Toward a Polyphonic Model
of Student Coauthorship: A Response
to Joseph Harris and Julie Lindquist

Ben Wetherbee

Both Joseph Harris's "Using Student Texts in Composition Scholarship" and Julie Lindquist's "Time to Grow Them: Practicing Slow Research in a Fast Field" raise questions about the status of student authorship, and about how students can receive due credit and ethical representation though their collaborations with rhetoric-and-composition scholars. Coauthoring with students presents one possible strategy for meeting both these criteria. The topic of coauthorship between undergraduates and post-graduates receives only secondary attention from Harris, whose primary concern remains "writing that is still clearly the work of *students*" (684); there's much to make, though, of his brief section on how those published in *College Composition and Communication* have approached coauthorship with those students who are interested in contributing to scholarly discourse. Lindquist's engagement with the topic of coauthorship is also secondary—and tacit, since the student interview subjects she discusses are never referred to as coauthors—but her concern with "disciplinary values" and the "affordances" of different modes of collaboration speak to the problems underlying coauthorship between teachers and students in composition. Taken together, in short, the two articles begin to unearth possibilities for coauthoring with undergraduates—a topic that deserves more attention from rhetoric-and-composition scholars, given our investment in understanding the perspectives of our students.

My interest in coauthorship emerges within a larger push in recent years to rethink the role of student texts within teaching and scholarship. Focus on the importance of student texts and student authorship has intensified with the publication of books like Nancy Dejoy's *Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies* and Harris, John D. Miles, and Charles Paine's edited collection *Teaching with Student Texts: Essays toward an Informed Practice,* and undergraduate re-search journals like *Young Scholars in Writing.* Still, though, a hierarchy remains cemented into our citation and publication practices: None of the

authors published in *Teaching with Student Texts,* for instance, are undergraduates,[1] and rhetoric-and-composition scholars rarely mention articles published in *Young Scholars in Writing* in the same breath as those from *JAC, CCC,* or *Rhetoric Review* (for a couple notable exceptions, see Robillard, Grobman). While the larger, more important point, as Harris stresses, should be that "we need to approach the writing of all students with the same respect and care we offer published writers" ("Using" 20), I think we need to acknowledge, at least in the meantime, that student coauthorship with postgraduates allows student writing to achieve an audience and clout it otherwise could not. My present inquiry, then, picks up one thread of Harris's much larger project: I want to specifically examine the strengths and drawbacks of the few undergraduate-postgraduate coauthored texts that have been published in rhetoric and composition, and begin to rethink how we might structure such collaborative articles in order to avoid subordinating the student's voice to that of the postgraduate researcher.

Such asymmetrical construction is one concern Harris raises in discussing student-teacher coauthorship. He writes:

> One strategy to bring students more fully into the discourse of our field is to invite them to become our coauthors. There have been four student/faculty collaborations in *CCC* since 1987. This is a welcome move, but not one, I'd argue, we yet know how to make with confidence, since three of the four articles strike me as reasserting the very distinction between students and faculty authors that they aim to contest. They do so by turning to the student authors for narratives about their experiences with writing—for examples, that is, which the faculty authors then critique, theorize, or situate in our professional discourse. ("Using" 19)

I take Harris's praise for the idea of undergraduate-postgraduate coauthorship, coupled with his reservations about its execution and scarcity, as motivation to 1) reevaluate the terms of collaborative writing between undergraduates and postgraduates in order to resist hierarchical formation in the resulting texts, and 2) to undertake the actual practice of such coauthorship more frequently. Lindquist's longitudinal research project, which relies centrally on the testimony of student-writers, provides ample and potent opportunity for coauthorship—but also the danger of

further reifying the hierarchy between researcher and student that Harris describes. To avoid treating students' voices as objects to "critique, theorize, or situate," we can begin by revisiting the coauthored pieces that have already been written.

Of the four pieces from *CCC* that Harris notes, "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy" (Jenn Fishman, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye) and "Becoming Literate in the Information Age: Cultural Ecologies of Technology" (Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Selfe, Brittney Moraski, and Melissa Pearson) most resemble each other formally.[2] Each of these texts integrates at least one section of student testimony into a larger framework of academic discourse. In both articles, an authorial hierarchy clearly emerges as readers instinctively match the names of the tenured professors—Fishman and Lunsford, Hawisher, and Selfe—with the academic voices that drive each article from beginning to end. Though "Performing Writing" offers the advantage of clearly denoting students as the "authors" of their respective sections, these sections function—to put it crudely—much like extended block quotes used to further the arguments of the "real" authors. In "Becoming Literate," Moraski's testimony quite literally takes the form of block quotes, and readers identify the narrative voice telling her story more directly with the academic authors than Moraski herself. Nowhere in either article do the student authors speak back to the academic authors who hold the reins, save McGregor's brief mention of Lunsford as the one who first alerted her to the idea "that all writing is performance" (235).

Beverly Lyon Clark and Sonja Wiedenhaupt's "On Blocking and Unblocking Sonja: A Case Study in Two Voices" comes only slightly closer to establishing a dialogue. Here, the narrative of Wiedenhaupt's struggle to cope with writer's block as she completed her undergraduate honors thesis toggles between two voices, demarcated by two different typefaces. One is Wiedenhaupt's, which speaks in the first person. The other is the academic voice, which readers instinctively ascribe to Clark, though no such correlation is made explicit in the text. While this article avoids simply embedding the student narrative within the larger academic one, Clark herself notes the limit of her form: "It may never be possible to achieve full equality in such a dialogue. If it is possible to distinguish the 'researcher's' voice, the voice of the person who is not 'Sonja,' she will

always seem more authoritative, even if the words of the 'researcher' and those of the 'subject' are in different kinds of type" (57). It's an insightful self-criticism, but one, oddly, that the authors do little to redress. As Harris's critique puts it, "It's an interesting piece. A problem with it, though, is suggested by its title, which figures one of the authors as also its subject. *Sonja* writes about her difficulties completing her senior honor thesis; Clark interprets and contextualizes those difficulties" ("Using" 19). I would articulate the problem like this: While the dialogical format of alternating voices opens up opportunities for interesting tension, the piece never quite becomes a dialogue because Wiedenhaupt's voice never speaks back to the ostensibly more authorial "researcher's voice" of Clark.

Harris notes an "exception to [the] pattern" of authorial hierarchy ("Uses" 14) in "Cross-Curricular Underlife: A Collaborative Report on Ways with Academic Words," a piece written by five undergraduate authors (Worth Anderson is listed first alphabetically) and their faculty mentor Susan Miller. Here, each student offers an individually narrated section speaking to his or her experience with underlife in various classroom settings, and then the students together (conceivably without Miller) offer a collaborative conclusion, summing up their assessments. Miller, then, "reluctantly" offers a "last word" (27), her own conclusion from the position of a teacher and rhetoric-and-composition scholar, which situates the students' observations and analyses in the discourse of the field. It's a fascinating article—and Harris is right that the students contribute much of the "analytic thrust" of the piece (683)—but here, again, I think it would have been interesting to allow the students to speak back to their faculty mentor, to engage in a tangible dialogue rather than, again, granting the monologic final word to the tenured researcher.

I should stress that I don't think any of the articles discussed above are necessarily harmful, damaging, shoddy—or, in any way, *bad* scholarship. In fact, I admire and value them all for their formal innovations and for crediting students as authors. In critiquing these five articles, then, my purpose is not so much to reveal what, as a field, we have done *wrong*, but *what we haven't tried yet*. And one strategy we haven't tried, despite creating multivocal coauthored texts, is to invite students to dialogically

speak back to the voices of academic researchers.

Here, Mikhail Bakhtin's discourse theory can help in thinking through the model I have in mind. Explicitly and reciprocally dialogic or not, it goes without saying that the examples of coauthored texts above are, in Bakhtin's terms, heteroglossic: they contain "a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices" ("Discourse" 262). Bakhtin would likely argue that even academic articles by single authors contain a powerful element of heteroglossia in their discursive fiber because they appropriate preexisting discourses and "selectively [assimilate] the words of others" ("Discourse" 341). In theorizing a new direction for coauthored scholarship, though, I want to distinguish between the general term *heteroglossia* and Bakhtin's more specific term *polyphony,* which he theorizes through attention to the novels of Dostoevsky. Polyphony, for Bakhtin, denotes an egalitarian *"plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses . . . . with equal rights and each with its own world,* combined but not merged in the unity of the event" (*Problems* 6, italics Bakhtin's).

Obvious differences between the Russian novel and American academic essay aside, Bakhtin's terms can still be helpful. Bakhtin saw the Dostoevskian novel as a democratic genre, showcasing a great diversity of voices and tensions, in subversion of the monologic authority that characterized public discourse in the theorist's own Stalinist Russia; I want to make the more modest claim that we can think of the polyphonic coauthored essay as showcasing multiple but interdependent voices, each in dialogue with both each other and the reader—a form to subvert the dominant trends of academic coauthorship. Bakhtin writes, "A character's self-consciousness in Dostoevsky is thoroughly dialogized: in its every aspect it is turned outward, intensely addressing itself, another, a third person" (251). Similarly, we might think of polyphonic coauthored works as at once reflective, addressing the self; textually dialogic, addressing the texts' other authors; and extratextually dialogic, addressing and seeking a response from readers. In this regard, none of the coauthored articles I consider above are quite polyphonic because, in some of the cases, the authors neglect to reflect on their own positions and, in every case, no reciprocal dialogue exists among the authors in their published presentation. Bakhtin sees the dominance of a primary authorial consciousness

as antithetical to polyphony (see *Problems* 5); thus the heteroglossic primacy of the academic researcher's voice can preempt polyphony and reify the hierarchy between students and their postgraduate coauthors.

The term *polyphony* is also a metaphor borrowed from music theory, and though Bakhtin himself remains skeptical of the metaphor's cross-disciplinary reach (see *Problems* 22), I find the comparison between music and print helpful. Musical polyphony suggests a multiplicity of two or more melodic voices juxtaposed to form a composite that, ideally, exceeds the power of either voice when heard independently. This, though, is not to say that one melody doesn't play longer or louder than the other, or that the two (or more) voices don't vary in timbre, pitch, and overall affective purpose: the soaring violin in a string quartet might sound naked without the less pronounced but harmonically vital cello part, as might a be-bop trio's trumpet solo without the complex bass line that grounds the chord progression. Similarly, especially in thinking about the juxtaposition of students' and teachers' voices, one shouldn't expect them to equal each other in duration or purpose. I am unconvinced, for example, by Harris's argument that, because "virtually all of the works cited in each of these [coauthored] articles are mentioned in the faculty-authored sections" ("Using" 19), an undesirable hierarchy necessarily follows. The number of works cited is only one way—a particularly academic way— of measuring authority, but students, who have less experience as academic researchers but other experiences that could prove equally valuable, might contribute different varieties of authority essential to the integrity of the polyphonic whole.

I agree, though, with Harris's conclusive argument that student voices are valuable for their very "potential to disrupt the smooth flow of our discourse about teaching" (689). This is a good reason, of course, to reconsider the value of student writing outside coauthored publication— in other research, in textbooks, in published student scholarship, and most importantly in the classroom—but also, I think, good reason to entertain the possibilities of coauthoring further with students and devising polyphonic genres that allow student perspectives to speak to, challenge, further, and disrupt the orthodox discourse of rhetoric and composition. Lindquist, in thinking through her project, is interested in "look[ing] outward to better

understand the values that undergird our own disciplinary routines" (660); she argues, and I agree, that rhetoric-and-composition scholars should carefully consider cross-disciplinary studies like that by the Center for Studies in Higher Education in order to better understand and critique our own disciplinary assumptions and values as they relate to the rest of academia (660–61). It strikes me, however, that students' perspectives might also prove valuable in such disciplinary self-assessment, and more so if we engage students in reciprocal dialogue, rather than solidifying their voices into objects of analysis and critique.

I see Lindquist's exciting work with *LiteracyCorps* as an auspicious chance to experiment with polyphonic coauthorship. Lindquist writes: "We want interviews, as pedagogic encounters, to do both constructive work (moving toward coherence) *and* deconstructive work (moving toward reflection)" (650). Certainly, these students and their longitudinal literacy narratives—by virtue of the scope and rigor of the *LiteracyCorps* project—have the capacity to do this work and aid the construction of disciplinary knowledge without their contributions taking authorial, published form. That is one option, and a respectable one. On the other hand, the sort of polyphonic coauthorship I advocate here might allow the students and faculty involved with *LiteracyCorps* to collaboratively and dialogically work toward the goals of coherence and reflectiveness Lindquist has in mind. A published dialogue could foster *mutual* reflection—allowing faculty to comment on student testimony about the roles of writing in their lives, and students to reflect on faculty perceptions about the roles of writing instruction—and, in juxtaposing such voices, possibly build toward a stronger, more coherent understanding of academic writing instruction's purposes. Lindquist's project, in short, could offer what I see as a welcome chance for students to speak in our scholarship as more than research subjects.

University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

Notes

1. The one exception, sort of, comes in Downs et al.'s "Students' Texts beyond the Classroom," which credits four undergraduates with quasi-authorial input: the byline reads "with Ruth Johnson, Claire O'Leary, Emily Strasser, and

Anita Varma" (118). The authors write that the ideas of these four "permeate this chapter in ways that have made them, while not exactly authorial, more than research subjects" (128). I admire this gesture of Downs et al. Certainly, we need better and more official means to recognize such varieties of credit.

2, There are at least two other student-faculty collaborations coming from within rhetoric and composition, but outside *CCC,* that one might consider here, too (see Albertz and Lewiecki-Wilson; Hawisher et al., "Literacies"). Both are compelling pieces for different reasons, but neither enacts the kind of dialogue between student and researcher that I ultimately recommend here.

Works Cited

Albertz, Megan, and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson. "Let's Talk about Sex ... And Disability Baby!" *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28.4 (2008). Web. 25 Nov. 2011 <http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/151/151>.

Anderson, Worth, et al. "Cross-Curricular Underlife: A Collaborative Report on Ways with Academic Words." *College Composition and Communication* 41 (1990): 11–36.

Bakhtin, M.M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. 1981. Austin: U of Texas P, 2004. 257–422.

——. *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics.* Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984.

Clark, Beverly Lyon, and Sonja Wiedenhaupt. "On Blocking and Unblocking Sonja: A Case Study in Two Voices." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 55–74.

Dejoy, Nancy. *Process This: Undergraduate Writing in Composition Studies.* Logan: Utah State UP, 2004.

Downs, Doug, Heidi Estrem, and Susan Thomas, with Ruth Johnson, Claire O'Leary, Emily Strasser, and Anita Varma. "Students' Text Beyond the Classroom: *Young Scholars in Writing's* Challenges to College Writing Instruction." Harris et al. 118–28.

Fishman, Jenn, Andrea Lunsford, Beth McGregor, and Mark Otuteye. "Performing Writing, Performing Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 57 (2005): 224–52.

Grobman, Laurie. "The Student-Scholar: (Re)Negotiating Authorship and Authority." *College Composition and Communication* 61.1 (Sept. 2009): 175–196.

Harris, Joseph, John D. Miles, and Charles Paine, eds. *Teaching with Student Texts: Essays Toward an Informed Practice*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2010.

Hawisher, Gail E., Cynthia L. Selfe, Brittney Moraski, and Melissa Pearson. "Becoming Literate in the Information Age: Cultural Ecologies of the Literacies of Technology." *College Composition and Communication* 55 (2004): 642–92.

Hawisher, Gail E., Cynthia L. Selfe, Oladipupo Lashore, and Pengfei Song. "Literacies and the Complexity of the Global Digital Divide." *Writing and Digital Media*. Ed. Luuk Van Waes, Marielle Leyten, and Chris Neuwirth. Amsterdam: Kluwer, 2006. 253–85.

Robillard, Amy E. "'Young Scholars' Affecting Composition: A Challenge to Disciplinary Citation Practices." *College English* 68 (2006): 253–70.

❦   ❦   ❦

Disciplinary Resistance: Promoting Possibility for the Writing Program

Amy Lueck

In "Disciplinary Purification: The Writing Program as Institutional Brand," Jeanne Gunner describes the ways managerial discourse and "our own accommodation of market forces" have encouraged the purification of the writing program: both the purification of and the purification to disciplinary content knowledge (619). She uses Stanley Fish's work as an example of