January 2012

Magic Words: Students Learning and Teaching Writing in First Year Seminar

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MAGIC WORDS: STUDENTS LEARNING AND TEACHING WRITING IN FIRST YEAR SEMINAR

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Introduction

Maryville University's 2011 Teaching and Learning conference proposed a set of questions: *Who are our learners? What are they learning? How do we know it? How do we shift from a teaching to a learning culture*? While possible responses are varied and complex, the easiest place to begin answering them seemed to be: Ask them.

This essay, then, is an extension of Jesse Kavadlo's Fall 2010 University Seminar class's collaboration among peer mentor Abbie Nicoloff*,* students Jess Burgess, Amelia Coplen, Kevin Olson, and Jesse.

Jesse: When I first began formulating questions for a self-study of this class, I imagined the result would be a traditional scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning essay: a question, description of problems and observations, data in the form of surveys and samples of student writing, and analyses of outcomes. Or if not that exactly, then it would highlight the important elements of the class, demonstrating the difficulties students have with college writing. I hoped to see how— or, less optimistically, whether—student writing improved throughout the semester, despite that it was not a writing class, and how assignments and course features could help students to examine and overcome their obstacles. I always planned to collaborate with Abbie, my peer mentor (more on our work soon), but I planned to select a few representative student essays and analyze what the students wrote, how they approached the revision and project, and how their writing and reflection demonstrated learning.

Abbie, having taken the class as a student before moving on to becoming peer mentor, would revise the course's writing assignments with me, shifting from a series of shorter papers, designed to cover a wider variety of topics, to a longer, single but multi-draft term-length essay.

But once the course began, and certainly after it ended, I no longer felt as though a conventional approach was right. Regardless of my methodology, it would still be filtered through my perspective and written in my voice. Yes, I would provide excerpts of student writing as examples, data to be mined and analyzed. But their voices would be quoted dialogue in my larger narrative, not their own stories.

I began to understand that students, especially students like Jess, Amelia, and Kevin, don't need me to filter and analyze their work for them. Any attempt to translate their language into the jargon of an academic journal seemed counterproductive to empowering their own voices. And, in the end, it was unnecessary. With some strategic guidance, together with equally deliberate independence, when asked what they had learned and how they had learned it, these students could speak for themselves.

Over the last two years, I've taken many notes, asked many questions, and held many meetings toward this project, and I find it gratifying in a new way to have my students tell and show me—and, here, you—what they thought, felt, and learned. And I hope to tell you what I learned as well.

Background

Jesse: The Teaching and Learning conference's questions were, it turns out, the same questions that the University Seminar program was asking and attempting to answer as well. University Seminar, Maryville University's first-year, first-semester course instituted in 2008, began as an attempt to achieve many goals. First, unlike its predecessor and unlike similar courses at other institutions, it was theme driven, based on the passions and expertise of its instructors. But the theme was meant to allow instructors to achieve three overall program goals—critical thinking, communication, and community—rather than to deliver the theme's content itself. And it was intended from the beginning to be collaborative between instructors and students. Each class would have its own peer mentor, a kind of Swiss Army knife teaching assistant, who could be involved in any ways that best fit the peer mentor's, instructor's, and students' needs.

And so, as I was constructing my University Seminar class—and as coordinator of the program, I felt some pressure to make succeed—I asked myself a series of questions: What theme would resonate best with students? My answer was "Secret Worlds: Fantasy Novels and their Fans," which analyzes selected novels and films in order to ask and answer questions about the books, popular culture, and ourselves. From there, I could formulate follow-up questions for students: What are the bases for these stories' massive appeal? What makes them work, both as novels and, in many cases, movies? What does their success say about their readers, who range from children to adults? How can students analyze, understand, and feel about what we are reading and discussing? And how can studying these books, movies, and ideas help us to be better thinkers, writers, speakers, and members of the academic community?

But the questions didn't end there. How could I, I wondered, get students thinking, talking, writing, and learning—together? How could I keep true to the goal of a seminar—"a small group of advanced students in a college or graduate school engaged in original research or intensive study under the guidance of a professor who meets regularly with them to discuss their reports and findings"—even when the students were not yet advanced, or even, on day one, quite yet college students? And how could I get students to learn and build the kinds of habits and processes that would carry over for the rest of their college work—and, maybe, the rest of their lives? To find out, I wanted to see what would happen if I tried to improve students' writing skills in ways that intentionally incorporate the University Seminar's Three C's with relevant

aspects of composition theory, such as an assignment broken down into multiple drafts, frequent feedback (from peers, peer mentor, and instructor), and reflection on the writing process itself.

In order to address and maybe even answer these questions, I've enlisted Abbie, Jess, Amelia, and Kevin to tell their stories, and, taken together, share the no-longer secret story of the Secret Worlds class. And since the class was about how and why we tell stories in the first place, especially stories combining magic with growing up, this essay will describe, and borrow from, our novels' conventions.

Abbie: As a first-year student, I participated in the same University Seminar course that I now serve in as a peer mentor. My experience in the class as a student largely shaped the future revisions of the course when I stepped into the role of peer mentor. Now, in my second year as a peer mentor, I have a much better understanding of the course's trajectory and goals. The course is built around our University Seminar goals of communication, community, and critical thinking. Based on these goals, the course requires in-class and online discussion, a term paper, and a collaborative creative writing assignment. Initially, the course required response papers following the completion of each novel discussed. The questions were separate, broad, and completely independent of one another. When the paper was finished, students considered themselves finished with the accompanying book and were less likely to make connections between the multiple works.

Jesse: I'm not an expert in the scholarship of peer mentoring (my colleague, Jen McCluskey, is), but after working with a variety of peer mentors for seven years, I felt well prepared to take faculty-student collaboration outside of the classroom and into the area of scholarship. Because Abbie was a student in the class, we were able to talk about real and practical revisions to the course: what aspects of the assignments and classwork had been most effective for her as a student, and what her multiple perspectives on the class meant to our revision.

The most important part of working with a student—first, in class, and now, on a project—is trust. First, simply that anything that needs to be done will, in fact, be done. Not all students can handle the kind of responsibility required of a peer mentor. But beyond that preliminary trust, I also needed to trust Abbie's contributions and ideas. Instructors may be reluctant to change aspects of their course because a student says so. It requires humility, a trait professors aren't famous for. But I trust Abbie completely, so when we began sending new drafts of our assignment back and forth, as she describes in greater detail, I knew that the result was going to be more effective for students than what I had come up with alone. Maryville already had the institutional structure in place to allow this kind of collaboration, but Abbie and I also simply work well together. Now that she has taken part in the class for three consecutive years, I feel like we're a vaudeville act, and she's the ringer in the room. Except, amazingly, it's not cheating at all. Just the opposite. It demonstrates to first-year students that students and instructors share the same goal: a terrific learning experience for everyone.

Our Story: Once upon a time…

Jess B.: Ever since I can remember I have loved fantasy novels. I loved the adventure, the mystery, the magic. So when I saw *Narnia, Peter Pan,* and *Harry Potter* on the reading list for a

class, I signed up instantly. The Secret World University Seminar class, however, was unlike any class I had taken before. The class was not an hour-long lecture from the professor; it was student-based discussion. And surprisingly, the discussion actually made me think! The conversations I had with my peers, with our peer mentor Abbie, and with Jesse were rich and stimulating. I would arrive at class with my own ideas and depart with so many more. I learned to ask questions, give answers, and articulately discuss my thoughts and ideas. More than anything, I became a better reader, writer, and critical thinker.

Kevin: At the start of last fall I was a new college student coming out of high school at the top of my class. I was excited to learn and to experience new classes and was pretty sure I would be able to handle anything new. I knew that I was forced to take a university seminar class, which I was both annoyed and excited about. A university-required class to me sounded easier than normal courses and not like it would be too much fun. I was wrong. The class was very exciting, and challenged me to think in new ways, especially in my writing, due to the way Jesse structured it.

Rising action: collaboration and conflict

Abbie: In order to strengthen the three goals of our University Seminar program (community, communication, and critical thinking) in the course assignments, Jesse and I wrote a prompt that would require future students enrolled in the course to write a term paper of ten to twelve pages in length. We started a discussion regarding what we wanted students to accomplish while writing the term paper. When I took the course the year before, we wrote response papers of 4-5 pages in length based on prompts designed to cover a broad range of themes and ideas. For our new term paper, Jesse felt it important to focus the direction of the topic so that students would be writing on common threads.

After several conversations debating the benefits of certain questions, we decided to ask students to focus on the conventions of fantasy stories and the ways in which the conventions were applicable to their experience as a first-year university student. We must have written a list of over thirty questions, which we shared back and forth until it was small enough to be developed into a still-extensive prompt over a page in length. I was familiar with Jesse's long prompts, and though I think he felt I could help to keep it succinct, I would return a revised copy to him with even more content because, in my experience, the prompts with more questions helped me to consider more about my topic than I thought of on my own.

The term paper requires students to discuss multiple course works and explore the novels' shared conventions in the constraints of a single, unifying topic. More importantly, the term project is the culmination of six drafts due at varying times throughout the semester. This method ensures that students are thinking about—and writing—their papers well before the final due date.

In addition to focusing on the paper's content, students are required to reflect on the writing process. Each draft, posted to our online discussion forum, identifies the students' struggles with the particular draft, the students' questions for peer reviewers, and best guesses on where the paper is headed. After posting, students are assigned to read at least two of their peers' papers and comment with their own questions, comments, and concerns. Just as Jesse and I collaborated

on the assignment, students then collaborate on the improvement of their individual papers. A peer's comment has the power to shape the overall outcome of the paper and teaches students how and when to incorporate feedback during revisions.

As the course's peer mentor, I go through each paper and provide comments after the first and third drafts. Students are then required to edit the draft and (hopefully) incorporate the feedback from their peers, peer mentor, and instructor. Generally, it's my job to mediate between the sugarcoated praise they receive from their peers and their own terror and insecurities about their capability as college writers. It also falls on me to convince them that Jesse is not out to get them when he provides them feedback on their two biggest drafts. In this way, I frequently end up mediating between the students and Jesse. As I have learned during my time working with him, grades, questions, and suggestions are meant to motivate and enrich a student's experience in the course. Most students would never ask what a question might mean or argue that their grade should be higher directly with Jesse, but with me in the middle, students often learned more about the professor's perspective.

It was often frustrating to see students deviating from the ideal—more than once students have neglected to post drafts, refused to incorporate feedback, or exerted the minimum effort necessary to complete the assignment. The varying approaches to and successes with the term project assignment emphasize the importance and significance of the individual behind the assignment instead of only seeing their paper separate from the student who wrote it. Jesse frequently had to remind me that we can encourage but never force best efforts. The assignment is designed to challenge students to take responsibility for both their writing and learning. Though there were times that I wanted to take control and tell a student where their paper should go, they learned so much more about their writing and themselves as students when I would support them from the sidelines and let them make their own choices, for better or worse.

Kevin: When I actually sat down to start writing my paper, I honestly had no idea what I was going to do with it. I knew that I was going to choose three conventions and show how they existed across different books and movies. I am a fan of the three-point structure for writing and use it as a basis to build off of. Once I had my three conventions, which were dark or adult themes, strong female characters, and a variety of character personalities, I picked three examples to support each, and explained how they fit the convention. When I turned in my first draft, I only had the first of my three conventions done as well as my introduction. I did not like my paper so far or the way we were being forced to write it.

I am a fairly procedural person in general, and that carries over into my writing. Usually when I write, I will do it at the last minute. If I have a paper due on Friday, I won't usually do it till Wednesday or Thursday. But the whole week I will be making an outline in my head of how I want to structure the paper and what I want to say so that when I finally start typing I can write it very quickly all at once. Breaking the paper up into pieces definitely threw off my style and was challenging for me. This is not to say it was wrong for me, I just disliked it at the time. Now, looking back I am very glad that we were forced to do three parts over a large period of time.

What this allowed me to do was step away from my writing and think about it further to be sure that the message I really wanted to get across was being made. Since starting college, I have

realized that taking breaks and reassessing your work is crucial if you want to produce quality work. I am personally an Interactive Design major, so anytime we need to be creative, or think outside of the box, or have a problem, a break almost always helps to think about things in a different way. This break period was something that I had never given myself for writing in the past but now try to do whenever possible. It really does help produce the best finished product possible.

Although I was conflicted with the process in the beginning, my final draft turned out better than it would have if I had completed the assignment in my usual way. The collaboration between me and the other students in the class was fantastic and was a huge part of why my final draft was so successful. Without that collaboration in combination with added time, my ideas never would have grown as much as they did by the end.

Amelia: The first draft I wrote of this term paper was almost embarrassing. I was confused about what I was supposed to be writing about and not sure what to do, so I gathered together a few of the prompts that Jesse had provided for us and threw together your standard five-paragraph, high school essay. It might not have been awful, but it was nowhere near what Jesse had asked us for. But, in the end I focused on answering three different questions: What is it about that fantasy that makes everyone so addicted? Are children the only people that are susceptible to falling under fantasy's spell? What does this "obsession" say about our society?

In the second draft I began to delve more in depth into how these fantasy novels actually worked. I focused on how the stories were written using conventional aspects of the fantasy realm, and also on what I called, the "conventional audience" of fantasy books. By this time I had begun to put together something that, by the time I finished, I was actually proud of. For the first time I felt that I *could* write this paper, make it comprehensible and also (maybe even more miraculous) I found that I was truly interested in what I was writing about. It seemed that I had finally become a full-fledged college student and stepped out of the high school mold. I allowed myself to make mistakes and change them, and to accept that just because something was hard, that did not necessarily mean that I could not do it.

The third and final draft of my term paper wasn't all that different from the second. The focus of my paper was still on the conventions of fantasy novels and their audience, but I went into more depth than I had planned on in terms of the cognitive and psychological reasons for why fantasy is so appealing to such a wide audience.

Abbie, the very first few days of our seminar class, had told all of us students that she and Jesse were both willing set up a time to collaborate with us outside of class if we found ourselves having any difficulty with our term paper, our topic, and anything else we might have needed help with to get the full experience out of this class. Looking back at how much I struggled with this term paper the first few weeks of class, I wish that I had taken them up on their generous offer. I think what kept me from seeking their advice was simply pride and intimidation. In high school I had always been good at English and writing, and one way or another I was sure that I could write this paper on my own. At the same time, I was also still trying to get used to how college worked, with its professors and student advisors, so I did not know what to expect or ask

of Jesse or Abbie. In the end, even though I am very happy with the final draft my Secret World's term paper, I still believe that if I had gone to them for help it could have been better.

Peers as partners

Kevin: Time was a major factor in my improvement, but so was the use of peer editing. At each draft we were required to peer edit two other papers in the class. This meant that by the time we made our final revisions, our paper had been edited and commented on at least six times in addition to comments from Jesse and Abbie on multiple occasions. With this much feedback, we were able to vastly improve our papers.

I really enjoyed the fact that we were able to read other people's papers. It was a good way to see what other people were writing in the class and see what they were doing well. By looking at what other people do well, you can often see where you can improve in your own work. Peer editing is not a new concept, but it is an effective technique when required to write papers. It was different to be put in the teaching position where you could give honest feedback that would most likely be taken. Being put into that teacher role forces you to want to give good feedback to improve the work of your peer.

I also enjoyed the peer responding because there was no set rule on who you could edit. Often in classes you are forced to respond to different people each time. That rule has its benefits, but it was awesome to comment on the same person's paper a few times, too. Jess and I were two of the people who consistently commented on and edited each other's papers after each draft. That meant that I could see her progress and give feedback on that as well as on her current draft. I seemed to get a better idea of what the author was trying to convey when I read multiple drafts, than when I only read one.

Amelia: As I neared the end of my time for writing the term paper, I really began to rely on the peer editing we had been doing throughout the semester. The notes from the other students had helped in the past drafts, but at this time we were all trying to wind down our papers and, for the first time, attempt to make them appear completed. I read and reread my 14-page term paper more times than I could count. I was sick of my paper by the end of the semester, but with the help of my peers editing my final draft—and not to mention Abbie's wonderful, in-depth analysis of my work!—I was confident that what I had written was comprehensible and in accordance with the initial directions for the project.

While writing a term paper during the whole semester, in three different phases, may be an unusual way to write a paper, I thought that in the long run it actually made our work easier. We didn't have to be intimidated at the end of the semester by a daunting 10-12 page paper that we had no idea when we could write. We just had a 4 page paper that we lengthened a little at a time, all the while getting help and advice from our friends and teacher as to what we might want to change or add.

Climax: Conventions of our stories as conventions of college?

Jess B.: The end of term project for the class was a paper centered on the different conventions of fantasy novels. The student could choose which conventions to include in the paper and which course texts to use as evidence for a thesis. When I was first assigned the project, however, all I could ask was, "What the heck is a convention?" A convention, I soon learned, is the way in which something is typically done. In other words, it is a theme. Since I had been in love with fantasy novels ever since I started reading, I was very familiar with the different themes of the fantasy genre. After various thesis revisions and multiple drafts, I had a paper.

The thesis for my paper centered on the idea of self-realization. I stated that most, if not all, fantasy novels use conventions to illustrate a character searching for his or her identity. "The fantasy genre employs underlying conventions to draw the character to the secret world, establish a sense of acceptance or rejection, and to demonstrate disillusionment in order to illustrate the universal battle of change and its effect, self-realization." I chose four different conventions: attraction to the secret world, acceptance versus rejection, disillusionment, and self-realization, and three course works, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, Pan's Labyrinth,* and *The Graveyard Book*, as evidence for my thesis.

The first convention, Attraction to a Secret World, is a theme readers have seen countless times in fantasy novels. Typically, the main character is suffering in his or her reality. Every day the character faces bullies or neglecting parents. The character feels like an outcast and is looking for something better in life. The fantasy world that the character stumbles upon presents the character with freedom from their reality and an escape to leave all worries behind. The new world provides characters not only with the strength to easily overcome the stresses of everyday life, but also with a chance to completely embrace who they truly are. Realizing that there is more in store for them, they choose not to accept the miserable life they are living and instead embrace the call to adventure in hopes to find meaning in life.

The second convention, Acceptance versus Rejection, ties in with the first. In their reality, the character is an outcast, is rejected, or feels like they do not belong. The secret world, however, completely dissolves this feeling; the character is instantly accepted and easily finds friends and mentors to help them build confidence. Additionally, the character usually finds that they are not just ordinary in this new world. Typically the character is royalty, famous, or some sort of champion. It is the zero to hero factor that audiences are used to and that they love. The fact that the character is now accepted by others allows the character to accept themselves, a necessary step for realizing one's identity.

The first impression of the new secret world is always of freedom and acceptance. But the character is always in a state of Disillusionment, the third convention of fantasy novels. No world can be flawless. There is always a source of evil lurking about, and usually it is only the main character that has the means to destroy the evil. Without this convention, change and self-realization would not be possible. In order to fully rise up and transform, the character must be shot down into the abyss, facing countless temptations and challenges. For without these challenges, the character would have no reason or motivation to grow.

The last convention and the quintessential goal of every fantasy novel is Self-realization. Through the lessons learned on the character's adventures, the character gains the tools necessary

to defeat the evil in the fantasy world. In defeating the evil in the secret world, the character also defeats the struggles of the real world, becoming a master of both worlds, able to balance reality and fantasy. This mastery leads to freedom from worries or struggles, which in turn leads to the freedom to live. Without any problems in either world, the character is truly free to grow. The character becomes whole.

I was very pleased with the conventions I chose, my explanations, and supporting evidence. Yet, I wanted to explore the bigger picture: Why are fantasy novels so relatable? How is it that 10 year olds and 80 year olds can enjoy the same book? The answer lies in the last convention of self-realization. Everyone is searching for his or her identity. It is life's ultimate goal. It then dawned on me this class was very fitting to have the first semester freshman year in college. I realized that college is a perfect parallel to a fantasy world! College, like fantasy worlds, is a new place that you are thrown into and learn to discover your calling in life and who you really are.

Everyone is attracted (Attraction to Fantasy World) to college because it is new and exciting. You are free from your parents and those people you couldn't wait to get away from in high school. You are searching for new freedoms and opportunities, something greater in life. College hands you all of these things. You also find that you are free from high school stereotypes (Acceptance versus Rejection). College is a totally new atmosphere. There are so many more people and so much more diversity. Everyone can find a group to fit into; no one is an outcast or reject. In college, as in the fantasy world, you can start anew. But college is not just all about friends and parties and no curfew (Disillusionment). Though there are not (hopefully) literal evil beings chasing you around campus, college, like a fantasy world, is full of hardship and responsibility. Just as characters in fantasy novels go on quests to reach their goals, students are required to take literal tests and exams in order to meet their goal: graduation. Students are also faced with many other problems besides schoolwork: roommate problems, time management, deciding upon majors. College, like a fantasy world, is full of challenges. It is because of these challenges, however, that students are able to experiment, learn from mistakes, and grow (Self-realization). College functions in a similar way to how the fantasy world and how it gives characters tools to face the real world. The final exams, the papers, and the projects, give students the necessary knowledge and experience to be successful once they step out into the real world. College is a time to figure out who you truly are.

Amelia: The main idea of my term paper had all to do with the various types of conventions that are found in fantasy. I defined conventions at the beginning of my paper as "when a reader identifies a repeating theme or quality that continually shows up within different books (or other material)". These techniques can be anything: a vague idea or a specific theme, coincidental happenings or the driving force behind the entire story. Some of the main branches in fantasy where I focused on finding these conventional techniques in my term paper were in the characters of the story, in the plot line itself, and in the story's audience.

Really, the characters and the plot lines of fantasy go together in definition—it is very hard to describe one without the other. In conventional fantasy, for the most part, the story will begin in the "real" world, with a lonely child who does not fit in and dreams of something more in his/her life (think of Harry Potter or Lucy Pevensie). To the child's amazement he one day finds his way through some type of portal- typically a doorway of some type- and into a world of imagination.

The child makes friends and meets a patriarchal figurehead (such as Dumbledore or Aslan), but the new world is not beyond having its flaws. Some evil dictator-like creature, because of a prophecy in most cases, holds a grudge against the child and demands the child's life. While story lines will vary from here on out, in the end there is some kind of ultimate battle that puts good and evil to the test — here's a little spoiler; the good guys always win, one way or another.

Once I classified the conventional aspect of fantasy novels, I moved on to classifying the conventional audience of fantasy. I asked what came to be the most important questions of my term paper: *Is* fantasy only for the children it is written for? Or can fantasy also be savored by adults as well? In other words, who is the conventional audience to these fantasy novels?

Children adore fantasy for many reasons, one of which being that fantasy offers young people a sense of understanding. Characters like Harry and Lucy offer security and are easily relatable, not only because of age similarity, but also because of their reactions to the changes that happen around them. Ultimately, fantasy offers children a safe, secret haven of their own, where they can get lost in a land of dreams, and escape the heartaches and confusion that growing up forces upon them. But children are not the only ones guilty of wanting to run away. Adults can and do find secret worlds of their own in the realm of fantasy, where they can escape from the responsibility of "grown up life" and relax. What many child characters of fantasy face is anything but childish making it easier for their adult audience to relate.

Resolution: Happily Ever After?

Jess B.: The Secret World Seminar class was simply amazing. I took so much away from the class. I not only developed my critical thinking, reading, and writing skills, but also, through analyzing these novels, began to further understand myself as an individual. I began my own process of self-realization and realized I must make every effort to thoroughly enjoy my four years of college. Everyone says college is the time of your life. And I realized college is the ultimate fantasy world. Mostly because it's real.

Amelia: In J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, Albus Dumbledore says, "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live" (Rowling, 1997, p.214). I think to some extent this summarizes what I learned from this term paper—and this entire class!—about what our attitudes toward Fantasy novels and the dreams they create should be. This term paper, and the entire class as well, taught me not only how to be a responsible student with my school work, but it also reminded me of the hope we need here in the real world that is reflected in so many children's fantasy stories.

Kevin: To wrap it all up, what have I learned from my University Seminar experience? I have learned that excellent writing comes with time and revisions. It is very hard to create a masterpiece on the first time around. You need time to develop your ideas, switch around wording, and select the best evidence and examples possible. From my seminar experience I have started to incorporate this idea into my writing. I will write drafts of my papers while I still have time to make revisions before turning it in. I will also let others look over my work and ask them if my main points came across well. If they didn't, then I know what to make changes on.

The idea that writing is a process that takes time to develop is an invaluable concept that will stay with me for the rest of my college career and beyond.

Abbie: Now that I'm in the course for the third time and in my second year of peer mentoring, the assignments and the roles that I play have taken on new meaning. The age gap between me and the incoming students widens each year, and I have to navigate my responsibilities as a peer and as a mentor differently. It's easy to fall into the role of mentor, co-teacher, and leader. I'm comfortable in that position and identify more strongly with Jesse, now, than I do freshmen in college. That wasn't always the case, and early on in our collaboration, I often reminded Jesse that I needed more instruction for my role than his suggestion of doing whatever I was comfortable with. I wasn't even sure what that meant at the time, and certainly had no clue what the possibilities for my role even were. He looked shocked when I brought this to his attention, but since then we share ideas of how to best use our time before assuming the other knows how or what to implement. I learn most by watching Jesse lead discussion, but the unique opportunities for my learning come when he challenges me with more responsibilities. Throughout the course, we've taught and learned from each other the value of sharing responsibilities as teacher and student, but also of sharing those roles with one another.

During my first year as a peer mentor, I only knew how to be a peer and student, and was woefully uncomfortable taking charge in class, with students, or with assignments. Marrying the two roles, though, serves the students' needs best. The more comfortable students feel with me and with each other, the more dynamic our discussions – in and out of class. While the assignments play an instrumental role in developing accurate expectations for the rigor of university level writing, the connections they make in class, through me and with my guidance and support, are providing them with another set of skills equally important to their overall success as college students and growing young-adults. Realizing the importance of the course for our students only solidifies its importance to me – as a student, as a leader, and as a learner.

Jesse: While I always make sure that my University Seminar class itself collaborates, before this project I didn't imagine that a paper could be equally collaborative, the study reflecting the very object of study. It is also closer to the collaborative spirit our University Seminar instructor action research group. Tammy Gocial, Jennifer McCluskey, Johannes Wich-Schwarz, and I met on a monthly basis for over a year, talking about our classes, our problems, and sometimes, when we had any, our innovation and development. And at these meetings, I understood that a traditional study—a problem, collection of data (a word that seemed incongruous, even funny, to me, since what I was looking at was student writing), an analysis of that writing, and further application and discussion of outcomes—would be a kind of fiction. It would not show the real process, how the class worked, or even, exactly, what the students learned. It would show academic readers what I *thought* students learned. Or worse: it would show academic readers what I wanted them *to think* I thought students learned. Too much filtering. I hope that my former students and current co-writers conveyed what they learned better, more authentically, and more accurately, speaking for themselves.

I also want to echo Abbie's conclusion. Like many college instructors, I experienced something of a disconnect moving from student to instructor. Too often in instructor-centered classes, the good student's job is to provide the right answer—meaning the answer that the instructor was

expecting. I'm still occasionally guilty of asking leading questions for which I have a specific answer in mind, and I sometimes talk too much in class (I can tell I've gone on for too long when I see Abbie making a specific exasperated face). But for the most part, I also want to be a learner. Because I began meeting with Jess, Amelia, and Kevin on this project after the semester was over, the work could be separated from grades and credits, motivated entirely by these students' extraordinary, intrinsic desire to participate. And I realized that this genuine motivation started in the class itself. Instructors lament that they have trouble getting students to read assignments, put more than a cursory effort into writing, or participate in class discussions. What this study confirms, for me, is that collaboration—making students feel as though they are not merely participating but rather producing—helps students think critically, communicate effectively, and create the classroom community, not because they have to, but because they want to.

Collaboration does not come without cost. It can be difficult to relinquish the control that instructors take for granted, and dialogue is far from professing. As anyone who has taught a discussion-based class will attest, it's easier to lecture single-handedly then nurture a classroom conversation, even as to the outsider the opposite may appear to be the case. The same principle holds true for this collaborative essay. But if there is a single theme of both the course's novels and the University Seminar course itself, it is that words have power. In the class, I wanted students to learn to wield that power; in this essay, Abbie, Jess, Amelia, and Kevin show that they can. But if the words "teaching and learning" are to have that power as well, then our students must understand how to teach as well as learn, and we must understand how to learn as well as teach.