

**EXPANDING THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS
OF VARIED COLLABORATIVE LEARNING INITIATIVES**

**Research Grant Proposal
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I. Project Summary

Recently, in a classroom experiment in collaboration, linking two levels of composition courses (described below), I experienced significantly positive applied results. However, in investigating the theoretical underpinnings of my effort for a conference presentation at the Annual National Writing-Across-the Curriculum Conference, I “discovered a hole.” While, of course, I found extensive theoretical discussion within related “service learning” literature, I could not find an adequate articulation of the many connections I see between numerous theories of language and learning which I firmly believe inform this as well as other current collaborative initiatives. Thus, I believe that more research needs to be done on interdisciplinary-focused rhetorical and pedagogical theories in order to link them with the burgeoning collaborative initiatives evident in nearly all arenas, including both the academy and the workplace.

This research builds upon my dissertation and subsequent scholarship. My research has been focused on the intersection of language and learning theory – specifically, looking at the ways the study of rhetoric links to student learning and writing-centered student learning ultimately links to professional participation in a chosen field. Furthermore, I see potentials to enhance the EC mission of interweaving liberal arts education with professional preparation, which is essentially in itself a “collaborative model.”

Therefore, I am requesting grant support to further investigate the theoretical connections underlying growing collaborative initiatives in order to: 1) strengthen our understanding of their roots and potential value for improving the student learning experience and 2) to ultimately provide greater *substantiated* interest in the expansion of EC collaborative initiatives especially: WAC, service learning, linked courses, and interdisciplinary research and/or pedagogy.

II. Narrative

The subsequent narrative details the current situation, the project plan, my faculty expertise, and plans for dissemination.

Current Situation:

Interest in the value of collaboration continues to expand. Evidence is clear in varied workplace settings, within academia on campuses nationwide, and specifically on the EC campus

(note for instance: increased service learning programs, professional development expansion, and the recent establishment of the Interdisciplinary Clearinghouse). Indeed, at a recent conference I was struck by the insightful remarks of Carol Geary Schneider, current President of the American Association of University Professors. Dr. Schneider insists that if undergraduate learning is to succeed it must aim to be “collaborative, engaged, and reflective.” That belief, which I strongly embrace, is the *essence* of my research.

Last semester I experimented with course collaboration. Seeking peer support for my freshman composition students and practical experience for my “theory-focused” seniors, I decided to link my senior-level composition theory students with my first-year writers in mentoring relationships. The upper-level course entitled Composition Theory and Research (English 401) consisted of mainly secondary education English majors, but also included several communications majors and in fact, one pre-med major. The course was structured to include what I labeled a “service learning” component as part of the course requirements. Upper level students were matched with my first-year students and instructed to meet weekly to work on the freshman writing assignments. These tutoring sessions would address different aspects of the writing process from initial brainstorming or assignment conceptualization to various stages of drafting or revision. After providing some tutor training for the upper-level students, I strongly encouraged them to let the first-year students “set the agenda.” This “service learning” component, structured as an “internal” reciprocal and reflective project, proved extremely successful. Indeed, in the final reflective essays students wrote things like: “Let me thank you for providing us with this opportunity. I learned about what teaching is all about. Creating relationships, establishing a solid base, giving guidance Though meeting with our tutees presented problems at times, when we did meet, something just happened. I don’t really know what that ‘something’ is, but I know that the feelings it produced will last forever.”; “I received great enjoyment out of this entire experience. Not only did I realize that I have acquired a significant amount of knowledge in college, I also found out how to effectively share that knowledge with others utilizing the concepts that we learned in class.”; “I really thought that tutoring was such a great experience. I learned a lot about myself as an educator and as a writer. . . I am glad I had this experience and it really affirmed my desire to be a teacher.”

There were clearly positive outcomes, both academic and affective, on each side of these relationships. As I had hoped, with concentrated additional personal attention, my freshmen students gradually improved as writers, but perhaps more importantly, their *confidence* as writers improved. For some students, a supportive “peer partner,” proved invaluable. Significant relationships began to develop between the students; the first-year students repeatedly indicated

how much they valued the assistance from their mentors. Interestingly, the senior-level students seemed to benefit even more. Challenged to begin putting theory to practice, they found themselves struggling with numerous aspects of the daunting task of improving -- and empowering -- less experienced student writers. These mentors were forced to prioritize and forced to pay renewed attention to their *own* writing, as both process and product. My upper-level students repeatedly expressed excitement with this challenge, albeit it tinged with frustration at times. Clearly, they received a glimpse into their future as maturing writers, and their future as educators.

These positive student outcomes, especially for the seniors soon facing real world application of their studies, led me to return to the theories underlying collaborative learning. Service learning, and other popular collaborative initiatives, are most commonly linked to educational theorist John Dewey whose influential writings on “experiential education” during the 1930’s are definitely having a resurgence of interest today. Dewey argues that the key to learning necessarily involves *an interaction of knowledge and skills with experience*. While Dewey is most readily designated, I would also argue that there are clear theoretical links to several other major theoretical perspectives involving the social construction of knowledge, namely learning and language theories espoused by Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail Bakhtin, Belenky et al. and others.

Vygotsky, the early 20th c. Russian theorist whose work has gained so much attention within the fields of rhetoric, psychology, and education since their translation to English in the late 1970’s and 80s, insists upon the social “inter-psychological” (as opposed to intra-psychological) development of both thought and language – in other words, social exchange is crucial to the development of knowledge and indeed, social exchange **precedes internal** development of cognition. Vygotsky is well known in the literature of education for his popular ZOPED concept (the “zone of proximal development”) that posits that students learn best in a situation slightly ahead of their development when assisted by a more knowledgeable peer or expert. I certainly found that to be true in my collaborative experiment and certainly numerous other scenarios are possible to construct.

Though not often referred to in context of service learning, Bakhtin, another Russian theorist of the 20th century offers significant contributions to this discussion. Bakhtin, whose works have gained considerable critical acclaim in a variety of fields including literary criticism, psychology, rhetoric, and linguistics, emphasizes the *dialogic* nature of both language itself and of genuine learning. In other words, he insists that language and learning are (as he often says) “always and forever” involved in an interactive process similar to dialogue. We are constantly

building upon our own backgrounds, experiences, and socio-cultural, historical contexts in response to those of others and then creating “new knowledge” in the interaction. Bakhtin insists on the importance of students learning through the bridging of “personal discourse” and “academic discourse.” I firmly believe that my students experienced learning as that kind of negotiated bridge, an experience which theorist and cultural psychologist Jerome Bruner would label “scaffolding.”

Furthermore, I see theoretical links to the works of scholars interested in “ways of knowing.” Take for example, the extremely popular study of 1986 entitled *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* by Belenky, Tarule, Goldberger, and Clinchy. Belenky et al. established that the young women gradually progressed from more personally-centered stages of knowing to “connected” knowing and ultimately to “constructed” knowing through varied experiences which were specifically scaffolded, structured opportunities of exchange, reinforced through reflection. Their study was of some 100 women, though they strongly maintain that their findings are applicable to men as well. They chose to study women partly to counterbalance the extremely influential 1970 study of college men, conducted by William Perry on their “stages of learning,” which was projected to apply to all learners.

Beyond these theories, there are several significant connections in other disciplines as well. Rhetoric, by its very nature, is an extremely interdisciplinary field; discourse production and analysis in some sense knows no disciplinary boundaries, since it relates to all disciplinary knowledge. I believe, for instance, that there are theoretical links between collaborative learning initiatives and psychology-based studies such as Rogoff’s on “situated cognition” which posits that genuine comprehension occurs most readily and sustainably in contextualized usage. Similarly, there are links to sociologically and ethnographically-based studies such as Lave and Wenger’s studies of apprenticeship situations that investigate their notion of “legitimate peripheral participation.” In other words, active participation, “doing,” becomes the essence of bridging from a stage of fledgling knowledge to entering a level of professional participation in a field. Service learning and other collaborative initiatives can provide such opportunities.

Finally, I will further explore links between the theory of epistemic rhetoric and collaborative learning initiatives. Epistemic rhetoric, as discussed by contemporary rhetoricians James Berlin, Patricia Bizzell and others, maintains that language use and production are largely “knowledge-creating” as opposed to merely “knowledge-transmitting.” This is a significant area of rhetorical theory and its application that I strongly believe needs further investigation and articulation. This will be a major focus of my research.

(Note: I am attaching a list of references for my preliminary research on this project in Appendix A.)

Project Plan:

My overall goal is to clarify and expand connections between varied theories that underscore collaborative learning initiatives. I am particularly interested in linking Dewey's notions of experiential education with other significant rhetorical and pedagogical theories. I believe this can: 1) contribute to interdisciplinary scholarship, 2) help to build a stronger theoretical foundation to substantiate the value of a wide variety of collaborative potentials, and 3) stimulate discussion as to appropriate models for cross-curricular collaboration both intra and inter-departmentally and/or models of collaboration between EC and the community-at-large. This research is clearly an extension of my dissertation and subsequent research on language and learning theories of Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Belenky et al. and my related research on successful leaning strategies and on the phenomenon of academic enculturation, especially within interdisciplinary settings. (My dissertation involved theoretical explorations of academic enculturation and field-based case studies of anthropology majors who were learning how to write as anthropologists in their attempt to enter the anthropology profession.)

My strategy to fulfill these goals is to conduct detailed research on the most recent findings in rhetorical theory, especially epistemic rhetoric, which views language production and analysis as "knowledge-creating" rather than simply "knowledge-recording" or "knowledge-transmitting," *and* to conduct research in the theory of psychology-based "situated cognition" and sociology-based "apprenticeship theory." The major focus will then be to forge links between those interdisciplinary frames particularly as they relate to collaborative learning initiatives.

The intended plan outcome is the development of one or more journal publications to contribute to the scholarship of my field of rhetorical theory in the hopes of building a stronger theoretical foundation for collaborative activities. Furthermore, I hope to stimulate further interest in current EC collaborative initiatives and/or to expand conversations on future collaborative activities. I have already presented my own intra-departmental linked course experiment at the EC Faculty Women's Research Symposium and would be happy to share the particulars of this model for collaboration in other venues on campus. I have added my name to the database site of faculty for the recently established Interdisciplinary Clearinghouse and additionally, I hope to contribute to the expansion of collaborative WAC-focused activities by beginning discussions with the EC WAC Steering Committee to which I have been recently appointed.

Faculty Expertise:

I hold a Ph.D. in English with a concentration in Language, Literacy and Rhetoric from University of Illinois at Chicago. My coursework focused heavily on rhetorical theory and language and learning theories; my dissertation explored connections between theory and practice providing a theoretical synthesis and a case study of the role of writing in students' academic efforts to enter a professional field. College students are essentially academic apprentices attempting to appropriate the skills, assumptions, and mindsets of professionals within a given academic discipline. Research indicates that that bridging process is greatly enhanced by the use of writing.

I have presented my research at national conferences numerous times and have contributed to faculty development and in-service training on collaborative efforts such as Writing-in-the-Disciplines. I have long been interested in the "Writing Across the Curriculum"(WAC) movement which universities across the nation have embraced with increased fervor over the past two decades.

Plans for Evaluation and Dissemination:

I plan to submit my research findings to one (or more, if I determine ways to divide aspects of this research) of the peer-reviewed journals in my field such as: *Written Communication, College Composition and Communication, Language and Learning in the Disciplines, Rhetoric Review* and/or *Reflections*. As mentioned above, I have already presented my course experiment and suggestions of some of the theoretical bases for it at the National WAC Conference (held in Houston at Rice University earlier this month). I also plan to submit a proposal for presenting these results in the Theory and Practice Division of the 2003 Conference on College Composition and Communication, the largest annual national conference in my field.

I envision several possibilities for the potential extended outcome of providing stimulus for discussions of collaborative initiatives. As stated above, I have already presented my own intra-departmental linked course experiment at the EC Faculty Women's Research Symposium and would be happy to share the particulars of this model for collaboration in other venues on campus or beyond. I also plan to participate in the Interdisciplinary Clearinghouse project recently begun by Dr. Timothy Good. Furthermore, I hope to contribute to the expansion of collaborative WAC-focused activities by beginning discussions with the EC WAC Steering Committee to which I have been recently appointed.

III. Time Line

As indicated, I have already begun some of this research in preparing for my two recent conference presentations (on campus and in Houston). I will continue this research as time permits this spring term, but the majority of the research, that is the extensive reading and writing for publication, will be a summer project. I am not slated to teach summer school and thus, will have time to devote considerable blocks of time to this research during summer term. I plan to submit at least one article by the end of the summer. I will also submit the proposal for the CCCC session in March of 2003 this spring, as required, and will learn of acceptance or not in September. Finally, I believe there will be ongoing opportunities for sharing articulation of the broader theoretical connections underlying collaborative learning initiatives in my role as member of the EC WAC Steering Committee and as a participant in the Interdisciplinary Clearinghouse.

IV. Budget

I am requesting this \$3500 grant as faculty salary in order to further my scholarship efforts, particularly my publication efforts, as a new faculty member.

V. Current and Previous Grants

I was recently awarded a Faculty Development \$300 Travel Grant towards my attendance at the Annual National Writing-Across-the-Curriculum Conference in Houston in March 2002 where I presented the preliminaries of this research.

VI. Publications/Presentations

My most recent conference presentations are:

“Writers As Mentors, Mentors As Writers: A Glimpse of the Future,” Sixth Annual National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, Houston, 2002.

“Bridging Theory and Practice: A Model for Academic Collaboration,” Elmhurst College Women’s Research Symposium, Elmhurst, 2002.

“Launching a Communication Across the Curriculum Program in a College of Business Administration,” Fifth Annual National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference, Bloomington, Indiana, 2001.

“Business Communications: A Discourse Community Apprenticeship,” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chicago, 1998.

Appendix A: References

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