

“WHAT WOULD YOU ADVISE US TO DO?”:
STATUS, KNOWLEDGE, AND ASYMMETRY IN
CROSS-LEVEL INTERACTIONS AMONG TEACHERS OF WRITING

by

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For Jennifer, Ryan, Madeline, and Lauren

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ABSTRACT

This study provides the results of a qualitative analysis of conversations among small groups of high school English teachers and college writing instructors. Such conversations have been advocated as a means of addressing first-year college students' difficulties transitioning from high school to college writing.

This microanalysis of question/answer sequences in four small-group discussions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors, addresses gaps in the literature by providing an empirical basis for our understanding of cross-level conversations and reconciling the seemingly contradictory views of these conversations that dominate the existing scholarship. The study argues that existing notions of both the benefits and challenges of school/college conversations about writing have been oversimplified. The concept of "conversational asymmetry," drawn from the field of Conversation Analysis, is offered as a way of understanding the unequal participation patterns that characterize the conversations about writing analyzed for this study. A model for facilitating cross-level conversations that acknowledges and values the inherent asymmetry of these conversations is offered.

CHAPTER 1

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Introduction

This study has its origins in the time I have spent as something of a teaching “double agent,” traveling between two groups that know little about one another and that are sometimes distrustful of one another’s motives: high school English teachers and college composition instructors. In the course of my work as a secondary school teacher, an educational researcher in high school, a National Writing Project site co-director, and first-year composition instructor, I have had the opportunity to teach, to talk with colleagues, and to observe what goes on in classrooms at both institutions.

I often find myself reporting to colleagues the results of my “reconnaissance.” For example, some of my university colleagues wonder aloud about what is being taught in high school English classes. They find their first-year students, at least according to the way they tell it in many conversations, to be woefully unprepared for the writing that is required in an introductory first-year composition course. As one of the few writing instructors at the university who has had any contact with high school teachers, I do my best to defend the work high school English teachers do and to let my colleagues know that, yes, writing really is part of the curriculum in high school English classes. I sometimes try to remind them that most of our students at the university are actually competent writers, but the struggling writers are the ones we remember. I find myself

arguing that if we have students who perform poorly in our first-year composition courses, it is likely that they also struggled in their high school English courses; thus, at least some of the fault should lay with the students themselves and not their high school teachers. These conversations never seem to progress much beyond the expression of frustration on the part of some of my colleagues. While they don't disagree with my view of high school teachers and students, my colleagues also don't seem to think that there is much that they, as college instructors, can do relative to students' readiness for college writing courses.

The high school teachers I meet tend to ask me about what teaching writing is like at the college level: *Do college professors really count off three points for every grammar error? Is it true that you don't require students to write research papers anymore? Are your first-year students good writers? Is MLA citation important when you grade papers?* The high school teachers hear things about college writing from their former students or from their own college-aged children, but since I actually teach first-year composition, the high school teachers see me as a more reliable source than their former students, for the truth about college writing.

Living this "double life"—in high schools and universities—has made me curious about how first-year students, most of whom know less about college than their high school teachers, experience their move to college, a place where they are likely to have professors with little idea about the writing practice and pedagogy of their high school teachers. Moreover, I've wondered what would happen if, instead of relying on reports from double agents like myself, these teachers met one another face-to-face to discover things for themselves.

High School Graduation and College Completion

Understanding the connection, or too often the divide, between high school and college may be more important than ever before. A growing body of research indicates that there are often large gaps—in curriculum, in pedagogy, in instructor and student expectations, in assessment—between colleges and high schools, gaps that serve as obstacles to students’ successful transition to college. Students’ struggles are reflected in statistics that indicate that although more students than ever before are attending college, a significant number of those students never receive a degree.

High School Graduation and College Enrollment

For many years, educators from all levels have sought to increase educational access and opportunity for all students. One obvious step toward increasing students’ opportunity to pursue a college education was increasing the number of students who complete high school. A look at statistics compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics (the data collection and analysis arm of the United States Department of Education) indicates that the lack of a high school education is, for most American students, no longer an obstacle to the pursuit of a college degree. According to The Condition of Education 2006, an NCES publication, in that year a higher percentage of students completed high school¹ than ever before. The NCES study indicates that in 2006, 86% of all 25-29 year olds had completed high school or received an equivalency certificate, compared with only 78% in 1971 (U.S. Department of Education 68).

¹ Before 1992, “high school completion” meant completing 12 years of schooling. After 1992, the definition changed to include only students who obtained either a high school diploma or an equivalency certificate (U.S. Department of Education 68). Thus, the narrowing of this definition makes the increases in “high school completion” even more significant.

As a higher proportion of students finish high school, more of them pursue a college education. The NCES results show that 57% of 25-29 year olds had completed at least some college. This represents an increase of more than 20 percentage points from the 34% of students who had completed some college in 1971 (U.S. Department of Education 68).

While these statistics take into account all students who attend college before the age of 29, data also indicate that more students than ever before are beginning their college education in the months following their high school graduation rather than postponing it. Between 1972 and 2004, the “immediate college enrollment rate” increased from 49% to 67%. The growth in the number of high school students immediately beginning college is evidence of a shift in societal expectations regarding a college education. College is no longer a privilege for the few, but an avenue open to all students; it is now seen as a natural next step in most high school graduates’ education. In this respect, the drive for increased educational opportunities for students has been successful. Not only do most high school students plan to attend college, they intend to earn a college degree. NCES data indicate that 69% of high school seniors plan on receiving a bachelor’s degree, a figure that has doubled over the last 22 years (U.S. Department of Education 60). These numbers highlight the pervasiveness of college as an expected next step for high school seniors.

College Completion

In spite of the progress we see in terms of students’ high school completion, their college aspirations, and their college enrollment, when we look at the percentages of students who are actually obtaining college degrees, the statistics are far less

encouraging. According to the 2006 NCES report, only 29% of 25-29 year olds had completed a bachelor's degree or higher. While this number represents an increase from the 17% who had completed a bachelor's degree in 1971 (U.S. Department of Education 68), this rate of growth is smaller than the 24% rise in the percentage of students completing some college in that time. So increases over the last several decades in the numbers of students graduating from high school and subsequently attending college have not been matched by a corresponding rise in college completion rates. And when we consider that, as stated earlier, 69% of high school seniors expect to earn a bachelor's degree while only 29% of students actually complete degrees within ten years of their high school graduation, the motivation of those increasingly concerned about students' transition from high school to college becomes clear. The promise resulting from the increased accessibility of a college education is tempered by the realization that although students start college, too many fail to finish.

Students' Transition to (and Preparation for) College

The reason for the gap between high school graduation and college completion is not immediately clear; attempts to explain it tend to fall into two categories. One line of research has as its focus the inherent difficulty involved in first-year students' move from high school to college. Studies have compared first-year students to "immigrants" (Chaskes), "travelers" (Estrem), and "strangers" (McCarthy). These studies attribute students' difficulty in transitioning to college life and academic work to the culture shock many first-year students feel upon leaving home for the first time to attend college. These authors tend to see the transition to college as something inherently challenging, and they argue that colleges and high schools should find ways of easing that transition.

Another category of response to the question of why so many students have difficulty completing college focuses on incoming students' level of preparation for college-level work. Implicit in this view is the notion that difficulties in making the transition from high school to college, particularly in the area of academics, can be avoided if students are adequately prepared for college. Proponents of this conception of the transition attribute students' failure to meet academic expectations at the college level to the insufficiency of the academic preparation they received in high school. This view of the high school/college transition issue leads to breathless headlines decrying the state of the U.S. education system:

- “Many Incoming Freshmen Aren't Prepared for College” (Marklein)
- “Third of Grads Not Ready for College: 'It's Shameful the Number ... That Are Not Prepared,' Legislator Says” (Newbart)
- “College Regents Fear Rising Numbers of Unprepared Students” (Walton)
- “College Test Says Juniors Unprepared” (Maitre and Murphy)

Viewing first-year college students' struggles through the lens of preparedness places the responsibility for students' academic performance squarely on high schools and high school teachers because, after all, high school teachers are the ones charged with “preparing” students for college. When preparation is seen as the culprit, college faculty and students are absolved of any responsibility for failures in first-year students' transition to college.

Student and Faculty Perceptions of College-Preparedness

Much of the support for the “college preparedness” view of the problem of low college completion rates comes, perhaps unsurprisingly, from college faculty and college

students themselves. A 2005 survey published by Achieve Inc., an organization founded by political and business leaders to address issues related to educational achievement, indicates that both college students and faculty members feel that large numbers of incoming first-year students are academically unprepared for college. According to the study, 39% of students indicate that they encountered large gaps between college expectations and the preparation they received in high school (“Rising” 3). Furthermore, 56% of those students say that they left high school without learning the study skills necessary to succeed in college (4). The implication here is that the high schools have set these students up for failure.

College faculty members surveyed as part of the same 2005 Achieve, Inc. study echo the students’ sentiments. The college instructors estimated that 42% of their students are unprepared for college (“Rising” 4). In addition, only 18% of college professors classify their students as being “extremely or very well prepared” for college as compared with 25% who feel that their students are “not too well or not well prepared at all” (7). And 48% of the college instructors surveyed indicate that they are unhappy with the job done by public high schools in preparing students for college-level work, while only 28% feel that public schools do an “adequate” job of college preparation. An indication of why college instructors may hold high schools in such low regard is suggested by the survey’s finding that 70% of the college instructors surveyed say that they spend “some” or a “significant amount” of time in their classes covering material that they believe students should have learned in high school (9). These professors seem to think that their class time is being ill spent by re-teaching things that they believe their students should already know.

What this survey fails to provide is any sense of these college instructors' level of knowledge about curriculum and instruction at the high school level. This knowledge, or lack thereof, is crucial. Just because the college professors believe something is, or should be, taught in high school does not mean that a particular concept is present in the high school curriculum. Perhaps some of the consternation implied in the college instructors' expressions of dissatisfaction with the ways high schools prepare students for college comes from a lack of knowledge on their part about high school curriculum and standards.

Another point of caution: while statistics like the ones gleaned from this survey make for compelling news stories, these studies and the articles reporting them often fail to acknowledge the stakes both students and college instructors have in placing the blame on high school teachers for students' lack of success in college. If the blame lies with high school teachers' inability to adequately prepare students for college, then students are not to blame for struggles they experience in their college courses. Likewise, if the blame rests on high school teachers, the college instructors can rest easy, knowing that they are only working with the "flawed" material sent by their high school counterparts. This reductive and rather self-serving way of looking at the issue of students' transition to high school may actually serve to widen the gap between teachers at the high school and college levels by placing high school teachers in the position of defending themselves against attacks on their competence.

"College Preparedness" and Large-Scale Assessment

Those that cite preparation as the key cause of first-year students' struggles can also draw upon the results of large-scale assessments of the academic skills of high

school seniors. The publisher of the ACT test, an admissions requirement for many colleges, annually releases aggregate test scores, which are promoted by the organization as indicators of “college-readiness.” These results are published in press releases with headings such as, “Average ACT Score Jumps for High School Class of 2006; College Readiness Improves, But Many Grads Still Lack College-Ready Skills.” According to the most recent ACT data, many high school seniors fall short of pre-determined “benchmarks” for college preparedness. ACT reports that 58% of test-takers failed to meet the “College Readiness Benchmark” on the ACT math test, 77% fell short of the benchmark on the science test, and 47% did not meet the benchmark for the reading test. Meanwhile according to the same study, 70% of students achieved the writing benchmark; this means that seven out of ten ACT test-takers are ready for college composition (“Average”). The study concludes that although they found an overall increase in college readiness, only 21% of students met the benchmarks in all four subject areas (“Average”).

While they do not give a full sense of the extent of the problem, these statistics suggest that a number of students leave high school unprepared to do the kind of work that will be required of them in college. High school teachers in particular, and the whole of the U.S. public education system in general, are thus portrayed as failing to serve the needs of the graduates they send to college.

The Impact of Remediation

Perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence linking students’ level of readiness at the start of college and their ability to complete college successfully is the set of findings related to remedial college courses. National remediation statistics suggest

that many students do not complete college because they are not ready for college-level academic work when they get there. The most recent NCES study looking at the impact of remedial courses, published in The Condition of Education 2004, found that 76% of colleges offered remedial courses in the Fall of 2000 (Wirt et al 63), a figure that indicates that the need for remediation is not isolated to community colleges or open-admission universities; rather these courses are a staple at more than three out of four U.S. colleges and universities.

Of greater importance, however, is the finding that students who enroll in remedial courses are much less likely to graduate from college than those who do not take remedial courses. While 69% of students who took no remedial courses obtained a degree or certificate from a postsecondary institution, the percentage of students receiving a degree or certificate after taking remedial courses drops to anywhere from 57% to as low as 30% depending on the subject area in which remediation is needed (Wirt et al 63). So first-year students who come to college and are ostensibly prepared—at least as indicated by their ability to score well on college placement assessments in subjects like reading, math, and writing are considerably more likely, sometimes as much as twice as likely, to get a degree than their counterparts who perform poorly on placement tests and are relegated to remedial courses.

These findings suggest that students who graduate from high school without the necessary skills for introductory college courses are much less likely to complete a degree than those who begin their college career taking courses in the core curriculum. Students who come to college unprepared are not easily “coached up” to college-level writing (or reading, or mathematics) in remedial courses; rather, their success hinges in

large part on whether or not they come to college already prepared for the rigors of the core curriculum.

Although these statistics do provide information about the importance of students' ability when they enter college, they fail to provide any sense of where the blame falls for unprepared students. It is not clear if the fault lies with the schools and the teachers, or with the students themselves. What these statistics do indicate is the importance of the interplay between these two worlds—high schools and colleges—in shaping students' educational futures.

The Transition to College Writing

While the discussion thus far has considered the issue of students' transition from high school to college broadly, when we focus on students' transition to college writing, particularly as it is portrayed in the popular media, similar patterns emerge. Surveys of college professors and students reveal that many of them believe students come to college unprepared to write effectively; large-scale writing assessments are seen to indicate the same thing. The result is a public narrative in which college students' perceived inability to write is attributed to a lack of preparation in high school.

These popular views are countered by several voices from composition scholars who argue that students' seeming lack of preparedness for college writing may not be related to the inadequacy of high school instruction; rather, they suggest that such struggles are an inherent part of the transition from high school to college. These scholars call into question the assumed college-preparatory function of high schools by arguing against what Janet Alsup and Michael Bernard-Donals call the “fantasy of the seamless transition”—an ideal in which students move from high school to college

writing without any difficulty. They argue that students' difficulties in introductory composition courses come from "being pushed out of one's comfort zone and challenged intellectually"—experiences the authors think are invaluable for first-year students (130).

Other scholars have focused on the lack of clarity regarding the relationship between high school and college writing by noting the difficulty that even experienced writing instructors have in articulating the differences between the two. Merrill Davies characterizes the distinction between high school and college writing as "fuzzy," while Deborah Appleman and Douglas Green write about the "elusive" boundary separating high school and college writing. While it's not always clear what the differences are, it is widely assumed that there are differences. Writing to students in the introduction of his first-year composition textbook, The Transition to College Writing, Keith Hjorthshoj articulates why attributing students' difficulties with college writing to their lack of preparation oversimplifies the issue: "Even the best high schools cannot fully prepare you to be a college student, because in some fundamental ways a college or a university is a different kind of learning environment in which you must become a different kind of student" (3). Once again, the notion that a smooth transition from high school to college writing is possible, or desirable, is called into question.

Although these authors question conclusions about the relationship between high school and college writing drawn from large-scale testing and surveys, such studies are reported by media outlets and shape public notions of the quality of writing instruction.

Student and Faculty Perceptions

The same 2005 survey commissioned by Achieve, Inc. that found widespread dissatisfaction among college students and instructors in students' college preparation,

“Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?,” shows that survey respondents find writing to be a particularly troublesome area relative to student preparation. When college students are asked to cite specific areas in which their high school experience failed to prepare them for their college coursework, 35% point to a gap between their high school experiences and college-level expectations related to the “quality of writing that is expected” (4).

The college faculty members surveyed as part of the Achieve, Inc. study echo those students’ sentiments. When asked about students’ preparedness in specific areas, the college faculty indicate that approximately 50% of their students are not prepared for college-level writing (“Rising” 8). The study also finds that “large majorities of instructors are dissatisfied with the job public schools do in preparing students for college when it comes to writing quality (62%)” (8). And when the college faculty are asked to identify key areas in which they would like to see improvements in student preparedness, 37% name “writing quality” (9). Many college instructors also indicate dissatisfaction with high school graduates’ development of other skills introduced in many high school English courses, and necessary for success in first-year college composition courses, including their ability to “think analytically” and to conduct research (8). Faculty in the humanities and social sciences polled for this study are particularly concerned about students’ preparedness in the area of writing. Nearly 70% of the faculty surveyed from these disciplines indicate dissatisfaction with their students’ writing ability (8-9).

College Writing and Large-Scale Assessments

In addition to the dissatisfaction expressed by some college students and instructors, results of national assessments of student writing are also presented in a way

that emphasizes students' lack of preparedness for college writing. As mentioned earlier, the results of the 2006 ACT test indicate that only 69% of students taking the test are ready for college-level writing ("College"). While this figure is much higher than the results in the other test areas, it still suggests that approximately 30% of first-year composition students may not be adequately prepared for their first college writing course. Likewise, results from the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing assessment also suggest that many graduating high school students are not prepared for college writing. The NAEP assessment data from the 2002 writing assessment show that 26% of 12th grade students write at a "below basic" level, and only 24% of high school seniors are writing at a level that NAEP deems "at or above proficient," the level the test makers characterize as "solid academic performance" (The Nation's Report Card).

Preparedness for College Writing as a National Issue

One result of the perception that incoming college students are deficient writers because they are not prepared to write effectively by their high school teachers is that a writing "crisis" is being declared from many quarters. Several large-scale studies of writing instruction have sought to define the nature of, and provide solutions for, this crisis. In The Neglected "R", their 2003 report on the state of writing instruction in the United States, The National Commission on Writing—a select panel funded by the College Board and comprised of teachers, administrators, and researchers from both the K-12 and college levels—calls for a comprehensive, national commitment to teaching writing. The authors of another analysis of the teaching of writing view the situation pessimistically. Writing Next, a 2007 report funded by the Carnegie Foundation and

published by the Alliance for Excellent Education, an educational policy organization, sound an alarming note: "...every year in the United States large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers" (Graham and Perin 3). Such conclusions are reported by major news outlets and result in a sense of "crisis" related to the teaching of writing.

It is important, however, to consider these declarations of a national writing emergency in their political context. For example, shortly after the publication of The Neglected "R", the College Board announced the institution of a writing component to the SAT test. The Alliance for Excellent Education's discussion of a writing crisis occurs in the context of their larger school reform efforts. Efforts tied, at least in part, to the organization's lobbying for increased federal funding of secondary education. Achieve, Inc. is funded by many of the largest corporations in the United States, including IBM, Boeing, and Intel. It is little surprise then that their survey data suggesting students' lack of preparation for college and workplace writing is accompanied by calls for linking high school standards and assessments with the expectations of employers. Although the political motivations of organizations such as Achieve, Inc. may be suspect, their influence on the public debate about writing instruction cannot be denied and has not gone unnoticed.

Understanding Students' Transition to College Writing

Amid these criticisms and calls for change, teachers and scholars in the field of composition have taken steps in recent years to learn more about how students experience the move from high school to college writing. While an interest in the relationships between writing instruction in high schools and colleges has been part of the scholarly

discussion in the field since the early twentieth century, recent studies have responded to the current pressures by looking critically at students' development as writers as they move from high school to college.

One area of inquiry pursued by scholars in composition studies seeking to understand the nature of students' transition from high school to college writing is an exploration of students' perceptions of the relationship between writing in high school and writing in the university. In a 1989 study, Ken Autrey looked at the ways students' previous writing experiences shaped their experience in first-year composition. He notes that students often expressed frustration about the assignments given in high school, particularly the research paper. He also finds that, when asked about individuals that have impacted their development as writers, nearly all students cited a secondary school teacher.

In their survey of 250 first-year writing students, D.R. Ransdell and Gregory Glau note students' dissatisfaction with the prevalence of the five-paragraph essay in their high school classes, a form that rarely led to success in their college classes. Students also indicate that their high school teachers had not graded them stringently enough to prepare them for the ways in which their college instructors evaluated writing.

These studies provide an interesting glimpse at students' feelings about how their high school writing experiences do, or do not, prepare them for college-level writing. However, just as with the survey data from college students discussed earlier, high school English teachers may provide an easy, absent scapegoat for college students who struggle in first-year composition.

Empirical studies that explore the ways in which students negotiate the transition from high school to college writing by examining students as they are in the process of

making the transition are rare. Since such studies would need to start in high schools and follow students to their colleges, this avenue of research presents formidable logistical challenges. Studying students who are minors and cannot grant their own permission to participate in a research project, being able to recruit an adequate number of students to account for the inevitable attrition of students, and observing and interviewing students at multiple sites and over a period of years all present obstacles that are not present when a study focuses on students at a single institution.

In spite of these obstacles, two recent studies provide a look at students as they actually make the transition from high school to college writing. In her study of how students experience the transition between the writing “cultures” of high school and college, Heidi Estrem finds that many of the participants in her study actually had little difficulty in making the transition. And Victoria Valentine Cobb argues that the transition to college writing is a negotiation process in which college instructors push students to try new things relative to their writing, and students try to do what their instructors ask. In this process, students rely on what they know about writing as well as things they have learned both in their high school English classes and in their writing experiences outside the classroom to make sense of the new things their college instructors are requiring of them (207).

These researchers’ descriptions of the ways students experience the transition from high school to college writing are richer and more complex than earlier studies that relied solely on interview and survey data gathered from college students months, or even years, after they had left high school. Notably, studies like these have yet to break into the mainstream of composition scholarship, as both Estrem’s and Cobb’s studies are unpublished doctoral dissertations. This may be due to issues of access—it is easier for

college composition instructors and researchers to study the students that are close at hand; however, it may also be an indicator of a lack of knowledge about or interest in high school English on the part of college composition scholars. Whatever the case, composition research about the transition has almost exclusively focused on college students.

Teachers and the Transition to College Writing

While research projects that examine the experiences, beliefs, and development of college student writers provide valuable information for those interested in how students experience the transition from high school to college writing, and while their student-centric nature is certainly understandable, there have been few studies that look directly at the roles high school and college teachers play in students' transition to college writing.

This research "blind spot" becomes a problem when we consider evidence that suggests teachers play an important role in students' transition from high school to college. For example, researchers with The Bridge Project, a Stanford University-based research initiative that explores the nature of the barriers to more productive relationships between K-12 and postsecondary educational institutions, have found that more high school students get advice about college from their teachers than from their school guidance counselors, despite the fact that teachers are generally less knowledgeable than guidance counselors about college entrance issues. The researchers also found that more students are encouraged to attend college by their high school teachers than by their guidance counselors (Venezia, Kirst, and Antonio 30).

High School Teachers' and Writing Pedagogy

Not only do high school teachers serve as ad hoc counselors for their students, but they also play an obvious pedagogical role in preparing their students for college. While the nature of teachers' classroom role is rather clear, the extent to which the high school teachers' classroom instruction affects students' decisions to matriculate to college as well as the ways in which students learn, and write, in their college classrooms is substantial.

In his study of the "life-worlds" of first-year composition students, William Knox found that high school English teachers greatly influence "...the knowledge, habits and attitudes [students] bring to their first college writing course..." (209). For the students in Knox's study, high school teachers' edicts about font size, paper format, sentence style, and paper structure—particularly a preference for the five-paragraph essay—shaped students' expectations of what would be important in their college composition classes. For example, one student whose high school teacher had consistently lowered her grade because of run-on sentences was reticent to try writing more complex sentences in her first-semester college writing course in spite of her college instructor's encouragement (Knox 212-13).

This persistent influence of high school teachers is complicated by research that suggests high school English teachers and college writing instructors may hold different views about what is important when evaluating student writing. A recent survey conducted by ACT indicates that English teachers in high schools and colleges stress different writing skills (Rooney). The survey identifies differences of opinion about which writing skills are most important as the area in which high school teachers and college instructors showed the least agreement. College instructors cited "grammar and

usage” as the most important skill while high school teachers indicated that “writing strategy” is the most important skill and that “grammar and usage” is the least important of the five categories included in the survey (Rooney). Furthermore, the researchers found that only 69% of high school English teachers say that they teach grammar in their classes (Rooney). The ACT researchers identified a link between increased enrollments in remedial writing courses and the differences in teaching priorities indicated by the survey data (Rooney).

While these results suggest a possible disconnect in the ways writing is taught at the high school and college levels, they also raise more questions than they answer about why we see incongruities in writing pedagogy at the two levels and how teachers enact the different priorities in their classes. These studies do indicate that high school English teachers play an important role in shaping students’ beliefs about writing and their ability to effectively transition to college writing. Although these issues have not been frequently addressed by researchers in composition studies, understanding teachers’ role in students’ transition to college writing have taken on greater importance, and scholars concerned about the transition have begun to focus on teachers of writing.

Cross-Level Conversations among Teachers and the Transition to College

In a 2006 collection of essays published by NCTE entitled What is “College-Level” Writing?, the contributors—who include high school teachers, college students, and faculty members from both two-year and four-year college—grapple with how to answer the titular question. What results is a collection that offers a variety of perspectives on issues related to the transition to college writing from people with widely varying institutional vantage points. In the course of addressing the titular question,

several authors describe shortcomings in students' college preparedness and offer suggestions about how best to ease students' transition from high school to college writing.

High School Teachers' Calls for Conversation

Among the several authors who address school/college transition issues directly, there emerges a common suggested course of action for improving the way students move from high school to college writing: holding conversations that include both high school English teachers and college writing instructors. High school teachers writing in this volume see such conversations as potential opportunities to learn more about the nature of college writing from the perspective of those responsible for teaching it. Davies writes that, as a high school teacher, she struggles to determine (emphasis in original) "...*how proficient* is a college student as compared to a high school student?" (34). She argues that "...it is difficult to identify specifically what college-level writing is and how it is (or should be) different than high school-level writing" (34). Davies characterizes the college preparation work that high school English teachers do as "whispering in the dark" (34), and she asserts that in order for students to be sufficiently prepared for college writing, "...college English professors and secondary English teachers in the same geographic areas need to find ways to communicate on a regular basis so that high school teachers can gauge how they are doing in preparing students for college work" (35).

Milka Mosley, a teacher who characterizes herself as being "...familiar with both worlds, high school and college..." (58), sees major differences in the complexity of writing at the two levels. She argues that the institutional structures within which high school teachers work make college preparation difficult, and she cites several culprits—

No Child Left Behind requirements, district and state “curriculum guides,” students’ lack of confidence in their own writing ability—that contribute to students’ difficulties in first-year writing. Mosley asserts that although “...high school English teachers are somewhat familiar with college-level writing expectations” (60), most college writing instructors are unaware of the demands placed on high school teachers by school, district, and state administrators. To address this lack of knowledge, Mosley proposes “...establish[ing] a line of communication between high school English teachers and first-year college composition instructors” (67). In Mosley’s view, this communication could take the form of “advice and practical workshops” offered by college instructors to help high school teachers better prepare their students for college. She also proposes discussions involving high school English teachers and college writing instructors that have as their basis a discussion of examples of student writing from both levels (67). Mosley concludes that these kinds of interactions might “help both high school and college-level writers” (67).

Another group of high school contributors to What is College-Level Writing?, Jeanette Jordan and her colleagues from Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, Illinois, also argue for more communication among high school English teachers and college writing instructors. Jordan and her colleagues wonder if they are “liars” when they tell their students what to expect in college writing courses. They note that because they have little contact with college instructors, they are forced to rely on the descriptions of the college writing experiences of their former students or on memories of their own experiences in writing courses as college students. Jordan et al see interaction with college instructors as a way of finding answers concerning a variety of issues, notably the importance of the research paper, grammar, and “voice” in college writing classes. They

proclaim their commitment to helping their students succeed in college composition courses but fear that they lack the information necessary to adequately prepare their students.

The high school teachers contributing to this collection are unanimous in their desire for more conversations with their university colleagues, conversations that would allow them to know more about college instructors' expectations for incoming student writers. As such, these teachers make a direct connection between their own knowledge about college writing and the work they do in their classroom relative to college preparation.

College Instructors' Calls for Conversation

These high school teachers' calls for increased communication between high school and college teachers are echoed by the college instructors writing in What Is College-Level Writing?. Patrick Sullivan argues that answering the question posed in the book's title is important because of the "cooling out" that often happens in first-year composition courses. That is, students who are encouraged to attend college but are unprepared for the academic realities they find there often leave the university because of their lack of success in their introductory courses such as first-year composition. Sullivan focuses on encouraging interaction between post-secondary instructors and administrators, but he also suggests initiating a "shared professional dialogue" about expectations for college writing that would include both college faculty and high school teachers (18).

Peter Kittle, a college faculty member writing in What Is College-Level Writing?, argues that college faculty who complain about students' lack of preparation for college

work are too often unaware of the realities that face high school teachers. Kittle draws on his own experience as a high school teacher who was trained in how best to teach writing, both in his college teacher education courses and through professional development with a National Writing Project site. Although he was well trained, Kittle encountered difficulty when attempting to incorporate pedagogical theory into the high school curriculum. He writes that his life as a high school teacher was characterized by "...large class sizes, limited time, and exhausting workload..." (136). He notes that while he confidently told his students what it would take for them to write successfully in college, he was, in actuality, perpetuating "...well-worn and firmly entrenched myths about college-level writing" (136). Kittle recalls that his views about both high school and college writing changed when he became a graduate student instructor, and eventually a professor, who taught college writing courses.

Based on these experiences, Kittle identifies two key impediments to students' successful transition to college writing: differences in the contexts within which high school and college writing instructors teach and the lack of communication between the two groups (140). He advocates "creating learning partnerships between college and high school, with genuine give and take on each side" (141) and emphasizes that these partnerships should not be "one-shot" inservice offerings, but instead be designed "...to establish the kinds of professional relationships that are predicated on mutual respect for teaching abilities, subject matter knowledge, and academic values..." (143). Kittle is pessimistic about the prospect of developing these kinds of collaborations because of the fundamental institutional change they would require, but he also sees collaboration as vital to addressing issues related to students' transition from high school to college writing.

The call for more interaction between high school and college teachers is not limited to What is College-Level Writing?; in an article from the Journal of Basic Writing, George Otte offers cross-level collaboration, in lieu of state-mandated, high-stakes assessments or state-funded charter schools, as the best solution for high school students' inability to transition to college successfully. He argues that these collaborations need to involve both high school teachers and college instructors and should be "knowledge-making" encounters that allow teachers to see how others teach (116). He cautions against potential missteps in these collaborations including the temptation for college instructors to either "talk down" to their high school counterparts or to play the "white knight" who rescues them from their despair (116).

These suggestions for increased communication between writing teachers at high schools and colleges are predicated on the assumption that any interaction between members of the two groups would be worthwhile. While Otte and Kittle offer warnings about potential problems with these kinds of collaborations, the other authors who have written about this issue do not foresee any difficulty. There seems to be little thought given to the next steps, to what might actually happen when high school English teachers and college writing instructors come together to discuss writing. Even for Otte and Kittle, the threats to effective cross-level conversations are not clearly defined. It is important, however, to view calls for more collaboration between high school English teachers and college writing instructors in their historical context. These are two groups who tend to have different levels of education, whose jobs carry different statuses within society, and who work in very different job conditions and within different institutional structures. The lack of consideration given to the ways these differences might impact conversations between high school and college teachers has the potential to doom these

conversations before they start. More importantly, what we do know about these conversations is based almost exclusively on anecdotal descriptions of cross-level interactions.

The History of Cross-Level Conversations

Recent proposals for cross-level conversations are situated within an historical context that has often portrayed high school teachers and college faculty as antagonists. In a 1988 CCC article, Lucille Schultz, Chester Laine, and Mary Savage look back at the often acrimonious relationship between these two groups and conclude:

With some embarrassment, we report that this history has been fraught with failures, that school and college teachers have resorted to blaming each other for those failures, and that more often than not, college teachers have attempted to dominate their colleagues in the schools. (140)

Schultz, Laine, and Savage argue that interactions between high school English teachers and college writing instructors must be considered within this troubling historical context; they also claim that much of the scholarship related to this issue fails to do just that.

In their analysis of the literature related to interactions between high school English teachers and college writing instructors, Schultz, Laine, and Savage describe the existing body of scholarly work about interactions between high school English teachers and college faculty as “minimal,” consisting of either “...prescriptive formulae for would-be collaborators...” or “...descriptive and anecdotal accounts of already successful projects...” (140). They advocate the development of research projects that examine interactions between high school and college teachers “analytically and critically” (140). In the last twenty years, little has changed regarding scholarly writing about high school/college interactions. The two categories Schultz, Laine, and Savage

identified in 1988—“prescriptive formulae” and “anecdotal accounts”—adequately describe the scholarly writing on the subject in the nearly twenty years since their article was published.

Significance of this Study

The existing body of literature related to high school/college interaction is inadequate. Many of us who are interested in the teaching of writing in secondary schools and colleges advocate interaction as a solution to one of our most pressing problems; however the only basis for our acceptance of the value of this enterprise is anecdotal evidence. There may indeed be value in the development of ongoing dialogues among high school teachers and college writing instructors; my own experiences moving between the two levels have convinced me of the need for, and potential value of, cross-institutional conversations. However, facilitation of these conversations must be approached critically, and their success should not be taken for granted. While anecdotal evidence does suggest that these conversations can be productive, a more thorough analysis of what happens in them and constructs for how these conversations might work most effectively are needed.

This study begins to address these gaps in our understanding of high school/college interactions by providing an analytical, empirical exploration of interactions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors. These conversations provide the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of talk between high school teachers and college instructors that is largely missing from the current body of scholarship. Rather than merely providing descriptions of these interactions, this project presents analyses of these conversations using empirical research methods from the field

of discourse analysis, methods that elucidate the influence of institutional status and knowledge in these cross-level conversations.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

- What types of interactional dynamics characterize small-group conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors?
- What topics are participants most interested in?
- What is the relationship between participants' institutional affiliation and their participation patterns or areas of interest in these small-group conversations?

Chapter 2 consists of an overview of the literature that informs this study—providing an historical context for conversations between high school and college teachers of writing. Chapter 3 explains the methods used to collect and analyze data in this examination of cross-institutional conversations and describes the context of the study: the participants, setting, and institutional forces that shaped these conversations. Chapter 4 describes the theoretical framework for this study, with a particular focus on how concepts from the field of Conversation Analysis can inform our understanding of cross-level conversations.

Descriptions of the roles that questions and answers play in these conversations are presented in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses the role of response tokens, particularly change-of-state response tokens, in question/answer sequences among high school and college writing teachers, while Chapter 7 reports the results of a thematic analysis of the participants' questions in the four conversations. Chapters 8 and 9 consist of the close examination of several question/answer sequences to illustrate the high school teachers'

focus on two aspects of college writing: action and evaluation. Finally, Chapter 10 provides a discussion of what these conversational moments, taken together, indicate about what happens when high school English teachers and college writing instructors get together to talk about writing. The final chapter also provides suggestions for the facilitation of future collaborative efforts between the two groups.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

As discussed in the preceding chapter, there is currently a great deal of scholarly interest in collaborations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors. Such interest is, however, not new. The relationship between high school English teachers and college composition instructors, and the need for interaction among them to aid students' transition to college writing has been of sporadic interest since the early twentieth century. Beginning with the formation of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1911, an organization founded to help high school English teachers mitigate the domination of the curriculum by college professors (Ward 72), journal articles describing the ways high school and college teachers interact with one another, suggesting potential models for interaction, detailing possible barriers to successful interaction, and arguing for more interaction have been regular features in forums read by both high school and college English teachers. In fact, articles dating back to the first issues of English Journal argue that high school teachers should have a larger role in the ongoing development of national standards for the teaching of English ("Editorial"), a process that seems to have been dominated by college faculty.

Although it has been a longstanding subject of discussion, scholarly interest in the relationship between high school and college English teachers has been haphazard; the

issue is frequently neglected, only to emerge as a disciplinary concern when there are initiatives for curricular reform or widespread discussion about the college preparation of high school graduates. For example, we see considerable interest in the topic during the 1910s, when the development of national teaching standards for high school English teachers was being considered. In the 1940s, when the changing demographics of college students in the aftermath of World War II necessitated dialogue about what incoming college students needed to know or be able to do, we see renewed interest in the relationship between high schools and colleges. During the 1960s, as college became even more accessible and college faculty and administrators took an interest in the academic preparation of all high school students rather than a select few, we see another surge in scholarly discussions about enhancing communication between high school and college English teachers. As states moved toward developing standards, accountability measures, and state-mandated, high-stakes tests in the 1980s, several descriptions of successful models for high school/college interaction were published. Recent years have seen a renewed interest in the relationship between high school and college English teachers as students' scores on state exit exams and college entrance tests have resulted in concern over high school students' preparedness for college-level work.

As a result of this intermittent scholarly interest in school/college interactions, the subject has resided in the margins of scholarship in the field. The only significant review of the literature related to interactions between high school and college English teachers is Schultz, Laine, and Savage's 1988 CCC article, "Interaction Among School and College Writing Teachers: Toward Recognizing and Remaking Old Patterns." However, rather than providing a complete history of the scholarship, they provide, in their words,

“an historical overview” of the nature of the literature related to school/college interactions about writing and an interpretation and analysis of that history.

Schultz, Laine, and Savage reach several conclusions about what has been written about school/college interactions. Most notably, they characterize the existing scholarship as narrow in scope, consisting of “prescriptive formulae for would-be collaborators... [or] descriptive and anecdotal accounts of already successful projects” (140). Schultz, Laine, and Savage identify two areas that would benefit from research that looked at cross-level interactions “analytically or critically” (140). First, they note the lack of scholarship exploring “the history of these collaborative projects” (140). Second, they call for research that looks critically at the interactions themselves: “we have not explored principles that can inform these collaborative enterprises; and we have not asked—let alone answered—the questions that can lead to further understanding and change” (140). In recent years, several “anecdotal accounts” of successful school/college collaborations have been published, but there has been no comprehensive history of these interactions and no critical inquiries into the nature of successful and unsuccessful interactions that move beyond descriptions of successful collaborations to explore how and why they succeed or fail.

Not only has the content and nature of the scholarship changed little in the years since Schultz, Laine, and Savage’s study, but scholarly treatment of cross-level interactions has also not evolved appreciably in the approximately 95 years since the formation of NCTE. This lack of development reflects poorly on our discipline’s treatment of this issue. If, as the recent calls for increased school/college interaction suggest, cross-level interactions can have a positive impact on writing pedagogy at both levels, we would expect that our collective understanding of those interactions would

have progressed over the last several decades. It has not. For example, in a 1944 issue of College English, Robert Pooley's essay containing recommendations for improving "continuity" between high school and college writing—suggestions similar to those being proposed in 2007—is followed by an article discussing the pedagogical implications of the *ie-ei* rule (Lee), a subject that is unlikely to be addressed in contemporary composition scholarship.

As scholars, we pride ourselves in asking questions and searching for answers. While those searches do not always result in definitive solutions, the expectation is that they will at least result in new questions. This has not been the case with scholarly inquiry into school/college interactions. Rather, the problems that interactions are thought to address, arguments in favor of facilitating interactions, the methods for organizing interactions, the barriers to effective interactions, and the descriptions of interactions have remained static for several decades.

Calls for Interaction

Calls for the formation of groups of high school and college English teachers have a long history. In 1921, George R. Coffman called for "...intelligent and comprehensive co-operation between the secondary schools and the colleges and universities" (139). Eight years earlier, the University of Chicago held a conference that included both high school English teachers and college professors (Schultz, Laine, and Savage 140). Also at this time, we see discussion about the development of nationwide uniform teaching requirements for English, a frequent topic of debate at early NCTE meetings and in issues of English Journal. Such a project necessitated collaboration among high school teachers and college faculty members. However, the committee charged with the development of

these standards was composed primarily of college faculty members; high school teachers made up only 25% of the attendees at the national conference to discuss the requirements in 1909 (“Editorial” 46).

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, English Journal and College English published several calls for increased interaction among high school and college English teachers. In 1940 Warner G. Rice argues that “misunderstandings and misconceptions are bound to disappear when teachers meet face to face, and many things can be said across a table which cannot be set down in writing without some risk of misconstruction” (142). In the same issue of College English in which Rice’s essay appeared, Dora V. Smith acknowledges the value of “conferences between teachers of contiguous sections of the school system” (153). She indicates that the success of articulation initiatives hinges on “the extent to which both high school and college instructors in English have united in the preparation of the standards set” (154). This unity happens, in Smith’s view, when high school and college teachers come together to “study co-operatively” the needs of their students.

Succeeding years saw similar suggestions regarding cross-level conversations. In a 1944 College English article, Pooley argues that in order to more effectively connect high school and college English classes, teachers must work to “break down barriers of prejudice and misunderstanding between the two groups and to create in both groups a sympathetic understanding of the other’s purposes and problems” (152). And in a series of reports addressing the articulation of high school and college writing courses developed from workshops at meetings of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, participants routinely mention cross-level interaction as a prime means of articulation. The advocacy of increased dialogue among high school and college

English teachers became so frequent that a 1952 report on a CCCC workshop addressing issues related to articulation acknowledges that their discussion “produced few new points” (“Articulation of High School” 29). And a similar report from 1958 mentions that although information relative to articulation had been repeated frequently, such repetition was necessary because many states had yet to develop any mechanism for facilitating interactions between high school and college English teachers (“Articulation of Secondary School”).

A similar committee report from the 1957 CCCC meeting also cites the need for “co-operative work study plans” to improve instruction, and it recommends workshops for high school teachers and collaboration among high school teachers and college faculty members in curriculum development (“Articulation between” 163-64). In a 1958 English Journal article, C.M. Rowe issues another call for meetings “Where high school teachers and college teachers meet on common grounds of understanding” (151). Edward Steinberg, writing in 1959, likewise argues that more effective articulation can happen if college instructors “undertake with the high school teachers of English the joint solution of a common problem” (365).

In the 1960s, the calls for greater communication among teachers are accompanied by assertions of the value of cross-level conversations. In 1963, Robert Shafer notes, “Important contributions to college preparation in English have come from the increased cooperation of high school and college teachers” (627). Writing a year earlier, Philip R. Wikelund describes his involvement in “cooperative activities with the high schools of our state” in an attempt to solve what he labels, “the problem of Freshman English” (47).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the discussion moved away from calls for these interactions and toward descriptions of successful collaborative activities from around the country. Collections such as School-College Collaborative Programs in English as well as articles in journals like English Journal and the Journal of Teaching Writing contained many descriptions of cross-level collaborations among high school and college teachers of writing.

As discussed in the previous chapter, recent arguments for interactions between college and high school English teachers are made in the 2006 collection, What Is “College-Level” Writing?. Several authors argue for the development of collaborative relationships between high school and college instructors as a way of addressing perceived problems with high school seniors’ preparedness for college writing. One high school teacher calls for finding “ways to communicate” with college writing instructors in her area (Davies 35), while another calls for creating “a line of communication between high school English teachers and first-year college composition instructors” (Mosley 67). College professors writing in the collection issue similar calls for initiating a “shared professional dialogue” between high school and college writing teachers (Sullivan 18) and “creating learning partnerships between college and high school, with genuine give and take on each side” (Kittle 141).

The authors in this collection are not alone among recent advocates of interaction between high school and college English teachers. In a 2002 Journal of Basic Writing article, George Otte argues that ongoing collaborations between high school and college teachers, rather than state mandates and assessments, can ameliorate perceived problems with high school education: “Colleges and high schools, the greatest and most essential learning communities we have, are starting to take a learning communities approach to

their mutual concerns and problems” (113). And in 2005, Miles McCrimmon asserts the need that school and college teachers “need to communicate across teaching levels much more consistently, humbly, and searchingly” (252). With the exception of Otte’s, all of these calls for more communication between high school and college English teachers echo similar sentiments and imply that their suggestions represent some kind of new course for the relationship between teachers from the two levels rather than the most recent incarnations of long-discussed ideas.

Cross-Level Interaction and Student Preparation

Recent calls for school/college interactions link these conversations with students’ preparation for college. That is, conversations among high school and college English teachers are seen as a means of helping students make a smoother transition to college writing. Historically, the perceived link between cross-level conversations and students’ transition to college has been a feature of most discussions of cross-level interactions. Many of the first interactions between high school English teachers and college faculty members were instigated by the university, and they were seen as a way of improving the skills of incoming first-year students.

In the inaugural issue of English Journal, W.D. Lewis, a high school teacher, writes about his belief that many of his students may not be ready for college-level work. He cites as evidence the increasing interest of universities in the high school writing curriculum: “We find, for instance, that Harvard University thinks it necessary to send out to the schools a pamphlet stating the most frequent errors in English among its Freshmen” (9). Harvard was not alone in its bid to improve students’ preparation for college writing by initiating a dialogue with high school English teachers. In the first

three decades of the twentieth century, joint projects between high schools and colleges were happening in several states across the U.S. including New York, Michigan, North Carolina, and Washington (Schultz, Laine, and Savage 141). And a decade later, Coffman's call for cooperation between secondary schools and colleges responds to the perceived need for students to be better prepared for college writing courses.

These early attempts to use cross-level interactions to impact students' preparation for college writing do not appear to have been successful based on the continued concern about student preparation throughout the twentieth century. William W. Watt, in a 1942 English Journal article, says that his first-year students "struggle to adapt" to writing in college (303), and later claims, "too many entering freshmen, perhaps the majority in some colleges, cannot write their own language with even a moderate degree of mechanical correctness" (304). Watt labels this group of students, "illiterates" (304). Writing in 1958, Joseph H. Marshburn states, "the high school graduate is inadequately prepared for English," a statement he describes as an "inescapable conclusion" (144). Rowe's 1958 essay about college preparation is actually titled, "What is the Real Problem?" In 1962, Wikelund labels high school students' lack of preparation, "the problem of Freshman English" (47).

As discussed in Chapter 1, expressions of concern regarding the preparation of graduating high school students for college writing have become more frequent in recent years. Otte describes a widespread belief—one that he personally rejects—that "high schools are not doing their job" (108). Other surveys of college students and faculty indicate that many of them feel that high schools fail to adequately prepare for college, and in particular college writing ("Rising"; Wirt et al; "College"; Graham and Perin).

Whatever the nature of the problems students encounter in the transition to college writing, getting teachers together for cross-level conversations is a popular solution.

High School “Problems” and College Preparation

The articulation between high school English and college composition and its effect on high school graduates’ level of college preparation have been considered by many authors to be a “problem” that needs solving (Wikelund; Smith). In this formulation, we are left with the question of what causes the problem. That is, if there is a problem with students’ preparation for college, and if a greater level of interaction between high school and college teachers is the way to solve the problem, it stands to reason that there are issues that will be mitigated by the interaction. Thinking of this medically—if underprepared college writers are the “symptom,” and cross-level interaction is the “cure,” then it would be helpful to know what “disease” is causing those “symptoms” and how the “cure” will work to eliminate the “disease.”

In the corpus of scholarship, most of which is authored by college faculty members, a portrait emerges that places the problems students face as they move from high school to college writing squarely on the high schools. The typical argument is that students struggle in first-year composition because the high schools have let them down. These arguments, however, are seldom meant as critiques of high school teachers. In fact, what emerges from the literature is a view of high school teachers as ignorant and powerless. College composition scholars addressing the issue have consistently attributed students’ lack of preparation for college writing to a combination of challenges faced by high school teachers, including class size, workload, student demographics, and their own lack of knowledge about what happens in college writing courses. Pooley

nicely summarizes these key categories in 1944 when he asserts, “Many teachers are weighed down with class loads which make time for individualized composition teaching next to impossible” (150). He also notes challenges caused by “the range of ability in many high-school classes” (150), and he argues that “high-school teachers are not generally well-enough informed as to the standards of composition demanded by college courses” (150). He suggests that this lack of information may be attributable to the fact that many high school teachers “pass through freshman English without much effort and with little or no consciousness of the problems of the poor student” (150-51).

Class size and teacher workload have been common concerns in discussions about the relationship between high schools and colleges. In 1942, Watt decries the “overpopulation” faced by high school teachers (302). In 1958, the participants at the CCCC workshop on articulation also single out teacher workload as the key challenge facing high school teachers relative to the preparation of students for college writing (“Articulation of Secondary School” 195). That same year, Watson writes that he and his colleagues are “appalled” to hear about high school teachers’ teaching loads and class sizes (153). Steinberg, writing in 1959, also indicates that large classes are part of the trouble with high schools: “High school classes are too large—too often double what they should be” (365). And reports from CCCC throughout the 1960’s echo these diagnoses of the problem with high schools. The concern over teacher workload has not abated over time. As recently as 2002, Otte argued, “high schools consistently have less time to work with more students” (110); and the National Commission on Writing identified lack of time as the key detriment to writing instruction in their 2003 study of writing pedagogy in U.S. schools, The Neglected “R”.

In addition to the large classes common in high schools, an ever-changing student population has also been cited as a reason high schools inadequately prepare students for college writing. The transformation of the student population in high schools and colleges at several historical moments in the twentieth century, moments at which both high school and college education became more accessible to a greater number of Americans, caused a shift in how each institution considered its role relative to its students. For colleges, this often meant struggling with how to work with first-generation college students who may not have come from high schools that emphasized college preparation in their curriculum.

In describing the “dark cloud” that faced the University of Michigan in 1940, Rice outlines a scenario—one repeated, with small variations, throughout the twentieth century—in which colleges struggle with an influx of students from segments of society that had not previously been well-represented in the university’s student population:

The situation which we faced was this: our enrolments were holding up, indeed more students than before were coming to us; but from our point of view at least, many of them seemed very badly prepared, and a great number were looking in new directions—making new demands upon our courses in English. (136)

Colleges struggled with ways to cope with their changing student population, and those students’ lack of preparedness for college. Often however, this struggle was presented as even more pressing for high schools, which did not have the benefit of imposing minimum entrance requirements.

Also writing in 1940, Smith argues that the changing demographics of high schools—which were educating more students, who had a broader range of postsecondary opportunities, for a longer time—necessitated a reassessment of their college-preparatory function. Likewise, Rowe, writing 18 years later, identifies

“increasing population growth” as a key factor in the problem of college preparation (150), which contributed to a situation in which high schools were faced with the often competing goals of preparing some students for college while meeting the academic needs of an increasingly broad range of students, many of whom had no academic ambitions beyond high school graduation. In 1963, Shafer describes the way that most high schools seemed to be addressing this conflict: “it is clear that most American high schools are continuing to maintain their ‘comprehensiveness’ by developing curriculum plans for students of greatly varying abilities” (625).

While the student population has experienced many changes, possible explanations for the problems of student preparedness for college writing have also been regularly attributed to the lack of knowledge of high school teachers. Much of this discussion has centered on the notion that high school teachers just do not know enough about what is required in college writing courses. There is certainly some basis for this claim as we see a number of published texts devoted to reprinting and answering high school English teachers’ questions about college writing.

Over the years, English Journal has published several articles written by college faculty members intended to respond to high school teachers’ questions about college expectations. In 1942, an essay entitled “What Do the Colleges Want?” is published. This work is followed in 1958 by a series of papers published in the same journal under the rather unoriginal title, “What Do the Colleges Want?” This series included essays written by college professors with titles like, “What We Do Not Expect from High School Graduates,” “What Literature Do College-Bound Students Read?”, and “What is the Real Problem?” Just two years later, English Journal published another article entitled, “What Do the Colleges Expect?” Implicit in these pieces is the belief that high

school teachers lack knowledge and that college instructors have the responsibility to supply it. In 1982, Perrin says as much when he writes that, in his experience, “high-school students and teachers had many unanswered questions about writing courses at the university,” and that he, as a university composition instructor, was equipped to provide those answers (409).

College faculty writing to provide high school teachers with answers about college writing do not tend to take a condescending tone; rather, they seem to think that it is unreasonable to expect most high school English teachers to have much knowledge about college writing. In arguing for classroom intervisitations, Otte attributes the lack of knowledge to the fact that the worlds in which high school teachers and college teachers work are “remarkably closed off and self-contained” (116). Many college faculty (McQuade; Steinberg; Marshburn; Watson; Watt) are also quick to acknowledge that they and their colleagues often exhibit a similar lack of knowledge of what happens in high school English classes.

The apparent sensitivity of college faculty toward the challenges faced by high school teachers extends to the discussions of high school teachers’ lack of knowledge. Rather than being overtly criticized for their ignorance, high school teachers’ lack of familiarity with the norms and expectations of colleges is explained and excused by college professors. Watson argues that high school teachers are often “out of touch” with college work because they rely on their own college experiences when attempting to prepare their students for college writing. One of the CCCC groups discussing articulation in the 1950’s goes so far as to argue that high school teachers’ lack of knowledge may be because of their academic prowess when they argue that “many persons are teaching English who, in college, were either entirely exempted from

Freshman English or given English credit for subfreshman English courses” (“Articulation between” 164). They add that “their [high school teachers’] teaching efficiency is obviously impaired through their having missed the very college course the content and methods of which most closely parallels high school English” (“Articulation between” 164).

What seems clear is that college professors writing about issues of college preparation not only believe that they are serving their own self-interest, but they also seem to believe strongly that many high school teachers desire their assistance. However, while college faculty frequently acknowledge that demographic shifts and their own lack of knowledge about high school teaching shape their view of first-year students, high schools are presented as the primary causes of students’ struggles with college writing. The tendency of college faculty to place the responsibility for students’ performance in first-year writing on high school teachers, regardless of the college instructors’ intentions in doing so, has been met with resistance from high school teachers who reject pedagogical suggestions emanating from colleges and universities.

Tension in Cross-Level Interactions

Suggestions by college faculty regarding how high schools might better prepare students for college writing have been met with a variety of reactions—reactions that seem to depend on how the suggestions have been transmitted. As a result, a paradox in the way we have understood the relationship between high school English teachers and college composition instructors emerges in the literature. On one hand, there are many descriptions of successful interactions between high school and college teachers in the form of anecdotal accounts of local collaborations. In these accounts, members of the

two groups engage in productive conversations and reach common understandings. However, other texts suggest that the relationship between high school teachers and college instructors is inherently flawed and consists primarily of interactions in which college instructors attempt to dictate how writing should be taught while high school teachers resist these proclamations.

English Journal has been the forum for some notable dustups between high school teachers and college faculty members that demonstrate the condescension and resistance that has characterized some cross-level interactions. In 1958, W. Arthur Boggs, a self-described “instructor of college composition” wrote an open letter (that he tells readers was actually sent) to an unnamed high school principal. In his letter, Boggs expresses “dismay” that the research paper was being taught in high schools because, in his view, high school students did not have the material or intellectual resources necessary for completing such an assignment. Boggs argues that teaching the research paper is not just unnecessary, but it can actually be harmful to students: “I can truthfully say that the more a student has learned about the research paper in high school, the more difficulty I have in teaching him valid research techniques, since I must have him unlearn all that he has learned as well as teach him what he must know” (86). The rest of the letter outlines what Boggs believes should be taught in high school classes—assignments that focus on writing unified and coherent paragraphs, composing clear and concise sentences, and learning “the mechanics of writing” (87).

English Journal published a response to Boggs’ letter a few months later. Will C. Jumper’s “Dear Instructor of College Composition” responds with “dismay” to Boggs’ letter. Jumper, a high school teacher, writes that Boggs has a “myopic” view of high schools; specifically, Jumper asserts that too many college instructors believe that “high

school teachers and principals are hopelessly unrealistic dolts who don't know a scholarly hawk from a pedagogical handsaw" (289). Jumper encourages Boggs to abandon his "delusions of grandeur" for a more "realistic" approach to teaching that focuses on the developmental needs of individual students (290). He closes his letter on a self-congratulatory note when he notes that the work of his high school seniors "far surpassed the comparable work of a class of upper-division and graduate students whose papers I graded recently at one of our outstanding universities" (291). Jumper makes it clear that Boggs' attempt at providing advice was unwelcome and that he believes high school teachers can thrive without any assistance from college faculty.

This sentiment would likely be shared by Karen Jost, whose 1990 English Journal article, "Why High-School Writing Teachers Should Not Write," argues against pedagogical decrees coming from "on high" (65). In particular, Jost feels that the notion that high school English teachers should write with their students, an idea championed by several key figures in composition studies including Donald Murray, James Moffett, and Jim Gray, is unrealistic and unhelpful. Jost cites the demands placed on high school teachers' time and attention as key reasons why high school teachers should not feel obligated to write with their students. In Jost's view, the underlying issue in this case is high school teachers' blind acceptance of pedagogical suggestions from college faculty. She believes there is an "alarming gap" between high school English teachers and college writing instructors; she argues that this gap allows "academia to propagate as truth what is in serious error" (65).

The gap between high school and college teachers, as Jost understands it, seems to be a nearly unbridgeable one that stems from college teachers' lack of understanding of the realities of high school teaching. For Jost, her world and that of college

composition instructors exist as polar opposites—high school teachers only have time to do “technical writing” while college professors can spend time on essays, stories, and poems; college professors are required to write for professional advancement, while most creative writing is a “pleasant hobby” for high school teachers; and high school teachers are “committed to the development of students as whole people, not just as writers,” while college instructors have the luxury of focusing solely on students’ development as writers (66). The metaphors that bookend Jost’s article underscore the sizeable differences she sees between the work of high school teachers and that of college instructors; she begins by talking about commands coming from the “mountain heights of academia” (65), and the essay ends with an invitation for college faculty to “come on down here into the trenches” (66).

The responses to Jost’s essay published in a subsequent issue of English Journal, said to be roughly five to one in Jost’s favor, indicate that many high school teachers agree with Jost’s assertion that an enormous gap exists between high school English teachers and college writing instructors. Letters praise Jost for “challenging the academics” (Sommerville 25) or “challenging the gurus” (Pierce 25). Another letter decries the “ridiculous, bombastic pomposity of the college professor who has never been in a high school” yet gives a seminar on writing pedagogy (Martin 26). Another letter-writer describes college professors as “pedantic” and “myopic” while completing a “light schedule” in their “ivory tower” (Rockefeller 26).

Several other essays also provide portraits of overworked and undereducated high school teachers and authoritarian, out-of-touch college instructors who are working at cross-purposes. McQuade decries English teachers at both levels who have resorted to “internal bickering [and] trading insults which reinforce the prejudices embedded in the

hierarchical structure of our system of learning” (8). He asserts that cross-level conversations among English teachers are “usually marked by patronizing and resentful attitudes nurtured by misconceptions” (9). McQuade describes college professors who, expecting that school teachers want to learn from them, “lecture imperiously” to these teachers about how to teach high school students without having done it themselves. School teachers, on the other hand, “quietly express their resentment—much of it misinformed or misguided—of the privileges enjoyed by college instructors” (9). McQuade asserts, “Many elementary and secondary school teachers look up at their college counterparts and envision them haughtily preoccupied with research on arcane subjects at the expense of more immediate and practical issues” (9).

The assumption of animosity between high school and college teachers, based on what McQuade admits may be his own “distended characterizations,” is one that is representative of the ways in which scholars have portrayed the relationship between high school and college English teachers. In their review of scholarship about high school/college interactions, Schultz, Laine, and Savage argue that many cross-level interactions have been “marked by acrimony” (141) and conclude that these interactions have been, on the whole, unsuccessful. However, this long-standing narrative of dissension exists alongside a significant body of scholarship that presents a very different portrait of these interactions—a picture of high school English teachers and college writing teachers engaging in productive and collegial cross-institutional conversations.

Successful Cross-Level Interactions

Most of the anecdotal descriptions of interactions between high school English teachers and college composition instructors portray these interactions to be successful

and free of the animosity that is ascribed to them in other scholarship on the subject. And while Schultz, Laine, and Savage imply that the move away from acrimony has occurred “only recently,” we can see evidence of the effectiveness of local interactions over a span of several decades.

In 1940, Rice describes a program initiated by the University of Michigan wherein English Department faculty members would be dispatched to area high schools to read and comment on high school students’ writing in order to provide feedback about how well their work met university standards. This program was augmented by professional development meetings for the high school participants. Rice says that the program, then in its initial phases, had proceeded “steadily and energetically” and that they had made “satisfactory progress” (144). In fact, we see no hint of any acrimony or disagreement between the high school teachers and the college faculty with whom they work. On the contrary, Rice provides excerpts from letters written by principals and teachers that provide glowing praise for the project. Rice notes that there was actually too much praise, and not enough thoughtful critique, in the responses of the high school teachers and principals; he advocates a more open exchange that might lead to criticism of the program along with suggestions for improvement.

Wikelund describes high school teachers’ positive reactions to statewide mandates that outlined effective college preparation practices and had been developed by college faculty and distributed to high school teachers and principals throughout the state. According to Wikelund, out of the hundreds of letters the authors of the statement received, only two letters, both written by administrators, were critical of the college faculty members’ suggestions. He notes that most of the reaction, including the response of the editor of the state journal for English teachers as well as that of attendees of the

state conference for high school English teachers, was overwhelmingly positive.

Wikelund asserts that the reaction from teachers in the state was unanimous: “There has not been a single objection to the Statement from a teacher” (50). Wikelund concludes his description of the committee’s work with excerpts from letters he received from teachers around the country—statements that reinforced how much teachers appreciated the advice given by his committee.

In a 1958 CCCC report on articulation, several successful articulation practices involving interaction between high school and college English teachers are discussed. These include inter-visitation of schools by instructors, cross-level writing assessment exchanges, and professional conferences for teachers from both levels that address issues of student preparation for college writing. All of these practices are presented as successful ones; there is no mention of failure, or even difficulty, in enacting these initiatives. In particular, the authors point out that activities such as the exchange of class visits “produce considerable good will and understanding in both camps” (“Articulation of” 194).

More recent descriptions of school/college collaborations are presented as similarly successful. Robert Perrin’s 1982 description of a grading exchange between colleges and high schools in Illinois indicates that teachers from both levels benefited greatly from the interaction. Perrin discusses not only what he learned about high school students and teachers as a result of his involvement in the project, but he also writes that high school teachers found that participation in the program led to “a new kind of excitement in their writing classes” (410). He gives no indication that teachers resisted his presence in their classes or the fact that he was evaluating their papers; in fact, he

argues that they were actually relieved to be able to talk with someone from the university who could answer their questions.

Linda Norris's 1994 description of an inquiry-based collaborative project for college faculty and high school English teachers was similarly successful. Norris indicates that this project, which had as its primary component collaborative planning sessions involving both high school and college teachers, allowed the participants to gain new insight into their teaching practices. She provides extensive examples from participants' "Discovery Memos" that show the effect of the cross-level collaboration on the way many participants thought about pedagogical questions they sought to answer. Norris also provides examples of the participants' feedback about the sessions that show how productive and mutually-beneficial the participants found the project to be. One high school teacher writes that the work was "refreshing, dynamic, and challenging," while another points out that the power inequality that seems to be an assumed part of interactions between high school and college teachers was absent: "I felt we treated each other as equals; no one distributed his attention according to status or experience...The college strata did not dominate—even if they wanted to! I never felt a 'them and us' attitude or discussion" (qtd. in Norris 32).

Strachan's 2002 description of conversations that she, a college professor, facilitated with high school teachers describes a similar level of success. She notes that the meetings were rewarding for all involved: "This exchange of views and practices has been richly rewarding for us all" (148). She also provides a response to the conversations from "Starla," one of the high school teachers who participated: "A lot of us feel that instructors at the university don't have a clue about the conditions of teachers at the high school, so these conversations are highly motivating—we can see that our work is

respected and understood” (149). Starla’s comment illustrates nicely the disjuncture between what high school teachers think “college instructors” as a group are like (or at least as they’re presented in much of the literature), and the reality of interpersonal interactions with an actual college instructor.

Even when some obstacles emerge in a project, which happened in a 1982 collaborative project between high school teachers and college faculty at the University of Indiana, those obstacles are presented as being outweighed by the benefits participants receive. Marilyn Sternglass’s description of a project in which high school teachers taught college composition courses, focuses on participants’ uncertainty regarding assessment methods. She describes participants as “concerned” and having “misgivings” about the assessment procedures. However, she concludes on a much more optimistic note when she quotes one of the high school teachers who participated in the study: “I enjoy being part of the project. Enjoyed the seminar and the meetings and the people I met” (260). Speaking on behalf of the college faculty members who took part in the project, Sternglass notes that the high school teachers “earned our respect and admiration for their commitment to their students and their discipline” (260). Once again, we see a collaborative project that, in spite of some disagreement among participants, is shown to be a success.

These examples demonstrate the pervasiveness of the positive view of interactions between high school and college English teachers. My research yielded no evidence of descriptions of cross-level interactions that contain anything like the animosity that is described in much of the literature and also in evidence in some of the published exchanges between high school and college teachers. The question remains as to the reasons for the universally positive descriptions of school/college interactions.

One reason may be that these interactions are nearly always written by college professors, either alone or in conjunction with a high school teacher. Much of the animosity in the relationship between high school and college English teachers as it has been traditionally presented originates from college instructors. In this formulation, it is the college instructors who have unrealistic expectations, who have no idea what goes on in high school classes, who choose to insult high school teachers because of the academic ability of incoming college students, and who refuse to take any responsibility for the development of student writers entering college. College faculty are frequently depicted as the aggressors in this relationship. They are portrayed as the ones who instigate, typically in an unproductive way, conversations with high school teachers. Budden, Nicolini, Fox, and Greene represent this view when they write, “Too many college composition faculty berate secondary school teachers, blaming them for college students’ inability to punctuate, to cite, to synthesize” (75). On the other hand, the high school teachers are typically portrayed as reactionary, as merely responding to college instructors’ criticisms and unwelcome advice.

The traditional casting of college faculty as the aggressors in the broader discussions about the relationship of the two institutions provides some incentive to college faculty members to emphasize the success of these interactions. College composition instructors are likely aware of the history of high school/college interactions that has placed the responsibility for animosity on them, and descriptions of successful interactions can be interpreted as attempts to revise that grand narrative.

Another factor that may contribute to the positive portrayals of school/college interactions is their authorship—nearly all of these descriptions are written by active participants in the conversations. People who have been actively engaged in initiating,

planning, and facilitating cross-level interactions are likely going to focus on the good things that happened during those conversations. The person who planned a meeting among teachers can take satisfaction if that interaction is successful. Conversely, an acrimonious conversation among teachers might reflect poorly on the planner of that session. It would certainly seem to be in the self-interests of active participants in cross-level conversations to focus on the successful aspects of those interactions. What this allows them to do is to present a kind of hero narrative in which the participants in an interaction are able to overcome decades of animosity, tension, and misunderstanding between high school and college English teachers and begin to change long-held perceptions about the school/college relationship.

The focus in the literature on the animosity between school and college English teachers provides an ideal counterpoint for teachers who have engaged in similar interactions. Descriptions of successful collaborative projects demonstrate growth in the cross-level relationship. The teachers describing these sessions can then juxtapose their positive experiences with the narrative recounting a history of animosity, and the appearance of progress is created. However, because there is little acknowledgment of the complex history of interactions between school and college English teachers, the authors fail to give readers a full sense of how their work actually advances our understanding of these interactions.

Conclusion

This lack of a significant scholarly agenda related to cross-level teacher interactions is surprising. Studies of school/college interactions in English have been assigned a sort of second-class status. For decades, these interactions have been seen as

having little value apart from the knowledge learned or the texts created. As a result, scholarly work related to these interactions has been largely informal and anecdotal; the primary venues for the “publication” of scholarship, apart from the handful of English Journal and College English articles and relevant essays from a few edited collections, have been professional conferences.

While the number of conference sessions devoted to the issue of cross-level interactions has remained rather consistent through the last several decades, and while the conversations that happen at professional meetings can be valuable, conference conversations tend to be left at the hotel ballroom door. The lack of scholarly activity is not, in my view, because people have become disinterested in the topic. Speaking anecdotally, What Is College-Level Writing? has been extremely popular. Consider: the initial publication run sold out in a matter of days; the NCTE vendors at the 2006 annual convention sold out of the book in the first two days of the conference; and the session at the 2006 NCTE annual convention featuring contributors to the collection was so well-attended that many teachers were turned away because the room had reached capacity.

The interest in cross-level conversations we see over the last several decades is still very much present; and as I suggested in the previous chapter, recent developments related to college entrance requirements and state standards have increased the sense of urgency surrounding discussions of effective college preparation practices. If, as the range of scholarship over several years suggests, constructive conversations among high school English teachers and college composition instructors are so important to the ways in which students are prepared for college writing, we need empirical inquiry so we can better understand what makes successful conversations work as well as what factors are at play in disagreements among high school and college English teachers. The need for

empirical research is underscored by the relative lack of movement in our understanding of this issue over several decades. We need research that helps to change the nature of our scholarly conversation about cross-level interaction. Rather than asking the same kinds of questions, identifying the same kinds of problems, and proposing the same kinds of solutions, research can help us move toward asking new questions, noticing new problems, and providing new solutions.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

In order to explore teacher talk about writing in the context of the high school/college transition, this study is designed to capture conversations between high school and college teachers. Since classroom teachers from these two institutional settings talk with one another infrequently, I organized a discussion between high school English teachers from Fairview Public Schools and graduate student instructors of composition from Midwest University². This meeting was arranged in response to concerns expressed by English teachers in Fairview that they were not adequately preparing their students for college writing. They thought that talking with college instructors might be helpful in addressing these concerns. I had also heard from many of my Midwest University colleagues, graduate student instructors teaching first-year writing, who expressed some frustration about large variations in the preparation level of the students in their first-year composition courses. They expressed an interest in talking with high school teachers in order to better understand how writing is taught in high school English classes. Like the high school teachers, their interest suggested a link between talking with teachers and better understanding the experiences of their students.

² The names of the university, the school district, and all participants are pseudonyms.

Study Design

In addition to addressing localized interest in cross-level conversations, this study is designed to respond to gaps in the current scholarship about high school/college interactions. High school/college interactions described in the literature tend to fall into two categories: either they are discussions that are fully organized and mediated by college faculty members (Strachan), or they are collaborations between small, select groups of high school teachers and university faculty typically formed to develop new curriculum or assessments (Dale and Traun; Norris; Carriere and Smith). While the descriptions of these two types of meetings provide some insight into interactions between high school and college teachers, the narrow range of participants runs counter to recent calls for broad-based professional dialogue among teachers of writing in high schools and colleges. This project is designed to move away from analysis of the discussions of small, elite, self-selected groups of teachers to look at conversations among a broader range of classroom teachers from both types of institutions.

The design of this study differs from most studies of school/college interactions among writing teachers described in the literature because a wide range of classroom teachers were invited to attend, the attendees were not there to complete any outside “project” or produce a tangible product, and the analysis of the interactions has not been done by an active participant in the conversations. All of the participants in these conversations are classroom teachers. And while the department chairs from Fairview’s two high schools were in attendance, there were no other administrators from either the school district or the university. In addition, the college instructors were all PhD students who were employed by the university as graduate student instructors of first-year writing courses as part of their financial support.

In these conversations, the groups had no goals beyond conversation. They were not required to produce a text that reflected their discussion or even to reach consensus on any of the issues they discussed. This was intended to encourage open, collegial dialogue, one of the desired forms of cross-level interactions in recent essays, rather than the task-oriented discussions so prevalent in the literature.

The researcher's level of participation in the small-group discussions that comprise the bulk of the data for this project was minimal. The researcher recruited participants for the meeting from both the high schools and the university, planned the logistics of the meeting, and assigned participants to small groups prior to the meeting in order to ensure that each small-group had a roughly equal number of people and that there was a fairly equal distribution of high school teachers and college instructors in each group. The researcher was not a participant in any of the small groups.

While broad claims regarding the typicality of cross-level conversations cannot be made based on four conversations, the narrow data corpus lends itself to microanalysis of discourse. As a result, this study serves as a foray into an area mostly untouched by empirical research. This study demonstrates the practical and conceptual value in looking closely at the ways that teachers talk with one another and has implications for the way we understand cross-level conversations among English teachers.

Context for the Study

Fairview Public Schools

The community of Fairview is a “first-ring” suburb that borders a major metropolitan area. Twenty years ago, it was a community that was majority white, with a

small minority population. In recent years, many of the community's white residents have moved to more distant, and typically more affluent suburbs while an influx of African-American residents moving out from the nearby metropolis has significantly changed the demography of the city. Fairview and some of its neighboring suburbs also have a large population of immigrants from the Middle East. At the time of data collection for this study, Fairview's student population consisted of roughly equal numbers of African-American and white students along with a sizable, but smaller number of students of Middle Eastern descent.

The college aspirations of Fairview students reflect national trends. Nearly all of the students graduating Fairview schools planned to pursue some form of postsecondary education, and approximately 80% did. Many of these students would be the first in their families to attend college. It was in part because of the high proportion of students who would be first-generation college students, and also because of a concern shared by many teachers that the district's intense focus on standardized test preparation was impeding other forms of instruction in English classes, that these teachers sought conversations with college writing instructors.

At the time of this study, the school district was responding to public pressure to raise students' scores on the state-mandated, high-stakes assessment by implementing mandates designed to improve test scores.³ In an interview with the local paper, the mayor had publicly criticized the district superintendent for the district's low scores. The mayor was concerned with decreasing property values in the city, which he attributed to a negative perception of the schools based on state test scores. The mayor believed that realtors were steering homebuyers away from Fairview and toward some of the more

³ The impact of high-stakes testing pressures on classroom instruction in Fairview has been examined previously. See Rex and Nelson, "What 'teaching'" and "How Teachers."

affluent neighboring towns and using the district's test scores as proof of these neighboring areas' superiority to Fairview.

The resulting public discussion about the state of the district's schools, and the level of their state test scores, led the district to implement mandates designed to improve test scores. These mandates were top-down measures that served to alienate many teachers. At one of the high schools, state test scores were listed by teacher and posted next to the school's main office. Both high schools devoted nearly all of their professional development time to workshops devoted to preparing students for the state test. The district bought, and teachers were expected to use in their classrooms, workbooks that contained exercises designed to prepare students for standardized tests. And all teachers at the district's two high schools were expected to conduct regular assessments of their students' readiness for the state tests, organize and report the scores of these tests along with their students' level of progress, and modify the curriculum as needed to address areas of weakness identified in the practice test results. This kind of top-down, high-stakes accountability system had set the teachers on edge. Many of them struggled with how to meet the district mandates for the state assessment while still staying true to their own beliefs about how best to teach literacy skills. This tension was especially strong for the teachers of juniors and seniors who wanted to prepare their students for college, but were required to do it within the curricular framework mandated by the district.

As a result of Fairview teachers' participation in a research project conducted by a faculty member from Midwest University, several high school English teachers from the district in collaboration with the faculty researcher formed a group called Literacy in Action (LIA); the group participated in designing professional development for English

teachers in the district that fulfilled the district's assessment mandate while still incorporating curriculum that met other standards. This was accomplished through regular collaboration and conversations about the roles of literacy in their classrooms and in the lives of their students.

This group was successful, in part, because of its voluntary nature. Each teacher in the group had chosen to take part in the professional development and was personally invested in the group's work in ways that were atypical in the district-mandated professional development sessions I had observed. This group also was unique in that it brought teachers from the district's two high schools together to work collaboratively. In the years before this professional development group began, teachers at the two high schools had little professional contact with one another in keeping with their history of competitive contentiousness. While there were, periodically, joint professional development meetings that were attended by teachers from both schools, generally teachers from the two schools sat on different sides of the room and had very little contact with one another. LIA allowed teachers from each of the two schools to learn more about their colleagues, the unique challenges that each school faced, and the common areas of concern that they shared.

The meeting which provided the data for this study was instigated at the request of the high school English teachers who were part of the LIA professional development study group. The high school teachers that attended wanted to be there and wanted to have the kinds of discussions that were taking place, even though some of the attendees were not LIA members. A co-chair of one high school's English department, who had boycotted LIA, even attended. As a result, the attendees were more amenable to the

proceedings than was typical in high school professional development meetings mandated by the district.

Based on my earlier experiences with high school English teachers in Fairview, it was clear that, apart from their work with LIA, most of them disliked the professional development they attended because it was geared solely toward district initiatives to increase student performance on the state's standardized test. They found these meetings, where they were instructed, for example, in how to use the comprehensive set of workbooks designed to help students review and prepare for the standardized tests, to be tedious. They frequently left these sessions angry because they felt that much of what the district was mandating ran contrary to their own beliefs about best practices for the teaching of English Language Arts.

This conversation occurred within a mostly close-knit community of teachers who had been working together over a period of several months. They also had experienced positive interactions with university representatives in their work with the school of education faculty member who facilitated LIA. In their experience, university personnel were honest, trustworthy, professional, and helpful. These experiences worked together to shape the frame of mind these individuals brought to the discussion with the university writing instructors. They had high expectations for professional development because they had been part of a professionally-rewarding professional development cohort. They expected the university personnel to be friendly and helpful because they had extensive experience with specific individuals they had come to know and trust for their expertise. They expected conversation rather than condemnation because their work with university personnel in the past had been constructive and collaborative in nature. In short, their experiences likely led to expectations that were nothing like the professional

development nightmare that Kittle describes. This gathering was a home-grown collaboration between two, close-knit groups of classroom practitioners.

Midwest University

Midwest University is a large, selective, state university in the Midwest with a total enrollment of approximately 35,000 students. While the university draws students from all over the nation and the world, a majority of first-year students come from the state. The university's writing program had undergone several significant changes in the years prior to this study, one of which was a move away from using portfolios for placement in first-year composition in favor of a self-placement system. This move toward self-selection had altered the student population of first-year composition courses. Under the new placement system, the only way students would take non-credit remedial courses was by placing themselves in these courses. As a result, many students who, in the past, would have been in remedial courses were choosing instead to enroll in first-year composition.

Just as the high school teachers were members of a community that had been formed prior to the meeting at which the data for this study was collected, the college writing instructors who attended were also part of a community that predated the meeting that day. All of the university attendees were graduate student instructors at the university. As is typical of large public universities, nearly all of the introductory composition courses at Midwest University were taught by either graduate students or adjunct faculty. These graduate student instructors were teaching introductory composition courses and enrolled in the same PhD program at the university—an interdisciplinary program that required them to complete coursework in both the English

Department and the School of Education. One requirement of this program was that all applicants have teaching experience prior to their admission to the program. As a result, this group was not necessarily representative of the cohort of graduate students who taught composition at this university. All of the graduate students had had teaching experience at their current institution and they all had previous teaching experience, some at other universities and some in high schools. Five of the nine college instructors had high school teaching experience, one of them as a substitute teacher.

Study Origins

The meeting between high school English teachers from Fairview and college writing instructors from Midwest University developed from an ongoing relationship between the school district and researchers from the university. I first met many of the high school English teachers in the district while working on an ethnographically-approached research project that investigated the cultures of the English departments in the district's two main high schools. As part of this project, I sat in on department meetings and district professional development workshops and interviewed teachers from both high schools.

This project led to a classroom-based research project examining the ways in which English teachers negotiated demands placed on them as a result of conflicts between district initiatives intended to raise students' standardized test scores and teachers' own notions of how best to help their students develop as readers and writers. The university researcher and I spent approximately two months in each class. These observations increased the profile of university researchers in the district, particularly among the district's high school English teachers.

In addition to these experiences, I taught first-year composition courses at Midwest University and had frequent discussions with my fellow graduate student instructors. Frequently in these discussions, some participants would wonder why students often had many problems with certain writing tasks. In particular, several instructors noted that students excelled when writing narratives, but their writing was much less effective when they were assigned more analytical tasks. Many of my graduate instructor colleagues were interested when presented with the possibility of talking with high school teachers about the teaching of writing.

The relationships I developed during my time as a graduate student instructor at Midwest University and as a researcher in Fairview Public Schools uniquely situated me to serve as facilitator of these discussions.

Setting

The conversations took place in the library at Fairview High School. The library was spacious and the individual groups of teachers met at tables spread out across the large room. The decision to conduct the meeting in Fairview at one of the two high schools and not at Midwest University was based on practical as well as conceptual reasons. Practically, it was much easier for the college instructors to make the 45-minute drive to Fairview for this after-school meeting than it would have been for the Fairview teachers to travel to the university. Since the university's semester had ended, and most of the college instructors were not involved in full-time work commitments, their schedules were more accommodating than were those of the high school teachers. Conceptually, since much of the literature related to conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors suggests an unequal power dynamic in

these conversations, and since the location of the conversations might have an impact on that power dynamic, having the meeting in a setting familiar to the high school teachers' was one possible way of addressing that power differential.

All teachers volunteered their participation. The meeting was conducted in the afternoon, after the school day had ended for the high school teachers. Participants were provided with snacks and dinner but no other incentives for their participation.

Participants

The notion of "participants" in this study is a somewhat complicated one. On one hand, my interest in the nature of these conversations as between high school English teachers and college writing instructors necessitates looking at the participants in the conversations as members of these two groups.

Rather than a random gathering of teachers from these two institutions, this meeting represented the coming together of two groups with prior histories. Both groups had been formed, in large part, because of the members' interest in developing as teachers and engaging in conversations with other teachers. Teachers in these groups had been engaging in conversations within their groups for a considerable period of time. In many ways, this project allowed for an extension of these within-group conversations across the several groups that were formed for this study.

A total of nineteen teachers from the two institutions (ten high school teachers and nine college instructors) attended the session. All participants in this study are classroom teachers; there were no administrators from either the high schools or the university. The college instructors who were invited were all graduate student instructors. This decision was a practical one necessitated by the fact that nearly all of

the first-year writing courses taught at the university were taught by graduate instructors. The high school teachers were all full-time classroom teachers; all were English teachers but one.

The Discussion Groups

The participants were broken up into four discussion groups. This was done for several reasons. First, having a conversation that included nineteen participants would be unlikely to encourage active participation by all of the teachers. The smaller groups offered the opportunity for everyone to be heard. Each of the smaller groups included at least two high school teachers and at least two college instructors. One of the groups had four participants and each of the other three groups had five members. Smaller groups allow for the analysis of more than one conversation. While all of these conversations took place on the same day and involved participants from the same two institutions, I have analyzed four separate and distinct conversations, which allows a comparative understanding of these interactions.

In addition, logistical concerns related to the collection of videotaped data were mitigated by having four small groups. It is more difficult to collect videotaped data of a large group because a wide-angle lens is required to capture all of the group members in one camera shot. This means that many non-verbal details of interactions are lost, including participants' gestures or facial expressions, key aspects of face-to-face interaction. In addition, audio is much more difficult to capture among a large group of people. The smaller groups allow the use of cameras set up near enough to the groups to capture non-verbal aspects of their conversation as well as the use of table microphones that effectively capture conversation with minimal interference from ambient noise.

Before the small groups began their discussions, all participants were given several minutes to read two samples of student writing. One was a piece written by a high school student and published in the school's newspaper. The other text was a literary analysis written by a student in a first-year composition course. The participants were asked to read and reflect on the strengths and deficiencies of each piece of writing. After several minutes devoted to this individual reading and reflection activity, teachers went to their groups which were indicated by the color of their nametag. The groups were situated at four different tables spread out evenly throughout the school library. Each group had a video camera stationed nearby and a microphone on the table to record audio of the participants' conversations.

The composition of the four groups is as follows:

- **Green Group**
2 high school teachers: Jolene, Harriet
2 college instructors: Robin, Andrea

- **Red Group**
3 high school teachers: Theresa, Carol, Deidre
2 college instructors: Susan, Laura

- **Purple Group**
2 high school teachers: Gwen, Marita
3 college instructors: Frank, Lena, Amanda

- **Blue Group**
3 high school teachers: Janet, Lydia, Violet
2 college instructors: Gina, Steve

Data Analysis

Data Sources

The data collected for this project consist primarily of the transcripts of videotaped conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors collected at the meeting between high school teachers from Fairview Public

Schools and graduate student instructors of first-year composition at Midwest University. As well, I analyzed the participants' written reflections on the pieces of student writing and on their perceptions of the conversations. The following is an overview of the data analyzed for this project:

- Opening Session: During this session, all participants introduced themselves and I discussed the format for the rest of the meeting. Duration: approximately 20 minutes
- Four Small Group Sessions: During this part of the meeting, participants were divided into four smaller groups for discussion of two texts that I provided for them. Duration: approximately 45 minutes each
- Closing Session: During this session, participants gathered as a large group and a representative from each small group reported on key points from their group's discussion; also, a representative from the university's writing center made a brief presentation about writing at the university, and teachers were invited to ask questions. Duration: approximately 35 minutes
- Participants' Written Reflections on the Interactions: At the end of the session, participants were invited to reflect on the session and provide feedback about the session as well as how, in their view, these kinds of conversations might be more effectively organized in the future.

Participants' Perceptions

One of the first steps in the data analysis process was an examination of the participants' responses to workshop evaluation forms they completed at the end of the session. Since most of the scholarly discussion of cross-level interactions focuses on the participants' perceptions of these interactions, an examination of these teachers' reactions seemed to be a logical initial step in the data analysis process.

In the anonymous response forms completed at the end of the small group discussions, the teachers from the two levels are unanimous in their view of the value of the interactions. In fact, when asked how the session could have been improved, 13 of

the 16 participants identify the need for more time for small-group discussion as the change they would make.

High School Teachers' Responses

Many of the high school teachers' comments focus on development of common ground with the teachers from the other level as a benefit of their discussions. This is particularly true for high school teachers, as half of them specifically mention the discovery of common ground as a benefit of the experience:

- I learned that we are more alike than dissimilar.
- We discovered that we have some issues in common, and that the college writing teachers have some wonderful ideas. I also felt that we shared some of the same frustrations.
- I was able to find out that many of the issues I have with teaching writing are the same at the college level.
- We shared common struggles in teaching writing and exchanged strategies/best practices in the start to improving “teaching writing.”

Meanwhile, other high school teachers focus on the value of the information they receive in preparing students for college writing:

- Having our students do well at the next level is so important. How best to learn but from those who assess and teach our students.
- My having the opportunity to have dialogue with university professors was both beneficial and engaging.
- It gave me an idea of what my students will experience as writers when they first go to college. It helped me to know how prepared they'll be when they have their first writing assignments as college students.
- It began an important discussion about writing—expectations, guidelines, purpose, quality, etc. How can we “scaffold” students toward quality writing?

These comments from the high school teachers tacitly acknowledge the ways in which they pursue information in these conversations; they tie the success of the conversation

with their ability to obtain answers to their questions over the course of the four small-group conversations.

College Instructors' Responses

The college instructors also indicate that these conversations are relevant to their teaching, and that they have learned new things about high school writing instruction:

- It's helpful to know how teachers think about writing and prepare their students to meet college-level writing standards.
- I learned things in this workshop that I will take with me into my teaching in the Fall.
- It's great to hear high school teachers talk about their goals, how their students develop before they get to us. It gives university teachers a more useful way to communicate to students and utilize the skills they already have.
- I gained insight into how English is taught in high school.

Two things are clear in the participants' evaluations of the sessions. First, all participants indicate that the sessions were valuable. This certainly reflects the unanimity of the positive reactions seen in nearly all of the recent descriptions of cross-level interactions among writing teachers. Second, several participants seem to acknowledge the interactional patterns that will be described in this study in which the high school teachers work primarily as pursuers of information and the college instructors serve as information providers

While the analysis of the information provided by teachers in their evaluations proves interesting, it is also limited. These results echo sentiments expressed in many anecdotal descriptions of cross-level interactions (Norris; Strachan; Wolfe). It is clear that the teachers view their experiences positively, but these responses reveal little beyond what has been discussed in earlier descriptions of cross-level conversations.

Mixed-Method Approach to Data Analysis

In light of the divergent views forwarded in the master narrative about the relationships between high school English teachers and college writing instructors, and the particular influence that the university's higher institutional status is believed to have on these conversations, my analysis of these conversations began with a search for common participation patterns across the four groups. In doing so, questions and answers emerged as a dominant pattern (Strauss and Corbin) of the participation structures of all four conversations, and confirmation was provided by a frequency count of the questions asked by the participants. This count focused on differences in question-asking frequency based on the level at which the participants' taught. This count confirmed a link between the participants' teaching level and the nature of their participation in these conversations.

Grounded Theory

This finding allowed for a selective narrowing of the analysis to focus on the participants' questions and answers in these conversations. I engaged in open coding, an analytical technique developed by researchers associated with the Grounded Theory (GT) approach, of the question/answer sequences in a search for patterns within the data provided a more coherent view of the significance of the interactional patterns in which the participants engaged. Open coding is a process of "text interpretation" in which the researcher engages in "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data" (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter 79). During the open coding process, the research questions were narrowed with a particular focus on the following:

Who asks questions? What kinds of questions do they ask? What do they ask questions about? Who are questions directed to? Who responds to questions? How do questioners respond to answers they receive?

During the open coding process, different conceptual categories were developed and modified as new features of the interactions emerged. This process allowed for the generating and testing of claims about the ways that questions and answers operated in these small-group interactions. An analysis of the “third turns” following question/answer adjacency pairs provided for an even richer view of the significance of questions and answers in these interactions. Thus, response tokens were also coded relative to who used them and how they were used during these conversations.

In addition to the analysis of the interactional features, the open coding of questions and answers led to the organization of all questions into thematic categories. These thematic categories were revised several times during the open coding process. Following open coding, the transcripts were analyzed using “axial coding” techniques. Axial coding involves looking for connections between the categories generated in the open coding stage. Following axial coding is selective coding, a process during which the core categories that emerge from the text are selected and systematically linked to other categories (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter 80).

Conversation Analysis

These analyses of the conversational structure of these small groups draw heavily from the field of Conversation Analysis (CA). CA is a method of data analysis that focuses on talk-in-interaction and suggests close examination of the sequence of talk. Because the purpose of CA research is to study talk as it occurs naturally, data collection

must be done using audio or video recording devices. The close analysis required in CA research cannot be achieved solely by means of ethnographic field notes or participant recollections. Recording interactions using audio and video equipment allows for repeated viewings and the creation of detailed transcripts that could not otherwise be produced.

Another characteristic of CA research that necessitates the use of audio or video recordings is its focus on elements of interaction that are often not identifiable on the first viewing of an interaction. Heritage and Atkinson note that “conversation analytic studies are thus designed to achieve systematic analysis of what, at best, is intuitively known and, more commonly, is tacitly oriented to in ordinary conduct” (4). As a result, what may seem to be a rather innocuous element of a conversation (one participant’s frequent use of “right” and “okay” in response to other participants’ utterances, for example) may in fact be critical to understanding the nature of the interaction.

This project would not be considered a piece of “pure” CA research due to the lack of generalizable claims about the nature of talk between high school and college teachers. Rather, the CA approach to data analysis and findings from the large body of CA research help us better understand cross-institutional interactions between teachers by illuminating characteristics of conversations that are often taken for granted. In this study, CA methods allow for microanalysis of interactions to determine how interactions among these teachers are co-constructed by the participants over their duration.

Transcription

No transcript can completely capture the complexity of face-to-face conversations. When producing transcripts, the researcher is placed in the position of

making choices about what to include and what to leave out, thus rendering all transcripts incomplete in some way. These decisions are not inconsequential; rather, as Ochs suggests, “what is on a transcript will influence and constrain what generalizations emerge” (168). Ochs also advocates a selective approach to transcription in order to avoid developing transcripts that are “too detailed” and thus “difficult to follow and assess” (168). She notes, however, that “selectivity should not be random and implicit...the basis for the selective transcription should be clear” (168).

My focus and intended audience were key factors in the development of transcriptions for this study. First, since this study is intended for an interdisciplinary audience rather than an audience exclusively comprised of social science researchers, my aim was to limit the number of symbols used in order to emphasize readability. Readability is also a prime concern in the chapters devoted to a thematic analysis of these conversations, as the content of the conversations is foregrounded. The study’s focus on questions and answers informed decisions regarding transcription as well. Since questions are a primary focus of this research, intonation becomes important. In particular, rising intonation at the end of a turn is a marker that identifies the preceding utterance as a question.

The conversations were transcribed using conventions developed by Gail Jefferson, which are considered the standard for discourse analysis research (Atkinson and Heritage). This notation system focuses on the relation of one individual’s utterances to those of other participants in a conversation and speaking characteristics such as changes in volume and intonation. Consult the Appendix for an overview of transcription conventions used in this study.

In choosing which portions of the conversations to present in this study and how best to represent those conversations, I endeavored to make decisions that would result in vivid and faithful representations of the level of active engagement the participants brought to each of the conversations. My aim is that these teachers' commitment to teaching writing and their interest in helping their students become more effective writers come through in the conversation excerpts presented in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis is a method of discourse analysis that takes as its subject “talk-in-interaction.” That is, talk that is naturally occurring. CA was developed by Sacks and Schegloff in the 1960’s, and was informed by Goffmann’s work on interpersonal interactions as well as Garfinkel’s work in ethnomethodology. Sacks’ study of tape-recorded calls to a suicide center led to a theory of conversation based on the idea that “what a doing, such as an utterance, means practically, the action it actually performs, depends on its sequential position” (ten Have 6).

That focus on the sequential relationship of utterances is a foundation of CA. In their early work, Sacks and Schegloff argued that each utterance in a conversation, rather than being viewed individually, should be considered along with the utterances that precede and follow it. This view represented a departure from the idea that an action is performed by merely making an utterance, a view that was forwarded by proponents of speech-act theory. This way of viewing the role of utterances was developed by Austin and extended by Searle. Searle’s work focused on the concept that each utterance performed an action, and the nature of the action being performed could be determined by studying the lexical and semantic structure of the utterance. Sacks and Schegloff,

however, argued that the action an utterance is seen to perform should be determined by looking not only at the individual utterance, but at the talk surrounding that utterance.

This view of the relationship between talk and action is based on Schegloff and Sacks' initial work with naturally-occurring talk, as discussed in their article, "Opening up Closings." Their analysis resulted in the development of the concept of "sequential implicativeness," a term describing the tendency of certain kinds of utterances to result in a narrow range of possible responses from other participants. So, a greeting by one participant will almost always be followed by a greeting, invitations are generally followed by either acceptance or rejection of that invitation, and questions are responded to with answers or other utterances that address the question in some way.

One other implication of Sacks and Schegloff's contention that talk can only be understood in context is that conversations can then be viewed as social co-constructions of the participants. Since the action performed by a particular utterance is dependent on the ways in which the other participants in a conversation respond to it, participants work together to construct a conversation through the kinds of utterances they use to initiate discussion as well as those utterances used in response to the talk of others. Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson describe conversations as "little system[s] of mutually ratified and ritually governed face-to-face action" (697). It is only by looking at the ways in which participants work together to "ratify" conversational action and understanding the rules that govern such conversations that the full complexity of an interaction can be appreciated.

In practice, the CA view of conversation has considerable implications for this study, which focuses on questions and answers. CA researchers hold that the mere fact that a statement is constructed as a question—beginning with a question word and rising

in intonation at the end—does not ensure that this utterance performs an interrogative act in a conversation. It is only if the other participants in the conversation recognize, acknowledge, and respond to the interrogative nature of the utterance with utterances that make sense as part of a question/answer sequence that the utterance should be considered a question. This view of the importance of context in determining the function of utterances informed the analysis of questions and answers in the cross-level conversations analyzed for this study.

Institutional Interaction

Heritage has identified two strands in CA research: work that “examines the institution *of* interaction as an entity in its own right” and research that “studies the management of social institutions *in* interaction” (“Conversational” 162). It is this second type of research that provides the basis for the analysis of data that occurs in the succeeding chapters. The institutional identity of the participants figures prominently in this analysis because of its importance in the literature. The view of conversations among college and high school teachers of writing as a coming together of two institutions has dominated descriptions of these interactions in the literature. It is precisely because of the institutional affiliations of the participants that such conversations are proposed and described so frequently in the literature. While this study looks at how conversations are conducted between representatives of two different institutions, it is much less clear how well the conversations analyzed for this study fit the CA concept of “institutional interaction.”

The definition of “institutional interaction” in CA is difficult to ascertain in that it is often defined in terms of what it is not. For example, Drew and Heritage define

“institutional interaction” as “talk-in-interaction [as a] means through which lay persons pursue various practical goals and the central medium through which the daily working activities of many professionals and organizational representatives are conducted” (3). However, in a footnote they stipulate, “We here restrict the term *institutional interaction* to interactions that are work- or task-oriented and ‘non-conversational’...our use of the term does not extend to persons who engage in mundane conversation about everyday topics while they happen to be working...” (59).

The small-group conversations analyzed in this study fit Drew and Heritage’s definition to the extent that they are understood as occurring within a context where participants’ institutional statuses inform their participation in the conversations. However, these conversations cannot be rightly described as “non-conversational” and they are not manifestly “task-oriented.” However, while these conversations exist in a sort of liminal state relative to the concept of institutional interaction, this analysis has drawn from CA research into institutional interaction as a way of understanding how participants’ institutional status may impact the roles they adopt during these cross-level conversations. The relevance of viewing these conversations as examples of “institutional interaction” will be discussed throughout this chapter, particularly in terms of the ways questions have been typically seen to function in institutional interactions.

The Role of Questions in Conversation

During my inductive analysis of four small-group conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors, the importance and prevalence of questions and answers emerged as critical to understanding the ways that participants co-construct interaction in each of the four conversations. Furthermore, close examination

of the roles that questions play in the four conversations revealed consistent patterns in the ways in which participants from the two institutions use and respond to questions and answers.

Questions, Answers, and the Sequential Organization of Talk

The importance of questions and answers in understanding the interactional dynamics of conversations, and particularly the part that participants' social identities play in those conversation, is due in part to their sequential relationship. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson argue that pairs of turns are the smallest viable units for analyzing conversation because a single utterance has no context, and consequently no interaction occurs within a single utterance. And if we view conversations as co-constructed by participants, an utterance or turn at talk must be viewed in terms of how it responds to what preceded it or leads to what happens subsequently. Questions and answers lend themselves to this kind of analysis because of the clear sequential relationship between the two types of utterances, a relationship that CA researchers have labeled an "adjacency pair" (Schegloff and Sacks). Adjacency pairs are sets of sequential utterances in which the first utterance (or first pair part) dictates the type of utterance (second pair part) that follows it. As mentioned earlier, this relationship between utterances is described as "sequential implicativeness" (296). In the case of questions and answers, our experience tells us that when someone asks a question, there are a limited number of generally acceptable responses: the next speaker can answer the question, ask a question for clarification, or provide an explanation for why an answer cannot be given. In sum, when a question is asked, an answer is expected in return, and

as a result the questioner dictates in large part the response options available to the person to whom a question is asked.

In addition to the role of questions in shaping the kind of utterance that will occur in the next turn at talk, questions also influence who will speak in the subsequent turn. In this way, questions serve as powerful “turn allocational techniques,” conversational moves used in interactions involving three or more participants that Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson identify as ways that “next speakers” in any conversation are decided (703). Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson differentiate between turn allocational techniques that allow for the next speaker to be self-selected and those that result in the current speaker determining the next speaker. As turn allocational techniques, questions are biased against self-selection of the next speaker. Instead, questions allow the current speaker to limit the field of possible next speakers or even to choose the next speaker directly.

In addition to their influence over the identity of the next speaker and the nature of the next speaker’s turn, questions also dictate, at least in part, the topic of the subsequent turn. In this way, questioners can be seen as exerting considerable control in the development of conversations.

Questions and Answers in Institutional Interactions

CA researchers have used questions and answers, particularly their asymmetric distribution in institutional settings, to gain a further understanding of the effects of the roles and statuses of speakers on interpersonal interactions. Studying conversations in a variety of settings, CA researchers have found that the ability to ask questions is typically associated with the social identity of the questioner (in these cases the identity of the questioner is institutionally defined) and more control for the questioner over the way a

conversation is conducted (Frankel; Atkinson and Drew; Heritage, “Analyzing”; ten Have, “Talk and Institution”). For example, in doctor-patient interactions, doctors ask most of the questions while patients typically provide answers. And it is through the use of questions that doctors influences, even dictate, the nature of these interactions.

Similarly, questions and answers in a courtroom indicate power relationships among participants. Stephen C. Levinson notes that judges and attorneys are typically the ones who ask questions, while defendants answer them. Judges and attorneys can, generally, ask what they want and compel witnesses and others to answer. They can also control the nature of the answers they receive. Their ability to control the conversation through their questions and answers is related to their institutional status and the roles they play in the courtroom.

Another type of conversation that is often dominated by questions and answers is the student/teacher interaction, particularly when the teacher and students are engaged in instruction. In this case, teachers ask the questions and students respond. Furthermore, in these instructional question-answer sequences a student’s answer is frequently followed by an evaluation of the answer. This initiation-response-feedback model, first articulated by Sinclair and Coulthard places the teacher at the center of classroom activity, able to control instructional interactions by both asking the questions and providing the answers. Again, the status of the participants dictates the ways in which questions function in these interactions.

Response Tokens

While question/answer adjacency pairs give insight into the ways conversations are co-constructed among participants, a look past the question/answer turns to the series

of turns that a question might initiate—most notably questioners’ responses to the answers they receive—provides a richer understanding of interactional dynamics.

Response Tokens and the Sequential Organization of Talk

As discussed earlier, CA research privileges the analysis of talk in context—not as a set of isolated utterances but rather as a series of utterances that are socially constructed by speakers over the course of an interaction. And while questions and answers are dependent on one another, units of talk that begin with a question/answer pair many times span several turns beyond the two turns containing the question and answer. Schiffrin argues that “question/answer pairs are rarely couplets which are totally disconnected from their containing discourse” (85); thus, even if utterances do not exist in a conditional relationship as do questions and answers, the turns at talk preceding and following a question/answer adjacency pair both influence, and are influenced by, the question/answer turns. CA researchers address this issue by an analysis of “third turns.” Third turns constitute the last part of a three-part sequence of related turns. In the case of question/answer interactions, the third turn, frequently taken by the questioner, provides some sort of response to or evaluation of the answer given in the previous turn. Several researchers argue for the value of this tripartite view of interactions (Sinclair and Coulthard; Schegloff and Sacks; Jefferson, “List Construction”; Drew, “Strategies”).

The role of the third turn in interactions with question/answer adjacency pairs is clear in both daily conversation as well as institutional discourse. When a speaker asks a question and receives an answer in return, the speaker typically acknowledges the answer with some kind of response which gives the respondent an indication of the extent to which the questioner understood, or perhaps even agreed with, the answer. Atkinson

(1992, “Displaying Neutrality”) argues that such third turns, called “response tokens,” are especially useful in conversations that contain many questions and answers because, at the most basic level, they give the individual responding to a question the sense that their answer has been heard and understood.

In his 2001 study of response tokens, When Listeners Talk: Response Tokens and Listener Stance, Rod Gardner defines them as “one class of conversational objects whose primary functions are not to make reference to the world, but to provide some information on the course the talk is taking” (14). Gardner identifies several categories into which response tokens can be divided based on their function within a conversation. Three of these categories are particularly relevant for this study:

- Continuers, which function to hand the floor back to the immediately prior speaker (e.g. *Mm hm, Uh huh*);
- Acknowledgements, which claim agreement or understanding of the prior turn (e.g. *Mm, Yeah*);
- Newsmarkers, and newsmarker-like objects, which mark the prior speaker’s turn as newsworthy in some way (e.g. *Really?*, the change-of-state token *Oh*, the ‘idea-connector’ *Right*). (2)

These response tokens lack semantic meaning and for many years were dismissed as being unworthy of study by CA researchers. However, as Jefferson points out, conversational order can be seen even in utterances that at first appear to be linguistic “garbage” (“Notes” 197), and response tokens contribute to a conversation by allowing the listener a chance both to comment on what they hear and to shape subsequent turns.

Response Tokens in Institutional Interactions

Just as CA researchers have found that different kinds of institutional interactions (often as typified by the social relationships of participants based on their status in the

conversation) differ in the ways participants use questions and answers, the type and frequency of response tokens employed by speakers seems largely dependent on their institutional status. For example, a question/answer pair from a classroom interaction involving a teacher's question (to which the teacher knows the answer) and a student's response, is often followed by a statement that serves as an evaluation of the student's answer, such as "very good" or "that's not quite right." Drew and Heritage point out that such an interactional pattern is linked inextricably to the primary purpose of this kind of teacher-student interaction, namely instruction (40-41). This link between the purpose and structure of interactions has serious implications for understanding conversation—when the setting changes, the appropriateness of a particular interactional pattern may vary. As a result, a response token that is acceptable in one situation may be inappropriate in another. While a teacher's evaluation of a student's answer is an accepted part of classroom interactions, repeated evaluation of the responses given by a friend in an informal conversation would be seen as unsuitable for that type of interaction.

Courtroom and doctor/patient interactions also demonstrate the differing standards regarding appropriate responses in third turns following question/answer pairs. In these institutional settings, response tokens that express surprise at an answer, such as *oh*, are not typically appropriate because the questioners are generally seen as holding a specialized knowledge and the status of a "professional" and responding with surprise might undercut that status. Thus doctors and therapists (Labov and Fanshel; ten Have, "Talk and Institution") and even news interviewers and teachers (Heritage, "Analyzing") rarely respond to answers with *oh*. These examples demonstrate the ways in which questions, answers, and the resulting third turns further illuminate the roles and

relationships among participants in conversations. The available ways of appropriately responding to an answer vary depending on the perceived status of both the questioner and the respondent in any conversation.

Change-of-State Response Tokens

Some kinds of response tokens simply acknowledge that the speaker has been heard and provide no comment on how the responder feels about the information they have heard. Heritage found that response tokens such as *yeah* or *mm hm* “avoid or defer treating prior talk as informative” (307). Schiffrin agrees and writes that these kinds of response tokens denote the “receipt of anticipated information” (89). Researchers ascribe a number of different labels to these kinds of response tokens; they are called “continuers,” “acknowledgement tokens,” “reactive tokens,” and “acknowledge acts,” among others (Gardner 2). In this study, “response tokens” will refer to the broad group of utterances used by listeners to respond to what they have heard, and “change-of-state response tokens,” a term coined by Heritage (“A Change-of-State”) will apply to response tokens that indicate that the listener has received information that is in some way new. Several of these change-of-state response tokens figure prominently in the question/answer sequences analyzed for this project.

Oh

Schiffrin asserts that when *oh* is used as a response to an answer it can be seen as an indication that the answer contained new or “unanticipated information.” Likewise, Heritage identifies the use of *oh* as a response to “informings.” He notes that recipients of information can use *oh* to confirm that a speaker has said something “that has

involved the transmission of information from an informed to an uninformed party. *Oh* is thus a means by which recipients can align themselves to, and confirm, a prior turn's proposal to have been informative" (304). Specifically, *oh* is rarely associated with further turn components that assert prior knowledge of "*oh*-received information" (305). This stands in contrast to other response tokens such as *yeah* and *mm hm* that tend to indicate agreement on the part of their producer while also implying that the information that was just received coincides with the producer's expectations or was information they already had.

In his study of the uses of *oh* ("Oh-Prefaced"), Heritage indicates that *oh* frequently occurs as a third turn in a question/answer sequence. He argues that the production of *oh* in such a situation "confirms an answer as an action that has involved the transmission of information from an informed to an uninformed party" (310). That is, when a speaker uses *oh* in response to a question/answer sequence, it is typically used to indicate the receipt of some previously unknown information, information that Heritage suggests runs counter to the questioner's expectations. We can also conclude based on Heritage's work that the lack of an *oh* or other change-of-state response token is an indication that either the questioner received an answer that conformed to their expectations or they are acting as though it has. Likewise, Schiffrin asserts that *oh* serves as a "receipt of unanticipated information," particularly when an answer falls outside of "question-encoded options" (89).

Newsmarks

Newsmarks (Jefferson, "The Abominable") are a class of change-of-state response tokens that indicate that what the speaker is responding to is "news." In

Jefferson's formulation, these utterances indicate disbelief and often involve repeating information contained in the preceding turn in the form of a question. Heritage terms newsmarks, "assertions of ritualized disbelief" ("A Change-of-State" 339); this "ritualized disbelief" is expressed through utterances like, "really?" "did they?" and "you've got to be kidding." Responses that restate part of the answer are also classified as newsmarks. Heritage distinguishes between newsmarks and other change-of-state response tokens by arguing that newsmarks serve to "...project further talk by the news deliverer/newsmark recipient by reference to the news" ("A Change-of-State" 340). Jefferson ("The Abominable") argues that the kind of "further talk" that results from newsmarks relates to the type of newsmark delivered. For example, some response tokens actually combine *oh* with a newsmark, as is the case with "oh really?" or "oh, you did?" According to Jefferson, these statements tend to move the action of the conversation forward in that their presence is usually followed by further discussion of the topic that elicited the newsmark.

Conversational Asymmetry

Paul Drew argues that much of our understanding about how language is used in conversation relates to the notion of conversations being organized in terms of "'equal participation' between speakers" ("Asymmetries" 21). The literature addressing interactions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors relies heavily on this belief. Kittle proposes that these cross-level conversations be "learning partnerships...with genuine give and take on each side" (141) and that they "establish the kinds of professional relationships that are predicated on mutual respect..." (143). However, the pursuit of equality in these conversations may be misguided.

The structure of most conversations that we might term “ordinary”—in the sense that they do not occur within an institutional context that assigns participation patterns to individuals based on their institutional role—allows for the possibility of equal participation. This possibility exists because the rules governing the allocation of turns show no preference for any speaker other than the “next speaker” (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson). In spite of this potential for equal participation, conversations are, perhaps necessarily, asymmetrical.

Linell and Luckmann assert that not only is equal participation in conversation an unattainable goal, but the “asymmetry” that results from the impossibility of equal participation is a vital interactional feature:

Asymmetries...are themselves essential properties of communication and dialogue. Indeed, if there were no asymmetries at all between people, i.e. if communicatively relevant inequalities of knowledge were non-existing, there would be little or no need for most kinds of communication! (3-4)

Viewing asymmetry, and by extension unequal participation in conversations, as an inherent attribute of conversations rather than a deficiency in particular conversations allows us to approach such interactional inequalities not as problems to be overcome, but as realities to be understood. Since these relationships take the form of interactions, we should not only focus on the role of social power in cross-level relationship, but also look at the ways in which teachers from the two levels co-construct conversations and what those co-constructions indicate about interactional dominance and perhaps social power as well. The concept of asymmetry is also useful because it allows for the exploration of inequalities both in terms of the structure of interactions and the social context within which interactions occur. According to Linell and Luckmann, asymmetries of “knowledge” and “participant status” function along with asymmetries in interactional participation.

Furthermore, asymmetry does not presuppose anything about the success or failure of interactions. As Linell and Luckmann state, “‘Asymmetries’ must be taken as a concept that is neutral with respect to success or non-success in communication” (8). This concept is useful in thinking about the competing grand narratives of cross-level interactions among English teachers in that it provides for the possibility of interactions that most participants view as successful to also have distinctly unequal interactional patterns among those participants.

Linell identifies four types of asymmetry, or dominance, in interactions:

- Quantitative Dominance: Dominance related to who talks most
- Semantic Dominance: Dominance related to the control of topics
- Interactional Dominance: Dominance related to the use of “initiation moves”
- Strategic Dominance: Dominance related to the utterance of “a few, strategically really important things.” (158)

These types of asymmetry suggest different domains within which the dominance of one party might occur. While quantitative, semantic, and interactional asymmetry all relate to who speaks and what they do during their turns-at-talk, strategic dominance is much more subtle and refers to the perceived quality of what speakers say, not just the quantity of their talk.

In addition to the interactional asymmetry inherent in many conversations, the concept of asymmetry can also be applied to differences in knowledge among participants. While the kinds of asymmetry discussed above all relate to particular features of interactions, asymmetries of knowledge are, in Drew’s words, “the product of factors which are exogenous to a given occasion” (25). Chief among these exogenous factors are the “role identities” of participants. Drew also argues that asymmetries in

knowledge are, in most cases, “associated with putting one of the participants at a disadvantage” (25).

Using conversational asymmetry as a lens through which to view cross-level interactions among English teachers provides a way to view these conversations in their full complexity rather than relying on generalizations about their effectiveness. Goodwin and Heritage argue that “the way in which...discourse identities intersect with a range of social arrangements involving entitlement to knowledge can lead to participation dynamics of considerable complexity” (qtd. in Linell and Luckmann 14). The differing statuses of the participants in these conversations, as characterized in large part by the differences in the knowledge they have about the teaching of writing at the university, shape the nature of these conversations. Looking at how these interactions are affected by the various kinds of conversational asymmetry does allow us to begin to understand the “participation dynamics of considerable complexity.”

CHAPTER 5

THE FUNCTION OF QUESTIONS IN CROSS-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

This analysis of four small-group conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors is intended to help further our understanding of the nature of cross-level conversations among teachers of writing in light of the two master narratives regarding such interactions that have emerged in the literature—narratives that portray cross-level interactions either as collegial and open conversations free of any disagreement or discord on the part of participants versus those narratives that portray cross-level interactions as fundamentally acrimonious, filled with disharmony and characterized by unequal power relationships among the participants.

The narratives that portray cross-level conversations as antagonistic tend to focus on the role of institutional status in shaping interactions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors. McQuade; Schultz, Laine, and Savage; Otte; and others identify the hierarchical relationship between the institutions in which they work as a key barrier to effective collaboration among high school and college writing teachers. And the characterization of this relationship—one that posits the college as higher status and more prestigious—has had the consequence of framing interactions between college and high school teachers in hierarchical terms. This study is an examination and interpretation of one set of cross-level conversation that provides insight

into how issues of status and authority are negotiated through the talk-in-interaction of high school and college teachers of writing.

During the initial coding of the transcripts from the four small-group discussions, participants' questions surfaced as an important interactional feature in each of the four conversations. Looking across the discussions of the four small groups, there emerges a consistent pattern in the ways that participants initiate and respond to questions, a pattern that appears to be related to the level at which they teach.

Chapters 5 through 9 provide a close analysis of the questions and answer sequences in these conversations. Chapter 5 examines who asks questions and to whom questions are asked in these small-group discussions, and how participants' use of questions as interactional moves might aid our understanding of the nature of status, knowledge, and dominance in cross-level conversations. Chapter 6 examines the participants' use of particular kinds of conversational responses: "change-of-state receipt tokens" and "newsmarks." Chapters 7, 8, and 9 provide the results of a thematic analysis of the participants' questions.

Question and Answers as Interactional Features

While question/answer pairs emerge as key to the conversational dynamics of these conversations, they fail to yield simple answers when looking at issues related to status—certainly not the kind of clear-cut answers suggested by those who see the relationships as fundamentally unbalanced in favor of college instructors. However, by looking closely at who asks questions in these conversations, and to whom those questions are asked, the nature of status and dominance in cross-level interactions is complicated.

Question Frequency

As the importance of questions became clear while coding the conversation transcripts, the next step in the analysis was a frequency count of the questions asked in these conversations⁴. This count revealed that in approximately 180 minutes of conversations (spread over four conversations, each approximately 45-minutes in length), a total of 132 questions are asked by the participants. Although the significance of these figures would be much clearer if there were an existing data corpus of similar types of interactions to which comparisons could be made, it is clear that questions are a prominent interactional feature, a feature whose prevalence is consistent across the four groups. While the figure of 132 total questions, when taken alone, may be of limited value due to the lack of comparable data sets, a look at who asks questions and to whom questions are asked allows for comparison among the participants in these four conversations.

Teaching Level of Questioners

In looking at who asks the questions, one focus is the level at which the questioners teach. The frequency count reveals a clear relationship between who asks questions and the level at which they teach. High school teachers ask questions much more frequently than college instructors, by a ratio of more than 3 to 1. As Table 5.1

⁴ One of the challenges of the data analysis for this project was defining what a question is. This is an issue of frequent concern to researchers in the area of discourse analysis. Erving Goffman went so far as to argue against the use of questions as a unit of analysis altogether (1981). In her analysis of the role of questions in doctor-patient interactions, Candace West provides a thorough discussion on the competing ways of defining questions. Rather than defining a question semantically or lexically, my analysis worked from the premise that questions are defined by the participants in an interaction. See Chapter 4 for an extended discussion of questions.

indicates, college instructors ask only 22% of the questions while the high school teachers ask 78%:

Teaching Level of Questioner

Questions asked by...	High School Teachers	103
	College Instructors	29
	TOTAL	132

Table 5.1

This pattern of high school teachers asking the large majority of the questions is consistent across the four small groups. Table 5.2 shows the distribution of questions asked by high school teachers and college instructors in each of the four small-group conversations.

Teaching Level of Questioner, by Group

Groups:		Purple	Red	Blue	Green	TOTAL
Questions asked by...	High School Teachers	26	31	31	15	103
	College Instructors	7	11	2	9	29
TOTAL		33	42	33	24	132

Table 5.2

While the discrepancy in the number of questions asked by high school teachers and college instructors is particularly large in the Blue Group and closer to even in the Green Group, we see a consistent pattern across the four groups—a pattern in which high school teachers ask questions in larger numbers than college instructors. Also, the data show

that in no group did the college instructors ask more questions than the high school teachers. Even in the Green Group, where the totals were the closest, the high school teachers ask 62.5% of the questions.

Teaching Level of Question Recipients

While determining who asks a question is a rather simple analytical task, determining the intended recipient of a question is more complicated. As such, considerations in determining to whom a question is asked include the questioner's gaze, the content of the question, and the larger conversational context within which the question occurs. While many questions in these conversations are directed to individual participants, there are also several occasions in which questions are posed to multiple participants—either all of the participants in the questioner's small group or all participants from one or the other teaching level. As a result, questions that are directed to a specific participant as well as questions that are asked of multiple participants from the same level are placed in the same category. So a question directed to a specific high school teacher is placed in the same category as a question posed to all of the high school teachers in a group.

Looking at the use of questions in these conversations, there emerges a strong link between teaching level and the identity of questioners can also be seen when we consider the relationship between teaching level and the identity of the intended question recipients. Table 5.3 shows the distribution of questions by recipient across the four small-group conversations. College instructors are asked 65% of the questions. The number of questions asked to high school teachers and those directed to the whole group

are identical: 17% of the participants' questions are directed to both the high school teachers and the whole group:

Teaching Level of Question Recipients

Questions asked to...	High School Teachers	23
	College Instructors	86
	Whole Group	23
	TOTAL	132

Table 5.3

As with the identity of the questioners, there exists a relatively consistent pattern in the distribution of question recipients in each of the four small groups. As Table 5.4 shows, college instructors are the most frequent recipient of questions in each of the four groups:

Teaching Level of Question Recipients, by Group

Groups		Purple	Red	Blue	Green	TOTAL
Questions asked to...	High School Teachers	7	11	4	1	23
	College Instructors	22	23	26	15	86
	Whole Group	4	8	3	8	23
TOTAL		33	42	33	24	132

Table 5.4

In each group, more than half of the questions are directed to college instructors, with only the Red Group having less than 60% of questions directed to college instructors.

Recipients of High School Teachers' Questions

A closer look at the teaching level of the questioners and question recipients taken together reveals a clear preference among participants in terms of to whom they direct their questions. Figure 5.1 shows that 80% of the high school teachers' questions are directed to college instructors, while the other 20% of their questions are distributed nearly equally between their high school colleagues and the whole group:

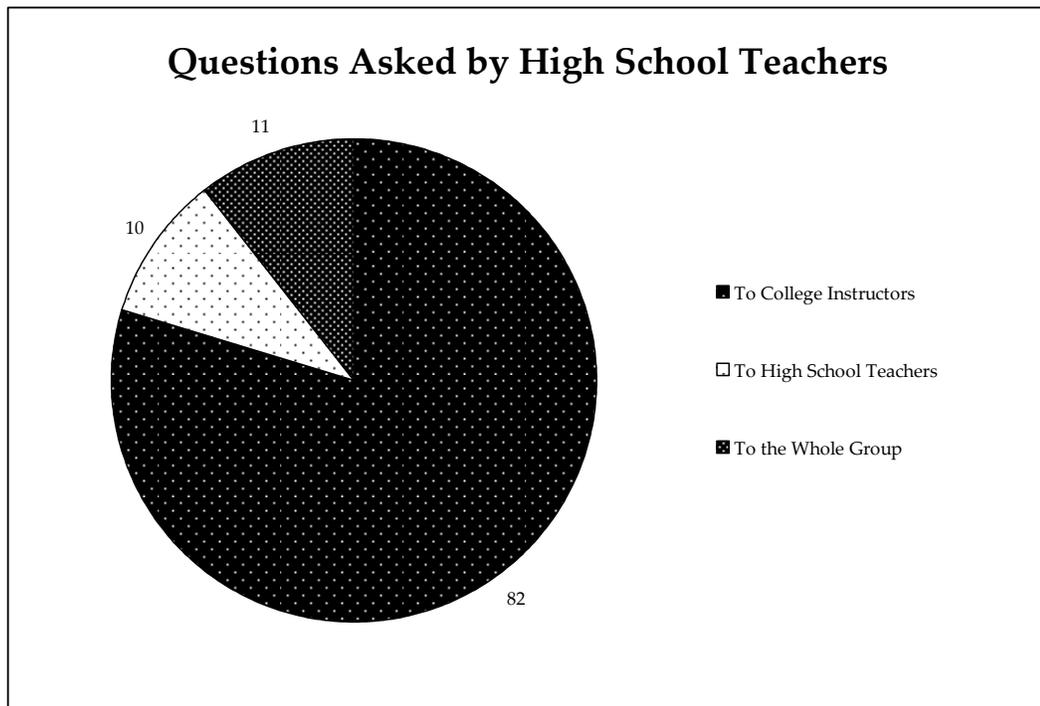


Figure 5.1

We see here that the high school teachers are much more likely—nearly four times more likely—to direct a question to one or more college instructors than they are to query either other high school teachers or the group as a whole. This suggests a considerable

preference on the part of high school teachers to interact with college instructors, particularly when their purpose is the elicitation of information.

Recipients of College Instructors' Questions

While the college instructors direct more of their questions to the high school teachers than to either their institutional colleagues or the whole group, the differences in proportion are not nearly as wide as they are for the high school teachers. Figure 5.2 shows that college instructors asked nearly as many questions to the whole group as they did to high school teachers. Furthermore, only 45% of their questions were directed toward high school teachers while 55% of their questions were directed toward the whole group or toward other college instructors:

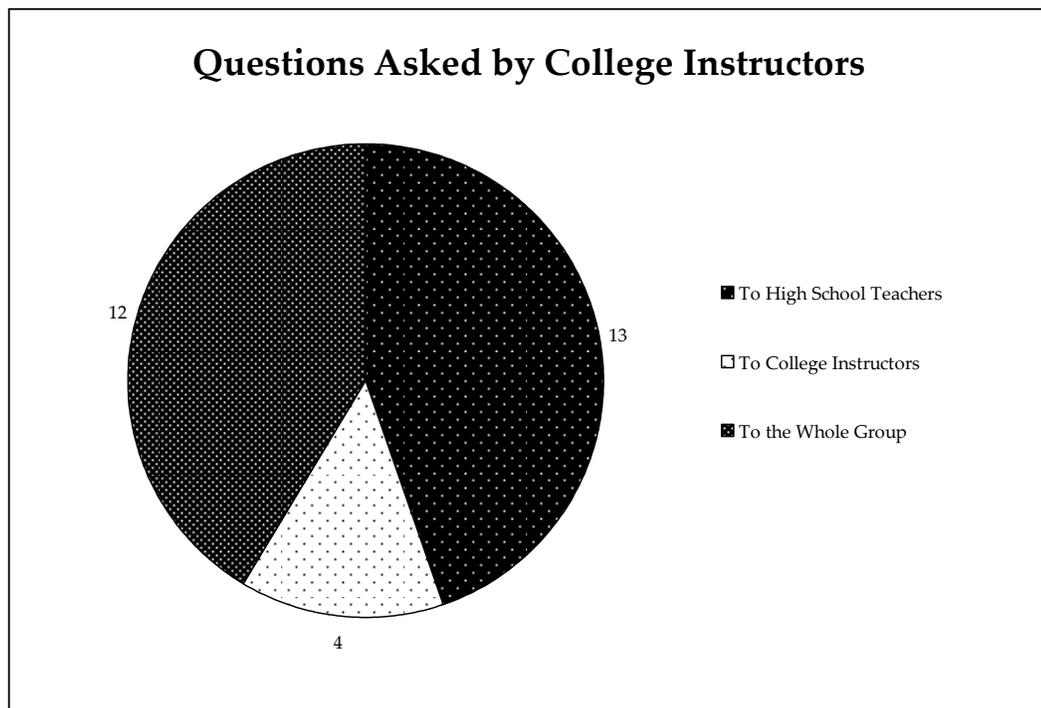


Figure 5.2

While the number of questions asked by the college instructors is substantially lower than that of the high school teachers, what is perhaps most interesting about the distribution of

the college instructors' questions is that they ask almost as many questions to the whole group as they do to the high school teachers.

It may be too much to say that the college instructors do not share the high school teachers' preference for cross-institutional dialogue since many of their questions to the whole group seem designed to encourage conversation among the participants in the small groups. What seems clear is that the college instructors do not seem to be using questions to pursue information; rather, their goal seems to be the encouragement of discussion among all the small-groups' participants.

Overall Question Frequency

Figure 5.3 provides an overview of the distribution of questions relative to the teaching level of both the questioner and the recipients:

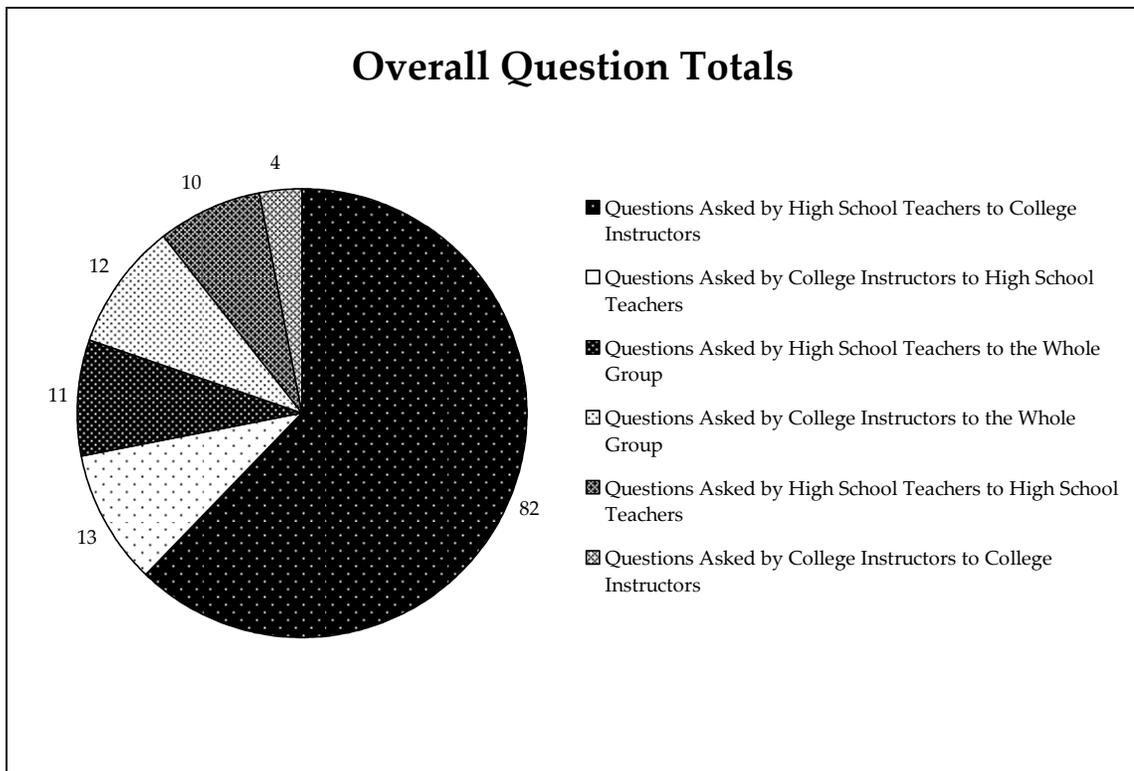


Figure 5.3

As might be expected, the distribution of questions in these conversations is dominated by questions posed by high school teachers to college instructors—fully 62% of all questions across the four small groups are asked by the high school teachers and directed to the college instructors. Although the next largest category consists of the college instructors’ questions for the high school teachers, these questions make up only 10% of the total number asked. Furthermore, there are nearly as many questions asked by high school teachers to other high school teachers, and by both the high school teachers and college instructors to the whole group, as there are college instructor questions for high school teachers.

Question Frequency and Persistence

The high school teachers’ persistence in pursuing answers is an important element in explaining the frequency differential. When one of the high school teachers poses a question that goes unanswered, they frequently ask the question again. In addition, high school teachers ask several follow-up questions seeking elaboration and clarification.

In the exchange from the Green Group provided in Excerpt 5.1, Andrea, one of the college instructors, is responding to an earlier question about how important grammar is to college instructors’ assessment of student writing. Andrea begins her turn by referring to the earlier question about grammar and then proceeds to give her own take on the issue:

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Andrea: | But the grammar thing, I was just saying, um, it may be something more general like—a B paper, the B paper has little to no, um= |
| 2 | Harriet: | = [Grammatical errors |
| 3 | Andrea: | [Distracting |
| 4 | Harriet: | [Okay |
| 5 | Robin: | [Distracting grammatical errors= |
| 6 | Jolene: | =And if it’s |

7 Andrea: distracting it might get knocked down to a C or a D
 Right. [Uh-huh.
 8 Jolene: [If it's really like Okay, I'm having a hard
 time getting through this [then it's gonna?
 9 Andrea: [Right, exactly, exactly.

Excerpt 5.1

As Andrea discusses her assessment practices, Jolene, one of the two high school teachers in the group, interrupts her twice (in Lines 6 and 8) with questions that seek clarification. In particular, Jolene and Harriet seem to be putting their understanding of Andrea's beliefs into their own words as a way of verifying their understanding. In this case, the result of these requests for clarification and elaboration is an interactional sequence in which the high school teachers have asked three questions (including Harriet's original question about grammar approximately two minutes earlier) in the pursuit of Andrea's ideas about the role grammar should play in writing assessment.

The following exchange from the Purple Group provides another example of the ways in which the high school teachers would use a series of questions in order to receive confirmation about something that the college instructors have said. This excerpt begins with Marita, a high school teacher, asking about the courses taught by the college instructors in her group:

1 Marita: But, is yours required? Is your course required?
 2 Amanda: Mine is, but it's one of 250 sections they can sign
 up for.
 3 Marita: [Oh.
 4 Carol: [Can you place out of it?
 5 Amanda: [No
 6 Frank: [No, you can't.
 7 Lena: [Not anymore.
 8 Frank: And a lot of them would like to=
 9 Lena: =[Well, yeah
 10 Marita: =[So they can take a
 course in place of it?
 11 Amanda: Well, they could take her section instead of mine,
 [and maybe she doesn't focus on that
 11 Marita: [Oh, okay. Okay. Alright

- 12 Lena: It's called first-year writing=
 13 Amanda: =College writing
 14 Lena: College writing or first-year writing.

Excerpt 5.2

In this case, just as in Excerpt 5.1, the high school teachers' attempts to confirm information are not limited to the individual asking a question. Here it is not Marita, but the other high school teacher in the group, Carol, who continues the questioning sequence after Marita's initial question about whether the courses taught by the college instructors are required (Line 4). Some of the questions, in this case Marita's question about whether or not students can take a course "in place of it" (Line 10), are attempts at confirming a prior utterance, the answer to Carol's question about whether students can "place out of it." Once again, the high school teachers do not settle for a partial understanding of the information the college instructors provide, instead they paraphrase answers they have been given in order to verify new information they have received.

In Excerpt 5.3, Theresa, a high school teacher of the Red Group, reacts with a series of confirming questions to the Laura's assertion that the university's remedial course is ungraded:

- 1 Laura: ...and it's not graded [so there's no pressure
 2 Theresa: [Oh, it's not?
 3 Laura: No, uh-uh
 4 Theresa: But they still take it seriously?
 5 Laura: ((nods head)) Yep, [they chose it
 6 Theresa: [Because they want to get ready
 for the next level
 7 Laura: Uh-huh

Excerpt 5.3

In this situation, Theresa employs a similar questioning strategy similar to those of the teachers in Excerpts 5.1 and 5.2, although she seems to take a different stance to the information they have received. While in the previous two exchanges, the high school teachers have sought verification of new information, Theresa's stance here is a skeptical

one. Her first question registers surprise at what she has just heard from Laura: “Oh, it’s not?” (Line 2). While response tokens will be discussed at length in Chapter 6, it is sufficient at this point to note Theresa’s use of a newsmark, a response token that indicates the receipt of “news” or otherwise surprising information by the speaker. Theresa follows Laura’s response to her skepticism with questions that seek to confirm Laura’s earlier assertion that many of the students in the remedial courses she has taught are thoughtful and engaged (Lines 4 and 6).

Theresa’s second question, “But they still take it seriously?” expresses skepticism about Laura’s confirmation that the class is ungraded and about her contention that students are engaged in such a course. When she again receives confirmation, Theresa follows with another question and mirrors the strategy employed by high school teachers in the previous two groups when, rather than asking a direct question, she constructs a statement from what she has heard for which she seeks confirmation from Laura.

In all three of these cases, the high school teachers ask multiple questions in pursuit of a discrete piece of information. The impact on the frequency differential of these types of question/answer sequences, sequences which are not employed by the college instructors, is clear—one reason the high school teachers ask more questions is that they pursue clarification and elaboration more vigilantly than the college instructors.

Discussion

Question Frequency

The frequency count of the number and type of questions asked by the participants in these cross-level conversations raises several questions. Chief among

them is why these high school teachers ask so many more questions than the college instructors. Perhaps the most obvious possibility is that high school teachers ask more questions because they want to know more about college than the college instructors do about high schools. This conclusion is based on the premise, as described by Schiffrin and others, that the person who asks questions in a conversation does not have information that another participant possesses. Questions, then, become a vehicle for the transfer of knowledge.

Another possible reason for the preponderance of questions from high school teachers is that they feel responsible for moving the conversation forward and use questions to accomplish this goal. In this way, questions can be seen as inviting participation in a conversation by participants other than the questioner since questions necessitate the relinquishing of the floor (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson). In the case of the high school teachers' use of questions directed to college instructors, the questions both allow them to control what gets talked about and also invite the college instructors to take a prominent role in the conversation as "next speakers."

Questions, Answers, and Interaction

While the precise reasons for the question frequency differential are unclear, the effect of that difference on the interactional dynamics of the small groups, particularly as it relates to status and control in these groups, should not be understated. Because questions and answers play such an important part in the organization of conversations, the number and type of questions asked primarily by high school teachers and directed at college instructors has several consequences for the organization of participation in these interactions.

The first consequence is that since they ask so many questions, the high school teachers exert considerable control over both the topics and speakers in each of the four small groups. Analyses of institutional interactions have found that a person who takes on the primary role of questioner in an interaction has a substantial amount of control of the content of the interaction (Button; Drew, “Strategies”). A question by a participant significantly narrows the range of possible responses available to the next speaker. In all four small groups, the conversation is tailored to the topics of interest to the high school teachers because they ask so many questions. While the college instructors have many opportunities to speak, the topics of their turns at talk are dictated, in large part, by the high school teachers’ questions.

In addition to allowing the questioner to influence the topic of conversation, questions also allow a speaker to determine, in large part, the identity of the next speaker. In these conversations, most of the high school teachers’ questions invite a college instructor to be the next speaker. Some questions are directed to individual college instructors and some to the college instructors generally, but in both cases, the high school teachers choose the teaching level of the next speaker. In these conversations, 72% of all questions were asked by a teacher from one level to one or more teachers from the other.

This preference for asking questions to participants with a different teaching level than that of the speaker results in conversations that are bilateral in nature. That is, although each small-group conversation has four or five individual participants, each conversation is structured so that it becomes, in large part, a conversation between representatives of two entities—the high school teachers and the college instructors—rather than among the four or five individuals. The result is that there is a strong

relationship between a participants' institutional identity and their participation patterns in the small-group conversations. A high school teacher is much more likely to ask a question of a college instructor than they are one of their high school colleagues; and college instructors frequently speak in response to questions from high school teachers.

Although the high school teachers have a considerable role in shaping the topic of the conversations, their questions also allow the college instructors to influence the conversation. Every time high school teachers address a question to the college instructors, they are, in effect, inviting the college instructors to take the floor, and by extension, to take temporary control of the conversation. Furthermore, the high school teachers' use of open-ended questions, as well as their lack of interest in limiting the college instructors' answers to yes/no or other kinds of limited questions, results in college instructors having lengthy turns at talk, thereby controlling the floor.

The Role of Context

The context of the meeting of which these conversations were a part likely contributed to the participants' identification with other teachers that teach at the same level. In particular, the high school teachers who were involved with the LIA professional development group had expressed interest in talking with the college writing instructors, so they are predisposed toward thinking of the college instructors in terms of their teaching level; the high school teachers come to the meeting expecting to meet with college instructors, in particular, not just other educators. Also, when this study was introduced to the group at the start of the meeting, the teachers were informed that one of the areas of exploration for this project is the way high school teachers and college instructors talk with one another. So there are several occasions when the teachers'

participation in these conversations is tied to their teaching level. Furthermore, the teachers actually sat with other teachers from their home institutions during the initial stages of the meeting. It was not until they were asked to move into their small groups that the high school teachers and college instructors interacted with one another.

Questions and “Conversational Asymmetry”

The concept of “conversational asymmetry” (Linell and Luckmann) provides a useful lens through which to view these conversations. And while we can consider all conversations as being inherently asymmetrical, the nature and pervasiveness of that asymmetry is by no means consistent in all situations. In these four small-group discussions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors, four types of asymmetry emerge.

First, the high school teachers’ role as initiators of topics can be seen as a type of interactional asymmetry or what Linell terms, “interactional dominance,” on the part of the high school teachers. Linell defines interactional dominance as addressing:

“patterns of asymmetry in terms of initiative-response (IR) structure. The dominant party is the one who makes most initiatory moves (contributions that strongly determine the unfolding local context) and makes relatively fewer weak moves (in which responding aspects prevail)” (158)

The high school teachers’ consistency in serving as initiators of the conversation in each of the four small-group discussions is indicative of a kind of interactional dominance on their part. The high school teachers regularly make conversational moves to initiate discussion of a topic, and the college instructors are primarily responders who do very little to initiate interaction, particularly after the initial stages of the small-group discussions.

While the high school teachers tend to demonstrate “interactional dominance” in these conversations, the impact of a second type of asymmetry, “semantic dominance,” is a bit more complicated. According to Linell, semantic dominance occurs where “one party predominantly introduced and maintained topics and perspectives on topic” (158). As a result, it cannot be easily ascribed to one or the other group in these conversations. In one sense, the high school teachers display semantic dominance in their initiation of topic throughout the conversations. As we have seen, the high school teachers are the primary introducers and maintainers of topics. However, the last phrase in Linell’s definition implies that interactional dominance is not only about the introduction of topics, but also about control of the perspectives that are expressed relative to those topics. In these conversations, the high school teachers exert little control over the opinions that are expressed relative to a given topic. In fact, as we will see in the next chapter, they frequently express surprise at the college instructors’ perspectives on topics. Thus, the high school teachers’ semantic dominance seems to stop at their control over the topics themselves and does not extend to the perspectives that are expressed about those topics.

The high school teachers’ control over topic choice relates to two other forms of conversational asymmetry: asymmetry of knowledge and asymmetry of participant status. The high school teachers take on the role of topic initiators, at least in part, because they believe that the college instructors have knowledge that the high school teachers themselves do not. It is this asymmetry of knowledge—an asymmetry that comes from what the college instructors know about college writing that the high school teachers do not—that drives the high school teachers’ influence on most of the interactional aspects of the conversation.

The asymmetry of knowledge in this interaction seems to be directly related to an asymmetry in participant status. It is the college instructors' status as university teachers that accounts for the knowledge differential. Because of the status of the institution of which they are a part, they have access to knowledge that is not readily available to the high school teachers. The high school teachers indicate that they routinely get information about college writing from their own college-aged children or from former students who return with stories of their own college experiences. However, the college instructors, individuals who actually teach writing at the university, hold a much different place in the institutional hierarchy than students, and as such have knowledge that is seen as more valuable.

Conclusion

We might expect that the participants' role and status relative to other participants would impact the way they interact in a conversation; however, in most cases described in CA research on "institutional interactions," the person representing the higher status group controls the conversation. In these four conversations, while it seems that the speakers' roles impact the nature of their participation, participants from the group that the literature suggests has the lower status, the high school teachers, exert considerable control over the conversation. Conversely, participants from the group with the higher status, at least in terms of the status of the institution they represent, are relatively passive; the college instructors spend little time initiating conversation and instead react to the questions posed by the high school teachers.

In many institutional interactions, the participants fulfill the responsibilities of narrowly-defined institutional roles (e.g., teachers and students, or judges and attorneys).

These cross-level conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors do not exhibit those pre-determined, socially-imposed participation patterns. Thus, the institutionally-sensitive roles that the participants adopt, consistently and across the four groups, as either questioners or respondents, can be viewed as co-constructions among members of each of the four groups rather than prescribed behaviors. No inherent institutional norm or expectation dictates that high school teachers should ask questions and college instructors should provide answers; rather, participants in each of the four groups repeatedly validate this participation structure over the course of their conversations.

Using the concept of asymmetry to understand these conversations does not allow for a simple apportionment of “power” to participants, in the ways that Schultz, Laine, and Savage, and others who have described the status inequality between high school English teachers and college writing instructors suggest. Contrary to what we might expect, the high school teachers exert considerable control over these conversations, control that comes from their use of questions.

CHAPTER 6

RESPONSE TOKENS IN CROSS-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

Although question/answer adjacency pairs are important interactional features, we can learn much by examining them as part of larger interactional sequences.

Questions/answer pairs do not occur in isolation; rather, they are parts of larger units of conversations and they often respond to previous turns and provide the impetus for subsequent turns. Several researchers have suggested a tripartite view of conversation that looks not only at a pair of turns, but also at the subsequent response to those turns (Sinclair and Coulthard; Schegloff and Sacks; Jefferson; Drew, “Strategies”). The “third turns” in a three-part interactional sequence, which frequently take the form of response tokens, can help us better understand the development of these conversations.

Response tokens provide perspective on the orientation of participants in a conversation toward what is being said by indicating the extent to which new information is being communicated in an interaction as well as participants’ views of new information they receive. Response tokens also affect the structure of conversation, as they can function in different ways as conversation management tools. They can be used to end discussion of a particular subject and take the conversation in a new direction, or they can function as “continuers” that extend discussion of the topic at hand. Considering the type and function of response tokens used by participants in the four small-group discussions

analyzed for this study provides a more nuanced view of the role of status and control in these conversations while highlighting information that participants identify as newsworthy.

College Instructors and Response Tokens

Frequency

In the four small-group conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors examined in this study, the frequency and type of response tokens used by participants appears to be related to the teaching level of the participants, just as we saw in the use of questions and answers in the previous chapter. Specifically, the college writing instructors are much less likely to use change-of-state response tokens in these conversations than are the high school English teachers. There is only a single instance in the four small-group discussions of a college instructor using a change-of-state response token in response to an answer given by a high school teacher.

Conversely, high school teachers use change-of-state responses nearly three dozen times.

The structure of the conversations resulting from the imbalance of questions and answers provides one explanation for the lack of change-of-state response tokens employed by the college instructors. Given the discrepancy in the numbers of questions asked by teachers from the two levels, it is unsurprising that college instructors use change-of-state response tokens less frequently than high school teachers. Since college instructors are answering questions, thereby providing information, more frequently than they are seeking information by asking questions, there is less information being received by the college instructors to which they can respond. However, a more sufficient

explanation is needed, in particular, for the near absence of the use of response tokens that indicate the receipt of new information or news on the part of the college instructors. Although they only ask 13 questions directly to high school teachers, it would seem plausible that the college instructors would respond to answers they hear as informational or newsworthy more than just a single time. Furthermore, a closer look at that single change-of-state response token employed by a college instructor shows that it occurs not in reaction to anything said during the substantive portion of the groups' discussion; rather it is part of a personal discussion as the groups' conversations were ending.

Excerpt 6.1 shows the single occasion of a change-of-state response token employed by a college instructor; as Lena responds to an answer to her query regarding why one of the high school teachers, Gwen, was leaving the meeting before its end:

- | | | |
|---|-------|---|
| 1 | Lena: | Where else do you teach? |
| 2 | Gwen: | My synagogue runs a school= |
| 3 | Lena: | =uh huh |
| 4 | Gwen: | So I teach seventh grade [I teach holocaust studies |
| 5 | Lena: | [Wow |

Excerpt 6.1

In this interaction, Gwen's declaration that she teaches in the evenings at her synagogue elicits the change-of-state response token from Lena (Line 5). However, this exchange does not pertain to the substance of their group's discussion or with the main business of the meeting. Instead, it occurs near the end of the small-group conversations as the participants are gathering their belongings and preparing to reconvene as a larger group to "report out" about the things they have been discussing in their small groups.

Neutral Response Tokens: *Yeah* and *Sure*

Instead of using response tokens that indicate the receipt of new or surprising information, the college instructors more frequently use response tokens, like *mm-hm* or

yeah which according to Heritage are used to “avoid or defer treating prior talk as informative” (Heritage, “A Change-of-State” 307). Excerpt 6.2 shows a typical question/answer sequence initiated by a college instructor. The sequence begins with a question asked by Laura, a college instructor. In quick succession, two of the high school teachers, Theresa and Deidre answer. Laura’s response to those answers, like those of many other college instructors, approaches the receipt of the information neutrally:

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Laura: | Do students type their papers in high school, or do you have [a lot of handwritten |
| 2 | Theresa: | [Yeah, it depends on the level. It depends on the level= |
| 3 | Deidre: | =When they do impromptus [too. |
| 4 | Laura: | [Yeah |
| 5 | Deidre: | So those are handwritten. |
| 6 | Deidre: | [Yeah. |
| 7 | Theresa: | [Yeah—any essay they do at home has to be typed. |
| 8 | Laura: | Mm-hm. |

Excerpt 6.2

Laura’s responses to the answers she receives (Lines 4 and 8) are generally affirming. They provide no indication that the answer she has received is information that she did not previously have or that she is surprised by what she has heard.

The next example of a college instructor’s response token shows that not only are the college instructors frequently noncommittal about the receipt of information, but in some cases their responses indicate that information provided by high school teachers is “old” information, or information that the college instructors already possess. The sequence in Excerpt 6.3, which is preceded by high school teacher Gwen’s discussion of a recent assignment, begins with a question posed by Amanda, a college instructor:

- | | | |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Amanda: | How many of their works cited do you actually take the time to check? [Do you spot check? |
| 2 | Gwen: | [Oh, I don’t know because I haven’t gotten them yet= |
| 3 | Amanda: | =Yeah. |
| 4 | Gwen: | But the, some of the kids I will spot check, some of |

5 Amanda: [them.
[Sure.

Excerpt 6.3

In this case, Amanda responds to Gwen's answer with simple confirmations that she has heard Gwen (Lines 3 and 5). In fact, Amanda's response in Line 5, "sure," does not just avoid treating Gwen's talk as informative; it actually treats it as expected information.

Overall, the college instructors' reactions to answers given by high school teachers do not indicate that they have, in the course of these four conversations, learned anything new. Whether or not they have learned anything new, the data show that the college instructors provide little indication that new information has been received.

High School Teachers and Response Tokens

Frequency

On the other hand, the high school teachers frequently respond to statements made by college instructors—most notably the college instructors' answers to questions posed by high school teachers—with response tokens indicating they have heard information that is new to them or even that they have heard "news." High school teachers use change-of-state response tokens 23 times as third turns in question/answer pairs. There were 12 other instances of their use in response to informings initiated by college instructors, which brings the total number to 35.

Oh

Oh is a change-of-state response token that, according to Heritage, "is used to propose that its producer has undergone some kind of change in his or her locally current

state of knowledge, information, orientation or awareness” (“A Change-of-State” 299). Likewise, Schiffrin argues that while *oh* is a discourse marker whose meaning cannot be determined except by looking at the context within which it occurs; it is typically used as a marker of “information management” used by speakers “as they replace one information unit with another, as they recognize old information which has become conversationally relevant, and as they receive new information to integrate into an already present knowledge base” (74). Schiffrin argues that we can ascertain which one of these information management tasks *oh* is fulfilling based on the place it occupies within an interactional sequence.

A closer look at the particular kinds of response tokens used by the high school teachers shows that 25 of the 35 newsmarks used by high school teachers involve the use of *oh*. Few of the high school teachers’ responses consist solely of *oh*. Instead, in most instances the use of *oh* is accompanied by more talk, including confirming questions and partial restatements of the previous speaker’s answer.

One prevalent aspect of the high school teachers’ use of *oh* as a response token is their use of *okay* along with *oh*. In many of the circumstances where *oh* is used as a response token by the high school teachers, it is preceded or followed by *okay*. The next several excerpts demonstrate the high school teachers’ use of *oh* and *okay* to respond to information provided by the college instructors. In Excerpt 6.4, Steve, a college instructor, responds to a question from one of the high school teachers, Lydia regarding the ways he teaches audience:

- | | | |
|---|--------|--|
| 1 | Lydia: | ...So do you have to tell your students what
[audience? |
| 2 | Steve: | [Well, I talk to [them about it and say |
| 3 | Lydia: | [You do tell them?=
=what kind of |
| 4 | Steve | audience do you think we should be [writing to |

5 Lydia: [Oh, okay.]

Excerpt 6.4

Lydia follows her original question with a newsmark in Line 3, and she then responds to Steve's reiteration and extension of his original answer with both *oh* and *okay* (Line 5).

Excerpts 6.5 and 6.6, each from different small groups, show a similar pattern in which high school teachers respond to statements made by college instructors with an *oh* followed immediately by *okay*:

1 Robin: I would say that's the biggest emphasis in first year writing, is revision.

2 Jolene: Oh, okay.

Excerpt 6.5

1 Gwen: So they can take a course in place of it?

2 Lena: Well, they could take her section instead of mine, and [maybe she doesn't focus on that

3 Gwen: [Oh, okay. Okay.

Excerpt 6.6

And Excerpt 6.7 depicts an extended turn that begins with *oh* and *okay* used as response tokens. In this sequence, high school teacher Jolene begins her response with "oh, okay" echoing the responses in the previous three excerpts; however, Jolene follows the initial response token by paraphrasing her original question and changing it into a declarative sentence:

1 Jolene: So, now is there, um, a place in your classrooms for, like, peer conferencing? Do you put that in there?

2 ((Andrea nods))

3 Robin: Oh, yes.

4 Jolene: Oh, okay, so they do do that, conference with someone else. Bring a draft in. I did that when I was in college, too. Only one English teacher I did, did that.

Excerpt 6.7

The portion of Jolene's turn that follows the response token provides some insight into the way *oh* and *okay* function as response tokens in these conversations. In Line 4,

Jolene affirms Robin's response that students do participate in peer conferencing: "so they do do that, conference with someone else." She follows this statement by connecting Robin's answer about peer critique with her own experiences as a college student: "I did that when I was in college, too." And Jolene ends her turn with a qualification of her peer critique experiences by noting that "only one" of her English teachers had employed peer critique as a class activity. The progression of Jolene's response, from the response token that indicates the receipt of new information along with the acceptance of that information to the statements regarding her own experiences with peer review, demonstrates the way that *okay* acts as a quick acceptance of the new information. Here, Jolene follows the response token by stating the basis for her surprise, that peer review happened infrequently in her college classes, as well as acknowledging that in her experience peer review is a thing that could happen in college English classes.

The high school teachers' consistent pairing of *okay* with response tokens containing *oh* is notable because it is employed only by high school teachers in these conversations and is seen consistently and across each of the four groups. *Okay* seems to work as a mitigation of the change-of-state response tokens in these situations, and thus allows the high school teachers to show that they have reoriented themselves to the changes in their knowledge about college composition. This acceptance and reorientation works to prevent disagreement about topics and also may function as a way for high school teachers to align themselves with their college counterparts.

Newsmarks

Newsmarks, utterances that typically follow the receipt of "news" can be distinguished from *oh* because they indicate a greater degree of change in the knowledge

state of the speaker. Heritage and Jefferson each connect this distinction to the difference between information that is merely “new” for the hearer and information that is “news.” News is responded to with a kind of skepticism or incredulity not evident in situations where hearers are responding to merely new information. Because newsmarks generally indicate receipt of information that runs counter to a speaker’s pre-existing beliefs or assumptions, they are useful in identifying not only when participants have learned something new, but more specifically when they have learned something that runs counter to their expectations or contradicts something that they have held to be true.

Examining the high school teachers’ use of newsmarks in their conversations with the college instructors provides a sense of how often, and when, they hear things from the college instructors that are surprising or contrary to their assumptions. Newsmarks also serve an important purpose in the structure of the conversations because they encourage further discussion of the topic at hand. Thus, the high school teachers’ use of newsmarks in response to answers provided to their questions results in further discussion of the topic raised by the high school teachers’ initial questions, and there are fewer opportunities for the college instructors to introduce new topics for discussion.

In some sequences in which the high school teachers employ newsmarks, the newsmarks are followed by *okay* to create responses much like those discussed in the previous section. In Excerpt 6.8, high school teacher Lydia asks a question about students’ use of personal pronouns such as “I” and “you” in their writing:

- | | | |
|---|--------|--|
| 1 | Lydia: | ...Second, did you find that they would use, “well <u>you</u> could use this in your classroom,” that type of voice? |
| 2 | Gina: | I—= |
| 3 | Lydia: | =Cause if have a problem with kids, “well I believe that this would be good in your classroom because,” |
| 4 | Gina: | I tell the students when they write “I believe that, I |

think that, I know that,” we already know, we’re reading your work. So, they can just scratch that phrase. I think that—I don’t have too much problem with them using first person
 5 Lydia: You don’t? okay.

Excerpt 6.8

In reply to Lydia’s question, Gina states that she does not have “too much problem” with students using personal pronouns (Line 4), and Lydia responds to this assertion with a newsmark: “You don’t? Okay” (Line 5). The use of the newsmark as a response token indicates that Gina’s answer is something that Lydia considers news. However, just as with the pairing of *oh* and *okay*, the pairing of the newsmark with *okay* indicates a quick reorientation on Lydia’s part to the news she has just received.

In the conversational sequence from the Green Group provided in Excerpt 6.9, we see another example of the use of *okay* following newsmarks. This sequence involves the same two teachers who interacted in Excerpt 6.7. In this case, high school teacher Jolene asks if using whole-class workshops for peer review of student writing would be feasible:

1 Jolene: Because would it even be possible that everyone would have the opportunity at some point to have the full class look at their paper?
 2 Robin: I’ve done it=
 3 Jolene: =You have? Okay.

Excerpt 6.9

Jolene’s response in Line 3 combines the newsmark element, *you have*, with *okay*. Like the other situations in which high school teachers use this response, in a single turn Jolene notes the receipt of “news” and acknowledges her acceptance of that news.

While Excerpts 6.8 and 6.9 may suggest that newsmarks function in much the same way as the less evocative change-of-state response token *oh*, the interactional sequence in Excerpt 6.10 demonstrates how *oh* and newsmarks function differently as response tokens. In this excerpt, Deidre, a high school teacher, asks the two college

instructors in the group what grade they would give the college writing sample the group has been discussing:

- 1 Deidre: So what grade would that kid get?
2 Susan: A B plus, [probably
3 Deidre: [Oh, okay ↑ So at least they're not getting
Cs and Ds.
4 Susan: They're not going to fail. I would never fail [them.
5 Laura: [But at
Midwest a B plus is considered a bad grade for so
many students=
6 Deidre: =[Oh, is it?
7 Theresa: =[I know, I know. Well because you
go there with a four point...

Excerpt 6.10

One notable aspect of this sequence is that it contains instances of high school teachers using newsmarks as well as *oh* and *okay* as response tokens. Deidre responds to Susan's answer that the student would receive "a B plus, probably" with the "oh, okay" response token employed frequently by the high school teachers (Line 3). With this response, Deidre indicates that she has received new information, but also that she has accepted that information. She follows up her response token with a brief explanation of her response: "at least they're not getting Cs and Ds."

While Deidre does not actively seek to further the conversation by asking a follow-up question, Laura, the other college instructor in the group notes that students at Midwest may not consider a B-plus to be a good grade, as it appears Deidre has. Here Deidre responds to this new information from Laura not with the change-of-state response token she employed in her previous turn, but with the newsmark, "oh, is it?" (Line 6). The newsmark indicates that Deidre views the "news" value of this information differently than she does Susan's earlier assertion that the paper would receive a B-plus. Rather than providing any sort of acceptance of the new information, she uses the

newsmark here to both challenge and seek clarification. In this case, that clarification is provided by one of the other high school teachers in the group, Theresa.

Theresa's response to Deidre's newsmark here also underscores the variability of response to the information exchanged in these conversations. The information that Deidre considers news is not news to Theresa. So even while identifying larger patterns of interactional participation that relate to the participants' teaching level, it is critical to note that the participants' reaction to what they hear is not uniform, no matter their teaching level. In fact, these individual differences in knowledge, experience, and viewpoint underscore the inadequacy of the existing research into these cross-level conversations. In this particular case, Theresa's experience as an AP instructor may give her access to more knowledge about grading standards in college composition courses than Deidre, her high school colleague. In addition, newsmarks tell us not about whether or not the information **is** news, but only if the participant indicates to the others in the conversation that they consider what they have heard to be news. Therefore, participants may choose not to respond to something that they have heard as newsworthy because it is something that they feel they should already know, a disposition toward the information they then portray to the other participants in the conversation.

We also see some variability in the ways different kinds of newsmarks function in these conversations. Excerpt 6.11 is an extended interactional sequence regarding the teaching of the thesis statement. In the lead-up to her initial question, which is not provided here, Violet expresses dismay at university professors who advocate approaches to writing pedagogy that are not, in her words, "definitive." As an example, Violet describes a conversation she had at a local professional conference with a professor who strongly discouraged the teaching of grammar out of context. Violet says that while she

is familiar with the theoretical basis for that viewpoint, she also believes that one reason her students “don’t have a grasp” of grammar is because they have only been taught grammar in context. She goes on to compare the resistance to teaching grammar out of context to teachers who advocate a model of writing instruction that is not thesis driven. At the start of the excerpt, Violet, a high school teacher, asks the two college instructors in the group, Steve and Gina, about whether or not they teach students to organize their papers around a thesis statement:

- 1 Violet: ...I mean, so I don’t know, I don’t know how this is, how would you approach that? Do you talk about that, you know? Is that a—do you know what I’m saying? Do you talk about that? The thesis statement, in particular.
- 2 Steve: [Um,
- 3 Violet: [Structure like that.
- 4 Steve: Um, I don’t identify specifically a thesis statement because I think, I think one of the things we try to do is move away from the idea of a thesis statement, so that they don’t need to rely on that so much. Because there’s a tendency to kind of lean on the thesis, that here I’m going back, see I’m proving my point, see I’m proving my point, see I’m proving [my point.
- 5 Lydia: [Really=
- 6 Steve: =So there’s kind of a dogmatic adherence to the thesis which seems to disrupt them from thinking beyond the thesis and using kind of the beginning as a premise for thinking something through. And so, I don’t specifically say you need a thesis; I’ll speak with them about their writing because I have the leisure. I mean, I don’t, you guys probably don’t have the leisure that I do. I deal with eighteen or twenty students, and so I have plenty of time to meet with them and talk about their papers. And so I can talk about, you know, I can have twenty, thirty minute meetings with students about, well this idea’s not working; I have a question about this point. So, the thesis statement, structurally, isn’t so important to get them started, um=
- 7 Lydia: =°Wow

Excerpt 6.11

In this case it is not the questioner, Violet, who responds to Steve’s answer with a newsmark, rather it is one of the other high school teachers in the group, Lydia. Lydia first asks “Really?” after Steve claims that students rely too much on thesis statements, then later softly says “Wow” as Steve reiterates that, in his view, the thesis is not important in terms of helping students get started writing. Both of these newsmarks indicate that Lydia has received “news” from Steve’s answer. Her first response, “really?,” is a newsmark that works as a request for clarification (Line 5). While Steve does not seem to directly address Lydia’s newsmark and clarification request, he proceeds to expand on his reasoning for not teaching thesis statements. Lydia’s response to Steve’s extended explanation again takes the form of a newsmark, but this time the newsmark does not prompt Steve to offer any further information; instead, it serves to register Lydia’s surprise (Line 7).

When so-called “minimal questions” are used as newsmarks, they tend to have a significant impact on the development of the conversation. The interactional sequence in Excerpt 6.12, although not part of a question/answer exchange, demonstrates the way in which newsmarks function to maintain a group’s focus on the topic at hand. In this sequence from the Green Group, Robin notes that most college students do not cite sources as adeptly as the author of the sample college paper the groups had read:

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Robin: | But I find a lot of college students don’t cite like this |
| 2 | Harriet: | Really? |
| 3 | Robin: | It’s multi-tasking. You have to be thinking about, [like |
| 4 | Jolene: | [It’s a lot to do= |
| 5 | Robin: | =It <u>is</u> a lot to do. And I think for first-year writers, it’s never surprising to me what I get, you know. |

Excerpt 6.12

Harriet's use of the newsmark, *really?*, in response to Robin's initial assertion extends discussion of this point. Following Harriet's newsmark, Robin explains why college students do not cite sources effectively: "It's multi-tasking" (Line 3). Robin follows Jolene's statement in Line 4 that "it's a lot to do" by noting that their discussion of college students' troubles with citation may be more broadly applicable: "and I think for first-year writers, it's never surprising to me what I get, you know" (Line 5). In this case, Harriet's newsmark influences the subsequent three turns of the conversation.

As earlier excerpts have shown, newsmarks function as a receipt of unanticipated information. A logical extension of this view is that when a newsmark is used as a response token following a question/answer sequence, it indicates that the answer that has been received does not match the expectation of the questioner. Schiffrin cautions against reading the use of newsmarks in absolute terms, but nevertheless argues for a careful examination of the context within which they occur as an indicator of their relevance: "Although we cannot know with certainty whether answers do conform to questioners' expectations, we can see whether they conform to the linguistically encoded expectations..." (88), expectations suggested by the construction of questions. Thus, when the high school teachers use newsmarks to acknowledge the receipt of answers provided in response to tag questions, questions that contain an answer that the respondent must simply verify, we can infer that in those cases, the high school teachers have received an answer that provided not only new information, but information that did not conform to what they had expected or assumed.

Excerpt 6.13 begins with a tag question asked by Theresa that suggests that the particular type of college student the group has been discussing, the student who simply wants a "checklist" for writing, is becoming less common:

- 1 Theresa: So you find that less? Less and less? That type of student?
- 2 Laura: Which, which type?=
3 Theresa: =The checklist student that says, “Okay, I’ve got this formula down pat now”
- 4 Laura: I find it more=
5 Susan: =More [and more ((nods vigorously))
6 Theresa: [You find it more? ((eyes widen)) Wow, that’s interesting.
- 7 Laura: Because my nightmare is the essay that’s written perfectly, no grammar mistakes, perfect organization, and there’s no thought.

Excerpt 6.13

Theresa’s assumption that these students are becoming less common is suggested by her use of a tag question. The surprise Theresa exhibits upon hearing Laura’s statement, supported by Susan’s affirmation, that such students are more common than in the past is a strong indication that a strongly held assumption has been challenged by the college instructors’ answers to her question. Theresa exhibits a noticeable physical response to the information by widening her eyes, and this action is accompanied by two newsmarks for two different audiences: a clarifying question for the college instructors that flips the assumption of her original query and an evaluative comment, “wow, that’s interesting,” directed not to the college instructors but to one of her high school teaching colleagues. Theresa’s response here suggests the degree to which newsmarks function as outward expressions of the effect of new information on existing beliefs and assumptions.

Response Tokens and Conversation Management

Since newsmarks serve as forward-looking conversational moves that suggest further discussion of the current topic, their use has consequences for the progression of interactions. Just as high school teachers exert control over the topic of the conversation by asking questions frequently, their use of newsmarks serves to further that control. The

college instructors' typical response to high school teachers' answers with neutral response tokens has the effect of bringing the discussion of a topic to a close. It is only if a speaker reintroduces the topic of conversation that the topic of the original question will continue to be under discussion. However, the high school teachers' newsmarks, which are generally forward-looking response tokens, allow them to not only respond to the answer they have received but to maintain discussion of the topic at hand by seeking clarification or elaboration.

Excerpt 6.14 provides an example of a conversational sequence that begins with a question and is perpetuated by the high school teachers' newsmarks. In this conversational sequence from the Red Group, Deidre, a high school teacher, asks the two college instructors in the group, Laura and Susan, if they are worried about things like "lack of parallelism" when they grade and respond to student writing. Deidre's question refers to a discussion preceding this excerpt of whether or not most college instructors would lower the grade on a writing assignment for each error in conventions, a practice Deidre has recently read about. Deidre is pressing Susan and Laura for their personal views relative to this practice because previously they have said only that they also have heard of college instructors who do deduct points for each error in conventions:

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Deidre: | Because when you're checking an essay, honestly, do you go through and do you say, "okay, lack of parallelism?" ((mimics writing on a paper)) ((to Laura)) I mean, do you do that? |
| 2 | Theresa: | Does she do what? |
| 3 | Deidre: | Do you say, you know, "lack of parallelism, lack of this, lack of that" ((mimics writing))? I mean, in terms of like conventions, do you go through? |
| 5 | | ((Laura and Susan shake their heads)) |
| 6 | Susan: | (2) I would notice; I mean I wouldn't write [anything. |
| 7 | Deidre: | [But you wouldn't comment= |
| 8 | Susan: | =I mean I would notice |

if I saw a sentence that had just this marvelous little structure to it. I would [notice it
 9 Deidre: [Right. But would that, I mean, lower the grade? I mean, let's say the content, like, I was reading something, and the book it said that there are still college professors who will mark down a grade for every three errors.
 10 Susan: [Oh, yeah
 11 Laura: [Mm-hm ((nods head))=
 12 Deidre: =In conventions?
 13 Susan: Mm-hm ((nods head))
 14 ((Laura nods head))
 15 Deidre: But what if it's a good essay?
 16 Laura: They're [Yeah. Well
 17 Deidre: [Why? Why?

Excerpt 6.14

In this sequence, Deidre registers surprise upon hearing that college instructors would penalize a paper for problems with conventions even if the development of ideas was effective. The newsmark “in conventions?” serves as an initial reaction that is followed by increasingly animated reactions from Deidre as she seeks clarification by asking “in conventions?” (Line 12), then ending with repeating the question “why?” (Line 17) It seems clear that Deidre disagrees with what she hears from Susan and Laura—which, it is important to note, is not a disagreement with Susan and Laura themselves, as Susan and Laura are merely recounting what they have observed of other teachers’ practices rather than their own. Rather than switching the subject as some possible responses would, the newsmarks necessitate that the conversation remains focused on Deidre’s original question about the importance of conventions in the assessment of writing at the college level, and they also allow Deidre to express disagreement and frustration about what she’s hearing in a non-combative way. Rather than directly disagreeing with what she’s heard, Deidre uses a series of minimal questions as response tokens to indicate her disapproval of the approach to grading being discussed by the group.

Discussion

As with the use of questions examined in the previous chapter, the use of response tokens in these cross-level conversations, particularly change-of-state response tokens, seems to be strongly related to a participant's institutional affiliation. And while there is certainly some relationship between the large number of questions asked by high school teachers and the openings for the use of response tokens that their questions make available, the mere availability of opportunities for response tokens does not adequately explain either the large number of change-of-state response tokens and newsmarks present in the talk of the high school teachers or their lack of use by college instructors.

Response Tokens and Asymmetries of Knowledge

One key aspect of the change-of-state response tokens in general, and of newsmarks in particular, is that we can infer a lack of knowledge on the part of speakers who employ them. So, if a person uses an expression that indicates they have received information they did not previously have, we might infer that there was some deficiency in their knowledge. As a result, the impulse against using change-of-state response tokens, and especially newsmarks, can be read as a face-saving maneuver on the part of the college instructors. This possibility raises a key distinction regarding the use of newsmarks—while the use of newsmarks and other change-of-state response tokens is a strong indication that the person who utters them has received new information, we cannot assume that the absence of newsmarks or other change-of-state response tokens is an indication that new information has not been received by participants. In this case, we cannot assume that because the college instructors fail to use change-of-state response

tokens or newsmarks that they have not heard any new information, but it is clear that they do not make the receipt of new information clear in the interactions they have with the high school teachers.

Response Tokens and Status

As discussed in Chapter 4, studies of institutional interactions have identified ways in which participants having a certain status in particular kinds of conversations refrain from using certain kinds of response tokens, particularly change-of-state response tokens and newsmarks. For example, arbitrators are unlikely to use change-of-state response tokens or any other responses that express surprise in response to testimony in an arbitration hearing because of their status as decision-makers. The arbitrators' status is socially constructed by both the arbitrators themselves and the lawyers and witnesses in this type of interaction would make an exclamation of surprise on the part of the arbitrator (i.e., "oh, really?") generally unacceptable (Atkinson). Likewise, it could be that the college instructors' status as representatives of the university, and as we saw in the previous chapter holders of knowledge, makes them unlikely to respond with newsmarks.

Response Token Frequency

What then should we make of such prominent use of newsmarks by the high school teachers? One explanation is that because, in general, they ask questions and the college instructors provide answers, the high school teachers are simply more likely to learn information that they did not know before and thus more likely to use newsmarks

and other change-of-state response tokens. While this is most likely a factor, it doesn't fully explain the size of the discrepancy between the two groups.

The discrepancy may also be related to the experiences of the particular high school teachers and college instructors who participated in these conversations. As mentioned earlier, five of the nine college instructors had secondary school teaching experience, while none of the high school teachers had experience teaching college composition. And while the college instructors with high school teaching experience rarely make direct reference to that experience, it may give them a level of knowledge about teaching at the other level that is not available to the high school teachers.

Another factor may be the topics of the questions that teachers from the two levels ask one another. While the thematic analysis of the questions in these conversations will be detailed in Chapter 7, 8, and 9, one general conclusion that is relevant to this discussion is that most of the college instructors' questions are about the small group activity—the evaluation of two student texts as examples of best writing—while the high school teachers' questions are more frequently about the college instructors' teaching practices and the institutional norms of the university. The nature of the college instructors' questions regarding the group activity do not lend to surprising or otherwise newsworthy answers. When the college instructors ask about the activity itself, they are unlikely to respond as though they have heard new information. Conversely, the high school teachers' questions about what happened in college classrooms seem better suited to providing answers that contain what the high school teachers would consider to be new information.

The high school teachers' frequent use of newsmarks and change-of-state response tokens is an indication that they hear quite a bit of new information, things that

they had not previously known, in the course of the small-group discussions. This provides some credence to the long-held notion among scholars addressing the transition from high school to college writing that one reason for students' difficulty with the transition is that many high school teachers do not know much about college writing. The frequency with which the high school teachers use newsmarks suggests that they are receiving new information regularly in these conversations. Since, as the following chapters of this study will describe, most of these newsmarks occur in the context of discussions about the teaching and assessment practices of the college instructors, a link emerges between the high school teachers' indications that they have received new information and the fact that the information being provided by the college instructors typically describes the ways writing is taught and assessed at the college level. While this analysis does not provide a definitive response to this issue, it does suggest that these cross-level interactions are situations through which high school teachers might gain new information.

Response Tokens and Cross-Level Conversations

When we look at the high school teachers' frequent use of newsmarks in light of the belief that high school English teachers are inadequately informed about college writing, we see that not only do these high school teachers learn new information, but they learn many things that they respond to as "news"—things that surprise them or that they find unexpected. So these teachers are learning not only new information, but also information that challenges their expectations. This complicates existing notions of high school teachers' lack of knowledge about college writing because it suggests that the

problem may not be the knowledge that the high school teachers lack, but instead misinformation they believe to be true.

Another reading of this situation, however, might indicate that the misunderstanding or misinformation, such as it exists, may not lie solely with the high school teachers. Rather, the fact that high school English teachers and college writing instructors have different perceptions of college writing does not mean that it is the high school teachers who are at fault. In some cases in each of these conversations, the discussions in which high school teachers use newsmarks are concerned with college writing in classes other than first-year composition.

In these cases, it may be that the reason why high school teachers view the information they receive as news is because the college instructors are answering broad questions about college writing from their narrow perspectives as first-year composition teachers. Thus an assertion on the part of a college instructor that impromptu writing is not important in college is received as news by high school teachers who are concerned about students' performances on essay exams in history and social science courses.

Response Tokens and Conversational Asymmetry

Newsmarks further complicate questions of authority and dominance that were raised in the preceding chapter's analysis of questions and answers. In some ways, the use of newsmarks is a "weak" interactional move because it puts the high school teachers in the position of seeming not as informed as they thought they were or as their counterparts from the university are. This would seem to indicate that the participants from both institutions believe that the college instructors have knowledge that is not readily available to all participants, in particular the high school teachers.

The high school teachers' use of newsmarks, however, also reinforces the control they exert over the way these conversations are conducted. Just as the frequent use of questions allows them to exert considerable control over both the topic and next speaker, the use of newsmarks, which as Heritage claims tend to further discussion of a topic by seeking reiteration or clarification from the person who answered the questions, allows high school teachers to determine, in large part, who talks and what they talk about. On the other hand, the college instructors frequently provide response tokens (i.e., "okay" and "right") that do little to encourage any further discussion. As a result, the high school teachers control the general progression of these conversations.

In addition, the change-of-state response tokens and newsmarks frequently employed by high school teachers allow them to disagree in a non-combative way. Rather than expressing skepticism or disagreement through declarative statements, the high school teachers are able to use newsmarks and other response tokens to question, sometimes repeatedly, statements by the college instructors while maintaining a sense of collegiality and goodwill during these conversations.

CHAPTER 7

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONS IN CROSS-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

While understanding the structure of these interactions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors is important, doing so without regard to the actual content of the conversations would be myopic. One of the glaring gaps in our knowledge regarding cross-level conversations about writing relates to what teachers from these two levels discuss when they talk with one another about writing. Furthermore, if cross-level conversations are a key to improving students' transition from high school to college writing, one supposed benefit of those conversations for the participants will be the nature of the information that is exchanged. Thematic analyses of this kind can be useful in determining the kinds of things teachers from each level are interested in knowing. Here again, participants' questions and answers prove to be useful units for analysis of these cross-level conversations.

A greater understanding of the “what” of these conversations is also helpful in rounding out the picture of the cross-level interactions that begins to come into focus with the analysis of the interaction patterns presented in the previous two chapters. While there are important conclusions to be drawn from the fact that high school teachers seem more likely than college instructors to ask questions and react as though they have received new information from the college instructors' answers, knowing what

participants ask questions about and what they respond to as news provides another useful way of looking at these interactions by providing a better sense of ways to proceed in helping students transition more effectively from high school to college writing.

A thematic analysis of the four small-group conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors was conducted by coding the question/answer interactional sequences in thematic categories using open coding techniques as outlined in the Grounded Theory approach to qualitative data analysis. Based on initial readings of the question/answer interactional sequences, categories emerging from the data were developed and the question/answer sequences were again coded using these initial categories. As coding proceeded, the categories were refined. In particular those categories related to assessment of and response to student writing underwent significant revision. The question/answer sequences were then coded once again using the revised categories. These sequences were then coded across the thematic categories that had been developed using axial coding techniques.

This analysis of the questions/answer interactional sequences resulted in the development of six thematic categories:

- Questions about the Group's Activity
- Questions about Classroom Practices
- Questions about Assessment and Response to Student Writing
- Questions about the Institutions
- Questions about Student Attitude and Ability
- Personal Questions

Each of the questions asked during the four small-group conversations fits into one of these categories.

College Instructors' Questions: Thematic Categories

A review of key points regarding the question-asking patterns of the group as discussed in Chapter 5 might provide helpful context for this thematic analysis of the questions from these small-group conversations. First, there is a large difference between the numbers of questions asked by the teachers from each institution. High school teachers ask 78% of the total number of questions, while college instructors asked only 22%. College instructors ask 45% of their questions to the high school teachers, 41% to the group as a whole, and 14% to other college instructors.

Both the discrepancy in the numbers of questions asked by each group and the differences in the intended recipients of the questions influence the thematic analysis of the question/answer sequences. As with the results discussed in the two preceding chapters, there is simply more data to work with from the high school teachers because they ask so many more questions than the college instructors. In addition, since the college instructors direct a high percentage of their questions to the whole group, the topics of their questions differ greatly from the topics covered by high school teachers, who direct most of their questions to the college instructors.

Question Topics

As Table 7.1 shows, the college instructors ask the majority of their questions, 48%, about the group activity. The next most frequent question topic was the institutional norms of the high school and the school district—they ask 28% of their questions about institutional norms:

College Instructors' Questions, by Topic

Questions asked to:	High School Teachers	Whole Group	College Instructors	TOTALS
Group Activity	1	11	2	14
Classroom Practices	3	1	0	4
Assessment/Response to Student Writing	2	0	0	2
Institution	6	0	2	8
Student Ability/Attitudes	0	0	0	0
Personal	1	0	0	1
TOTALS	13	12	4	29

Table 7.1

However, 2 of the 8 questions about institutional norms are actually questions asked by college instructors to other college instructors about university policies. They ask few personal questions, questions about classroom practices or response to student writing, and they ask no questions about student ability and attitude.

High-Stakes Testing

Nearly half of the questions the college instructors asked to the high school teachers address institutional norms. More specifically, several of these questions are about the state's mandatory, high-stakes, standardized test. Based on this relatively small data sample, we can conclude that the topics of greatest interest to these college instructors relative to high school teaching are the institutional contexts—state, district, school-wide—that shape the high school teachers' teaching of writing.

The Group Activity

Most of the college instructors' questions, however, are about the activity that provides the context for the small-group conversations. As described in Chapter 3, prior to the small-group discussions, all of the participants read two writing samples, one written by a high school and one by a college student. The teachers were given some reflective questions regarding how representative these texts were of good writing at their respective institutions. While the participants were not told to confine their discussion to these topics, the questions were intended to provide a starting point for the small-group discussions, a way of framing these conversations for the participants.

The college instructors ask nearly half of their questions about the group's activity. The large number of questions about the group activity, particularly when we see that 79% of the questions about the group activity are posited to the whole group, is an indicator that the college instructors take some initiative in starting the conversations and in keeping the conversations "on topic." On the other hand, as we will see below, the high school teachers are much more likely to take the conversation away from the group's "topic" by asking questions about the range of other concerns that they had.

Furthermore, many of the college instructors' questions for the whole group are questions that could be characterized as administrative. That is, many of the questions focus on how the group will actually conduct the conversation—who will start first, who will go next, who will report out to the entire gathering at the end, et cetera. These questions are, perhaps, necessary for the smooth functioning of the group, but they make up a large number of the college instructors' questions—9 out of the 29 total questions the college instructors pose relate directly to how the group conversation will be

organized. The college instructors' focus on the small-group activity allows for a kind of detachment in their questions. Rather than gearing many of their questions toward the things that high school teachers do in their classrooms, they ask broader questions about pedagogy to the whole group, questions that are filtered through the sample texts the participants have read.

Excerpt 7.1 is an example of the type of question directed to the whole group that avoids direct questions about pedagogy to the high school teachers. In this excerpt, Robin asks the group if the paper they have read is “an ‘A’ paper”:

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Robin: | I guess my question is, is this an A paper? Based on, you know, those kinds of—and we may not be able to answer that |
| 2 | Harriet: | Right. I think in terms of, you know, absolute standard of something, I probably would give it an A minus. |

Excerpt 7.1

While Robin's question is answered by a high school teacher, Robin does not direct the question to the high school teachers in particular. Whereas the high school teachers, as we will see later, ask college instructors directly about what their standards are for an 'A' paper, Robin's conversational move here is much less direct. This type of move does facilitate conversation among all the participants in the group, but it is not nearly as direct, because it is posed to the whole group, as many of the high school teachers' questions for the college instructors.

In Excerpt 7.2, an exchange that occurs near the beginning of the Blue Group's conversation, Gina, a college instructor, attempts to start a discussion of one of the two student texts the participants have been reading by asking one of the high school teachers, Violet, what she thinks is the “thesis” of the paper:

- | | | |
|---|---------|--|
| 1 | Gina: | ((to Violet)) What would you say that the thesis is? |
| 2 | Violet: | Um, I'm sorry. ((shuffles through a stack of |

paper)) I was just kind of pondering what we—I'm trying to write down a couple of things we were talking about. Okay, well it seems as though the purpose here in a, it's quite a mouthful, but because, um, because it starts off talking about Gregory Lynn. Um, the implication is really that, you know, there's a, I guess, a comparison of Gregory slipping, I mean I don't know how you can do that, though. Kind of slip and slide this character

3 Lydia: But which sentence did you think was the thesis?

4 Violet: Oh. Well, I thought that there was an effort, starting from, uh, starting from that Gregory Lynn part, you know, there are two sentences here. But starting from the Gregory Lynn part to the end there's an effort to kind of construct a thesis statement of sort

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.

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5 And it seems like sometimes it's okay to say that, and other times we're kind of hinting that, well maybe we need more structure, but if you don't give them, you know, some kind of an idea of how to get that structure, then they're going to be floating a little bit, you know. I mean, so I don't know, I don't know how this is, how would you approach that? Do you talk about that, you know? Is that a—do you know what I'm saying? Do you talk about that? The thesis statement, in particular.

Excerpt 7.2

This question seems to take Violet off guard, as her first reaction, in Line 2, takes the form of an apology, “I’m sorry,” and she then has difficulty beginning an answer to Gina’s question and shuffles through the papers in front of her (perhaps looking for her copy of the essay in question). As Violet’s turn progresses, she proceeds from her answer to Gina’s question about the thesis statement of the student paper to a question, addressed to the college instructors in the group, about whether or not they teach thesis statements.

The juxtaposition of Gina’s questions about thesis statements that focus on the text the group has read and Violet’s question about how the college instructors teach the

concept of the thesis statement in their classes, provides a telling example of the different concerns of the teachers of the two levels, and how those concerns are manifested in both the recipient of the questions and the topics about which the questions are asked.

In several of the groups, the college instructors use broad questions for the whole group about the student texts in an attempt to jumpstart the group's discussion. In the previous excerpt (Excerpt 7.2), we saw how Gina used such a strategy at the beginning of the Blue Group's conversation. In the Red Group, Laura, one of the college instructors, attempts to negotiate how the group will begin by seeking validation from the other members:

- | | | |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Laura: | Should we talk, or should we just each put them all [out there? |
| 2 | Carol: | [I don't care. We can do what we want, we're the pink group= |
| 3 | Susan: | =I could just respond. I'll just add what I did |

Excerpt 7.3

In Excerpt 7.3, Laura uses questions in an attempt to achieve consensus about how the group will proceed with their conversation. In this case, Carol responds ambivalently before Susan, the other college instructor, takes the initiative and begins to read some of the notes she has written while reading the student texts.

The college instructors in the Green Group, and particularly Robin, also pose questions about the student texts to the whole group in an attempt to get the conversation started. In Excerpt 7.4, we see that the rest of the group responds with ambivalence similar to that exhibited by teachers in the Red Group:

- | | | |
|---|----------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Robin: | Ready to chat? |
| 2 | | (6) |
| 3 | Robin: | Are we just supposed to jump in? |
| 4 | | (2) |
| 4 | Harriet: | Jump. |
| 5 | | ((laughter)) |

6 Robin: Well, do we want to start with the college essay?
7 Harriet: Okay.

Excerpt 7.4

Robin asks three questions to the whole group in short succession in an effort to determine a way to start the group's conversation that the other participants will find acceptable. The lack of active response to Robin's questions seems to place the responsibility on her. Robin's deployment of the questions here might be viewed as successful because even though the other teachers in the group do not take her question as an opportunity to begin the discussion, the responses to her questions imply acquiescence on the group's part to Robin's plan for starting the conversation.

The college instructors' focus on questions related to the group's activity and the relative frequency with which they pose questions to the whole group seem to complement one another interactionally. Since the questions they ask are general ones, it is reasonable that they would ask these questions not to participants from one of the teaching levels, but to the whole group. Furthermore, their use of questions as discussion-starters is a further indication that the large number of questions asked by high school teachers is not due to any attempt on their part to encourage group discussion. Rather, it is the college instructors who make interactional moves using questions to elicit discussion from group members while the high school teachers focus their questions, for the most part, on the pursuit of information.

High School Teachers' Questions: Thematic Categories

As discussed in Chapter 5, high school teachers ask more than three times as many questions as college instructors, and they direct the large majority of their questions—80%—to the college instructors. They ask the remaining questions in

roughly equal numbers to their fellow high school teachers or to the small group as a whole.

Question Topics

Thematic analysis of the high school teachers' questions indicates that they have a particular interest in what college instructors have to say about institutional norms and procedures, particularly those related to evaluating student writing, classroom teaching, and the institutional practices of writing at the university. As Table 7.2 shows, 34% of the high school teachers' questions for college instructors are about institutional norms at the college level while nearly as many address the college instructors' classroom practices:

High School Teachers' Questions, by Topic

Questions asked to:	College Instructors	Whole Group	High School Teachers	TOTALS
Group Activity	0	8	5	13
Classroom Practices	27	0	0	27
Assessment/Response to Student Writing	17	2	1	20
Institution	28	1	1	30
Student Ability/Attitudes	4	0	0	4
Personal	6	0	3	9
TOTALS	82	11	10	103

Table 7.2

Also, 21% of the high school teachers' questions for college instructors relate to the college instructors' views on responding to and evaluating student writing, and another

5% of these questions reference college instructors' perceptions of student ability and attitude. High school teachers also ask questions about several aspects of how college, as an institution, works. In particular, they asked about aspects of the institution that are of vital importance to first-year students (i.e., placement, grading, course selection, revision, timed writing, typical classroom activities).

After coding the data based on these six categories, categories that had emerged during the open coding stage, the next step was axial coding, a process of looking for relevant connections across the thematic categories. During the axial coding process, two particular areas of focus in terms of the questions asked by high school teachers emerged:

- **Action:** What teachers and students of first-year composition do
- **Evaluation:** How students' writing is judged, both in terms of grading and the college instructors' perceptions of incoming students

Careful analysis of the high school teachers' questions about these two areas provides a richer view than currently exists in the literature about the particular concerns high school teachers have relative to college writing. Thus, each of these areas will be explored in greater depth in the succeeding chapters. Chapter 8 will provide a close analysis of the high school teachers' questions about what is done in first-year composition courses—not only in terms of the types of writing assignments and classroom activities that take place, but also in terms of the pedagogical strategies that the college instructors employ and their reasons for doing so. Chapter 9 will explore the high school teachers' questions about college instructors' evaluation of students and student writing not only in the context of grading but also in the instructors' and the institution's assessment of the preparedness of incoming first-year students.

CHAPTER 8

QUESTIONS ABOUT “ACTION” IN CROSS-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

As discussed in the preceding chapter, coding and analysis of the questions in these conversations yielded six thematic categories. However, when looking across these categories there emerged two broad areas of interest, particularly on the part of the high school teachers. One of these is evaluation—the high school teachers want to know how, in several different contexts, college students’ writing is judged. Chapter 9 will discuss evaluation in greater depth. The other area of particular interest to high school teachers is related to action—what teachers and students of first-year composition do in the course of teaching and learning writing.

The high school teachers’ focus on action cuts across several of the thematic categories. For example, high school teachers are concerned both about what kinds of writing assignments are typical for first-year writing courses as well as how the teachers assess student writing. Their interest extends beyond mere classroom activity, however, to include questions about the pedagogical approaches of the college instructors as well as the theoretical bases for those approaches. In addition, the high school teachers’ questions also indicate interest in how the college instructors’ classroom practices—the things they do in the classroom—are affected by their assessments of the writing ability of incoming students.

The focus on action permeates the conversations in all four of the small groups as the high school teachers seek specific information about the kinds of writing students do in college and the pedagogical practices college instructors employ to help students become better writers. While the college instructors seem inclined to stick with discussion of the two sample student papers, the high school teachers seem to be much more interested in what the college instructors and students actually do in first-year composition courses, and they ask multiple questions attempting to find out.

Student Writing as Action

One of the high school teachers' prominent concerns relative to student action is the amount and type of writing students do in their first-year composition courses. Excerpt 8.1 contains a question about the number of papers, while in Excerpt 8.2 a high school teacher asks about whether or not students "do" journals, in first-year composition courses:

1 Gwen: Do they do research papers for you?

Excerpt 8.1

1 Lydia: You guys don't even do them ((journals)) in college, do you?

Excerpt 8.2

In both of these instances, the high school teachers do not merely ask about student assignments, but their questions are structured to emphasize the action itself; they are interested in what students do. In this case, the high school teachers want to know whether or not students "do" journals or "do" research papers in college.

While the high school teachers in the previous two excerpts ask about assignments in terms of broad genres in which students sometimes are required to write,

others ask more specifically about the ways in which assignments are constructed. In Excerpt 8.3, Lydia, a high school teacher asks about how college instructor Gina constructs assignments with respect to the audiences for which she asks students to write. Lydia contextualizes her question by mentioning the state standardized assessment and the generic “group of adults” that serves as students’ intended audience on the test:

- 1 Lydia: So what are the different audiences that you tell your students to write to? Because on the [state standardized test], it’s always, you’re writing to a group of [adults
- 2 Janet: [Adults=
- 3 Lydia: =Interested adults. That’s boring to me. I’d rather say you’re writing for the New York Times or you’re writing for, like I like to do, you’re writing for incoming ninth graders who have to read this book. And, or, you know what I mean?
- 4 Gina: Yeah=
- 5 Lydia: =A little more specific. So do you have to tell your students what audience?
- 6 Gina: Yeah, I have to talk=
- 7 Lydia: =You do [tell them?
- 8 Gina: [To them and say, what kind of audience do you think we should be writing to?
- 9 Lydia: Oh, okay.

Excerpt 8.3

In this exchange, Lydia indicates her lack of enthusiasm for the nondescript “adult” audience by calling it boring, and she goes on to suggest some other possible audiences for which students could write. In Line 5, Lydia transitions from discussing the situation she struggles with in her high school classes by asking Gina if she struggles with the same thing: “So do you have to tell your students what audience?” Gina answers affirmatively and Lydia responds with a change-of-state response token, “oh, okay” (Line 9). This conversation serves as the starting point for an extended discussion about audience in which Gina complies with a request to describe in detail how she encourages her students to write for specific audiences rather than generic ones.

Excerpt 8.4, another interactional sequence from the Blue Group, occurs after Gina has described one of her assignments in response to Lydia's questions about audience. In this assignment, Gina asks her students to write to hypothetical high school teachers with a recommendation about using a current teen film, whose plot is a re-imagining of a Shakespearean play, in their class. Gina presents this as one way she has her students write for audiences other than "an interested reader." In the aftermath of this description, which is presented in Excerpt 8.11, Lydia shifts her line of questioning to focus not on the audience students address, but the implications of those audience choices on the genres within which students write:

- 1 Lydia: Now let me ask you this. Do you get in that kind of compare/contrast, and the fact that they're writing to high school teachers—one, did you have them write it in an essay[it was in an essay format?
- 2 Gina: [Uh-huh. It was in an essay [format.
- 3 Lydia: [It was in an essay format...

Excerpt 8.4

Lydia's question here about whether or not students wrote in an "essay format" is typical of the high school teachers' pursuit of information about assignments. Although Lydia's approach is much more specific and direct than the ones in Excerpts 8.1 and 8.2, she still focuses her questions on the acquisition of information about what students do in response to writing assignments.

The high school teachers' questions about the kinds of writing students do in college composition courses seem to be informed a great deal by what they believe to be true about college writing. Most of these questions are asked in a way that limits the range of answers available to the respondent, and in the case of the questions about research papers and journals, the structures of the questions make clear that the

questioners expect one of a narrow range of answers, and in the case of the journal question, that they believe they already know the answer.

When we look closely at the particular kinds of assignments about which the high school teachers express the greatest interest, the specter of the state-mandated standardized test, which controls so many of the curricular choices made in Fairview schools, emerges. The LIA professional development group, in which nearly all of the high school teachers were participants, had been working together on developing assignments and assessments that both honored the district's mandate that classroom assessments emulate the kinds of questions on the state standardized test while also incorporating what they knew about best practices for teaching writing. Audience is one issue raised in these small-group discussions had been a topic of conversation during LIA workshops. As Lydia mentions in Excerpt 8.3, the state test asked students to direct their writing to a group of "interested adults" (Line 3). Rather than having students write to a "boring" audience, Lydia asks the college instructors to discuss the audiences to which they ask their first-year composition students to write. Lydia seems to be asking these questions in order to find new ways to balance the demands of the high-stakes assessment (writing for interested adults) with her sense that students need to have a more narrowly-defined audience than offered by the state test.

Peer Review as Action

Not only are the high school teachers concerned with the kinds of writing students do in college composition courses, but they also want to know more about what students do when they are in class, particularly as it relates to the issue of peer review. Like the

questions about writing assignments, these questions use action-oriented language to obtain information about what students and teachers do.

In Excerpt 8.5, Deidre asks the college instructors in her small group if their students “ever peer critique”:

- | | | |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Deidre: | Now do they ever, do they ever peer critique? |
| 2 | Susan: | Uh-huh ((nods)) |
| 3 | Deidre: | Okay |

Excerpt 8.5

Susan’s response does not seem to surprise Deidre, as she does not respond to it with a change-of-state response token or newsmark. As with other question/answer sequences initiated by the high school teachers, Deidre’s question is both direct and specific. She asks the college instructors about things that their students do, things that happen in their classrooms, rather than asking about first-year writing courses more generally. Also, Deidre’s primary concern here is the activity itself. She does not seek information about why the college instructors direct their students to “do peer review;” rather, her question suggests that she is interested primarily in the presence or absence of the activity.

In Excerpt 8.6, a sequence from the Green Group, Jolene asks, when referring to peer conferencing, if the college instructors “put that in there”:

- | | | |
|---|---------|---|
| 1 | Jolene: | So, now is there, um, a place in your classrooms for, like, peer conferencing? Do you put that in there? |
| 2 | | [(Andrea nods)] |
| 3 | Robin: | [Oh, yes.= |
| 4 | Jolene: | =Oh, okay, so they do do that, conference with someone else. Bring a draft in. I did that when I was in college, too. Only one English teacher I did, did that. |

Excerpt 8.6

Jolene’s response to the college instructors’ affirmative answers shifts focus to student action, as she confirms that “they [the students] do do that, conference with someone else. Bring a draft in.” Jolene follows with a discussion of the peer review that she and

one of her professors “did” when she was in college. And as this line of questioning continues, Jolene follows up with questions about the particular kind of peer review that the college instructors use in their classrooms and even what they do to facilitate, for example, whole-class peer review sessions.

The focus on the active nature of the college composition course exemplified by Jolene’s response in the previous excerpt is also evident in Excerpt 8.7. This brief excerpt begins with a narrowly-constructed question for one of the college instructors in the group, Lena:

1 Gwen: So you read and write?
2 Lena: [nods] uh-huh.

Excerpt 8.7

Gwen responds to Lena’s description of the textbooks she uses in her first-year composition courses, with this attempt to verify her interpretation of Lena’s answer. Here the “you” Gwen refers to seems to refer to Lena’s sentences rather than her directly.

The high school teachers’ questions in the preceding three excerpts can be understood as attempts to reconcile the test preparation mandates that influenced their pedagogical choices. Jolene’s and Deidre’s questions about peer critique address one of the classroom activities neglected by many teachers as they attempt to satisfy the district’s test-preparation mandates. Jolene and Deidre ask questions about first-year composition pedagogy that also help them gauge the relationship between what they do in their classes in an attempt to prepare their students for both the state test and for what those students will do in their college composition courses. Likewise, Gwen’s question in Excerpt 8.7 may also be related to the test-preparation mindset of the high school teachers. In the course of developing assessments that emulated the state assessment, the LIA teachers had been discussing how to integrate the reading their students were doing

with the writing “practice” the district had mandated for their students. Thus, Gwen’s question here can be read as an attempt to determine the college-preparatory value of her attempts to link reading and writing in response to testing pressures.

Teaching as Action

In addition to their focus on the assignments that the college instructors give and what students do in their writing courses, the high school teachers are also concerned with the college instructors’ pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing as well as the rationale behind those approaches. As a result, several of their questions deal with specific pedagogical practices engaged in by the college instructors. These types of questions occurred in all of the groups and they ranged from specific questions about how and to what extent the college instructors teach grammar, MLA citation, audience awareness, and thesis statements to more general queries about the college instructors’ teaching strategies. These lines of questioning lead to discussions that reflect ongoing conversations in the field of composition. Teachers from both levels bring a range of beliefs and experiences that inform their perspectives on these issues. While this makes generalizing claims based on these conversations difficult, it shows the potential value of these conversations as teachers discuss pedagogical issues including organization, correctness, and even the role of teachers in the teaching of writing.

Excerpt 8.8, an interactional sequence from the Purple Group, picks up in the middle of Gwen’s turn at talk, one in which she begins by describing her experiences as an undergraduate in a college writing class and how she warns her high school students not to make the same mistakes she did, particularly when it comes to paragraph organization. She says that she and the other high school teachers are “trying to walk

them [students] through the steps” of writing. She follows up this discussion with a lengthy question for the college instructors:

- 1 Gwen: ...But tell us, because two of my daughters have graduated from Midwest U, but, um, do you walk the kids through or do you say to them, “you have a paper” because one of my daughters who’s at Southern State now, she came home, she said, “mom, he gave us no instructions, he said write a paper of X number of pages and that was it.” And I thought, is that how it is in most university classes or do you walk them through anything? Do you say, “I want, you know, to use MLA, and I want you to use parenthetical documentation. I expect you to...”? I mean, what do you do?
- 2 Amanda: I actually spend a lot of time in my first-year course on using quotations, why you use them, how to incorporate them smoothly. So I always feel like if a student knows to put a page number in their parenthetical documentation and knows to choose a quotation, then that’s great raw material and then like I can take the next=
- 3 Gwen: =And we do teach that.

Excerpt 8.8

In some ways, Gwen’s line of questioning here is similar to the questions about audience and genre in Excerpts 8.3 and 8.4. The set of questions she asks are all related to the level of specificity of the writing tasks the college instructors assign. Because of the presumed link between assignments and assessment, these questions also probe the college instructors’ expectations for their students’ texts. However, rather than addressing these broader questions about the links between assignments and assessment, Amanda provides a very narrow answer, one that addresses only the last of Gwen’s series of questions. Rather than saying anything about the level and type of direction she gives students when assigning a writing task, Amanda describes the extent to which she believes parenthetical documentation is important. Amanda’s answer receives a positive response from Gwen (Line 3), but leaves Gwen’s other questions unanswered.

One thing to note here is the urgency of Gwen’s question—she actually begins it with an imperative: “but tell us.” She follows this with a personal story of her daughter’s struggle with a writing course at a local university. Meanwhile, the question itself focuses on teacher action. She asks if the college instructors “walk them [the students] through anything,” and she also asks what they “say” to students (Line 1). She ends with a more general question: “what do you do?” As noted in the previous paragraph, Amanda’s answer does not directly address Gwen’s questions. She picks up on Gwen’s reference to “parenthetical documentation” near the end of the question and focuses her answer on the work she does with students in terms of incorporating quotations smoothly. The resulting answer leads Gwen to assess how well what she and her colleagues do in their classes fits with what goes on in first-year writing courses at the university.

Later in the Purple Group’s conversation, Marita, the other high school teacher in the group, returns the conversation to the college instructors’ teaching strategies. As we see in Excerpt 8.9, Marita, like Gwen in the previous excerpt, does not limit herself to one question. Instead she asks a pair of questions, each referring to a different kind of action on the part of the college instructors. She asks first what kinds of things the college instructors do in their courses then narrows it to address course content, in particular:

- | | | |
|---|---------|--|
| 1 | Marita: | So what do you, what kinds of things do you do in your courses? What kinds of things do you make sure you cover for your students? |
| 2 | | (5) |
| 3 | Lena: | Um, in my course, I’ve chosen to use, um, published essays. A collection, an anthology of published essays as the text= |
| 4 | Gwen: | =What’s the name of that text? |

Excerpt 8.9

This pair of questions encompasses a wide range of activity on the part of both the teachers and students. It refers to not only the subject matter that is taught, but also the way in which that subject matter is taught.

The college instructors' response, or lack thereof, to these questions is noteworthy. After the question, a five-second period of silence elapses, a rather uncomfortable and atypical length of silence in a group conversation like this one. When Lena finally does respond, she does not direct her answer to either of Marita's questions and instead talks about the textbook for her course. She avoids saying very much about what she actually does in her first-year writing course, which seems to be the main focus of Marita's questions. This mirrors the pattern we see in Amanda's answer in Excerpt 8.8.

Like Marita and Gwen in the Purple Group, high school teachers in the other small groups asked questions about the kinds of teaching strategies the college instructors employ in their classes. In the Red Group, Theresa asks a similar question to the ones in the previous two excerpts. The sequence presented in Excerpt 8.10 follows a discussion of what type of grade the group members would give the sample college essay they have read. Theresa shifts the hypothetical grading discussion to a discussion about what the college instructors do to assist students in writing with "better development, more depth":

- 1 Theresa: So this kid has a B+ and of course they're probably not very happy because it's not an A=
- 2 Susan: =Yeah, and we're like, "We were so generous"=
- 3 Theresa: =And they got an "A" in high school doing that, what are some of the things you try to do to move, or what are the things you do that effectively move a kid into better development, more depth?
- 4 Laura: Well, one of the first things I do is I talk to them and ask them questions about how they came up with their ideas for the essay. And that inevitably

leads to “you know, I just knew,” or “it’s just obvious.” And so I try to poke at that, and say, and challenge points in the paper. And when they start talking through their ideas, I’ll say, “now that’s interesting. Because that’s fuzzy, it’s original. I’ve never heard anybody say that before, so why didn’t you write that paper.”

- 5 Susan: Because it was hard=
6 Laura: =Because it was hard, and I
wasn’t sure what I wanted to say
7 Theresa: And they can’t get a handle on it.

Excerpt 8.10

In keeping with the high school teachers’ general focus on the college instructors’ classroom practices rather than the sample student texts that fueled the small groups’ initial discussions, in the course of asking her question Theresa moves from talking about “this kid” who wrote the college paper the group had been discussing to “a kid” who might be in one of the college instructors’ classes. Theresa’s question, like the ones asked by Gwen and Marita in the previous two excerpts is a rather broad one. While she does ask the college instructors to address “depth” and “development,” these are sprawling concepts that individuals are likely to interpret in different ways.

The responses that Laura and Susan, the two college instructors in the group, provide to Theresa’s question about moving students “into better development, more depth” indicate that, in their view, conversation is a critical to the teaching of writing. In Laura’s response (Line 4), she says that talking with students is “one of the first things” she does to help them better develop their writing. This talk takes the form of questions that Laura asks, which she follows by “poking” and “challenging” students’ ideas. Laura indicates that in the process of “talking through their ideas,” students will hit on something that is “interesting” or “fuzzy” or “original.” Laura ties her pursuit of the “unique” idea to “depth” and “development” in student writing.

This excerpt shows that for Laura, one-on-one conversation is crucial to helping students develop writing of greater depth and more substance. These conversations are unlikely to happen within the classroom or in large groups but are more likely to occur during office hours or other times outside of class. Also, the teaching strategy described by Laura here is not one predicated on direct instruction, but on the teacher taking the role of an interested reader whose questions about, and responses to, students' texts encourage them to develop their own "original" ideas.

In their questions about the teaching of college composition, the high school teachers' pursuit of answers and desire for concrete information remain consistent to the pattern that emerges in the discussion of other topics. The college instructors' responses to these kinds of questions are not as consistent. In some situations they seem reluctant to make any broad pronouncements about how they approach the teaching of writing or to provide suggestions about how the high school teachers should teach writing. Instead, the college instructors dwell on teaching strategies they employ for discrete tasks like MLA citation style.

The college instructors' reluctance to provide definitive suggestions may lie in their previous experiences as high school teachers as well as their status as graduate students. As graduate students, the college instructors may have felt uncomfortable in being too direct in the suggestions they provided to the high school teachers. They may not have felt comfortable taking on that role in this situation, particularly since, in general, the high school teachers were older and had more years of teaching experience than did the college instructors. In addition, since several of the college instructors had previous experience as high school teachers, they may have felt some reluctance in being

seen as the university interlopers coming in to dictate teaching practices to high school teachers—the portrait of school/college interactions presented so often in the literature.

The college instructors do seem more willing to engage in the question of what they do in their first-year writing courses to improve students as writers. This is an important distinction as it does not require the college instructors to make suggestions about what they think should be happening in high school English classes, but allows them to discuss their own teaching practices at the college level. This distinction between questions that ask college instructors to discuss how they teach writing at the college level and those that ask for suggestions about what the college instructors think should be done in high school English classes seems to factor strongly in the college instructors' willingness to answer high school teachers' questions about pedagogy directly.

CHAPTER 9

QUESTIONS ABOUT “EVALUATION” IN CROSS-LEVEL CONVERSATIONS

Introduction

Another form of college instructor “action”—evaluation of student writing—is a frequent topic of the high school teachers’ questions. Their interest in evaluation seems to come not only from its relationship to issues ranging from placement to final grades in first-year composition courses, but also from a perceived link, alluded to by some of the high school teachers, between the college instructors’ evaluation of incoming college students’ writing and their evaluation of the competence of the high school teachers themselves. In these discussions about the evaluation of student writing, we again see representations of ongoing discussions in the field of composition studies, particularly as related to the tension between correctness and thought in the evaluation of student work.

Error and Evaluation

One of the primary concerns of the high school teachers relative to the evaluation of student writing is how error, particularly surface-level error, affects students’ grades. In all four small groups, high school teachers had questions about the extent to which errors in grammatical conventions, sentence structure, and punctuation would impact the college instructors’ evaluation of student writing. One particularly animated discussion of this issue is transcribed, in part, in Excerpt 9.1. In this excerpt, high school teacher

Deidre is asking the two college instructors in her group whether or not teachers would comment on a student's "lack of parallelism" when evaluating a piece of writing. After repeating the question at Theresa's behest, Deidre broadens her question to include not only parallelism, but other problems with "conventions." After Susan's assertion in Line 6 that she would notice, but not comment, Deidre follows up with a confirming question, seeking to verify that Susan would not, in fact, write comments related to parallelism on a student paper. In Line 8, Susan reiterates that she would notice a student's sentence structure, but the implication is that she would not necessarily comment:

- 1 Deidre: Because when you're checking an essay, honestly, do you go through and do you say, "okay, lack of parallelism?" ((mimics writing on a paper)) ((to Laura)) I mean, do you do that?
- 2 Theresa: Does she do what?
- 3 Deidre: Do you say, you know, "lack of parallelism, lack of this, lack of that" ((mimics writing))? I mean, in terms of like conventions, do you go through?
- 5 ((Laura and Susan shake their heads))
- 6 Susan: (2) I would notice; I mean I wouldn't write [anything.
- 7 Deidre: [But you wouldn't comment=
- 8 Susan: =I mean I would notice if I saw a sentence that had just this marvelous little structure to it. I would [notice it
- 9 Deidre: [Right. But would that, I mean, lower the grade? I mean, let's say the content, like, I was reading something, and the book it said that there are still college professors who will mark down a grade for every three errors.
- 10 Susan: [Oh, yeah
- 11 Laura: [Mm-hm ((nods head))=
- 12 Deidre: =In conventions?
- 13 Susan: Mm-hm ((nods head))
- 14 ((Laura nods head))
- 15 Deidre: But what if it's a good essay?
- 16 Laura: They're [Yeah. Well
- 17 Deidre: [Why? Why?

Excerpt 9.1

At this point, Deidre moves the conversation from instructor comments to grading when she asks in Line 9, “But would that, I mean, lower the grade?” Deidre mentions that a book she had read recently had indicated that some college instructors lower students’ grades based on the quantity of students’ errors. Deidre responds with newsmarks when Susan and Laura both confirm that this is the case. Deidre first reiterates the question: “in conventions?” (Line 12), then asks, probably rhetorically, “What if it’s a good essay?” (Line 15).

Deidre’s comments and questions during this interactional sequence demonstrate not only her passion for teaching, but also the persistence with which many of the high school teachers pursue answers to their questions in these conversations, particularly when they hear things that they regard as “news.” In Deidre’s case, she follows up her original question four times with questions seeking confirmation, reiteration, or clarification from Laura and Susan. She does all of this in the service of determining the justification for the grades college students receive.

Deidre is not alone in her attempt to find out about how grammatical errors impact the assessment of student writing at the college level. In Excerpt 9.2, an interaction from the Green Group, Harriet, like Deidre in the previous excerpt, asks if college instructors take off a set number of points for a certain number of errors (Line 3). Also like Deidre, Harriet says that this question is based on information that she has heard from outside sources, in this case her former students who have recounted to her their experiences with college writing:

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Harriet: | There’s some universities, whose kids have come back and reported, that do have error policies. Okay, um, I [wanna say Iowa State, |
| 2 | Robin: | [Did you say error? |
| 3 | Harriet: | Error. Um, where if there are so many errors within |

X amount of the paper, percentages are knocked off numerically. And so they don't do a rubric, rather they do kind of I guess this little sheet of, you know, "comma splice, we're knocking off, like, eight percentage points per comma splice." Do you, at all, or just the rubric pretty much deals with thought?

4 Robin: I don't work with the rubric, so I don't know, Z.

5 Andrea: I use one. It's not that [meticulous

6 Harriet: [Okay.

7 Andrea: Where I identify particular grammatical=

8 Harriet: =Errors

[okay

9 Andrea: [Mistakes, yeah and say that this many points comes off because of that. Um, but, there may be some more general statements, like,

Excerpt 9.2

Harriet's reaction to the answer she gets is more reserved than we saw from Deidre, but this is, perhaps, because she receives a different answer. Whereas Laura told Deidre that some professors do punitively reduce students' grades for grammatical errors, Andrea's response here emphasizes the point that she personally rejects such a policy.

After the sequence in Excerpt 9.2, the Green Group's discussion moves away from error when all the groups are asked by the facilitator to reflect on the conversations they have had and to be prepared to share those reflections with the other groups. Following a brief discussion about the common ground the group members feel they have found during their conversation, Andrea, a college instructor, returns to the discussion of the relationship between error and the evaluation of student writing:

1 Andrea: But the grammar thing, I was just saying, um, it may be something more general like—a B paper, the B paper has little to no, um=

2 Harriet: =[Grammatical errors

3 Andrea: [Distracting

4 Harriet: [Okay

5 Robin: [Distracting grammatical errors=

6 Jolene: =And if it's

distracting it might get knocked down to a C or a D

7 Andrea: Right. [Uh-huh.

- 8 Jolene: [If it's really like Okay, I'm having a hard time getting through this [then it's gonna?
- 9 Andrea: [Right, exactly, exactly.
- 10 Jolene: That's similar, like, to the rubric we use on a lot of our things, too. So that there's a thing in there about the grammar errors and what score can be given.

Excerpt 9.3

While Harriet's original question about the importance of error is focused on her assertion, based on the reports of former students, that college instructors lower grades for each error, the approach that Andrea articulates here is holistic in nature. Andrea does not draw any direct connection between the numbers of grammar errors and students' grades, rather she uses an approach she describes as "more general." In this assessment model, students are not penalized for each error, rather their grade suffers if the grammatical errors are so numerous or egregious that they have become "distracting."

In this sequence we see little response from Harriet. After she responds to Andrea's initial statement about "distracting" grammatical errors, Jolene takes a more active role with several restatements of Andrea's point. With these restatements, Jolene seems to be looking for confirmation of two aspects of Andrea's approach to the relationship between error and grading: the types of errors that she considers "distracting" and how much those errors would impact a student's grade. First Jolene offers that distracting grammatical errors might result in the paper being "knocked down to a C or a D" (Line 6), a statement about how errors impact grading. Andrea interprets as a request for clarification; she interrupts Jolene with affirmations: "Right. Uh-huh" (Line 7). When Jolene continues her statement after Andrea's affirmations, she moves from the impact of "distracting" errors on a student's grade to a definition of "distracting." Jolene offers that errors might be distracting if as an instructor, "I'm having a hard time getting through then it's gonna..." (Line 8). Again, Andrea interprets this as a request for further

clarification because she interrupts Jolene to provide an affirmative response indicating her agreement with Jolene's proposition.

Interestingly, Jolene notes that this approach fits with the way her colleagues view the relationship between grammar and writing assessment. She does not clarify the identity of the "we" she mentions in Line 10, but she indicates that the approach Andrea has just described is similar to what is employed on a rubric "we use on a lot of our things." It is not clear if this is a rubric the teachers use as part of the test preparation curriculum or if the rubric is something that has any administrative approval—something that has been adopted for use by a department chair, for example. Jolene's assertion that this is the approach that she and her colleagues use is interesting not only because what Andrea outlines here contradicts Harriet's assumptions about the importance of error in the evaluation of college writing, but also because Jolene's pursuit of clarification is not indicative of the receipt of information she already possessed.

As the preceding two excerpts show, the high school teachers preface their questions about the relationship between error and evaluation by describing the sources of their information. As a result, these question/answer sequences are exchanges in which the high school teachers seek corroboration for information they have previously obtained. The high school teachers want to know if what they have read in books or what their former students and even their own children have told them about the importance of error in the evaluation of writing at the college level is true.

Grading as Evaluation

Perhaps foremost in high school teachers' questions about evaluation in these four small-group conversations is the issue of grading. As we saw in Excerpt 9.3, the high

school teachers ask many questions to determine which aspects of writing the college instructors consider to be important when grading student writing. In Excerpt 9.4, a sequence from the Purple Group, Gwen asks the college instructors in the group to explain the elements of an “A” paper:

- 1 Gwen: Could you explain? What should a paper have to be an A?
2 Lena: An “A” is like, this is outstanding=
3 Amanda: =Yeah, yeah, it’s an outstanding paper. It shows, you know, original thinking, um, it’s well structured, smooth transitions, exceptional use of vocabulary, um, a person, uh, reading the paper feels as though they’ve learned something.
4 Gwen: Okay, so it’s basically what the state would call a 4 or a 6 on a different rubric.

Excerpt 9.4

Gwen seems satisfied with the answers she receives from Lena and Amanda; she uses a response token, “okay,” that indicates the receipt of information and conveys a neutral stance toward that information. Gwen does not pursue an answer by asking follow-up questions as other teachers do in these conversations.

Excerpt 9.5 is another interactional sequence in which Deidre asks a question about the assessment of student writing. However, instead of asking about characteristics of the best student writing, as Gwen did in the previous excerpt, she asks about the characteristics of student writing that the college instructors find the most troublesome:

- 1 Deidre: Now what would be, what’s, like, your worst nightmare in terms of an essay? What’s your worst nightmare?
2 ((laughter))
3 Laura: A plagiarized one
4 ((laughter))
5 Deidre: ((to Laura)) I mean outside of a plagiarized one.
6 Susan: The thing, now this is probably not the worst essay I get, but the thing that is the biggest antithesis to my class is students who want a checklist ((Theresa nods)) of things to do to make a good grade.

7 Deidre: Okay ↓

Excerpt 9.5

In Line 1, Deidre asks for the college instructors' "worst nightmare" relative to student writing. Laura at first answers the question by joking that it would be "a plagiarized one" (Line 3). Deidre, just as she did on several other occasions, pursues a more definitive answer. Susan responds that one thing she struggles with is students who seek a "checklist" for good writing. Deidre's intonation in her response to Susan's answer indicates some skepticism on her part that a student who wants a "checklist" for how to make an "A" in the class is actually Susan's worst nightmare.

After a lengthy description from Susan regarding why the "checklist" student is her worst nightmare, Deidre expresses her skepticism about the "checklist" student being such a problem. In Excerpt 9.6, an interactional sequence separated from Excerpt 9.5 by Susan's description of why "checklist" students are such a challenge, Deidre asks if there are any writers at Midwest University who are "inept" or "lacking in sophistication of language":

1 Deidre: So you're saying even at [Midwest University],
honestly=
2 Theresa: =Oh, lord yes, [even more so.
3 Deidre: [You don't get any writers
who are, um, inept?
4 Laura: (1) Oh, yeah ((nods))=
5 Deidre: =I mean, seriously, who are
lacking in sophistication of language
6 ((Laura continues to nod))
7 Susan: [In my first year
8 Laura: [Not so much in 125, [probably
9 Susan: [There's a remedial=
10 Laura: I'm going to talk about that class
11 Susan: That you go to if you don't think you're ready for
the freshman course=
12 Deidre: =Okay.

Excerpt 9.6

Deidre’s line of questioning indicates that she believes that writers who are “inept” are much more of a “nightmare” than those that want their instructor to narrowly prescribe how they should write. For Deidre, the evaluation of students’ attitude toward writing takes a backseat to their level of fluency as writers.

While the high school teachers rarely focus their questions on the papers the group has read prior to their small-group discussions, they do invoke them in their questions about grades. However, their questions about the sample papers have a different tone and purpose than the college instructors’ questions about the same texts. As the following two excerpts show, while the college instructors asked general questions that invited feedback on both the high school and the college sample, the high school teachers’ questions are focused on the college paper. And in contrast to the college instructors’ questions to the whole group about aspects of the sample texts early in the groups’ conversations in what seem to be attempts to begin the discussions, the high school teachers’ questions about the sample college text are addressed exclusively to the college instructors, tend to occur rather late in the groups’ discussions, and seem to be intended to elicit information about the college instructors’ grading practices rather than to encourage conversation.

In the interactional sequence from the Red Group presented in Excerpt 9.7, Deidre asks what kind of a grade “that kid,” referring to the author of the college sample paper, would “get”:

- | | | |
|---|---------|--|
| 1 | Deidre: | So what grade would that kid get? |
| 2 | Laura: | A B plus, probably |
| 3 | Deidre: | Oh, okay↑ So at least they’re not getting Cs and Ds. |

Excerpt 9.7

Deidre indicates surprise at Laura's answer and seems as though she expected that the paper would receive a lower grade than a B plus. It does not appear that Deidre is using this question to initiate a discussion of the sample college paper; rather her response suggests that she seeks the college instructors' perspective about the grade the paper would receive as a way of gauging the grading practices in first-year composition courses more generally. As a result the "they" Deidre refers to in her response to Laura's answer seems just as likely to be referring to first-year college students as a group as it does to refer to the individual author of the sample paper.

What also emerges in this excerpt is Deidre's pursuit of a "worst-case scenario" relative to the grading of student writing. She seems relieved to hear that the author of the sample paper would get a B plus, as she responds by noting that "at least" the grades are not in the C or D range (Line 3). This reaction may indicate recognition that she and the college instructors in her group have reached similar conclusions about the quality of the paper. However, her reaction also seems to be related to the question of how her students might be graded when they take first-year composition. Notably both the question at the beginning of this sequence and her reaction at the end show her identifying with the student. She asks her question not in terms of what grade the paper would receive, but what grade the student would receive. And in her reaction in Line 3, Lena express the kind of relief a student might feel at receiving a B instead of a much lower grade. This exchange hints at the extent of the high school teachers' concern about the future success of their students, an issue that will be addressed later in the chapter.

In Excerpt 9.8, a sequence from the Green Group, high school teacher Jolene responds to Andrea's description of an A paper with a clarifying question about the grade that the author of the sample college paper would receive: "maybe not an 'A' then?"

(Line 2). This sequence follows a discussion in which Harriet, the other high school teacher in the group, has said she would give the sample college paper an A minus.

Andrea's initial turn in this sequence is a response to Harriet's assertion about the grade she would give:

- 1 Andrea: And usually the A does say something about risk taking and so this would probably be
- 2 Jolene: Maybe not be an A then=
- 3 Robin: =Maybe like at the very bottom of the A=
- 4 Jolene: =Maybe an A minus?
- 5 Andrea: Right.
- 6 Jolene: Okay.
- 7 Andrea: It meets all of the kind of technical requirements ((Harriet nods vigorously)). So I think, depending on how strict you are and what other kind of amazing writers there are in the class, this could be an A minus, B plus. Sometimes I use those slashes. I know that's like they kind of hate that. But, um, ((shrugs))

Excerpt 9.8

Andrea does not directly contradict Harriet's assertion, since she eventually agrees with Jolene's suggestion that this paper would be "maybe an A minus" (Line 4). However, she situates her answer in the context of the university's departmental grading policies rather than her own.

The sequence starts with Andrea's description of an A paper, which Jolene responds to with the suggestion that the sample paper under discussion fails to meet those criteria. While both Andrea and Robin respond affirmatively to Jolene's suggestion that the sample paper is "not an A," they also situate the possible grade for the paper even lower. First, Robin suggests that the paper could be placed "at the very bottom of the A," and Andrea follows with the assertion that the paper could be either an "an A minus B plus." As with Excerpt 9.7, reaching a consensus on a grade for this sample paper does not seem to be the goal of the conversation presented in Excerpt 9.8, particularly since

the groups were not asked to do so. Instead, Jolene's persistence in using confirming questions that lead the college instructors to identify a specific grade for the text seems intended to elicit information about the relationship between the college instructors' general evaluation of the text and how they would grade it.

One thing that emerges in these discussions of grading is how infrequently the college instructors mention issues related to error. In contrast to the high school teachers' focus on the role of error, as described in the previous section, the college instructors identify issues such as "original thinking" (Excerpt 9.4), "risk taking" (Excerpt 9.8), and the sense that as a reader they have "learned something" as key to their evaluation of student writing. Although the college instructors do speak of the importance of surface-level issues such as structure, transitions, vocabulary, and so-called "technical requirements," they focus much less on penalizing students for their errors than they do on rewarding students for the originality and complexity of thought displayed in their writing.

This focus on thought may be related to the academic abilities of the students who attend Midwest U. Since the university is the state flagship school and has rigorous entrance standards, many students enter the university with knowledge of the conventions of writing that obviates the need for college instructors to focus on such issues in their assessment of student writing. Although, as we see in Excerpt 9.6, Laura and Susan acknowledge that some student writers at Midwest U are "inept" or "lacking in sophistication of language," for these instructors, students who want a "checklist" for writing are considered more of a problem than students who have yet to master writing conventions.

Placement as Evaluation

The high school teachers also seek information about how students are evaluated at the college level before the students even begin college by asking questions about the university's placement policies for first-year composition courses. Three of the four small groups engage in extended discussions about how students are placed in writing courses when they begin their first year at the university. The high school teachers seem to know very little about placement practices, as evidenced by their frequent use of change-of-state response tokens when the subject is raised. It is also important to remember that, as discussed in Chapter 3, Midwest U employs a "guided self-placement" system in which students themselves decide whether to begin their college career in the first-year writing course that meets the requirements of the core curriculum or instead take a not-for-credit writing course before proceeding to first-year composition. While some of the high school teachers had heard about this system, many believed that the university still employed the portfolio placement program that had been replaced by the self-placement model.

Excerpt 9.9, a lengthy interaction about placement among the participants in the Red Group, is indicative of the kinds of questions high school teachers had regarding placement. In this excerpt, Theresa begins with a question about how students are placed in remedial courses at the university:

- | | | |
|---|----------|---|
| 1 | Theresa: | Now at orientation, is there placement for that? |
| 2 | Susan: | ((to Laura)) They self place, right? |
| 3 | Laura: | They choose it. |
| 4 | Theresa: | Because [Midwest U] used to do the portfolio= |
| 5 | Laura: | =Right,
and they don't do that so much anymore |
| 6 | Deidre: | I thought they got placed by test scores, [the Bridge |
| 7 | Theresa: | [No, no, no
((shakes head)) |
| 8 | Laura: | They choose it on their own. Now a lot of them |

9 Deidre: come in and their advisor will give them a schedule,
 Deidre: Okay
 10 Laura: And it'll have writing practicum on there.
 11 Deidre: And how did they get that?
 Deidre: Was it based on=
 12 Laura: =[Based on their
 13 Theresa: =[Their transcript probably.
 14 Deidre: Okay
 15 Laura: On their transcripts, whatever their advisor knows
 Laura: about their background
 16 Deidre: Okay ↓

Excerpt 9.9

Theresa mentions that she knows that Midwest University previously employed a portfolio placement system, and Deidre jumps in to say that she assumed students were placed using their test scores, an assertion that Theresa refutes: “No, no, no” (Line 7).

Theresa shows surprise, however, when Laura mentions that the remedial course is not for credit and ungraded, as we see in the next interactional sequence.

In Excerpt 9.10, Theresa acknowledges the information about the remedial course with a change-of-state response token: “oh, it’s not?” (Line 2), and she then follows Laura’s confirmation with a newsmark that expresses surprise that students would put much effort into the course if their work is not graded:

1 ((Laura mentions that the remedial course in writing
 is not graded))
 2 Theresa: Oh, it’s not?
 3 Laura: No, uh-uhm?
 4 Theresa: But they still take it seriously?
 5 Laura: ((nods))
 6 Theresa: Because they want to get ready for the next level?

Excerpt 9.10

Even when Laura confirms that students do, in fact, take the course seriously despite the fact that they receive neither credit nor a grade, Theresa again responds with a newsmark, “Because they want to get ready for the next level?” (Line 6), that seeks further confirmation for why students would take the course seriously.

Placement is one issue that cuts across the small-group conversations. Three of the four small groups had extended discussions about the university's first-year composition placement practices. In the interactional sequence from the Green Group provided in Excerpt 9.11, high school teacher Harriet refers to the course number for the university's introductory-level writing course (English 125) when asking what happens with a student "who can't do 125":

- | | | |
|---|----------|--|
| 1 | Harriet: | What do you do, in college with, okay someone who can't do 125? Is there a 98 or 99? |
| 2 | | ((laughter)) |
| 3 | Robin: | There's a practicum. |
| 4 | Harriet: | Okay. |
| 5 | Robin: | I mean, you can take sort of a prep. |
| 6 | Andrea: | You can. The only problem with that is that it puts you behind= |
| 7 | Harriet: | =You don't get [credit. |
| 8 | Jolene: | [It's no credit, right? |
| | | It's just to get you ready for the credit class. |
| 9 | | ((Andrea nods)) |

Excerpt 9.11

In this sequence, many of the issues from the previous Red Group excerpts are raised—namely, the existence of a practicum course and the lack of credit for the practicum course. However, while the high school teachers in the Red Group expressed surprise at the placement policy, particularly the fact that the practicum course is not offered for credit, Jolene and Harriet, the high school teachers in the Green Group, respond in a way that suggests that they are receiving anticipated information. Even Jolene's use of a tag question here, "It's no credit, right?" (Line 8), and Andrea's confirming response, indicates that she came to the group's discussion with at least some information about the university's practicum course.

A conversational sequence from the Purple Group presented in Excerpt 9.12 depicts yet another discussion of placement. This sequence begins with college instructor

Amanda discussing the lack of strict departmental mandates regarding the content of first-year composition courses at the university. After Gwen notes that requirements related to the numbers of pages students are required to produce are also operative in high school, the other high school teacher in the group, Marita, interjects with a question about whether or not Amanda's course is "required":

- 1 Amanda: But the thing is I'm interested in these guys' [Lena and Steve] answers, too. Because the thing is at [Midwest U], we don't have any departmental mandate of what our course content has to be besides that the students have to produce
- 2 Gwen: And now they're doing that in high school.
- 3 Marita: But, is yours required? Is your course required?
- 4 Amanda: Mine is, but it's one of 250 sections they can sign up for.
- 5 Marita: [Oh.
- 6 Gwen: [Can you place out of it?
- 7 Amanda: [No
- 8 Frank: [No, you can't.
- 9 Lena: [Not anymore.
- 10 Frank: And a lot of them would like to=
- 11 Lena: =[Well, yeah
- 12 Marita: =[So they can take a course in place of it?
- 13 Amanda: Well, they could take her section instead of mine, [and maybe she doesn't focus on that
- 14 Marita: [Oh, okay. Okay. Alright
- 15 Lena: It's called first-year writing=
- 16 Amanda: =College writing
- 17 Lena: College writing or first-year writing.

Excerpt 9.12

The questions and responses produced by Marita and Gwen in this sequence indicate that they, unlike Jolene in the previous excerpt, have very little knowledge about the university's placement practices. In this case, Marita responds twice with change-of-state response tokens (Lines 5 and 14), and Gwen's question in Line 6 about placing out of the first-year composition course is refuted by the college instructors.

In each of these sequences, the interest and relative lack of knowledge on the part of the high school teachers of the university's first-year composition placement practices is clear. The high school teachers' interest in the subject suggests that they see their function as high school teachers, at least in part, as preparing students for first-year composition. Their particular focus on the ways in which students who are underprepared for the core first-year composition course are dealt with by the university suggests that the high school teachers' primary concern is not the fate of their most accomplished students, but of those college-bound students who may not be ready for writing at the college level. Just as we saw in the interactional sequences during which grading is discussed, the high school teachers' questions about placement seem to be designed to determine what will happen if, for whatever reason, students leave high school unprepared for college writing—another potential “worst-case” scenario. Such discussions underscore how important these conversations seem to be for the high school teachers. The high school teachers' sense of the importance of obtaining the information elicited by their questions, and perhaps the potential consequences for themselves and their students of failing to obtain the information, seem to relate strongly to their sense of how they and their students will be judged as students transition from high school to college writing.

The Stakes of Evaluation

In general, the high school teachers' questions about evaluation and the college instructors' pedagogical practices focus on a rather narrow set of issues:

- How students are placed in first-year composition courses
- What first-year composition instructors think of the writing ability of incoming first-year students

- What kinds of writing students will do in their college courses and how that writing will be graded

These issues correspond to steps that students face as they move from high school to college writing, and each of these items is likely to impact students' success, or lack thereof, as college writers.

The high school teachers' focus on these issues seems to be related to the high stakes that are associated with students' performance in college composition courses. That is, what students do, and how well they do, in their college composition courses seems to be much more important to the high school teachers than the college instructors in these conversations. The high school teachers seem to sense that success in first-year composition is important not only for their students, who will succeed or fail in their first-year composition courses based on how prepared they are, but that the stakes are high for the teachers themselves.

The high stakes involved in preparation for college writing for the students is clear, and it seems to be a pressing concern for several of the high school teachers during the small-group conversations. Excerpt 9.13 provides one example of the high school teachers' focus on students' experiences in moving from high school to college writing:

1 Deidre: No, I'm thinking like a student, I'm thinking like an average student would think. No honestly, I have two students who have been accepted to U of M, and their writing is, may not be like that top ten percent. And they may hang out with a bunch of other people where their writing is similar. [to Theresa] And then what happens?

Excerpt 9.13

Deidre both notes the difficulties that students might encounter as they move from high school classes to college courses and asserts that these students may not actually know their writing is deficient until they begin making poor grades in college writing courses.

In addition to the prospect of students struggling and failing in their college composition courses because they are not adequately prepared, the high school teachers in these conversations also identify high stakes for themselves in preparing students for college writing. In Excerpt 9.14, Marita expresses concern that judgments about her teaching competence will be made based on her students' writing performance:

- 1 Marita: Because otherwise, uh-uh, otherwise they're going to leave high school, go to college, and tell somebody that I taught them.
2 ((laughter))
3 Marita: You know? You don't know me ((like she would say to somebody questioning the job she did)). You don't know me.

Excerpt 9.14

The indication here is that Marita is not entirely comfortable with the idea of being judged in this way. But she does think that she will be judged, by people who have never met her, on the basis of how well her students perform in their college composition courses. Thus, the stakes of students' preparedness for college writing go beyond her their success to reflect on the quality of her work as a professional educator.

The high school teachers' sense of the high stakes of obtaining knowledge about college writing is likely related to the nature of the student population they serve. Many high school students from Fairview are the first in their families to go to college, and as such may lack for role models of college success. Based on previous ethnographic studies of students and teachers in Fairview (see Rex and Nelson, "How Teachers'" and "What 'Teaching'"), many of the teachers in the district are deeply committed to helping students succeed not only in high school but in college as well. This commitment fueled the LIA teachers' interest in engaging in these conversations with college instructors. Both the interactional and topical aspects of these conversations are shaped by the deep, personal investment on the part of these high school teachers in their students' success in

college, as well as the teachers' sense that their students' success reflects on their own value as teachers. For many of these teachers, the professional stakes could not be higher.

Discussion

The thematic analysis of these cross-level conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors reveals that the high school teachers pursue specific information about what students will do in their college composition courses and how the students' work will be judged. This pursuit of information helps further explain the large discrepancy between the two groups in the numbers and kinds of questions asked.

Participants' Motivations

Careful consideration of the participants' questions in these conversations also reveals that the participants from the two teaching levels may have quite different motivations for their participation in these conversations. While this research is based on the assumption that all individuals have personal motivations for their actions, viewing the questions asked in the small-group discussions in terms of the teaching level of the questioner allows for some generalization about the motivations of the groups of teachers. One thing that is clear from these conversations is that the participants are engaged in the topics that are raised in each small group. There is an obvious interest on the part of all of the participants in discussing issues related to the teaching of writing. This level of engagement is not surprising given the voluntary nature of these conversations—all of the teachers chose to take the time to participate in the

conversations without any financial compensation. As well, nearly all of these teachers were part of a group of like-minded colleagues: the high school teachers' LIA professional development group and the college instructors' interdisciplinary doctoral program. Thus the participants' interest, evident throughout these conversations, in discussing issues related to the teaching of writing is a logical extension of ongoing professional conversations in which they had been taking part.

The college instructors' participation in these conversations is focused primarily on the activity itself; they are concerned with how the conversation is organized and what the other participants think about the two sample papers. Their questions seem designed to facilitate these goals. Thus, for the college instructors, the goal does not appear to be the gathering of information, but the engagement in discussion for its own sake. One might argue that graduate students are particularly well trained for this approach to conversation, and the college instructors' status as graduate students who work within a university culture that prizes the exchange of ideas through discussion likely shapes the way they approach these conversations. However, their status as college instructors also means that the stakes they associate with these conversations are much lower.

While these conversations may yield some information that is valuable for the ways they teach first-year writing at the university, the high school teachers' actions relative to the teaching of writing do not seem to have the same kind of impact as those of the college instructors. Thus, the participants in these conversations, both the high school teachers and the college instructors, act as though the information the college instructors possess about their own teaching practices and the institutional context within which their teaching occurs is more important than similar information about the work of the high school teachers.

The idea that what the college instructors do in their classes is particularly important is reinforced by the sense of urgency the high school teachers exhibit during these conversations. One likely cause of this urgency is the high school teachers' commitment to preparing their students for college writing. They want to know exactly what students will face in their first-year composition courses—what they will do in class, what they will be assigned to write, and how their writing will be graded. The high school teachers seem to take the responsibility of readying their students for college writing seriously; thus the stakes of these conversations are high for them. Some of the high school teachers also express a belief that they will be judged as teachers based on the level of preparedness of their students for college writing. So their pursuit of answers may be motivated not only by their commitment to their students but also by their desire to be highly thought of as professionals.

Participants' Motivations and Conversational Asymmetry

Interestingly, the college instructors do not exhibit the same kinds of beliefs about being evaluated by teachers from the other teaching level. This is one part of the inherently unequal relationship between these two groups of teachers. College writing instructors are in the position of evaluating the quality of writing instruction in the high schools because they teach classes full of first-year students every fall; however, there is not a situation in which the reverse is true, in which high school teachers come into contact with large groups of college students in a classroom situation. This difference in terms of the personal stakes felt by many of the participants is at least one indication that the ideal of unfettered mutuality and equality for cross-level conversations may be unattainable. Once again, the concept of asymmetry is useful in understanding the nature

of these conversations. It is not the case that these conversations are doomed to failure because equality is impossible. Although these conversations, like most, are based on mutuality and respect, an acknowledgement that all conversations are inherently asymmetrical suggests that mutuality and reciprocity are not absolute.

The inability to achieve complete mutuality of purpose and participation in these conversations does not imply that they will be unproductive or even that participants will see the differences as a problem. Instead, as Linell and Luckmann state, “asymmetries and inequalities of many kinds are compatible with mutuality and reciprocity” (3). In the case of cross-level conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors, identifying, understanding, and addressing these asymmetries can aid in the development of more useful and productive discussions about the teaching of writing.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis of four small-group conversations among college writing instructors and high school English teachers suggests that there are some common concerns among participants in cross-level interactions. While some of these concerns are undoubtedly context-sensitive, issues such as assignments, classroom activities, grading, and placement are likely to be of interest to most high school teachers who have little direct knowledge of what happens in college composition courses. The high school teachers’ interest in these topics speaks to the responsibility they feel for preparing their students for college writing. The high school teachers in these conversations seek information from the college instructors that they can use both to structure their own classes and to offer as advice to their students, and in so doing prepare those students for writing at the college level.

CHAPTER 10

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

These cross-level conversations among high school English teachers and college writing instructors provide new insight into many of the assumptions that have driven the two master narratives regarding cross-level conversations among teachers of writing. This study provides confirmation of some of our long-held beliefs about cross-level interaction and reasons to doubt several others. It also provides insight into the ways in which issues of central concern to teachers of writing at all levels—developing writing assignments, evaluating student writing, preparing students for high-stakes writing assessments—are addressed by these groups of high school teachers and college instructors.

Participants' Perceptions of Cross-Level Conversations

One of the largest discrepancies between the conflicting master narratives regarding cross-level conversations is whether or not these interactions are marked by animosity or harmony. These conversations had none of the characteristics of hostile conversations that McQuade, Jost, and Schultz, Laine, and Savage insist are inherent to many interactions among high school and college English teachers. Rather, the participants' reactions to these conversations mirror the uniformly positive appraisals we see in descriptions of cross-level interactions in many of recently published works

addressing the issue. Like the descriptions of successful positive reactions to cross-level interaction found in Rice, Norris, Strachan, and Wolfe among others, the participants' reactions after these conversations, as recorded on anonymous evaluation forms, indicate that they found these conversations to be valuable.

Collegiality within Small-Group Conversations

There are other indications of the participants' positive reactions to these interactions in the interactions themselves. Near the end of the Green Group's discussion, Robin, one of the college instructors, states that she feels the group has created a "beloved community" during their conversation. In response, Harriet, one of the high school teachers in Robin's group, says that although she had been "dreading" coming to the after-school meeting, she is now "like, thank you, Lord." She says that she is pleased to find out that "we see the same, I mean literally, the same kinds of problems and trying to address them." Harriet concludes by telling the group that the chance to talk with one another "has been really helpful."

In the Blue and Red Groups, some of the high school teachers inquire about whether some of the college instructors might come in and talk with their classes about college writing. In other groups, participants made plans for further collaboration, which typically took the form of visits by the college instructors to the high school teachers' classes to discuss writing at the university level.

Many of the participants seem to acknowledge the interactional pattern that has been described in this study, a pattern in which the high school teachers work primarily as pursuers of information and the college instructors serve as information providers. However, there is no indication that the participants saw this difference in participation to

be a problem. The participants' responses do indicate that while most of them recognize the asymmetrical interactional pattern discussed in the preceding chapters, they found value in the conversations apart from the roles that teachers from their teaching level seemed to adopt. That is, although high school teachers generally sought information from the college instructors, their evaluation responses indicate that some of them found value in being able to share information about high school English. Likewise, while college instructors served primarily as the providers of information, several of them noted on their feedback sheet that they had learned things from the high school teachers that would have consequences for the way they would approach their first-year composition courses in the future. For example, one college instructor wrote that hearing about the high school teachers' goals for their students' development as writers provides her with "a more useful way to communicate to students and utilize the skills they already have." Another college instructor said that knowing about "how [high school] teachers think about writing and prepare their students to meet college level writing standards" is valuable to their work with first-year students. Thus, even though they asked relatively few questions, at least some of the college instructors were able to come away from these conversations with information that they believe will be valuable in their work as instructors of first-year composition.

Complicating the View of Cross-Level Interactions

While there are some strong connections between the findings of this study and the existing literature related to cross-level interactions, the data also suggest that the nature of power, status, and equality in these conversations is much more complex than has been conceived in the literature. The literature tends toward the extremes—

alternating between rosy pictures of cooperation (Norris; Wolfe) and depictions of cross-level interactions characterized by vitriolic hostility (Jost; McQuade; Steinberg).

Meanwhile, the conversations analyzed in this study indicate that not only are the high school teachers not “dominated” by the college instructors, the high school teachers actually exert considerable control over both the topics and speakers in these conversations by using questions. They do most of the work to dictate the interactional dynamics of these conversations (who talks to whom, when, and for what purpose)

However, we also find that the college instructors seem to be viewed by the participants in these conversations as “experts,” with specialized knowledge to which the high school teachers would like to gain access. The college instructors are frequently offered the floor to respond to the high school teachers’ questions. The number of questions posed to college instructors indicates that their knowledge is perceived to be valuable in ways that the high school teachers’ is not. The college instructors do not make conversational moves to establish their authority; that is, they do not seem to try to dictate the conversations. However, this may be because their authority is inherent because of the difference in knowledge and status that is afforded to them due to their affiliation with the university.

Asymmetry in Cross-Level Interactions

Thus, the notion that high school teachers are dominated, condescended to, etc. at the hands of college instructors is not supported by this study. Furthermore, interpretive narratives that stress only the collegiality and equality of interactions likely mask the complications of cross-level conversations. Such narratives tend to minimize the differences inherent in the institutional identities of participants by focusing exclusively

on areas of common ground. The data from this study suggest that the interactional dynamics surrounding institutional identity in these cross-level conversations are much more complex than this body of scholarship has indicated. The concept of conversational asymmetry—a view of conversations that seeks to understand the inherent differences in the quantity and nature of speakers’ participation in a conversation, particularly as such participation patterns relate to differences in the speakers’ knowledge and institutional role—is useful in making sense of this complexity.

One benefit of using the construct of conversational asymmetry to conceptualize cross-level interactions is that asymmetry thus defined is a neutral concept that suggests inequality without implying that such inequalities thwart effective interaction. In fact, the view espoused by Linell and Luckmann that asymmetry is a feature inherent to any conversation allows us to view differences in participation patterns among participants in cross-level interactions without necessarily attributing those differences to oppressive power relationships among the participants that arise from their position within the social structure.

The concept of asymmetry also illuminates the ways in which interactional dominance relates not only to differences in knowledge and status, which would tend to result in dominance on the part of college instructors in cross-level interactions, but also to interactional dominance that may not be connected with a participants’ knowledge or social status within the group. And while there is no expectation that the nature of the asymmetry of the small-group conversations analyzed in this study is the nature of asymmetry in all cross-level interactions among teachers of writing, viewing cross-level interactions as asymmetrical does not limit the analysis of interactional dominance to pre-

identified factors related only to dominance resulting from differences in institutional status.

Thus, conversational asymmetry provides possible explanations for the competing grand narratives that dominate the literature related to interactions among high school English teachers and college writing instructors. Asymmetry provides one way of reconciling unequal participation patterns, differences in knowledge, and differences in status among participants. We can see, then, how cross-level interactions can be influenced by the differences in knowledge and status among the participants while still being viewed as productive and successful by the participants in the interaction.

In addition to the concept of conversational asymmetry, Linell proposes viewing interactions along two dimensions—looking not only at the relative symmetry of a conversation but also at the nature of the exchange in a conversation. His use of these two dimensions results in four ideal types of conversations:

- The symmetrical-and-co-operative type(s).
- The symmetrical-and-competitive type(s).
- The asymmetrical-and-co-operative type(s).
- The asymmetrical-and-competitive type(s). (“The Power” 168)

The conversations analyzed for this study could be most readily described as asymmetrical and co-operative. Thus, the binary way in which the field has often viewed cross-level conversations among English teachers, and the resultant competing master narratives that have resulted, might be replaced by a more complex understanding of the nature of interactions that acknowledges both the asymmetry that results from the hierarchical relationship between high schools and colleges and the co-operative nature of interactional exchange seen among engaged teachers from both levels.

The Role of Questions in Cross-Level Interactions

Considered along with descriptions of so many successful cross-level collaborations described in the literature and the participants' positive perceptions of these interactions, the large number of questions asked by high school teachers in the small-group conversations analyzed for this study suggest that the worries expressed in the literature about college instructors bombarding high school teachers with unwelcome pedagogical advice are likely unfounded, certainly given the context within which these conversations occurred. Some writers (Jost; Sitler; McQuade) suggest that college instructors seek to impose their notions about teaching writing onto high school teachers despite the college instructors' lack of familiarity with high schools in general. However, in this study's interactions, the high school teachers aggressively sought information from the college instructors through interactional moves that actually put the college instructors in a position where a choice **not** to be directive would impede the conversation. The institutional status of the college instructors in these conversations likely played a part in the nature of their participation. In particular, the college instructors' status as graduate students, their enrollment in a doctoral program attuned to pedagogical issues, and the previous experience teaching at the high school level of many of them, may have led them to avoid the kind of unwelcome pedagogical suggestions that are mentioned so frequently in the literature. What the potential importance of these contextual factors also suggests, however, is that there are likely more links across the cross-level gap than the more pessimistic assessments of the subject acknowledge.

These high school teachers craved not only information, but also guidance. A set of questions asked by Gwen, a high school teacher in the Purple Group exemplifies this desire for direction:

1 Gwen: So, I was just going to ask you, because I do have to leave. What, that you've seen, because I've taught honors, I've taught regular, and I've sent a lot of kids to [Midwest] in my career, but, um, what would you advise us to do? I mean, we see the pattern that we're going in, and that's why we want you here, because we sort of what, with that in mind. We want to teach our classes with what the university—because all of our kids are college-bound. Some of them will go to [the local community college] for a year or so, some of them may never get out of [the local community college], but all of them are college-bound. So what would you like to see us do with them, the things that we should give them, the skills, or ?

Excerpt 10.1

In this turn at talk, which comes as Gwen is preparing to leave the small group to attend another meeting, she asks the college instructors not merely for information about what they do in their own classrooms, but also what the college instructors think she and her colleagues should do in their classrooms, when she asks, “what would you advise us to do?” She reiterates the question again a moment later when she asks, “So what would you like to see us do with them, the things that we should give them, the skills, or?”

Gwen's questions here provide a telling counterpoint to the commonly held notion that college writing instructors have, over the last hundred years, attempted to dictate what gets taught in high school English classes as well as how it gets taught. And while these utterances from one high school teacher do not render historical attempts on the part of college faculty to exert that kind of influence on the high school curriculum, they do provide some evidence that some high school teachers actually desire input from college instructors because they feel a responsibility to, as Gwen says, “...teach our classes with what the university [wants]—because all of our kids are college-bound.” It is important to note here that because of the nature of the LIA professional development group of which Gwen was a part, she came to these conversations having had positive

experiences collaborating with university faculty members. And while we cannot be sure, it is unlikely that Gwen and the other high school teachers would have been as active in their solicitation of the college instructors' opinions absent this successful history of cross-level collaboration.

There are other indications of high school English teachers' desire for guidance from college instructors in the literature. In Strachan's description of the group discussion she facilitated with high school teachers, she notes their desire to find out more about college writing because of the difficulty their students often have in introductory college composition courses. Much of Strachan's description of the small-group discussions she led consists of questions the high school teachers have about the nature of college writing and their role in preparing students for writing effectively in college.

And in What is College-Level Writing?, Jordan and her colleagues pose a multitude of questions in their essay, beginning with the title, "Am I a Liar? The Angst of a High School English Teacher." Over the course of the essay, they ask 24 questions ranging from general questions about college instructors' expectations to more particular ones regarding the importance of punctuation and grammar—questions whose topics and tone echo the high school teachers' questions discussed in the preceding chapters. Jordan and her colleagues' justification for their questions echoes Gwen's plea in her request for direction. They wonder if "they are really so out of touch with what is expected of [their] students in their postsecondary education" (36-37). Jordan and her colleagues go on to cite the need for information about the "consistencies" of writing instruction that span institutional differences; they conclude that, "these consistencies are what [we] need to hear about so that [we] can confidently tell [our] students, 'Yes, you will need to do this

when you write in college” (40). These authors make the same link between their desire for information from college instructors and their desire to be able to confidently prepare their students for college writing that we see expressed by Gwen in Excerpt 10.2.

Thus, we have several indications that the belief that high school English teachers are hostile to input from college writing instructors, a belief that is influenced by the fervor with which some high school teachers, such as Jost, have resisted such input in the past, may be misguided. If, because of their prior positive experiences, high school teachers seek guidance from college instructors based on the instructors’ unique institutional knowledge, we would be remiss in denying them that information in the name of interactional equality. Rather, we need to not only find out more about the nature of cross-level interactions but also think about ways that high school teachers’ desire for information can become part, but only one part, of cross-level conversations among writing teachers.

The Knowledge Gap: College Instructors and High School Writing

The lack of questions on the part of the college instructors in these conversations brings to mind the criticisms in the literature leveled by college faculty members toward their own colleagues regarding the general lack of knowledge about high school English classes on the part of college composition instructors (McQuade; Steinberg; Marshburn; Watson; Watt). And while the college instructors who participated in this study certainly do not fit Steinberg’s characterization of college teachers who “snort disdainfully” at the preparation of their students, their seeming lack of interest, at least as evidenced by their lack of initiative in seeking information from high school English teachers is noteworthy.

One possible explanation for the lack of college instructors' questions regarding high school English is that some of them have previous teaching experience as high school English teachers. However, those college instructors with high school teaching experience are in the minority. Of the nine college instructors in this study, two of them had a year or more of full-time high school teaching experience and another one had significant experience as a substitute teacher. The other two-thirds of the college instructors had little experience related to high school English. So while we might expect that the participants with high school teaching experience might be less likely than others to ask questions, there were still many college participants who had little experience or prior knowledge about the teaching of English in high schools.

Another possibility is that the college instructors simply have little desire to know more about high school pedagogical practices. And while this seems unlikely given the general interest in pedagogical issues on the part of the particular group of college instructors who participated in these conversations, they do seek information much less frequently and much less aggressively than do the high school teachers. Further, when they do ask questions and get answers, the college instructors do not express surprise at what they hear, as indicated by their lack of newsmarks. Thus, while the claim that the college instructors do not care about high school English is not fully supported by the data and runs counter to the contextual knowledge we have about these instructors, the data clearly suggest a difference between the high school teachers' orientation toward college writing and that of the college instructors toward high school English.

This difference in orientation could be seen as a kind of deference on the part of the college instructors to the interactional aims of the high school teachers. Once the high school teachers take the lead in controlling the conversation through their use of

questions, the college instructors acquiesce by placing the apparent goals of the high school teachers in these conversations above their own interests. It was, after all, the high school teachers who invited the college instructors into the conversation.

The willingness on the part of the college instructors to defer to the high school teachers' goals for these conversations is also likely related to the participants' levels of motivation. As discussed in the preceding chapter, it seems that the high school teachers have more motivation for asking questions than do the college instructors because of the hierarchical relationship between the institutions the teachers represent. However, the effect of the hierarchy in which college is seen as "higher" than high school is a bit more complex than many in the literature have suggested. For example, McQuade discusses the hierarchical, and in his view contentious, relationship between high school as college teachers as resulting from what he terms, "the fallacy of simple location" (9).

In the conversations analyzed for this study, the relevance of the hierarchical relationship between high school and college, their "simple location," is not fallacious. Indeed, the fact that the education system is structured so that students proceed from high school into college inalterably shapes the nature of these cross-level interactions. It certainly does not result in the kind of condescension and proclamations of superiority that McQuade suggests; rather teachers appear to retain a strong sense of self importance in their roles as they relate to the "higher" institution.

The high school teachers seem to approach these conversations fully aware of a consequential role they play in the preparation of their students for college writing; a role that likely drives their pursuit of information. But this is not a reciprocal relationship. Ideally, the students taught by the high school teachers will all eventually be taught by these college instructors or others like them. However, there is no expectation that the

first-year college students in the college instructors' composition courses will ever return to high school to be students. As a result, the need that the high school teachers seem to feel to adequately prepare students for college writing has no equivalent for the college instructors. And the high school teachers' response to their very real "location" in the educational hierarchy is to take on a more active conversational role, particularly when seeking new knowledge. Meanwhile, the college instructors, content to take on the role of information providers while remaining secure in their status positions as "experts," subsume their interest in acquiring information from these high school teachers.

The Knowledge Gap: High School Teachers and College Writing

Much of the reasoning for the need for cross-level conversations among teachers of writing, both historically and in the more recent instances, is based on the assumption that high school and college teachers do not know much about how writing gets taught at the other level. In particular, high school teachers' knowledge about college writing is routinely characterized as deficient and cross-level conversations have been seen as a vehicle through which high school teachers might get that knowledge. In the conversations analyzed in this study, it seems clear that there is much that the high school teachers want to know about college writing, as evidenced by the large number of questions they ask in each of the four small-group conversations. Taken alone, the frequency with which the high school teachers question the college instructors does not indicate that the high school teachers necessarily learn anything new in the responses to their questions. However, when the frequent use of change-of-state response tokens and newsmarks is also considered, there are strong indications that the high school teachers in this study are not receiving information that simply confirms what they already know;

rather, those change-of-state response tokens indicate that the high school teachers, in many cases, receive new information—they find out things they did not previously know.

Placement

If the high school teachers do indeed learn things from these cross-level conversations, a logical next step is determining the things they learned that surprised them most. That is, what information did they receive that they found most newsworthy? One area about which the high school teachers across the four groups seem to know very little is placement. In three of the four groups, the participants engage in an extended discussion of how the university determines what type of writing course students enroll in during their first semester at the university and what happens to students who are under-prepared for the standard first-year composition course. In both of these areas of inquiry, the high school teachers indicate that what they hear regarding placement is “news.” This is particularly interesting given the important advisory role that high school teachers have been found to play in students’ preparation for college.

In these four small-group conversations, a lack of knowledge on the part of the high school teachers regarding placement in first-year composition courses, one of the first encounters students have with college writing, is in evidence. In fact, this was one area in which the high school teachers in all three of the groups that discussed placement specifically indicated that what they heard from the college instructors was new information. If the lack of knowledge in this area exhibited by these high school teachers is shared by a great number of other teachers across the country, as research suggests is the case, the implications are potentially quite great. This is true particularly in areas where schools are under funded and guidance counselors’ offices are under staffed.

If, as the findings of The Bridge Project suggest, high school teachers are being used by many students as de facto counselors during the college-preparation process, it becomes even more important that these teachers have reliable information about not only the content covered in first-year composition courses, but also other institutional procedures related to first-year writing courses. Placement seems to be particularly important since, as mentioned earlier, it is the first encounter with college writing for most first-year students.

In addition, placement becomes even more critical when studies show that students are less likely to leave college having successfully completed a degree if they take even one remedial course. The findings from the NCES report on American education indicate that the percentage of students who take remedial courses and still receive a degree or certificate ranges from 30% to 57% (Wirt et al 63). These figures compare unfavorably to the 69% completion rate for students who take no remedial courses. These statistics demonstrate the importance of providing high school students and their parents with, as the Bridge Project researchers suggest, “accurate, high quality, information about, and access to, courses that will help prepare students for college-level standards” (46). Getting this information out to those who need it most, students and parents, is a critical step in helping students prepare for college. And while steps should be taken to provide students and their parents access to information about college preparation that decreases the burden of being de facto guidance counselors in addition to their teaching responsibilities, high school teachers should be given reliable, discipline-specific information about how to help their students prepare for academic success in college writing, as first encountered during placement.

Writing Assignments and High-Stakes Assessment

Another of the things the high school teachers in this study frequently acknowledge as new information is the intense focus on revision in first-year college composition courses. As discussed in the preceding chapter, writing assignments are the focus of many of the high school teachers' questions. In all four of the small-group conversations, issues related to how many and what kind of writing assignments first-year composition instructors typically give are raised. In particular, the high school teachers ask questions about how many drafts students typically write and how many of the assignments in first-year writing are timed, on-demand, "impromptu" pieces. When they hear that, at least in the first-year composition courses taught by these instructors, not only do students almost never write impromptu essays and that revision is, in the view of many of the college instructors, the most important aspect of the teaching of writing, the high school teachers' responses indicate surprise.

The responses of these high school teachers to the college instructors' focus on revision is in part a byproduct of the local context within which these discussions took place. Because of the school district's intense focus on high-stakes test preparation, impromptu writing was becoming a more significant part of the curriculum as the high school English teachers attempted to do what was needed to adequately prepare students for the state assessment. The English teachers in the district were tasked with developing classroom assessments that mirrored the style of multiple-choice, constructed-response, and extended writing questions that were on the state assessment. Thus, much of their classroom writing assessment took the form of on-demand or impromptu essays. This situation likely shaped the high school teachers' response to the college instructors' disregard for on-demand writing.

The differing views of the importance of revision and impromptu writing may also be related to a fundamental difference in the participants' views about college writing. Since the college instructors participating in the study all taught college composition, their answers when asked about the kinds of writing college students do focused primarily on the writing that is done in first-year composition courses. This situation is likely to be the case when participation in cross-level conversations about writing is limited to college faculty members who are affiliated with English departments. In contrast, the high school teachers seem to hold a much broader view of the notion of college writing, a view that considers the kinds of writing assignments students do in university courses other than composition. The high school teachers who ask questions about impromptu writing reference the kinds of writing they did in social science and even English classes in which essay exams were the most frequent genre within which they wrote. Thus, the high school teachers' surprise about college writing may be due not to their ignorance but to the fact that many of them have a broader view of the kinds of writing typical students do across the college curriculum, not just in their first-year composition courses. The implications of this point for future cross-level discussions of writing will be explored in more depth later in this chapter.

Error, Thought, and the Evaluation of Writing

Of considerable importance in these conversations are the discussions of issues related to the evaluation of student writing. In particular, the high school teachers asked many questions about grading and specifically the role that error plays in the college instructors' evaluation of student writing. What emerged in these conversations is a situation in which the high school teachers ask questions about the extent to which the

college instructors penalize error in their grading while the college instructors indicate that they were most concerned not about the errors students make but the extent to which their writing shows evidence of original and well-developed thought.

In her groundbreaking text, Errors and Expectations, Mina Shaughnessy notes that “English teachers are inclined to exaggerate the seriousness of error” (121), and she argues for the concept of “tolerable error,” a concept free from the “rigid prescriptions of the unregenerated English teacher” (122). Such a view of error runs counter to the expectations of the high school teachers who ask questions about error. They recount horror stories they have heard about the extent to which still “unregenerated English teachers” penalize students for each mistake, without regard for how such actions impact the ability of a text to accomplish its purpose.

While the college instructors concede that perhaps some professors approach the grading of student writing as an exercise in error identification, they characterize their own grading practices as concerned primarily with the extent to which students’ writing evinces thought. In a 1999 essay, Lee Odell describes the value in “looking past surface errors” while being aware of the judgments we make about the extent to which “a given piece of writing seems perceptive, imaginative, thoughtful, or engaging” (10). It is this set of criteria that seems to inform the college instructors’ approach to writing assessment.

One possible explanation for the uniformity of the college instructors’ views on assessment is the common training they received as graduate student instructors at the university prior to their first semester of teaching. The potential importance of this training, however, is mitigated by the fact that all of the college instructors came to the university with previous teaching experience. As well, in the course of these

conversations, the college instructors tended to speak about their assessment practices as their own rather than as institutional mandates. Whatever the origin of the college instructors' approaches to assessment, the differences between their approaches and the high school teachers' presuppositions about the assessment of writing at the college level exemplify the variety of stances toward writing assessment both within and across institutions.

The Role of Lore in Cross-Level Conversations

Throughout the last half-century, scholars have argued that since most high school teachers lack adequate knowledge about college writing, they compensate by drawing on their own experiences, and the experiences of former students and family members, in formulating their beliefs about writing at the college level. In the conversations analyzed for this study, the high school teachers draw liberally on their own experience, the experiences of former students who come back to talk with them, the experiences of their family members, and the insights of college instructors they know personally. Many of the high school teachers' questions are prefaced with references to things they have heard from former students, that their children experienced, or that they themselves remember about writing in college.

For example, Gwen prefaced questions with references to her experiences in a literature class at a local university and her children's experiences in college writing courses at Midwest U. Marita, the other high school teacher in the Purple Group, says that she was given little guidance about how to proceed with writing assignments when she was in school. Meanwhile, Violet, in the Blue Group, says that she tells her students about the blue books and the writing she did in college. A veteran high school teacher in

the Green Group, Harriet, tells the participants in her group that in college “you live and die by being able to craft a research paper, and also by doing blue books.” When one of the college instructors in the group, Robin, says that she thinks “it depends on the college, it depends on the setting,” Harriet responds by citing personal experience—both her students’ and her own: “Blue book, research papers. And I know that is a thousand years ago, but from talking with students who come back, that still seems to be the thrust.” A few minutes later, Harriet prefaces a question about grading with assertions derived from “student reports.” The other high school teacher in the Green Group, Jolene, expresses surprise that the college instructors spend so much class time engaged in peer review. She says that she had only one English professor who did that.

In the Red Group, Theresa tells her group that every year she invites some of her former students back to tell the seniors in her classes what to expect in their college English classes. Deidre, another high school teacher in the Red Group, notes that when she was in school she “had a lot of, you know, under the watch...you’re trying to produce a stellar essay in 55 minutes.” And later Deidre responds to the college instructors’ comments about the importance of revision by once again comparing what the college instructors have said with her own experience as a college student:

1 Deidre: So it sounds like there’s been a paradigm shift at the college level. Because when I graduated from college, there was not this revision thing...I mean, it was strictly, you had one time and you better write well the first time around

Excerpt 10.2

We see in Deidre’s comments a need to reconcile competing information regarding college writing; a need to figure out how the new information she has received from these college instructors fits with her own experiences as a college student.

Such interactions call to mind Stephen North's description of "lore" as it relates to the development of a body of knowledge. North characterizes lore, in the context of writing pedagogy, as a body of knowledge that is essentially "experiential" and "pragmatic" (23). And while he argues for the potential value of lore, he also says that it can be considered "a muddled combination of half-truths, myths, and superstitions" (23). And while North acknowledges both the importance and limitations of lore in the development of the field of composition, as Peckham argues, North's work associates lore with the work of "practitioners," whose practical approach to writing pedagogy is compared unfavorably to a "praxis" approach that melds theory and practice (Peckham 254).

The three "functional properties" of lore North identifies can be seen operating in these conversations as high school teachers discuss how they know what they know about college writing. First, North argues that "anything can become part of lore" (24). For the high school teachers from Fairview, their own experiences figure significantly into their knowledge of college writing. As mentioned earlier, they also draw from the experiences of their former students, their own children, and things that they have heard and read about college writing. Even what they hear from the college instructors in these conversation becomes, in a sense, part of the lore related to college writing—another piece of practical information based on personal experience that enlarges the teachers' body of knowledge.

The second functional property of lore as defined by North is that "nothing can ever be dropped from it" (24). In the case of cross-level conversations about college writing, the lore must assimilate a range of seemingly contradictory perspectives on college writing that come from sources with very different perspectives on the issue,

including students, high school teachers, and college professors. The difficulty of the reconciliation of contradictory aspects of the lore about college writing can be seen in the writing of several of the high school teachers who contributed essays to What is “College-Level” Writing?. Davies cites conflicting reports she has received from former students about how well their high school coursework prepared them for college writing. She concludes that she is “whistling in the dark” in her attempt to reconcile this contradictory information as she attempts to prepare her students for college (31). Likewise, Jordan and her colleagues describe their shock when former students return after graduating from college and tell them that, for example, they never wrote research papers during their college careers (36). These high school teachers describe their confusion as they attempt to reconcile their beliefs about college writing based on previous experiences and knowledge with these conflicting reports from students. There is evidence of similar frustration on the part of the high school teachers participating in the conversations analyzed for this study. What seems clear, however, is that the teachers do not seem prepared to dismiss any of the characterizations of college writing; rather, they seem predisposed to accept the ways that, in North’s words, their experience “affirms seemingly contrary truths” (24).

In North’s view, the third functional property of lore is that since contributions to it must be pragmatic, they will be altered if they are found not to be so (25). In the case of the high school teachers from Fairview, the body of knowledge they have about college writing seems to be practically useful for their teaching because it relates closely to the kinds of writing their students need to do well in order to succeed on the state’s high-stakes assessment. Thus, the parts of the lore that are most functional given the

demands of the high school teachers' current working conditions are the ones that they seem to value most highly.

While North's conception of lore is useful for understanding the nature of the cross-level knowledge of high school teachers in these conversations, the extent to which North identifies lore with practice, the disfavored element of the practice/praxis binary might obscure the importance and value of lore in these cross-level conversations. While the sources of information from which the high school teachers' knowledge about college writing have been gleaned may provide an incomplete portrait of college writing, particularly given how much new information the high school teachers seem to have acquired during the small-group conversations, the variety of those experiences also provides a breadth of perspective relative to the notion of college writing that many of the college writing instructors in this study do not seem to possess. In this way, lore provides the high school teachers a perspective on college writing that is unavailable to their college counterparts because of the disciplinary divisions that have traditionally Balkanized the academy. Thus, the high school teachers' knowledge base allows a cross-disciplinary view of college writing that is more difficult for the college instructors to obtain because of their position within the university. The same position that allows them access to privileged information about college writing also inhibits their ability to take a broad view of the same.

What is "College" Writing?

In the conversations analyzed here, the college instructors' view of college writing is one that adheres to tenets of process writing pedagogy typical to most first-year composition courses. This orientation makes sense considering that these college

instructors are enrolled in a PhD program focused in large part on reading and writing pedagogy. They are immersed in composition scholarship that reinforces the importance of revision, the importance of developing multiple drafts of a particular assignment, the importance of getting feedback during the writing process, and using writing as a way of exploring complicated ideas without necessarily coming to a tidy, well-defined conclusion. Unsurprisingly it dominates their responses to the teachers. For example, in the Red Group, Laura talks about how she values aspects of student writing that are “fuzzy” or “original.” These same college instructors reject the importance of on-demand writing, or as it is variously called by high school teachers, “blue book” or “impromptu” writing. Such writing is for schooling assessment purposes, part of the institutional tool kit for assigning grades, and, therefore, not considered within the realm of writing as an intellectual and rhetorical activity.

The title of this section is an adaptation of the title of one of the books that has figured prominently in the development of this project: What is “College-Level” Writing? The portion of the title that has been omitted here is an important one. While What is “College-Level” Writing? focuses primarily on the ways college-level writing is defined in college composition courses, the issues raised by the data in this project show that a focus on students’ transition from high school to college writing that is focused only on first-year writing courses may be inadequate. Research into writing practices across the curriculum tells us that the approaches to writing and knowledge-making in first-year composition courses do not always relate to similar practices in other subject areas (Anderson et al). Thus, it may be that conversations about student preparation for college writing need to stretch across disciplinary boundaries to engage teachers from

each level in other disciplines, including the humanities, social sciences, mathematics, and science.

Susan E. Schorn, writing in What is “College-Level” Writing?, describes the potential benefits of dialogue among college composition instructors and college instructors in other disciplines, particularly discussions geared toward the development of college-wide writing standards. She argues that the cooperative development of writing standards “broadens an institution’s understanding of the purpose of writing and sharpens awareness of writing’s myriad uses” (333). While these kinds of conversations are certainly valuable, conversations that remain within the university have little value for high school teachers like the ones in Fairview.

Thus, cross-level conversations involving not only English teachers or college writing instructors, but also high school teachers and college faculty from many subject areas may lead to a fuller understanding of the nature of college writing on the part of all participants. These kinds of conversations would allow for discussion about the importance of writing in subject areas other than English as well as the modes of writing that are privileged in particular disciplines. College composition instructors might leave these discussions with a more intricate notion of college writing; college faculty from other disciplines might leave with a clearer understanding of the focus of the first-year composition course; high school teachers across the curriculum areas might leave with a better idea of the role that writing will play in students’ college biology, or history, or math courses; and high school English teachers might leave with information that allows them to reconcile the sometimes competing focuses of on-demand and process-centered writing at the college level.

Creating opportunities for cross-level conversations that are also cross-curricular would do more than foster understanding, as worthwhile a goal as that is. They might also increase awareness across subject areas of not only the importance of writing in those disciplines but also the key role teachers trained in that discipline play as teachers of writing. Teachers in the subject areas are equipped in a way that English teachers will never be to help students prepare for writing in that discipline. As Elizabeth Moje suggests in her research into adolescent literacy, disciplines have “conventions for communicating and representing knowledge and ideas, and ways of interacting, defending ideas, and challenging the deeply held ideas of others in the discipline.” Moje argues that the teaching and learning of such discipline-specific “conventions” must not be the exclusive province of English Language Arts courses: “Content area texts make unique demands on readers, and the best people to teach how to read and write content area texts are those who are expert in the disciplines themselves.”

Arguments in favor of writing across the curriculum such as the ones offered by Moje have shaped the discussion among composition scholars about the roles that professors in the subject areas might play in the teaching of writing. Toby Fulwiler has argued for the value of writing as a meaning-making enterprise that should figure prominently in students’ learning in all disciplines. And writing more than 25 years ago, James Kinneavy identified the expert knowledge that professors in disciplines bring to the subject matter, and the writing activities in which students can engage in content-area courses, as elements of an integrated approach to writing instruction that goes beyond first-year composition.

With these as guiding assumptions, cross-level and cross-disciplinary discussions of writing become not merely desirable, but essential to helping students prepare for the

complexity that is college writing not only in first-year composition courses, but also in the diversity of the core curriculum.

Implications for Further Research

This study was designed to be an exploratory examination of cross-level conversations that could illuminate further empirical research. Because of the dearth of empirical research, further interrogation of the functioning of all types of cross-level collaborations among teachers of writing would be valuable. The unit of analysis in this study was intentionally limited to conversation interactions. The initial understanding of the complexity of these interactions made possible in this study demonstrates the possibilities of examining a wide range of cross-level groups and discovering relationships between particular interactional features and the success of the groups. Examination of how different participation structures work to encourage or hinder conversation among participants would also be illuminating. Other research might combine microanalysis of interactions with ethnographic methods to help understand the lived experiences of the members of such a group. An interactional ethnographic approach would be particularly valuable in understanding the ways that cross-level collaborations develop over time. Given the importance of the teachers' history with successful college faculty professional development, such approaches could describe the kinds of cross-level partnerships that prepare the ground for bridging conversations about college writing.

We have many voices asserting that these macro and micro interactions are important. As such, this seems like a particularly relevant time to examine much more

closely the ways in which these conversations function and the impact they have on participants.

Implications for Future Cross-Level Interactions

We need to be aware of, and acknowledge the power and status differentials that seem to characterize these relationships. It is clear that these kinds of conversations need to be happening. However, expecting there to be equal participation among participants from high schools and colleges is unrealistic. Furthermore, expecting the lack of equal participation to lead to antagonistic or otherwise unsuccessful discussions is also misguided. The results of this study imply that differences in status or participation do not necessarily impede successful conversation.

The cross-level conversations examined in this study are not “learning partnerships between college and high school” characterized by “genuine give and take on each side” (141) that Kittle and others advocate. This is due in large part to the significance of a participant’s institutional affiliation in determining to whom they talk and how they talk with one another. The result is a situation in which “high school teachers” talk with “college instructors” rather than one in which individuals engage in open discussion with colleagues with no regard to institutional affiliation.

What we must do is accept that these are not going to be utopian communities and incorporate knowledge of and engagement with the consequences of the interactional dynamics for cross-level groups of writing teachers from the initial meetings of such collaboratives. Acknowledgement that high school teachers likely want to know much more about college writing than college instructors do about high school English classes can result in a more productive use of time. The active solicitation of questions from

high school teachers at the beginning of cross-level interactions could then be accompanied by asking college instructors if they have any questions. It may be the case that college instructors have many questions about high school English but don't ask them as a matter of course. Thus, making questions a focal point early on in cross-level conversations may result in teachers from both kinds of institutions learning things they don't know. Devoting time early on in cross-level conversations to participants' questions about the work of their counterparts would then open the possibility for discussions that involve a more balanced exchange of ideas. Such discussions might then be free from the strictures involved when eliciting information is the primary goal. In its place could be a discussion among teachers about the implications of what they learn by asking questions for both their students and themselves.

Conclusion

This study has convinced me of a few things. First, teachers at both levels are committed to doing things in their classes that are in the best interests of their students. When the teachers in the conversations analyzed here expressed confusion about the teaching and expectations at the other level, they did so not to indict other teachers, but to find out what will be expected from or what to expect of their students. This unrehearsed and unexpected solidarity is what Rex and Schiller (2007) have conceived of as civil cooperation in the face of disagreement. This propensity for successful professional conversation offers a positive case that warrants further exploration and application.

Second, better communication between the two institutions is one important local way of helping students make a smoother transition from high school to college writing. The "politics of location" that has shaped these cross-level interactions is a powerful

dynamic that must be addressed by the purposeful development of professional relationships between teachers on both sides of the high school/college divide. This project indicates that we cannot approach these kinds of relationships with an “if we build it, they will come” mentality. That is, we should not expect that facilitating successful conversations among high school and college teachers of writing is as simple as conquering “the politics of location” by getting teachers from each level in the same room. We must also recognize that there may be differences between conversations that the participants perceive as successful and those that meet the goals of collegiality and mutuality that we ascribe to them. We need to approach the design and development of cross-level relationships with a regard for the competing motivations and interests of the participants, motivations and interests that are not universal, but context dependent. It is with these principles in mind that we can foster the development of cross-level relationships among teachers of writing that both meet the immediate needs of the participants and encourage the kind of collegiality that teachers of English have sought for the past 90 years.

APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions (Atkinson and Heritage)

- [Simultaneous talk
- = Contiguous Talk
- ↑ A marked rising intonation
- ↓ A marked falling intonation
- Pauses of less than a second are indicated by a dash
- (3) Pauses in seconds (e.g., a 3-second pause)
- Underlining indicates emphasis
- CAPS** Capital letters indicate that part of an utterance is spoken much more loudly than surrounding talk
 - Degree signs indicate that part of an utterance is spoken much more quietly than surrounding talk
- (()) Double parentheses contain details of the interaction or other descriptions of participants' talk and actions

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