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A Network Approach to Writing Center Outreach

Thomas Deans

When doing scholarship, we habitually work through overlapping networks: some are local, as when we consult with a colleague down the hall; some are national or global, as when we attend conferences and contribute to journals—or read them, as you’re doing now. Derek Mueller helps us document and visualize such networks within writing studies. Researchers in other fields, most notably Bruno Latour, have adopted the notion of the network to trace relationships, both metaphorical and material, and make sense of complex phenomena. Networks are decentralized and distributed assemblages of elements acting and reacting to one another—interactions, both predictable and unpredictable, among multiple people, objects, events, and institutions. Few writing center outreach initiatives adopt the network as their signature identity, but the one that I describe here does.

In contrast, when college and university writing centers take up community engagement, most default to binary partnerships: a collaboration with a particular library or non-profit or school or neighborhood organization. These can be strategic collaborations between well-established institutions; they can be scrappy, grassroots efforts. They can be alliances designed to last; they can be initiatives pulled together to meet the exigencies of a particular moment. Either way, such partnerships rise or fall on the buy-in of each partner, and even the most well-planned partnerships can be difficult to sustain, though when they end that doesn’t necessarily mean they have failed, as there are multiple ways to think about the lifecycles of community literacy projects (Restaino and Cella).

Networks and binary partnerships. Both have their merits and constraints, and one project can even pivot from one orientation to the other. This was the case with the University of Connecticut Writing Center’s outreach efforts, which started fifteen years ago as a typical university-secondary school partnership—tutors from our university writing center started delivering writing tutoring to an urban school—but later shifted to developing a regional network that encourages middle and high schools to start and sustain their own peer writing centers. Our experience offers one model for imagining writing center outreach; it may likewise suggest the possibilities of network thinking for other kinds community literacy work.

The UConn Writing Center’s Secondary School Outreach Program started in 2004, two years before I landed there, triggered by the actions of Nina Rivera, an undergraduate enrolled in a course on writing theory and practice taught by Laurie Cella, a doctoral student in English and director of the Writing Center. Rivera’s final project for Cella’s course was to plan and launch a partnership that brought several UConn Writing Center tutors to her old high school weekly to tutor. Rivera, Cella, and a colleague reflect on the rise and fall of this program in “Re-Assessing Sustainability: Leveraging Marginal Power for Service-Learning Programs,” drawing on Pau-

la Mathieu's notions of tactical and strategic modes of community engagement to affirm the program's tactical value despite its discontinuation after a few years. When that partnership ended for reasons typical in university/school initiatives—in this case the departure of key teachers and administrators—the Writing Center changed its outreach philosophy. We maintained our engagement with secondary schools but shifted focus from delivering tutoring at one school to building regional capacity for middle and high schools to start and sustain their own peer writing centers.

Ever since we made the shift from delivering tutoring to building regional capacity for peer tutoring, we have been growing a network whose main event is an annual Conference for Secondary Schools. More than 150 students and teachers gather in Storrs each fall to share strategies with UConn tutors, and especially with each other. Universities already have the infrastructure for conferences, and this half-day event serves as both a catalyst for new teachers and students to learn how good writing centers work and as a place for schools with established peer centers to train and re-energize their new cohorts of tutors. It is also a place for schools to connect with one another.



Figure 1. Students from Ellington High School present at the Twelfth Annual Secondary Schools Writing Centers Conference in September 2019.



Figure 2. Middle and high school students from different schools mix at a breakout session led by a UConn tutor

Meanwhile, across the academic year we work intensively with a different middle or high school in our region each year. A small group of experienced UConn tutors visits that school weekly to train a founding cohort of middle or high school tutors. Yes, this is a kind of binary partnership, but one that is term-limited to a year, although we hope to see that school the next year—and going forward—at our annual conference. In fact, every school we work with must commit to being a featured presenter at the next conference as a way of paying forward the professional development they received. This dual approach—a big annual conference for many schools, and weekly visits to one school to help them get a new center started—allows us to incrementally grow and sustain a network of relationships (see Deans & Courtmanche for a detailed account of how these processes work). You can track the cumulative reach of those efforts on a digital map of more than sixty schools that have attended our conference over the last dozen years (*Network Map*).

The regional infrastructure we have developed through the annual conference—and the range of relationships it has engendered—has reached an impressive stage of maturity: middle schoolers who have done peer tutoring in writing centers that we helped found now transition into high schools where we have helped found similar centers; student peer tutors trained by those high schools move on to UConn, where some now tutor at our center; each year an experienced UConn Writing Center tutor who is pursuing a degree in education becomes our graduate outreach coordinator, and the next year that person is typically hired by Connecticut middle or high school to teach English; some of those former UConn tutors and outreach coordinators have founded additional peer writing centers across the state and brought *their* students to our annual conference. Those homecomings are especially gratifying.

When compared to binary partnerships—even good, reciprocal ones—the webbed, flexible, dynamic relationships of a network can offer a wider range of ways to participate and different possibilities for growth. Networks need to be deliberately built and maintained—that is, they require some strategic and predictable infrastructure, like our annual conference—but their everyday functioning is tactical and protean. For example, the middle and high school teachers who work with us take several different pathways into our network and their relationships to the university range from one-time conference attendance, to a full year of weekly school visits by our tutors, to year-after-year conference attendance and presenting. Many of the connections run through UConn, but there are also more horizontal, school-to-school connections. There is no center of a network, yet there can be many writing centers in a network!

Some relationships within our network are thick; some are thin. Some relationships have been consistently active since we started; some have blinked on and off, or even permanently off, typically as a result of administrative changes or teacher turnover. We've accepted that about a quarter of the writing centers we help launch won't be operating five years later. It's tempting to view each of those as a failed partnership, but instead we accept the pattern as natural to an evolving network, or at least characteristic of our network.

In our network ecology, teachers and schools toggle in and out of participation, or even drop out entirely, but the network continues. Many, many students churn through, most just for a year or two. The network offers multiple ways in, multiple levels of involvement, gentle ways out, and chances to re-enter. As the longtime director of the Writing Center, I know the teachers who have been our most reliable collaborators, but I don't personally know everyone involved, which from a partnership perspective might seem irresponsible, but from a network perspective is OK, even expected.

This kind of network could be developed from scratch, as we tried in our early days. We soon learned, however, that grafting our network to existing networks was a much better and more sustainable way to go. We collaborate with the local National Writing Project site, also housed at UConn, which does professional development for secondary teachers and shares our commitment to promoting writing as a social, iterative process for learning and doing. One might label the Connecticut Writing Project (CWP) our partner; however, what we really do is plug into their network, the relationships with teachers across the region that CWP has been cultivating for decades. CWP developed a network through its own distinctive infrastructure: the summer institute for teachers. When we mesh, we both become stronger.

We aspire to expand our network—this time beyond the thirty or so mile radius we now focus on. If this happens—and for May 2020 we had a new conference in the planning stages before it was cancelled due to coronavirus—it will involve another grafting of networks, this time with UConn's dual-enrollment program, which has many strong relationships with high schools across the state, and which shares a commitment to robust writing pedagogies that include peer-to-peer engagement.

The network approach often lacks the immediacy and intimacy of typical community writing center partnerships, yet we experience some such moments each year at our conference. We also trust that the network, and what teachers and student tutors have all learned through its connections and energy, have made possible many daily peer-to-peer tutorials, distributed across many middle and high schools, for more than a decade.

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Author Bio

Thomas Deans is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Connecticut. His interests include writing across the curriculum, community engagement, writing centers, writing assessment, prose style, and representations of literacy in literary and sacred texts. He wrote *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* and *Writing and Community Engagement: A Service-Learning Rhetoric and Reader*, and he co-edits the *Oxford Brief Guides to Writing in the Disciplines* series.