

Metaphors We Innovate By: Graduate Students Transforming a Writing Community through Networked Experiences

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Innovation requires an openness to uncertainty and a willingness to create what is possible but “does not yet exist” (Engeström 130). Because innovation involves topics, concepts, and practices that have not yet fully arrived, the metaphors we used to describe development and change may not be up to the task of fully capturing innovation’s emergent processes. According to learning theorists Yrjö Engeström and Annalisa Sannino, two metaphors in particular tend to fall short—namely, acquisition and participation. Acquisition conjures images of individuals internalizing established knowledge of a particular domain. In this view, learning is a matter of filling people’s heads with the right kinds of ideas. Participation, on the other hand, casts the learner as an emerging member of a community who adopts that community’s established values, attitudes, and practices over time, moving from the periphery of the community to the center in a somewhat linear fashion. While both metaphors provide a glimpse into the process of development and change, neither metaphor fully captures the work involved with innovation in complex, collaborative environments.

To address this complexity, Engeström and Sannino advocate another metaphor—namely, expansion—which captures the “transformation of communities” through collective

learning and the “creation of culture” (3). In the present article, the narratives that follow offer examples of graduate students transforming community through a series of networked curricular and co-curricular experiences—a coordinated effort to create a dynamic culture of writing at our institution. Each narrative shares the experience of a graduate student enacting local curricular and programmatic change by engaging opportunities afforded by doctoral coursework. These narratives speak to learning and professional development as an *expansive* effort, neither simply acquiring content knowledge nor proceeding along a clearly delineated path toward full membership of the community. Instead, these narratives showcase the situated realities—nonlinear, often messy—associated with changing culture and the consequences such change can have on the identities of individuals and the wider community.

Below, drawing on the unique perspective and experiences of each author, we describe in detail various elements of what we have come to call the Writing Resource Initiative (WRI), a label given to a set of interconnected projects tied to the way writing is studied, taught, learned, and lived at our institution. More specifically, the WRI is a student-led, collaborative effort aiming to enhance the visibility of writing and rhetoric at a mid-size midwestern research university. The purposes and structure of the WRI are evolving, but there are two primary goals at present: (1) to support various initiatives taking place within a newly structured writing program and (2) to forge meaningful relationships with campus partners beyond the writing program itself. This collection of projects known as the WRI got their start in a doctoral seminar focused on writing program administration led by Dan. Crucially, the projects were also

developed in conjunction with the local writing program administrator, Lee, who continues to lead efforts to change the way writing is recognized on our campus.

Sara: Curriculum as *Sandbox*

One innovation that resulted from the WRI involved revising the first-year writing curriculum for incoming Graduate Teaching Associates (GTAs) to one that is additionally alive, flexible, and modifiable. In previous years, the curriculum was one that was *acquired* by the GTAs as they adopted the established disciplinary content through a prescribed curriculum. Although GTAs *participated* in the curriculum by taking on the practices of the community, the curriculum itself was static and changed little from year to year. In the past, GTAs were closely monitored, and, as a result, felt that their curricular options were limited. But the curriculum revision opened up new possibilities. In this way, the curriculum revision became a *sandbox*—a metaphorical space that involves playing, getting the lay of the land, exploring, selecting what to focus on, considering what challenges to take up, and wondering how things might exist in new ways. As a metaphor for innovation, the sandbox allows for possibility and interaction. In the case of curricular revisions, I had to get the lay of the land, so to speak, by teaching the first-year writing course, before I could consider what challenges to take up and wonder how the curriculum might exist in new ways. Familiarity with the curriculum was necessary before revisions could be made.

However, in order for the curriculum redesign to happen the writing people within our department needed to be in the same sandbox with a common understanding of assignments and

goals for the course. The writing people include not only the GTAs that teach in the first-year writing program but the full-time faculty in the first-year writing program as well. With more people in the same space, metaphorically speaking, the sandbox was a way of inviting others to take up new challenges and explore possibilities within the metaphorical space. The curriculum as a sandbox can lead to benefits for both GTAs and faculty as (newly) established intra-disciplinary relationships continue to form.

One example of building intra-disciplinary relationships directly related to the curriculum as sandbox was working on the curriculum committee. As a graduate student member of the curriculum committee I formed new relationships with full-time faculty teaching first-year writing. The curriculum committee fostered interactions among people in the program not only in the meeting space, but also in the sandbox. In other words, when I was asked to share the revised curriculum with faculty members we could connect in new ways and consider new challenges that a revised curriculum might present.

Part of working in curriculum as sandbox involves sharing the curriculum with others while still inviting them to play. The curriculum as a sandbox, then, is a means of inviting participation from both graduate students and faculty. While the revised curriculum is still shared with new GTAs, it is no longer prescribed. Instead, GTAs make the curriculum their own, experiment, and play while considering what challenges to take up and what to focus on. Although the revised curriculum represents a drastic change from the curriculum that new graduate teaching associates were assigned in the past, it is not followed across the entire program. Instead, it might be seen as an exploration of curricular possibilities by those in the

sandbox with an always open invitation to anyone interested in playing and innovating. These possibilities might include other ways of innovating lesson plans, assignments, classroom plans, interviews with faculty/students, graduate students, work that relates to this constellation of the WRI.

The WRI, when viewed through the lens of the sandbox, considers ways of fostering interactions among people within a program. It invites a grappling with uncertainty and connecting people in new ways. The metaphor of the sandbox asks us to consider: how to invite participation from students, faculty, administrators, and stakeholders within Language Arts education? What are ways of fostering interaction among a program?

Marshall: Game Space Learning Laboratory as *Workbench*

Innovation often requires blueprinting and retooling ideas into prototypes that can be observed in real world conditions. From this perspective, the WRI provides an opportunity to view the classroom through the metaphor of a *workbench*. The WRI as it emerged from our group's collective machinations help position the classroom as the space where we gathered to embrace the messiness of our work and ratchet out ideas, methods, and practices. Innovation through the lens of this metaphor asks us to consider the parts we choose, the tools we need, and the arrangement of our designs for the purposes we intend. But this is not isolated work. The workbench concept invites curiosity and co-designers, within and across departments, to bring with them the materials which can offer to support good ideas. Interestingly, when positive initiatives are put on the workbench and meaningful relationships among collaborators and

stakeholders form around these initiatives, the many hands at work often do their best to see these prototypes succeed.

The doctoral seminar—English 7800: Writing Program Administration: Inquiry, Activity, Design—functioned as both a course and workbench site. On the one hand the course focused on WPA scholarship, projects, and lectures. On the other hand, the course invited conversations with active WPAs in the field, positioned design projects towards the WPA conference, and presented the opportunity to create programmatic designs situated within the context of specific sites. As we delved deeper into our projects, we refined the WRI, and in turn, these ideas began to take shape as plausible pilot programs and designs beyond the scope of the course. Essentially, workbenching material is difficult and often tedious work that requires planning, constructive feedback, and a fair amount of bravery to invite stakeholders to the table. During the course, we were inspired by the the wiley nature of WPAs to find solutions under daunting circumstances and by their openness to network with us and openly share wisdom. Much of the innovating their work requires is reminiscent of the work we had set before us, both as students working on complicated projects and as future professionals situating ourselves around work that would help define our trajectories. For me, the workbench metaphor fittingly frames the notion that innovation is always ongoing and requires many rolled up sleeves.

One example of the workbench metaphor is the development of the Game Space Learning Laboratory (GSLI). I saw value in creating a writing laboratory that espoused the values of learning from positive play. Our WPA is forward thinking and I managed to get a proposal for the GSLI accepted as a pilot program with a set of intended deliverables, but there

was no precedent for such a lab existing in our writing department, and I have absolutely no funding. In keeping with the workbench metaphor through the WRI, I managed to find allies such as the WPA, the Information Technology department, the popular culture archivists, and faculty within department and across the university who expressed interest in the project. They bring ideas, tools, and materials that have helped move forward English's work with gaming, multimodality, and course design. The positive outcomes so far have led to even more support in terms of equipment and programmatic connections. Because we all collaborate around the workbench, we share in innovations and possibilities, together ratcheting out the GSLL as a machine, always undergoing refinement, but one that is beginning to drive more opportunities forward.

Kelly: Composition Practicum as *Incubator*

I see the WRI, which at its core seeks to build community among writing stakeholders within and beyond the English Department unit, as an *incubator* space where graduate students can build relationships that reflect our multiple identities as students, teachers, and scholars. The WRI, in other words, affords us opportunities to perform our multiple, conflicting identities, perhaps simultaneously, by bringing our students, peers, colleagues, and mentors into the same space. Like Turner et al., I see our incubator not so much as a physical space, but as a group of people (133). Through this lens, the WRI is a space where we can innovate together by testing out new ideas, tools, and approaches that seek, in part, to blur the lines between our research, teaching, and studenting. At the same time, however, the space of the WRI—much like WIDE at

Michigan State University—provides stakeholders with “real” situations to work with. Like WIDE, the WRI “provides a space to test our research and apply our pedagogy through enacting, embodying, and exploring research and mentorship” (Turner et al. 131). The work we do through the WRI not only reflects, but enacts, our identities as graduate students at our institution.

As an incubator space, and largely informed by the model of the doctoral seminar in which Marshall, Lauren, Sara and I began the WRI project, the WRI affords us and its other constituents opportunities to reflect on how our identities as graduate students affect and influence the pedagogical and scholarly projects we pursue. It is not uncommon that our teaching and coursework might occur back-to-back throughout the week, requiring us to switch roles completely—from teacher/authority figure to student/mentee, and vice versa—not only in the same day, but often within the same hour. Our ability as graduate students to transition between and among performances of these identities—and to embody multiple identities at the same time—places us in a unique position within the institution. The incubator space of the WRI further positions us, then, as integral, albeit flexible, members of our programmatic and institutional writing communities. Learning to embody our roles and occupy the space of graduate student at the university helps us to create connections between those who might occupy space differently at the institution.

For example, at our institution the composition practicum for first-time GTAs in the first-year writing program affords additional opportunities to foster community in our department, particularly among graduate students in various English graduate programs and between graduate students and faculty. The course brings together MA students in literary and textual

studies, MFA students in fiction and poetry, and doctoral students in rhetoric and writing in a workshop environment focused on their teaching. Much like the doctoral seminar in which Sara, Marshall, Lauren, and I began work on the WRI, the practicum space acts as an incubator where graduate student instructors can immerse themselves in the newness of writing studies and the lived experience of teaching.

The incubator metaphor affords us a lens through which to consider how peers and colleagues of different (sub-)disciplines might work, think, investigate, and problem-solve together. How might we foster relationship-building between colleagues in our own departments and beyond, bringing the conversation on writing on our campuses to a wider variety of stakeholders? Who are the stakeholders on our campus, and what existing incubator spaces might we identify to bring the stakeholders together? What new incubator spaces can we imagine creating? In our context, the practicum course represents a community-building effort that brings graduate student experience to the center of innovation. Incubators as sites of innovation allow us to work in real situations to enact overarching goals for institutional communities.

Lauren: Web Design/Designer as *Bridge*

As mentioned, the WRI was initially a collection of projects begun in a doctoral seminar. Yet, innovation does not occur in only one instance or even at just the beginning of the project. Our doctoral coursework afforded us the opportunity to begin the development of the WRI and to form the collaborations between Sara, Marshall, Kelly, and me. As innovation is an ongoing, iterative process, though, it is continually engaged through new and evolving opportunities.

What has evolved from this is understanding and using what was developed in the space of the seminar to now create *bridges* during other co-curricular experiences, forging relationships beyond and on behalf of the writing program.

The creation of such bridges does not happen all at once and instead has been through a series of experiences leading to multiple bridges. A goal of the WRI is to forge meaningful relationships with campus partners beyond the writing program itself. In moving beyond the writing program, partners for me have become those within the department. This required developing my relationship with the English Department beyond just my doctoral program and becoming involved in formal and informal learning spaces throughout the department. One such formal space was as a graduate representative on a department committee. Involvements have also come from much more informal spaces, such as passing greetings in the hall, staying to chat in the secretaries' offices, or even fitness classes at our university recreation center.

These initial involvements, though small, have played a critical role in forming much needed bridges, as I now serve as the publication assistant for the English Department, focused primarily on the development, design/redesign, and maintenance of the department's website. Because the department is made up of many programs, this includes working on many web pages for those programs as well as working with their faculty and graduate students, requiring me to act as a bridge between people but also between people and the website itself. I am now looking at how to maintain a consistency across programs to represent us as one department, while still highlighting the unique identity of each program. With the recent merging of first-year writing

and the English Department, an additional focus of the department website redesign has been enhancing the digital visibility of writing.

Initially, the university developed a template for departments' homepages. Now that template is being adapted for the individual programs like the first-year writing program as well as larger focuses of the department like the writing programs. For example, the writing programs landing page is highlighting the significance of writing within the department and it uses this template. The first-year writing program uses this template but also adapts it to meet the identity of the program. Making these significant changes works to establish a consistent feel and look to different programs, representing them more so as part of one department. This also serves the goal of enhancing the visibility of writing within the department's digital presence. With programs not as focused on writing, however, my knowledge of those programs is limited at best. For those changes that have been made in other programs, seeing myself as a bridge and using those bridges that I already had has been critical, particularly when it comes to asking questions when requests for changes are sent to me and adapting the template to meet that program's identity.

By beginning with web pages that are not specific to one program, such as the homepage and even the faculty, graduate student, and staff page, as well as working on pages specific to writing, such as the first-year writing homepage and the writing programs landing page, this has required me to work in both unfamiliar and familiar areas. This has enabled me to learn about how the department is digitally represented and to learn more about the people in the department

while simultaneously forging relationships and creating bridges both in digital spaces and with people in physical spaces.

Ultimately, I continue to find myself utilizing already created bridges, while also working to create new bridges that help to foster innovation and meet the vision of the department.

Questions I have had to ask myself are how do I serve as a bridge for the writing program? What bridges, in both digital and physical spaces, am I trying to help create? Who is important in the creation of such bridges? And how are my already established relationships important to those bridges?

Innovating Over the Long Term: Remaining Open to Opportunities; or, One Last Metaphor

Doing more—and doing better—with less has become the default for K-20 faculty and administrative teams across our home state of Ohio. How then do we go about the important task of introducing undergraduate education majors and graduate students alike to the new realities of what it means to be a literacy educator in this milieu? How might we mentor rising colleagues in the everyday lived realities of teaching—the important on-the-ground messiness of delivering curricula, but also participating in departmental meetings, supervising student groups, or contributing to the invisible yet primary work of sustaining and even growing a learner-centered community?

Sara, Marshall, Kelly, and Lauren undertook projects and pursue their respective interests and build their professional profiles by doing the work associated with that profile invested in

first-year writing pedagogy. Sara revised our program's first-semester writing course curriculum. Marshall applied his research interest in gaming, design theory, and activity theory and established a game lab. Kelly deepened her understanding of teacher development through collaborating with the program administration on a series of initiatives for which she assumed the lead role. Finally, Lauren engaged design thinking and digital rhetoric scholarship in order to overhaul the departmental website. As their faculty—permanent members of the doctoral program, English department, and University whose culture(s) transformed by the respective efforts—we have great respect for the initiative and creativity involved in realizing each of the changes. Additionally, we are mindful of the balance Sara, Marshall, Kelly, and Lauren each were able to strike between meeting expectations for their assigned coursework and also building on the ideas shared in their seminar research projects to innovation efforts, taking advantage of the structural support provided by degree program and then translating the projects to innovations responsive to community but also responsible for transforming—(re)making those same communities.

Kunstler offers the metaphor of a hothouse to signal the long term goal of creating a community of innovation that lasts beyond any single term. Achieving transformation requires a wide angle lens as well as a long temporal horizon. Innovation, as we have experienced it, demands a collective effort. It requires careful attention to ways in which design elements (i.e., material features of a writing program, a doctoral program, a department, the institution) are effectively interwoven.

Workbench. Sandbox. Bridge. Incubator. Hothouse. These metaphors have proven helpful for us as a strategy for critically engaging what *is* and imagining what *could be*.

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