Everything Is Praxis

Pedagogical Alliances Among Writing Instructors and Teaching Librarians through a Writing Information Literacy Community of Practice

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Abstract

In this praxis piece, a WPA and a writing instructor describe a writing information literacy community of practice among writing instructors and teaching librarians. Through paying attention to one resulting assignment, a full class annotated bibliography, the co-authors argue this professional development program extended collaborations among the writing program and the library to center contextual notions of authority and metacognition that connect to composition's democratic political commitments.

In her 2017 CWPA keynote, Nancy Welch describes an environmental engineering faculty union member who supports the writing program's focus on promoting students' "critical inquiry and restless creativity" to suggest that alliances across academic departments may be one way to advocate among faculty members in influential departments for writing program resources ("Plan" 107). As Welch notes throughout her scholarship, such public displays often rely on a protest rhetorical tradition, which may be unfamiliar to many WPAs, as an avenue worthwhile to consider in response to our field's well known neoliberal labor conditions ("Living Room"; Welch and Scott). This radical alliance-seeking perspective departs from an assumed even playing field of public deliberation through centering contextual knowledge of local conditions in ways that foreground questions of shared resources, spaces for collaboration, and methods to share responsibility. Other WPAs and teacher-scholars propose that a similar alliance-seeking, or coalitional, perspective may be especially worthwhile to the development of in-depth writing program and library collaborations that counter politicized information networks and the twenty-first century student reading crisis (Sullivan, Tinberg, and Blau; Carillo and Horning). In this article, we suggest an alliance-oriented reading of our university's writing information literacy (WIL) community of practice. This reading enables us to recognize both the practical benefits of increased collaboration

between our writing instructors and the library, and theoretical connections to composition's democratic commitments.

Our WIL fellowship program used a grant opportunity for cross-disciplinary collaborations to increase student retention rates to meet the need to promote a ground-up redesign of our first-year writing courses with attention to the ways students write with print and digital sources. Nationally, multiple surveys have found it vital for college students to learn strategies to evaluate print and digital sources as they develop their critical thinking skills in more expansive ways than the CRAAP test or completing the occasional credibility worksheet (Breakstone et al.; Head, Fister, and MacMilan; National Endowment for the Arts, Reading at Risk and To Read or Not to Read). At the local level, our full-time writing faculty have recognized the need to redesign our program's three first-year writing courses to emphasize digital composing with responsible ways for students to navigate the overwhelming volume of online information. At the classroom level, a previous writing assessment identified the need for students to integrate external sources of information in their papers in ways that avoid new college students' tendencies to "patch write" rather than paraphrase or insert a quotation without context (Howard). With this range of holistic challenges, the WPA and a library faculty member recognized an opportunity to plan ways to equip first-year writing instructors with the resources to level up their research-based writing pedagogy. In what follows, we describe the origins and key activities of the resulting WIL community of practice. Both of us were participants, as the WPA and faculty co-leader, and as a graduate teaching assistant and writing instructor. After the overview, we turn to the writing instructor's assignments as an example of promoting CWPA and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) frameworks in a way that parallels the beneficial social structures of the community of practice format for first-year writing students.

Teacher-scholars in composition and information literacy have much to say about the benefits library faculty bring to professional development programs and classroom collaborations. Among many shared findings, WPAs note the overlaps in both composition and information literacy professional student learning documents, often called "writing information literacy," with the key need for ongoing writing and library faculty communication "to abolish the formulaic writing of the research paper and the mechanical searching for and use of sources in favor of more generative, productive, and transferable practice" (Anderson, Blalock, Louis, and Wolff Murphy 4; see also Kazan, Behm, and Cook; Bowles-Terry, Davis, and Holliday; Norgaard). One recent study finds quantifiable benefits of digital and information literacy professional development programs for writing assessments and instructors (Hardy, Kordonowy, and Liss). As Morgan Hanson notes in a review of this journal's professional development scholarship, often, professional development opportunities make labor conditions visible (82), which Elizabeth Wardle notes is a crucial step for professional advocacy for "a system in place for long-term faculty development and support." For librarians, such collaborations with writing instructors enable them to see the professional demands on part-time writing instructors who often teach multiple classes while working on scholarly projects and must navigate multiple student learning outcomes within their classes.

Our composition and library faculty have a history of collaborations that facilitated the WIL grant proposal. Each semester, library teaching and learning staff have consulted with writing instructors on co-taught class sessions centering research processes and assignments. The WPA, a co-author of this essay, participated in a library-sponsored course redesign community of practice that centered digital composing. At the same time, a library faculty member and an assistant WPA hosted a brown-bag discussion of the library's student learning goals for writing instructors. Through these collaborations, composition faculty learned of library faculty desires to share their knowledge in more in-depth ways than one-and-done research days focused on the features of a particular database or a tour of the library building. One library faculty member was especially interested in extending the reach of her staff through collaborations with the writing program to promote open access educational resources, develop digital library guides, introduce students to primary sources in the Archives and Special Collections, and disseminate the library's online tutorials. These prior collaborations solidified writing program and library faculty interest in creating a professional development opportunity to promote new college students' research skills beyond a generic research paper as librarians and writing instructors learn ways to share the responsibilities to educate students with the habits of mind to use sources that might not pop up on their social media feeds or page one of the database they used in high school.

At the same time, the past collaborations illustrated an interesting dichotomy: just as our writing instructors are quick to recognize students become overwhelmed with the quantity of available information—especially on social media, academic databases, public information, and digital and physical archives—so too can the instructors become overwhelmed by the prospect of teaching their students how to develop as writers in the midst of so much information. With professional responsibilities to teach different classes, complete graduate course work, and develop creative and scholarly work, the circumstances of our program's non-unionized contingently employed writing instructors do not enable an expansive redesign of their

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courses without financial and professional support. During the first full group WIL meeting, all the instructors described this overwhelming feeling in response to a prompt that asks how they plan to include the CWPA, NCTE, and National Writing Project "Post-Secondary Success" and ACRL "Information Literacy" frameworks in their fall courses (see "First Meeting" tasks in the appendix). As one of the instructors and a writing center assistant director writes, "Holy cow! This is a TON to do in a single class. How is this even possible?!" The instructor continues, "Each of these things we are asking students to do in their writing and thinking is like the tentacle of an octopus—slippery, squirmy, and seems to have a mind of its own—and we're asking them to get all these tentacles swimming in the same direction at the same time!" As the instructor's statements indicate, due to the significant asks within our writing program redesign with student learning goals, a funded community of practice became essential.

In the spring of 2020, our campus's Center for Transformative Teaching funded cross-departmental pedagogical interventions to promote student success through improving student retention rates and time to degree. Scholars and researchers have found benefits for such retention efforts through the synergies of student knowledge of the resources available at their university libraries and the massive numbers of students in required college writing courses (Flierl, Bonem, Maybee, and Fundator; Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud; Kuh et al.). In the successful WIL fellowship grant proposal, the WPA and two library faculty members proposed a community of practice for writing instructors to work together over the summer in cohorts specific to the three different first- and second-year composition courses on our campus, which corresponded with the instructors' upcoming fall courses. These cohort groups were then responsible to develop a continuum of learning-a course design tool to emphasize information literacy knowledge throughout the fifteen-week semester-and activities that would allow students to demonstrate crucial writing and information literacy skills.

The three faculty organizers agreed to allocate most of the grant funds to compensate each instructor for their participation in the community of practice at the rate of teaching a summer class. On our campus, the part-time writing instructors are lecturers or graduate teaching assistants typically hired to teach exclusively during the fall and spring semesters. There are fewer summer courses, which requires the instructors compete to teach the summer courses or find employment outside the department. To keep the community of practice funding proposal competitive to the grant reviewers and attract writing instructors, the tenure-line faculty were intentional to allocate funding for the participants. These funding decisions also signaled the faculty members' commitment to recognizing the labor of pedagogical work and the writing instructors' expertise of the contexts of their classes.

The faculty co-organizers chose a representative group of instructors based on those who applied. This group included both graduate teaching assistants and adjunct faculty lecturers, new and more experienced instructors, and those with scholarly backgrounds representative of the English department's specializations in creative writing, composition, literature, and digital humanities. Finally, the organizers were especially supportive of the instructors who described commitments to underrepresented students including multilingual students, students who transferred from community colleges, students with disabilities, first-generation college students, students of color, and students with diverse gender expressions.

The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic complicated the proposal and required the WPA to carefully consider postponing the project, or how to coordinate it to enable slow changes to the composition program. The library faculty each had small children at home. Through conversations with leaders in the English department, the WPA also recognized that part-time writing instructors needed additional professional and financial support due to the pandemic. The WPA pondered these needs, and remembered her experiences as a young academic parent of a child with cancer, a time that required isolation, and fatigue associated with a health crisis that required navigating the safety of a little person ushered into the world while building a professional profile. The WPA and the library faculty agreed the WIL project could be energizing. While the shift to online work resulted in many academic conference cancelations, the WPA also recognized the opportunity to reallocate the grant's travel funding to support an additional writing instructor. To acknowledge the working conditions of the writing instructors, and the family responsibilities of the grant team, the faculty coordinators agreed to require four full group meetings, and to trust each writing instructor cohort group to decide how to work together outside of the full group meetings.

The resulting WIL fellowship program was an online, in-depth facilitated cohort-based community of practice. The organizers invited the participants to think early on about how they might share teaching materials with other writing instructors. Participants were required to attend four virtual whole group meetings throughout the summer months with additional smaller group meetings as needed (see the appendix for details about the work for the four full group meetings). In addition to a set of reflective writing assignments focused on the place of information literacy in their classrooms that instructors shared with the whole group for the first full group meeting, for later meetings, participants produced an in-depth course overview, or "continuum of learning" (Wiggins and McTighe), specific to their small group's composition course. From there, instructors worked individually to apply the co-authored student learning documents to refine their course materials before a final meeting devoted to describing course redesigns and assignments. Finally, the organizers expected the participants to use those materials during the fall semester and, after they entered their students' final grades, provide written reflections, which may inform a future mixed methods library teaching and learning research article.

The WIL program resulted in classroom assignments that include a Google Maps-based writing assignment, refined selfie photo analysis, Instagram-inspired research starter pack, and a "who is at your table" reflection on representation activity. Several of these assignments have since become part the writing program's sourcebook for new graduate teaching assistants. The WIL program also created a new, ongoing, part-timewriting-instructor-led professional development series in our department; prompted two participants to share their work during a campus-wide teaching symposium; and motivated the University Libraries to establish a year-long graduate student information literacy teaching assistantship. In short, WIL sponsored an expanded network of instructor-driven change as the writing program adapts to composing in twenty-first century information landscapes. However, it is also important to recognize that the project wasn't conceptualized to have such wide impacts. The grant proposal described a community of practice for part-time writing instructors with expertise related to our university's students and first-year writing student learning goals. The results emphasize the better-than-anticipated benefits of providing time and space for instructors to collaborate with each other and library teaching faculty over several weeks during the isolation of the early COVID pandemic. Moreover, as we describe with the "full class annotated bibliography" activity below, we draw connections to the ways this activity facilitates similar collaborative opportunities for students in composition classrooms that the WIL program provided for writing instructors.

A Full Class Annotated Bibliography: In-Class Community Building and Applied Social Composing Practice

The full class annotated bibliography was one of the activities a writing instructor developed during the WIL fellowship program. We highlight this assignment for several reasons. First, the full class activity emphasizes the ACRL's "authority is constructed and contextual" information literacy framework and the CWPA, NCTE, and National Writing Project's

"metacognition" habit of mind (Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing), two shared student learning outcomes central to our first-year "writing as argument" class. Second, the activity relies on the familiar genre of an annotated bibliography through using the network capabilities of digital discussion boards to move a typically individual activity into one that promotes the whole class's participation in ways that reflect deliberative processes. Finally, this activity has circulated in our department through multiple class sessions and graduate teaching assistant orientations with modified prompts. The version of the assignment we describe is disseminated through the Open Access Writing Spaces Assignments and Activities Archive (McDonald). We hope this is one activity other WPAs may consider adding to their assignment banks with prompts that fit their students and classes. We also hope this activity showcases the radical potential of in-depth library and composition professional development programs to have an impact beyond an individual classroom. For ease of reading, the following two sections use the first person to allow the writing instructor to describe her assignment. We then return to a shared voice in the conclusion.

Activity Design and Process

Through my knowledge of women's studies and ethnic studies programs, I've recognized not all students have had the same opportunities to "study themselves . . . [and] 'give and get' something through writing . . . to write about something that matters to them" in their required first-year writing classes (Sommers and Saltz 141). I wanted to prioritize class conversations about different types of knowledge and authority rather than assume authority is something a source has or doesn't have without careful consideration of its context for a particular project, as the first ACRL information literacy "authority is constructed and contextual" and the CWPA, NCTE, and National Writing Project "metacognition" frames emphasize. I designed the full class annotated bibliography for students to have experience shaping the class's knowledge and experience the ways evaluating sources requires technical skills such as identifying an author's credibility markers and social skills such as deciding how a specific source may be worthwhile to share with readers in the class. I wanted to provide time for students to discuss their research processes, the context of their sources, and different types of authority. I also wanted to provide time for students to collectively reflect on the value of those whose knowledge is often glossed over in more general sources of knowledge in a similar purpose to feminist rhetorical recovery efforts (Ritchie and Ronald; Lunsford; Royster).

The activity prompt engages a central information need of the class, such as examining local resources and scholarship addressing health and mental health among college students. From there, students individually find one or two sources they recommend the class consider annotating and posting on a discussion board. During class time, students work together in small groups of three to four students to decide on a single source their group will spend time annotating and describing. This requirement facilitates student conversations centering a holistic evaluation of the credibility of different sources for in-class audiences, such as if information about a sober tailgate hosted by the campus counseling center may be more useful for the class to read about than a social work academic journal article summarizing key practices among campus health center staff. Once each group has decided on their source, each student has a role to play in the full class discussion board. One student reads the source to write an annotation. A second student justifies how the group's source is a valuable contribution to the class's knowledge. A different student posts a description of why their group chose their source. A final student reads a different group's annotation and makes a comparison between their group's source and that of a different group. The resulting discussion board can then inform class discussions as students engage their individual research-informed projects, or as a reference for students researching health and mental health.

My assignment emphasizes attention to dynamic social relationships and to making choices that, while they can be uncomfortable, are central for democratic pedagogies. While this deliberation-oriented movement has a deep history within democratic pedagogies and the National Writing Project, it is especially beneficial for writers from historically marginalized backgrounds to initially break into supportive groups as one way to participate in more general conversations, as seen in the recent work of the Black Digital Literacy and Composition Collective's NextGEN ListServ and the Anti-Ableist Composition Collective (Baniya et al.). However, as I noted above, this deliberative step on its own cannot be assumed to automatically center the needs of historically marginalized, and multiply marginalized, students or their knowledges (hooks; Ellsworth). Instead, in a similar way to how the WIL community of practice enabled part-time instructors, including myself, resources to redesign their syllabi, this class activity created time for student conversations about the interconnections among power, social location, and knowledge, a central starting place for students to equitably assess the credibility of sources in traditional and online media environments.

Activity Reflection

As I've worked on this essay with my WPA and co-author, what most stands out are the ways our many conversations illuminate national professional values within the context of our writing program. Our program has progressivist commitments, seen clearly through our department's sponsorship of one of the longest-running local sites of the National Writing Project, faculty joint appointments in women's and ethnic studies programs, and more recent public anti-racist statements. Following the WIL program, the writing program also adopted first-year writing learning outcomes for students to examine relationships between language and social change. I've learned these local values, and ways they have shaped the WIL program from the grant proposal to retrospective reflection, through multiple coffeefacilitated conversations. As my WPA has reminded me, neither the WIL community of practice structure, nor the directions in my full class annotated bibliography activity, require that students or instructors center historically marginalized knowledges, although the nuances of these positions should be carefully considered by WPAs interested in facilitating a similar WIL program on their campuses. The collaborative structures that provide contingent writing instructors with funded time and accountability structures can make explicit different legacies of power and sources of authority (Kleinfeld), which can then inform new opportunities for student agency as they make informed decisions about which information networks are worth their time and which ones give them an informed position to write from. Discussing these responsibilities with my WPA has allowed me to see who I would like to become if I'm the one seeking professional development funding, listening to the asks of writing instructors, and working to address a key finding from a writing assessment. I hope if I'm in such a position, I too will work to ensure as much money as possible goes to parttime instructors, and they have a structure that enables their collaborative work to influence other instructors in the department, and perhaps circulate through additional networks of influence. These are radical goals in a moment when many question the economic value of higher education, but goals that are not out of reach.

Conclusion

During her 2017 CWPA conference keynote, Welch connects such democratic commitments to class and race-based inclusion efforts through the pioneering work of Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective to suggest WPAs center the most marginalized "to take inspiration from the Combahee and Black Lives Matter slogans. . . . 'When adjunct faculty get free, we all get free" ("Plan" 110). Welch's call to draw upon the tradition of those who examine the intersections of class and race-based oppressions, among other forms of significant difference, forms a bridge to composition's key professional values to promote authentic collaborations and create equitable labor conditions especially for the many writing programs, such as ours, staffed primarily by part-time graduate teaching assistants and adjunct instructors. Welch suggests coalitional rhetoric and practices can enable generative creative opportunities to gather engaged collaborators to design opportunities for writing instructors and students to bring their full selves to classrooms in ways more expansive than financial-based customer and employee relationships.

While we do not want to suggest our WIL program was a coalition, or used the rhetoric of coalitions, we have found similar dynamics between our program and this avenue of inquiry. Those who study coalitions center questions of how to establish trust and accountability, and how to respond to differences among collaborators. The Civil Rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon, especially, calls for women not to assume their groups are already fully inclusive of all possible points of view, a value our writing fellow selection process sought to model through selecting a representative group of instructors. Yet, perhaps most centrally, coalitions emphasize the necessity to share responsibility and have words and deeds reflect each other through providing time and space for collaborations. In our community of practice structure shaped by the NCTE's "network models" approach to teacher development (Arellano Cabusao, Fleischer, and Polson), we saw results that have been challenging to measure but may have circulated in ways unlikely in a more top-down mandated approach. The faculty WIL organizers modeled this practice through allocating funding primarily to part-time instructors and providing them with a structure of accountability. The faculty answered instructor questions during the international upheavals of the summer of 2020 at rates of compensation that recognized the disruptions to future conference travel, the financial needs of part-time instructors, and the responsibilities for faculty parents to keep their families safe during quarantine. The instructors had many of the same caregiving responsibilities and found ways to schedule meetings with their cohort groups, participate in the four required meetings, and complete in-depth course redesigns. The overwhelming task to redesign a class can be similarly mediated through ongoing conversations, readings, and course design templates. Likewise, introducing students to the "authority is constructed and contextual" and "metacognition" frameworks may be best taught when students have hands-on experiences like they do in the full class annotated bibliography activity, which required time, knowledge,

and multiple collaborators (Association of College and Research Libraries Board; CWPA, NCTE, and the National Writing Project). The benefits of prioritizing collaborations among many axes of difference in academic discipline, professional employment status, or social location are often difficult to quantify in the short-term. Collaborators may change jobs, need to step away from research projects, or require flexible deadlines. We recognize the level of funding our WIL program won is unusual, and yet it was essential to the program's success. We hope the readings, prompts, and annotated bibliography activity in the appendix inspire WPAs to draw upon existing collaborations with their campus's library faculty to advocate for funding to promote student retention through facilitating composition course redesigns. In circumstances that threaten to overwhelm, we see publicly ambitious working alliances that take full advantage of the knowledge of part-time writing instructors and teaching librarians as well worth further pursuing.

Appendix: Overview of Tasks Associated with the Writing Information Literacy Inquiry Program

First Meeting: Introduction to the Writing Information Fellowship and Learning Outcomes

Preparation Tasks:

- Complete a "pre-program" reflection on how information literacy currently figures in your teaching of your composition course, that is, English 150: Writing as Inquiry, English 151: Writing as Argument, or English 254: Writing and Communities.
 - What do you already know about information literacy?
 - In what contexts have you considered or learned about information literacy prior to this program?
 - How do you feel about your current approach to information literacy in your FYW course(s)?
 - What is one thing you absolutely hope to come away with after participation in this program?
- Complete and share a post for the group that introduces you to the group.
- Read ACRL's "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education" and review our own campus's Libraries' Learning Outcomes.
- Additional material:
- Bowen, Ryan S. "Understanding by Design." *Center for Teaching*, Vanderbilt University, 2017, https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/understanding-by-design/. Accessed 5 June 2020.
- Mackey, Thomas, and Trudi E. Jacobson. "Reframing Information Literacy as Metaliteracy." *College and Research Libraries*, vol. 72, no. 1, 2011, pp. 62–78.
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- Nelson, Tamara Holmlund, Angie Deuel, David Slavit, and Anne Kennedy. "Leading Deep
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Second Meeting: Examine the Convergences among Information Literacy and Local Campus Composition Student Learning Outcomes

Preparation Tasks:

- Post a reflection on the intersections of composition and information literacy to the WIL discussion board.
- Read:

Anderson, Jennifer, Glenn Blalock, Lisa Louis, and Susan Wolff Murphy. "Collaborations as Conversations: When Writing Studies and the Library Use the Same Conceptual Lens." *Teaching Information Literacy and Writing Studies*, edited by Grace Veach, vol. 1, Purdue University Press, 2018, pp. 3–18.

- Artman, Margaret, Erica Frisicaro-Pawlowski, and Robert Monge. "Not Just One Shot: Extending the Dialogue about Information Literacy in Composition Classes." *Composition Studies*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2010, pp. 93–110.
- Reflect:
 - How might the decoding-the-disciplines approach inform your approach to composition and information literacy?
- Additional material:
 - Grim, Valerie, David Pace, and Leah Shopkow. "Learning to Use Evidence in the Study of History." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, vol. 2004, no. 98, 2004, pp. 57–65.
 - Norgaard, Rolf. "Writing Information Literacy: Contributions to a Concept." *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 2, 2003, pp. 124–30.
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 - Sommers, Nancy, and Laura Saltz. "The Novice as Expert: Writing the Freshman Year." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2004, pp. 124–49.

Third Meeting: Marking a Transition from Conceptualizing Writing Information Literacy to Designing Your Instruction and Developing Assessment Plans

Preparation Tasks:

- With your course cohort, create and share a first draft continuum-oflearning document for that course.
- Read excerpt from Wiggins and McTighe's Understanding by Design.
- Post to group discussion your favorite resources or readings related to writing course development or assessing student learning.
- Additional material:

Brown, Sydney. "Designing Your Course: Part 1." *Teaching @ UNL:* An Instructor Guide,

- InnovativeInstructionalDesign,https://canvas.unl.edu/courses/51131/ pages/designing-your-course-part-1?module_item_id=839945. Accessed 20 June 2023.
- Head, Alison, Alaina Bull, Margy MacMillan. "Asking the Right Questions: Bridging Gaps Between Information Literacy Assessment Approaches." *Against the Grain*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2019, pp. 20–22.

Final Meeting: Share and Celebrate Our Work

Preparation Tasks:

- Post to discussion board a final iteration of the continuum of learning for your fall composition course.
- Post a second iteration of your plan for how writing information literacy will reside in your course.
- Review what others in your cohort group have shared and be prepared to discuss with the full group.

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