experience to have revision be a truly constant state. Ever-efficient, I was always on my way to throw old writings out. “Uh, excuse me. You weren’t going to toss that, were you?” Denise’s voice of experience would call from across the room. “Of course not,” I’d say, slinking guiltily back to the table. And why wouldn’t I toss that forty-eighth draft? Because each idea had the potential to add a new color to our article.

Denise and I already had forty-seven drafts of ideas, quotes, beginning paragraphs and other miscellaneous writings in a constant state of revision. Ever-efficient, I was always on my way to throw old writings out. “Uh, excuse me. You weren’t going to toss that, were you?” Denise’s voice of experience would call from across the room. “Of course not,” I’d say, slinking guiltily back to the table. And why wouldn’t I toss that forty-eighth draft? Because each idea had the potential to add a new color to our article.

I had heard this crazy rumor about a constant state of revision. I really witnessed it until I believe it anyway, when change were graded and tucked away. I never revised any of the drafts now, I was starting to see them could grow into new writing that wouldn’t be surprising if the co-authored article was the yellow sticky note under ‘revisions’ in Denise’s co-growing through revision.

Another idea we considered providing a feeling of mystique of topics and bring cohesion to hesitation, she smuggled toy tutors were exposed to the other voice did not become part of connections in our project.

One of the benefits of my obviously, this can be done faculty/student relationships I can’t predict, so the other hand, I seemed burden writing by instinct; I don’t know where we were going, just to trust the process. This called for a new process.

Having never participated writing, I had to exercise the way I never had. Part of providing each other with includes giving and receiving criticism, sharing ideas, coughing ideas, and so much interaction—an unique student/faculty. This called for a new process. I liked her opening paragraph inst. I had to give my opinion, mattering when she took or were simply two writers, ideas and working toward.
I had heard this crazy rumor that writing was in a constant state of revision, but had never really witnessed it until this project. How could I believe it anyway, when all of my class essays were graded and tucked away every semester? I never revised any of those old papers. But now, I was starting to see how old writing could grow into new writing. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the opening line of our co-authored article was found on a folded yellow sticky note under that growing pile of “revisions” in Denise's condo. Our writing was growing through revision.

Another idea we considered was that of a detective voice between main points of the article, providing a feeling of mystery and discovery. We used sleuth-like terms to emphasize the topics and bring cohesion to our two writing perspectives. Here's a brief sample: “Without hesitation, she smuggled toys into her university writing center. Within weeks, all fifty of her tutors were exposed to the contraband: Legos and Bright Builders.” Although the detective voice did not become part of the final draft, it helped us recognize the progression of ideas and connections in our project.

One of the benefits of my work with Sarah was that I had someone to talk things over with. Obviously, this can be done with a myriad of people. But there's something unique about a faculty/student relationship that develops new ideas, new connections. Because she is learning things I can't predict, she asks questions that lead to new ideas and connections. On the other hand, I seemed burdened with the responsibility of guiding the project. Yet, I develop my writing by instinct; I don't write outlines. My world isn't black and white. So it was hard to know where we were going. Sometimes I couldn't answer Sarah's questions. I had to ask her just to trust the process. That's sort of a mantra in writing, or any art form—trust the process.

Having never participated in co-authored writing, I had to exercise communication in a way I never had. Part of writing as a team is providing each other with feedback. This includes giving and receiving constructive criticism, sharing ideas, deciding the validity of those ideas, and so much more. What a situation—a unique student/faculty relationship. This called for a new perspective in receiving ideas from each other. To have Denise ask if I liked her opening paragraph was unnerving at first. I had to give my opinion and found it flattering when she took my advice. Soon, we were simply two writers, jamming with new ideas and working toward the same goal.
I was impressed by the energy that Sarah had for the project. Sometimes I’d feel like we just weren’t making progress, and I’d be tempted to throw in the towel; there was no outside entity forcing us to keep going. I’d ask Sarah if she wanted to keep at it and she always said yes. She’d talk about how much she was enjoying writing like this because there were fewer constraints. She’d say she was learning so much. She’d say this was fun. And then I’d have to agree with her—it was fun. On the days we were scheduled to meet I never woke up thinking, “Oh, no. I don’t want to do this.” I woke up and said, “Ok, what haven’t I read or written that I was supposed to?”

We’ve had one article apiece accepted for publication. We’ve also completed a co-authored piece currently undergoing even more revision. Though Sarah is now student teaching, we make time every week or two to get together for a few hours to continue this work we enjoy. We may not have found Oz, but we have created a colorful land of student/faculty writing.

We encourage other faculty/student writing collaborations. It yields far more than publications—it encourages new ideas; it changes drudgery into fun; it creates a rich learning environment. Perhaps we teach best by working side by side.

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Southern Prayer

Cold and washed, free of war,

Kosovo

Peace, no more,

Forgot the

Agnes

The hopes of our lives:

Alt Music

Many other

to have the love of