

College Composition Conversations at Maryland K-16 English Alignment Conference

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The bright blue morning of Friday, November 7th found me not in my high school classroom administering vocabulary quizzes but at CCBC, Catonsville at a Maryland K-16 English Alignment Conference devoted to “College Composition Conversations.” I learned about this conference through Barbara Bass’s MWP List-Serve which funnels messages of varying types to its receivers. I religiously open all such notices never knowing when I will reap the benefit of their contents as I did this day.

The name of the conference struck a chord with me because I have long felt that there is a need for communication among the teachers of English across the grade levels. As a teacher of seniors, I looked forward to speaking with those who would soon be instructing my students. I did not realize that I would be the lone high school English teacher there. While this was literally conversations by teachers of college composition, I was able to give a high school teacher’s view. Having been an

adjunct at both Catonsville and Carroll Community College in the past, I could identify with their concerns. Indeed, I was there as a representative of Towson University as both an adjunct and graduate student. Of course, I also represented the Maryland Writing Project taking the opportunity to acquaint my colleagues with the philosophy of MWP which dovetailed with the conference’s purpose. Annmarie Chiarini ('02) and Beth Edelstein ('00) also were MWP advocates.

After brief opening remarks by Nancy Shapiro, Associate Vice Chancellor, University Systems of Maryland, and Suzanne Beal, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Frederick Community College, who co-chaired the Conference, the agenda consisted of three sessions of roundtable discussions. Each session had



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four to six roundtables with presenters introducing a topic and then opening up the discussion to those at the table. The many interesting topics led to some difficulty choosing roundtables: “Defining Identity,” “The Importance of Style as a Rhetorical Device,” and “Here’s the Gun: Exploring Evidence, Explanation and Logical Fallacy” are examples.

For Roundtable I, I went to “Revisiting Our Senses” facilitated by Colleen Webster, Harford Community College. She presented a series of innovative nature-related exercises which she has used effectively with her English 101 and her creative writing students. One exercise requires them to sit outside alone with no cell phone or audio device and observe their surroundings for twenty minutes. They then research what they have observed to be able to give names to their observations and model an essay upon an Annie Dillard essay. A suggestion made by a round table member about this exercise, which makes her students extremely uncomfortable, was for them to come up with an exercise for her that would put her in a milieu of theirs for her to write about! I came away with many great ideas.

For Roundtable II, I went to “The Role of Grammar in the College Classroom.” The lead facilitator was Nicole Wilson from Bowie State U. She had with her a group of students who were members of the English Club. Concerned with the problems students had with grammar, they had done a survey of students,

professors and middle school teachers about students’ grammar knowledge. They presented their findings that, I think, did not surprise any of us present. Students may say that they have had grammar in their previous 12 years of schooling, but could not identify parts of speech when asked. It was gratifying to see potential teachers concerned about grammar issues and endeavoring to do something about them. English 101 teachers expressed the fact that they are now spending more time dealing with grammar than with the required topics of their curriculum. There was much discussion about how to handle this but, due to time constraints, no definitive solutions were presented.

For Roundtable III, I went to “The Write Classroom” facilitated by Nancy Shapiro. This dealt with creating a learning community within a composition classroom and many teachers shared experiences that had worked within their classrooms. One idea was a writing project that went beyond the classroom such as working to change something on campus. Several spoke about a linked class experience when two teachers had the same set of students and coordinated their efforts to the benefit of both groups. I gained many potential ideas for use with my classes.

At the closing, when the group was asked what additional conference topics should be addressed, grammar was first, followed by the need for a dialogue with high school teachers. I look forward to an opportunity for such a conference in the future.