

*Theory to Practice*

# Negotiating Uncommon Spaces: Fostering Common Ground in a Summer Bridge Writing Classroom

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## **ABSTRACT**

*This article describes a summer bridge writing course that engages students who are actively transitioning from high school to college. The summer bridge course curriculum supports students' meaning-making efforts through a variety of text-based writing activities which helps students begin the process of critical inquiry: extending arguments, poking holes in theories, and putting these theories in conversation with multiple voices from the real world. The writing activities in the program create a common ground for students where they can encounter texts and discover their own voices. Fostering open-endedness in students is a gradual process, and students acquire critical inquiry skills in increments over multiple semesters. The article showcases foundational writing activities that create opportunities for open-ended thinking that will lead to self-discovery.*

What, then, is a travelling mind-set? Receptivity might be said to be its chief characteristic. Receptive, we approach new places with humility. We carry with us no rigid ideas about what is or is not interesting. [...] Home, by contrast, finds us more settled in our expectations. We feel assured that we have discovered everything interesting about our neighborhood, primarily by virtue of having lived there a long time. It seems inconceivable that there could be anything new to find in a place where we have been living a decade or more. We have become habituated and therefore blind to it.  
—Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*, pp. 242-243

Students often feel disconnected from both the worlds they write about and live in. They don't see themselves as active participants and

contributors to a literary world that they can affect and influence; instead, they see themselves as fenced out. The summer bridge writing curriculum described in this essay is grounded in the idea that students should not feel that they stand outside of the text, as well as the hope that they will feel they can enter the public sphere—a space where they, too, can offer an analysis of the materials in question, even if the analysis is preliminary. By supporting early moments of meaning-making through a variety of text-based writing activities, the writing activities described here help students begin the process of taking hold of the world in front of them: extending arguments, poking holes in theories, and putting these theories in conversation with multiple voices from the real world, including their own.

By encouraging students to envision the endless possibilities of a text, these activities give them room to think critically. Our purpose as writing instructors is to create opportunities for open-ended thinking that will lead to self-discovery. Fostering open-endedness in students is a gradual process, and students acquire critical inquiry skills in increments over multiple semesters. This article describes a summer bridge writing course curriculum that engages students, who are transitioning from high school to college, in the process of creating common ground where they can encounter texts and discover their own voices.

### The Transition to College

The transition from high school to college is not seamless in any way. Academically, college-level tasks requiring critical inquiry and critical response move students out of the comfort they have found with summation. Kurt Spellmeyer (1998) argues that students are “trained in high school to filter, absorb, and digest; they typically lack any sense of an inquiry as a conversation” (p. 115). Spellmeyer believes “students often retreat to summary—the inability to make a real discovery or to venture beyond the assigned reading into implication, assent, disagreement or the consideration of examples” (p. 115). He argues further that for the transition from summary to engagement to occur, it is necessary for students to create *common ground* in the classroom. Common ground is established when the student can move beyond bearing witness to meaning-making and enter into dialogue with the author, fellow students, and the instructor. The meaning-making process embraces and acknowledges differences that may arise in perspective, and uses these differences as launching points for students to engage in self-reflexive discourse.

Spellmeyer (1990) posits that “to produce knowledge is to change knowledge by transposing it into the specific context of a life or lives” (p. 335). For example, an architecture student might need to learn how to synthesize a piece of text with an image or blue print of a bridge. What narrative is the structure trying to convey? What problems is it trying to solve?

While the architect’s immediate focus is on drawings and measurements, there is also a connection with the outside world. The inanimate structures architects create are, in essence, living, breathing things which must fit with the activities of people in the already existing environment. Similarly, music majors who might spend their days studying Mozart or Coltrane—each key stroke punctuating the air to create meaning—also recognize early on that music is a story in sound that brings with it cultural traditions, and that for some musicians, the story represents desperate syncopation and improvisation to break free from those traditions. This process is not unlike the scientist, who repeats older studies and creates new experiments, and thus must find ways to contextualize her findings in order to extrapolate and build a body of work. The process of fostering common ground utilizes the types of strategies that help students build critical inquiry skills. Common ground allows students to take a kind of *knowledge inventory* where they think through what they know already about a given subject or concept. That sort of meta-cognitive reflection allows students to build on life and classroom experiences. The examples of the architect, the musician, and the scientist suggest the universality of these strategies and their importance in building engaged critical thinkers.

Reading as a meaning-making process, along with the act of contextualizing, refers to how students unpack and create meaning when they interact with different forms of narratives. Teaching critical thinking skills, especially early composition skills, is integral to how effectively students will later synthesize readings across, within, and beyond their chosen disciplines.

### Writing in Moments of Self-Transition

The foundational work of composition in the first two semesters at the college takes these theories of reading and the construction of disciplinary knowledge into consideration. Pre-composition reading and writing activities, such as in a summer bridge program, can set the tone for an inquiry-based model of learning in

other first-year courses as well. The keys to student success in the first-year curricula, generally speaking, are a receptive mindset and a willingness to take risks in construing texts. Students need to see that they are active participants in the making of knowledge and that critical inquiry is rooted in their ability to look beyond and across the different types of materials they will engage as new college students. *Receptivity*, or the ability to be open to new materials and experiences, encourages students to actively engage in the learning process, even in subject areas they find difficult or unappealing. Following Spellmeyer's (1990) notion that "education should demystify knowledge by showing it to be something made, something anyone can make, [and] made through the activity of dialogue" (pp. 334-335), the summer bridge writing curriculum I will describe below emphasizes the necessity of creating common ground as a bedrock for this kind of reciprocal learning.

Spellmeyer's (1990) emphasis on dialogue was central to the design of these pre-composition reading and writing activities. The activities embed skills development within credit-bearing level work and allow for differentiated skill levels in the classroom. During the summer months, when students transition from high school into a new place and mindset, they also begin to make the intellectual transition to more inquiry-based work. The three goals of demystifying education, of providing spaces for collaborative dialogue, and of finding and creating common ground provide a frame that allows instructors and students to contextualize the physical and cognitive transitions students make over the twelve-day bridge program and into their first semester as college students.

The goals of the summer program writing activities are to help students to conceptualize those transitions through theories of place that invoke a travelling mindset, based on Alain de Botton's (2002) idea that receptivity to our surroundings is an intentional behavior (pp. 242-243). Students apply these theories in actual places, conducting investigations of iconic New York City locales by analyzing and making connections across texts

through strategies (e.g., note taking, annotation, paraphrasing, and summarizing) and by using collaborative strategies to develop and present research findings in multiple formats. In what follows, I discuss three writing activities that help students create common ground in the pre-composition classroom and begin the transition to a college mindset. While these activities are based on NYC locations, they could be easily adapted to apply to any other place-based inquiry (e.g., a different city, a region of the country, or even a nation as a whole).

### **First Assignment: Songs as Text**

The first assignment, "Songs as Text: Learning Annotation Strategies and Making Connections," plays with the notions of home culture by utilizing two accessible and familiar songs as texts available for basic critical analysis. Students read and annotate the lyrics of Alicia Keys' "Empire State of Mind Part II" (Carter et al., 2009) and Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" (Kander, 1979). The fact that two songs focus on New York City, where my college is located, allows students to build on their shared experiences and create the common ground Spellmeyer (1998) encourages. This first writing activity focuses specifically on annotation and summation and invites students to articulate how their previous familiarity with the texts provides access to meaning, as well as how that same familiarity might also simultaneously obfuscate their ability to unpack or explain the texts. de Botton (2002) takes up the conflicting effects of familiarity in his description of a "home" mindset in which occupants become habituated to their environments and thus easily overlook specific details. Where Spellmeyer sees value in familiarity in academic contexts, de Botton urges us to pay closer attention to the familiar by adopting a travelling mindset, exactly the detail-oriented approach to critical inquiry that delights instructors of first-year English.

At the beginning of the "Songs as Texts" lesson, students are given a refresher on how to annotate texts. With the instruction, students discuss how they annotate as they read and are also introduced to new techniques, such as using

Post-it® notes to highlight key points and sharing annotations across multiple readers. Starting in groups of 4 and then breaking into pairs, students read each song and annotate them, and then exchange papers with their partner. In the second round, students annotate the annotations and make additional comments. By the end of the second round, each page has the words of the songwriter, the words of the first reader, and the words of the second reader. The page has become a visual representation of the idea of producing a response to a text that makes concrete the notion of *collaborative dialogue*, a collaboration focused more on examining a piece of text together rather than simply agreeing on what the song writer was trying to convey. Students discuss the similarity between the textual aspects they noticed and make discoveries about the aspects the other reader values, perhaps also noticing the words or ideas the other reader struggles with. Each song is then played aloud so students can further contextualize and interpret each songwriter's message.

At the end of the writing activity and the listening activity, students often indicate that they never quite understood Keys' words, although they were moderately familiar to them. Students also often report that they didn't know the Frank Sinatra song at all, even though it is an iconic song in New York City history and is frequently played at major sporting events in the region. Students complete a Venn diagram worksheet and take notes on the core ideas presented by both songs, highlighting where the songs paralleled and differed.

The first assignment utilizes Judith Harris' (2003) ideas about writing and revision: "Writing is a process of finding out what is already, on some level, known, but it can also be a means of creating an identity. Words are always self-designating" (p. 198). Harris focuses on how language, home culture, and the students' past and present experiences play a role in the intersection of arguments and situating texts. This activity then expands into an all-class discussion in which students share ideas about the absence of people in Sinatra's song and the inclusivity of common folk in Keys' songs: "On the avenue, there ain't never a curfew, ladies work so

hard/Such a melting pot, on the corner selling rock, preachers pray to God/Hail a gypsy-cab, takes me down from Harlem to the Brooklyn Bridge/Some will sleep tonight with a hunger far more than an empty fridge" (Carter et al., 2009). Students talk about the core message of each song: "The spirit of New York, the resilience of people who came to New York, and New York as a place of dreams and a place for dreamers. Students also note that Sinatra's desire to see his name in lights is much like Keys' "seeing [her] face in lights or [her] name on marquees found down on Broadway." Sinatra's goal to reach the top is evident when he sings "I want to wake up in that city/That never sleeps/And find I'm king of the hill/Top of the list/Head of the heap/King of the hill" (Kander, 1979). Both singers talk about dreams and about "making it" while touting the idea that if you can make it in New York's competitive environment, you can make it anywhere. In these lyrics, New York transcends the notion of a mere locale/physical space to become a state of mind for the songwriters. The students' remarks reiterated that they saw some of these sentiments in the everyday New Yorkers in their communities. For these students, being in college was a way to "make a brand new start of it." Their desires, although not represented by "vagabond shoes," are reminiscent of their own longings to "stray right through the very heart of it" (Kander, 1979).

## Second Assignment: The Three New Yorks

This simple activity showcases that even though students may bop to a song, they do not think critically about the message, especially if the song is familiar. Students also begin to conceptualize the notion of place and the fact that places shape inhabitants just as much as inhabitants shape places. This key question about the reciprocal relationship between places and people is introduced to students through a second reading and writing activity. Given the short time frame of the summer session, theories of place were distilled to three key ideas presented by Sharon Zukin (2011) in *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Lucy Lippard (1997) in *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multi-centered Society*,

and Dolores Hayden (1995) in *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*. Because these authors connect critical thinking to physical spaces, the class's common ground is not merely figurative. Instead, the physical setting anchors students in their new experiences with college and the physical newness of being in college.

Using Hayden (1995), Lippard (1997), and Zukin (2011), students begin to unpack the idea of place literally and figuratively. For example, in *The Power of Place*, Hayden writes that “urban landscapes are storehouses for . . . social memories, because natural features such as hills or harbors, as well as streets, buildings, and patterns of settlement, frame the lives of many people and often outlast many lifetimes” (p. 9). Similarly, Lippard in *The Lure of the Local* indicates “all places exist somewhere between the inside and outside views of them, [and] the ways in which they compare to, and contrast with, other places” (p. 33). Zukin, in *Naked City*, asserts “just as icons—in the original, religious meaning of the word—derive their meaning from the rituals in which they are embedded, so do neighborhoods, buildings and streets” (p. 244). Students summarize these views in their own words and debate which approach to place most closely resembles their own. The techniques used in this activity highlight Messig’s (1986) characterization of the writing and reflecting process: “Writing by its very nature, is a heuristic, problem solving process, he/she is making decisions, organizing, translating, reviewing and revising. Writing therefore can promote such critical thinking skills as hypothesizing, comparing and contrasting, generalizing, synthesizing and evaluating” (p. 7).

Working with Zukin (2011), Lippard (1997), and Hayden (1995) formalizes for students how words and ideas in a song affect the culture of place, and are transmitted by and embedded in the everyday activities they take for granted. Building on students’ emerging awareness of theories of place, the second reading and writing assignment centers on the analysis of sociological concepts that impact how places are defined. The assignment asks students to evaluate the role of stereotypes in literature. Students read an excerpt from E.B. White’s (1949) “Here Is New York” and write critical reflections on a group or type of

person not identified in White’s categorizations of New Yorkers. The excerpt below from White’s essay describes three types:

There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born there, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size, its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter—the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something. Of these trembling cities the greatest is the last—the city of final destination, the city that is a goal. It is this third city that accounts for New York’s high strung disposition, its poetical deportment, its dedication to the arts, and its incomparable achievements. Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness, natives give it solidity and continuity, but the settlers give it passion. And whether it is a farmer arriving from a small town in Mississippi to escape the indignity of being observed by her neighbors, or a boy arriving from the Corn Belt with a manuscript in his suitcase and a pain in his heart, it makes no difference: each embraces New York with the intense excitement of first love, each absorbs New York with the fresh eyes of an adventurer, each generates heat and light to dwarf the Consolidated Edison Company. (p. 43)

According to White (1949), New Yorkers can be categorized into three groups: native New Yorkers, commuters, and migrants in search of something. Students annotate and summarize the different types of New Yorkers discussed in White’s passage. Working in groups, they then come up with a fourth category: for example, the “Leavers.” The close reading of the passage activity provides many benefits to students because, like the “Songs as Texts” activity, it requires individual and collective analysis of the texts. Students react to a piece of text, but must also frame their reactions with evidence from other passages or claims in the text in order to support or dispute

White's claims. Students discuss their ideas collaboratively to focus on what they found useful about the categories outlined in White and to discover New Yorkers who may not be included in his demarcations. This activity moves students beyond summary by asking them to think critically about where they fall in White's groups and how they might account for their contribution or lack of contribution to the vibrancy of the City. Making and using categorizations, students examine multiple kinds of stereotypes associated with New Yorkers. This past summer, for instance, students wondered out loud about "Leavers," native New Yorkers who leave New York and never return or even acknowledge that they have an affiliation with the City. Students were vehement about the categorization of these groups of expatriates who exit, taking parts of New York with them.

Constructing a category builds upon ideas presented by James A. Reitner and Douglas Vipond (1989) who encourage writing instructors to ask, "In what ways are writers collaborating with others when they write?" (p.856). They continue, "phrasing the question this way brings into focus writer's relationship to other writing and other writers. Thinking of writing as a collaborative process gives us more precise ways to consider what writers do when they write, not just with their texts, but also with their language, their personae, their readers" in the process of making knowledge (p. 856). Making the fourth category also echoes Mariolina Salvatori (1996), who argues that students should become interlocutors through interrogation where [they] "articulate a reflexive critique both of the argument they attribute to those texts and of the argument they compose as they respond to those texts" (p. 444). By asking students to think about categorizations and the underlying reasoning behind that process, students are examining both the author and their own individual and collective notions of definitions. Through the act of defining, students are also synthesizing the fluidity of meaning-making. They also learn that meaning-making is contingent on context and discipline, much like the lens or viewpoint they will use to investigate the locale in the third writing assignment.

## Culminating Assignment: My Place in New York

The culminating activity of the summer bridge program is integrated across the Critical Issues, Quantitative Reasoning, and Reading and Writing courses. The writing portion of the assignment expands students' notions of text by framing the City itself as a text that offers multiple narratives of neighborhoods and the people who shape them. Beginning with a mini-field research activity that uses ideas of sensory based "seeing" discussed in de Botton's (2002) *The Art of Travel*, students take a *sensory inventory* of Bryant Park, an iconic park in the heart of Manhattan, situated across the street from the College. This short field activity invites students to find newness in a space they consider mundane. Students approach the park as a sort of narrative that they have to probe: the voices of the visitors, the interactions and activities of the visitors, the smells of different areas within the park, and the similarities and differences of what visitors were doing. Students see the park through the same critical lenses that they have applied to Sinatra and Keys' songs and White's (1949) essay. They begin to understand the ways that stereotypes affect what we visualize and how small concepts can be applied across multiple narratives. As student researchers, they create their own discourse of the City, a locale that is shaping their lives and a setting that is reciprocally shaped by those who use it.

The experiential component of the summer bridge course focuses on the public and private meanings associated with places. How these meanings take flight depends on personal experiences with the place under investigation, and makes for a rich common ground that transcends a homogenous view of where we start as writers or thinkers in the college composition classroom. The process of creating a shared experience also makes it possible for students to see that common grounds are not prefabricated spaces, but rather communities built on open exchange across multiple experiences.

The final project begins with a knowledge inventory of an assigned locale in which students write about what they know already. Building on this knowledge, students work together to create a plan of inquiry to research what they want to know about the

place and how they might get the information they need. Students collaborate on this embedded information literacy activity using LibGuides™ created by instructors and college librarians and other Internet resources. Within each small group, students focus on five lenses: arts and culture, history, economics, demographics, and physical environment. Students conduct additional fieldwork, spending a day in groups at their assigned locale. They compile the information they gather through field work and Internet and library-based research in order to develop an interactive multimedia presentation on their assigned place. While the multimedia presentation is collaborative, students write individual papers using their lens to describe their locale. This past summer, the more sophisticated writers were

able to incorporate ideas about the pulse of New York presented by Keys and Sinatra and the richness of the different types of people described by White (1949) in their research into a specific locale and lens.

While students who were still learning how to incorporate past class work with this type of inquiry may not have mentioned the parallels between earlier readings, in their final class reflections, it was evident that their understanding of place had shifted and that they, too, had begun to feel a shift within themselves. The final summer reflections illustrated that these students had begun to see themselves as critical thinkers capable of tackling an inquiry-based question. These three activities set the tone for a new place in the student's lives—one where commonality and receptivity create fertile ground for collaborative discourse. JCLL

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