

Where We Are: Intergenerational Exchanges

Intergenerational Exchange in Rhetoric and Composition: Some Views from Here

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“We all got history. Some of us just don’t know it.”

—Ellen Hazard

“It’s a funny kind of history that only looks backwards.”

—Lewis Carroll

Let us be clear. We feel humbled in the face of the invitation to write about intergenerational dialogue and collaboration in this moment of deep cultural and educational change, even as we continue our long, slow improvisational journey away from active teaching, department meetings, and the pressures to publish or perish (Actually, perishing is no longer a metaphor as we look ahead). Using our own experiences across nearly fifty years of work-life in literacy studies and teaching, we want to explore some forms of intentional intergenerational work and think out loud about why it is so critical to undertake intergenerational work mindfully.

Of course, intergenerational exchange is always happening. Faculty study with and learn from earlier generations of scholars, formally and informally, and they in turn teach many generations of students across the academic lifecycle, some of whom they mentor as future professionals. And the cycle continues. But we may not always recognize the cycle’s potential; worse, we may see it as simply inconvenient or even a burden, especially when it is easy to see insights of earlier generations as obsolete or out of touch. Indeed, in some respects, it may be easier to speak to the power of intergenerational work when you have lived through multiple generational shifts and can reflect on the kinds of intergenerational exchanges you have had to have with yourself across your own life.

In this active stage of our retirement, we also have the luxury of pausing to consider all the *multidirectional* forms of professional exchange that have made our lives so rich, looking back to teachers, older scholars, and mentors, and looking forward to our students and younger colleagues, all of whom have supported, stimulated, and provoked us at every turn. We understand that the

field—broadly construed—and American higher education undergo constant change, sometimes continuous and incremental, sometimes discontinuous, and that we all enter and are formed by distinct temporal intellectual and social forces. While those differences are significant and can—and do—cause gaps and tensions, we offer the metaphor of *accompaniment*¹ as a means of respecting critical differences in view, while sharing some portion of our lifelong journeys as literacy educators.

We entered the field as graduate students and beginning teachers/scholars almost by accident, as so many did across the late 1960s and 70s. It was a turbulent time with odd resonances to this one—the terrible bloody fight for civil rights, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the early feminist movement with its fight for equal rights and control over women’s bodies, an untrustworthy government, a corrupt megalomaniac for a president, and an unjust international war that killed thousands of poor white, Brown, and Black young Americans, as well as countless Southeast Asians. We were witnessing the opening of a huge fissure in the social and political fabric of our society—a time when one could not look away. These moments revealed deep conflicts over the “present schemes of wealth and power” a apt phrase coined by Jonathan Swift in his well-known essay “Argument Against Abolishing Christianity.”

It was during this time of discontinuity and rupture that multidirectional intergenerational exchange—what we have come to think of as *accompaniment*—was necessary for the survival of students and higher education itself, especially over the question of empowerment through literacy. The CUNY Open Admissions movement of the early 1970s, which John participated in as a brand-new teacher in New York, was a direct response to students’ (often poor, minority, and/or immigrant students) demands for access to higher education. He and several of his colleagues realized they needed to listen to their students, question much of their own training and education, develop radically different resources and approaches cobbled together from many developing areas of applied research, and attempt to meet the needs of these new generations of students. Teachers committed to Open Admissions did so in the face of immense resistance from many of their fellow faculty, administrators, and purveyors of academic culture writ large who implicitly believed that white male standards were being “compromised.”

CUNY administrators attempted to initiate an intergenerational dialogue among English faculty, with mixed results. A series of annual CUNY Conferences were organized, but these one-day affairs could not build a true community of scholars all committed to the same project. Instead, what emerged over time was what John has called “an invisible college,” teachers teaching each other what they were learning about—and from—their students. It was a

rich intergenerational dialogue. This accompaniment started spontaneously but over time became the CUNY Association of Writing Supervisors (or CAWS), the direct forebear of today's CWPA. And there were also other less obvious, but enduring, positive legacies. For example, one early CAWS president, Ken Bruffee, focused his research on how student dialogue within group settings can lead to enhanced learning and into a mode of collaborative intergenerational teaching/learning, which can also be seen as a kind of facilitated accompaniment. Bruffee's notions of peer collaboration in learning have been taken up in many classrooms to increase student agency and empowerment and have been central to the development of peer tutoring and writing center programs (1972, *Collaborative* 1984, *Peer Tutoring*, 1984).

We know our efforts to make change were provisional, incomplete, and riddled with imperfect efforts, but we tried throughout the decades both to understand our antecedents better and to be open to the work that newer generations of scholars and scholarship would bring to bear (Gannett and Brereton, 2020).

Fifty years later, we find ourselves collectively in another period of great and discontinuous change, a paradigm shift, or rather, several simultaneously. We are now engaged in a wild new world of virtual communication networks, which have radically reshaped the forms, formats, and nature of human discourse, enabling mass instant transmission of information, making online educational, social, political, and cultural work possible. This new digital universe is also complicated and compounded by the nature of false information and virulent social media, where public communication, niched to create "alternate facts" (and "alternate worlds" to live in), fosters radical social division. There are clear similarities to the era of our own entrance into the field: an uncertain democracy, the devastating consequences of a corrupted government, and a president who has encouraged the public acceptance of serious racial and gender bias and violence yet again—both within the US and across its borders. And sitting on top of it all: a global pandemic.

So what might it mean to meet the moment through accompaniment? There are many responses to this question, and sadly little space to do more than touch on one or two.

Archival Work

One way we can practice intergenerational work as accompaniment is through the joint undertaking of archival work. While it is common to think of "the archive" as a repository of old, privileged artifacts of high culture, newer notions of archiving as intergenerational, democratized literacy work is reinvigorating composition studies. When John and I created the Robert J. Connors Writing Center/WAC Archive at the University of New Hamp-

shire some years ago, we invited graduate students Kate Tirabassi and Amy Zenger to collaborate as full partners with us and bring their own perspectives on what should be preserved and why (Gannett et al.). And if we want to ensure that our histories reflect and honor our diverse literacy histories, we need to support (that is, accompany) new, diverse generations of scholars to undertake this critical recovery work. Indeed, intergenerational work that draws on archival materials or the production of archival materials themselves is becoming increasingly popular in undergraduate and graduate courses in rhetoric and composition, as seen in Graban and Hayden's forthcoming collection (2021).

Boston Writing and Rhetoric Network (BRAWN)

Regional and local associations or groups can be one means of continuing valuable, meaningful accompaniment work outside of institution-specific structures. As one example, the Boston Area Rhetoric and Writing Network is a space that affords retired faculty productive, mutual, cross-generational engagement. BRAWN began over ten years ago as a collective effort by a small group of college and university WPAs to pool and share professional resources for local teachers of composition and rhetoric without traditional rank or status (graduate students, instructors, lecturers, adjuncts) who teach the vast majority of writing courses in the larger Boston area, often without regular access to useful professional development.¹

While many of these faculty are pre-and early career, the group includes instructors of all ages and serves all institutional types (community colleges, specialized technical schools, liberal arts, and research colleges and universities). Anchor schools—such Boston College, Boston University, MIT, Northeastern, UMass Boston, and others—provide modest financial resources and organizational infrastructure, thereby receiving ongoing supplemental professional support for their own graduate students and contingent faculty.

Importantly, BRAWN is overseen by a Board that is deliberately diverse in terms of role, status, and life-stage. For example, even as a retired professor without institutional status, Cindy was welcomed to the Board (and, in fact, became its President). Intergenerational collaboration is therefore both necessary to fuel the initiative and intentionally cultivated; the operating principle is that everyone is always both expert and novice in different contexts. Said differently: we are all learners as well as teachers and scholars. Organizational leaders and workshop leaders provide their work voluntarily; we accompany each other along the way. We share our labor and our curiosities.

BRAWN undertakes many initiatives (a list-serv, book receptions, reading groups, writing retreats), but most importantly, it sponsors a free annual Summer Institute for up to a hundred contingent faculty. In keeping with

our commitment to mutual mentoring, the workshops are facilitated by pre-, early, mid, and late-career professionals, and workshop leaders are expected to attend other workshops as *learners* like anyone else—that is, we accompany each other here, too. We have also instituted a Microhistories Session at the end of the conference, inviting local senior rhet-comp scholars to share their own (often messy) academic journeys, with a view to creating rich, complex, panhistoriographic faculty and field perspectives, and to invite all participants to situate themselves in—and across—embodied individual and collective pasts, presents, and futures.

Through BRAWN, intergenerational exchange is fostered for all participants: newcomers are supported beyond their own institutions as they enter the field and contribute their fresh pedagogical and scholarly insights to a larger community of practice. Non-tenure faculty with varying identities, allegiances, and support systems can find (and create) a community to sustain their ongoing development, value their labor, and engage in networking, while they contribute their own insights, lived experience, and research interests. Retired faculty offer their time, expertise, experience, and sometimes a meal (precious commodities!) to nourish present and future generations, while being continuously renewed and refreshed as members of our broad, collective, vital enterprise.

Accompanying each other forward: How might we deliberately sponsor rich cross-generational, cross-role associations and relationships *adjacent to* (or even temporarily unmoored from) the hierarchies of academic structures of specific institutions? What are the challenges to fostering these kinds of activities? What could we gain collectively, individually?

Notes:

1. BRAWN is most publicly accessible through its website, which is at <https://bostonrhetoricwriting.org/>

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