Introduction

Writing With: Toward New Identities for Students and Teachers

Thomas Fox, David Bleich, and Sally Barr Reagan

Recently, research on collaborative learning in the teaching of writing has begun to face and explore the complex ideologies that affect collaboration. It is no longer a simple matter to ''get into groups'' because the ideologies of belonging—those relating to gender, race, class, and individualism—emerge in ways that can no longer be ignored. The Reagan Era's retreat from social responsibility and its endorsement of androcentric values of individualism and competition has resulted in racial violence, increased rape and battery against women, violence against gays and lesbians, and the proliferation of homeless and jobless people. The right-wing attacks on education by Bennett, Hirsch, Bloom, Cheney, Kimball, D'Sousa, Paglia, and others single out as threats to American culture the collective and collaborative accomplishments of those who strive to make education more inclusive. The backlash against these accomplishments has been proceeding with sanctimonious enthusiasm.

Those of us persevering in the search for more inclusive schools and more generous social policies are facing social and interpersonal challenges and provocations unprecedented in classrooms until recently. The movements toward collectivist classroom practices have begun to change schools from staging areas for the fatuous pursuits of abstract truths, as wished for by Lynn Cheney in her recent ''official'' pamphlet, *Telling the Truth* (National Endowment for the Humanities, 1992) into sites where there is no choice but to admit the truth about hostilities and frustrations in society at large, and to do so in and through new teaching practices and curricula, and especially in the subjects of writing and language use.

The chapters in this book appear in this climate of opposition and tension. To one degree or another, they each open a discussion with other voices, some of opposition, some of support. These discussions necessarily engage and threaten individualist and androcentric values, historically embedded practices

of evaluation of both teachers and students, and classroom social relations that are based on hierarchies of position. We editors/authors of this volume, in our own teaching practices, are trying to face how these rejected values nevertheless continue to function in ourselves, how they persist in affecting our own professional lives as teachers, researchers, and students. While this move of self-inclusion is one main gesture of this collection of essays, we also seek to create a plausible rationale for social change through a realistically enlightened pedagogy, and that pedagogy requires a new orientation around collaboration.

A good portion of the struggle to account for the complexity that collaboration involves is the examination and revision of earlier models and metaphors for collaboration and the resulting attempt to contribute new terms and usages. Some authors, like Kennedy, Marback, and McManus and their students (Chapter 10) seek a metaphor—the orchestra—for both society and collaboration that reduces the violent connotations of "melting pot" and its assimilationist priorities. Victor Villanueva, Jr., (Chapter 8) argues that attention to the daily realities of many students' struggle for subsistence can reorient narrow academic emphases on orality vs. literacy, black vs. white. Susan Miller's "new discourse city" (Chapter 17) searches for a context in which no orthodoxies dominate, and all styles can, somehow, be at least temporarily admitted. Her argument questions the viability of the feel-good term "community" found in the thought styles of middle-class complacency. Similarly, Judith Rodby (Chapter 9) argues against the damaging ways that "community" functions normatively in ESL theory and pedagogy by borrowing Victor Turner's more temporary term "communitas" to describe the real dimensions of the classroom gatherings. Cooper, George, and Sanders (Chapter 2) use Sartre's term "fused group" to show how collaborative groups work in a context of political expediency. Fox (Chapter 7) and Bleich (Chapter 11) explore how collaboration means a new kind of extended work relationship among class members. These are all new efforts to create a language of collaboration that does not erase or minimize difference.

Most of the contributors to this volume refer to real, lived classroom situations to exemplify the challenges faced by collaborative efforts. These situations show that ideology is not a free-floating abstraction, but is something that saturates feeling and behavior. We see, for example, how Sally Barr Reagan's graduate student, Gail (Chapter 12), considers herself to be functioning in a meritocracy because of her assumption that in graduate school one must compete for scarce rewards such as the teacher's judgments of merit. In spite of the intensity of the course and its extended attention to the psychology of collaboration, it is not clear that Gail is persuaded about the advantages of considering her colleagues as new resources. Similarly, the violent competitive assumptions of Tom Fox's students (Chapter 7) suggest the long path ahead if they are ever to trust their colleagues in the school situation, much less in the real world where

relationships are more problematic. When Judith Rodby's student (Chapter 9) announces, "Missy, you are maestra," it signals what happens at the end of Rodby's account: the student returns to her out-of-school life apparently untouched even by the success of her experience. And Susan Miller's student (Chapter 17) thinks he cannot take the tropes of collaboration into the overwhelming "other" context of university life where "they grade on a curve" and "many fail so that I may succeed."

"They," the unidentified ones who grade on a curve, metonymically represent the institution. Since the majority of authors in this volume work in universities, it isn't surprising that many of us want to transform our workplaces so that they are more congenial to collaborative practices in research and writing, teaching, and program evaluation. The voice of existing institutional mores is so strong, however, that Thia Wolf (Chapter 6) feels she must ask her students to remain "suspicious" of her because she represents the institution even as she opposes its values. She feels she must insert into her procedures regular interrogations of her own behavior so that the students may continue to be eligible for the institution's certification even as they and she are in the process of trying to change the terms of that certification. Melanie Sperling (Chapter 14) studies how even the most highly respected and successful teacher cannot escape some of the traditional intrusive tropes of hierarchical teaching arrangements in his negotiations with junior high school girls in an English class. Judith Entes (Chapter 3) shows how her own attempt to enter the profession is marked by administrative advice to work alone that is radically at variance with professional research practice in her field. She shows how her institution adopts the ideology of individualism as a doctrine, but at the same time how this doctrine is discredited by the majority of researchers she examines and particularly by distinguished members in her field. Monseau, Gerlach, and McClure (Chapter 4) focus our attention on how, to both meet institutional standards and be true to their own purposes, they must mobilize close interpersonal relationships toward a new role in their professional lives, and how this mobilization creates new subject matters. They give an account of how the "missing chapters" of women's continuing but hitherto unnoticed contributions are inserted into the history of the National Council of Teachers of English. But they also show that sustaining the feminist sense of "connectedness" was very difficult because institutionally (and discipline-based) writing routines seemed to require distance and hierarchy, especially in response and revision.

Several essays in this volume address how the meritocracy, driven by the grading system, works against our tendencies toward collaboration. In addition to Susan Miller's essay (Chapter 17) citing her student's orientation toward "grading on a curve" and to Sally Barr Reagan's essay (Chapter 12) describing Gail's reliance on competition, Deborah Holdstein's essay (Chapter 5) explores

some of the deeper roots of the grading system. She describes the split between administrative behavior and pedagogical standards. She discusses how administrators of university and college writing programs allow competitive testing and quantitative grading to override the ways of teaching literacy. She further observes that they try to justify their meddling with false uses of collaboration, teamwork, or consensus-building in establishing writing standards. Overall, they use the false gestures of collaboration to conceal their monolithic control of the teaching of writing and literacy, regardless of the objections made by teachers, or of their attempts to govern the certification processes in their own subject matters.

The existing social alignment of educational practices, conventions, and habits with the social forces of sexism, racism, and elitism always hinders collaborative initiatives. However, several contributors offer instances that give the shape of collaborative classroom events in the face of these oppositions. Rebecca Bell-Metereau's essay (Chapter 15) describes a combination of student-administered meritocracy with a curriculum that leads students out of the classroom to study living institutions in society. When meritocratic techniques function on a peer-basis outside the classroom, they are, in part, more directly answerable to the task at hand rather to institutionalized authority. Cooper, George, and Sander's essay (Chapter 2) similarly dramatizes how stepping outside the university community can teach what collaboration means and does. Jane Zeni's instance (Chapter 13), perhaps in contrast to the situations presented by Melanie Sperling (Chapter 14), suggests that when young students are ''released'' to one another, their capacity for intiative is also released and they achieve an increased sophistication in their writing. Kennedy, Marback, and McManus (Chapter 10) bring out the laborious but nevertheless successful derivation of a new conceptualization of collaboration as a symphony orchestra rather than a melting pot. But especially noteworthy is the lack of a utopian character to this new metaphor: ''So the symphony metaphor works both ways for the students—it captures their differences and it explains their similarities—but they can't seem to make it do both simultaneously'' (171). David Bleich's students (Chapter 11) also stuck with one another to achieve a new mutual understanding and a new interpersonal candor, yet they also ended as much on the recognition of deep difference as on the agreement on common purpose. Similarly, Pamela Spoto and Mary Ann Latimer (Chapter 16) show that while a limited consensus often appears among collaborating students (the two twenty-somethings and one forty-something who are studying ''*thirtysomething*''), and while deep differences of perspective remain, the collaborative practice allowed students to experience more directly both the truth and falsehood of the concept of a cultural ''world view.'' The results of the foregoing essays, as well as the more conflictual situations described by Wolf (Chapter 6), Fox (Chapter 7), and Rodby

(Chapter 9), again point to Susan Miller's "urban" characterization of where collaboration may be leading.

As a whole, *Writing With* presents an argument for changing social and institutional conditions so that collaboration can be more regularly successful. Chief among them is an ongoing critique of individualism, competition, and the meritocracy that accompanies them in schools and universities, and the concurrent argument for changes in the ways that both students and faculty are evaluated. More democratic and dialogic ways of evaluation may go a long way towards encouraging participation of women and other disenfranchised constituencies at all levels of education. Changes in evaluation procedures are the most difficult to make. The system of grades and tenure decision making discourages real collaboration. Yet who makes these decisions? Most of the time, we do. This volume is as much intended as self-examination and self-critique as it is a critique of school and society. We want to disclose as much how we unconsciously "collaborate" with what we oppose as we collaborate with one another to encourage a new system of values across the board.

In this volume, we are declaring our own status as students, even as we are envisioning a new identity for teachers. We promote change in the nature of teaching and learning regardless of what mood we may hear in each voice or set of voices emerging in the following pages. In fact, we expect that the variety of moods can belong to groups of teachers of any persuasion. Consequently, the essays suggest not that collaboration is the new answer to the old patronizing questions of "why can't children learn" but that the *pedagogical paradigm of collaboration signals a changed sense of society*, no longer singular or monolithic, no longer functioning according to uniform values, but a sense in which perhaps for the first time, local differences of style, cultural and economic heritage, and individual circumstance can actually be honored, understood, and ameliorated if necessary by the recursive meetings of students and teachers in classrooms. We are trying to view collaboration as an *underlying orientation* that could help students and teachers create interpersonal contacts of such range and consequence that schools may become, in all parts of society, the sites of nurturance and cultivation hitherto expected only from privileged nuclear homes. Taken together, the essays in this volume suggest the plausibility of such a development.

Momentarily, a view from within: for us editors, working on this volume has brought the term collaboration to the brink of jargon, cliche, and ritual. On the one hand, we assembled a group of teachers and scholars that has pursued as a common interest a relatively new path in classroom political practice; on the other, the varying styles of individualism have created so many different voices of collaboration that it is hard to see if or how change is taking place. While there is a certain reassuring clarity in our efforts to "revise the

myth of the individual scholar'' there is also the effort by many of us to revise the false optimism sometimes associated with classroom collaboration: we may want to understand collaboration as more of a new reality than as a solution to old problems, and we may want to learn more to accept how we don't quite get along, how we may not like one another, how we find ourselves in the grip of forces, collective though they are, that overwhelm whatever community feeling we may create in our classrooms, and remind ourselves of the differences we are likely to find at the moment of contact with one another.

In this spirit of difference, we offer an unapologetic guide for the loose arrangement of chapters. As you can tell from this preface, we view the essays thematically, and therefore arrangeable in almost any way. The truth is we can't decide on some ''right'' way to arrange the essays, and we hardly wanted to pretend that we could concoct in some Platonic mode the idea of a volume of essays on collaboration and then actually expect to get just the right mix to match our idea. What we actually did was ask prospective contributors to engage all the issues we discussed in this preface and to try, if they could, to include instances of collaboration or the lack thereof from their own teaching, research, and administrative experience. For the most part this is what we have in this volume, but we do not see any transcendental order to this unusual collection of reports, commentaries, and reflections about collaborative work.

We believe that this collection, in its loose ends and ungainly elements, does represent what a ''community'' really is—something with a general focus, a general sense of purpose and orientation, a discernable role for all of its constituents, but something that has at least one ''open end,'' one main side or part without resolution or clarity, one sense in which the order cannot be discerned. Having said this, here is the rationale for the actual sequence of essays; hopefully, it will help you to get more quickly to those essays you prefer.

Patricia Sullivan's essay is first because it seems to strike the keynote of starting point for our collective feelings: the critique of individualism and the grounds for its revocation. Susan Miller's essay is last because it outlines a new destination for us who want to honor both individual and communitarian values, but who deeply desire to be something like ''ourselves among others'' without either losing ouselves or harming others.

The essays in the first part address the social and institutional scene. While some may call this scene the ''larger picture,'' we only call it the social and institutional picture. It is clear that this scene is highly personal for all of the contributors, and perhaps it can be distinguished from the other essays in the volume by their relative lack of reference to classrooms.

The essays in the second section are all directly engaged in the classroom. Some mainly deal with conflict, some mainly with more benign situations, some with altogether benign situations. It occurred to us to arrange the essays that way, but it finally seemed artificial (fake, to be exact). If the situation is

conflictual, it implies a positive achievement anyhow; if the situation is benign, there are still implied—and concealed—problems. Suffice it to say that Chapters 6 through 16 are about the classroom: graduate, undergraduate, secondary, and elementary—but mostly undergraduate. We could separate the undergraduate from everything else, but then the issues these essays raise are often similar to those raised in one of those "everything else" situations, as the thematic preface suggests.

In fact, the "ungroupability" of this group of eleven essays communicates something important: the understanding that we will have to face each and every teaching situation in its uniqueness, and that it may no longer be possible to speak about classrooms and school communities as if they were ultimately similar in this society, in this civilization. At the same time, we think that the conceptual, thematic similarities among them are so clear that no groupings or further editorial guidance is needed. We want to lay out for interested colleagues, co-workers, students, anyone within hearing distance really, teaching and school situations that are both inherently authentic and characteristic at once. We want to make available the radical variety of pedagogical effort now growing among us writing teachers, an effort that is insisting on both social and pedagogical change. We want to publish a new menu that will render our work more appetizing to many now living on canned curricula and frozen teaching practices, a menu that will urge others to create their own menus.

So, eat, eat.