

Epic Learning in a “Jumbo” Writing Course

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Course Description: English 130: Academic Writing

The first year writing “jumbo” is a large enrollment composition course with ninety students and nine embedded writing mentors. The “jumbo” structure “emerged from an ‘entanglement’ of the institutional environment and intentional innovation” (Jaxon). Currently taught with a human rights focus, but with other iterations including a focus on digital culture, the “jumbo” model offers a provocation to the field’s focus on class size, including preferences for smaller student-teacher ratios and the assumption that only the writing instructor can give valuable feedback. Three key structures support the jumbo design: a small workshop (ten students led by a mentor) that meets “outside but alongside” the jumbo class, writing mentors who participate in the large course, and an intentional design focused on community-building and various forms of participation that distribute labor and expertise among class members (Grego and Thompson 69). All of these structures emerged from a complex history on our campus of supporting students’ literacies alongside a commitment to honoring student labor. Importantly, remediation, as an identity or pedagogical practice, is absent from the design.

Institutional Context: Corequisite Courses in Response to “Basic” Writing

In 1991, English faculty at our institution abolished basic writing courses for students who scored low on a California State University (CSU) system-wide English Placement Test (EPT). Students scoring low on the EPT began attending a one-credit adjunct workshop in conjunction with our credit-bearing first year course (FYC). It was a radical move at the time, coming against the backdrop of increased attention to basic writing courses and other remedial programs as colleges and universities took steps to deal with what was seen as a growing problem (see Rodby and Fox; Stanley). For EPT students who had previously taken one or two “remedial” classes before having a chance to take composition for baccalaureate credit, abolishing remediation was a move that recognized their literate experience and labor as having real value.

This ten-person writing workshop operates on principles and practices similar to the Studio model developed by Grego and Thompson and is in many ways functionally analogous to it. Drawn from Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s theories of situated learning and participation within communities of practice, the workshop facilitates peer- and near-peer learning and is led by

trained undergraduate and graduate student mentors, who work to create a culture of inquiry among students about all aspects of literate practice.

Thirty years later, and through changes in placement mechanisms in the CSU system, students still meet in groups of ten and use the workshop space to work on readings and assignments, as well as peer-critique drafts from their different sections of first year writing. In the intervening time, this workshop space, first described in Rodby and again in Rodby and Fox, has been very successful: over the past 30 years, the average rate at which so-called remedial students pass the for-credit writing course (with a C- or better) hovers at around 90%, which is as high as—sometimes higher than—that of their nonremedial peers.

Creating Space for the “Jumbo” FYC Course

These principles—situated learning and communities of practice—were arguably the most important elements in developing a new model for composition classes on our campus, called (ominously enough) “the jumbo.” For the past ten years, our writing program has offered, with great success, a large-enrollment writing course that extends what has been learned from this rich history of supported and supportive writing mentors who lead the corequisite workshop. We know, for example, that it is possible to distribute writing expertise among writing mentors and students. In this jumbo model, just over one hundred people meet in a large classroom for two hours each week—ninety first year writing students, one instructor, and nine writing mentors who are recruited from our corequisite workshop program. First designed by Kim Jaxon, the “jumbo” was not occasioned by top-down institutional pressures like budgets or staffing shortages. It “does not take part in neoliberal projects of scaling for fiduciary efficiency” (Jaxon). Rather, the jumbo is an intentional and student-centered innovation that leverages the institutional environment and students’ and faculty’s expertise, with student participation and professional development for future teachers as core principles.

We launched the first jumbo sections of our FYC course in fall 2009. Since then, more than ten years later, eight instructors (five full-time faculty in composition and three lecturer faculty) have taught twenty-two sections of the large course. To put these numbers in perspective, our writing program typically offers twenty-five sections of FYC each semester, which includes 1-2 sections of the large class. To date, more than 2,000 students have participated in jumbo sections with a 95% pass rate in their first attempt.

Support for Writing Mentors

The “jumbo” structure requires institutional support, from classroom space with moveable furniture to a budget for hiring student writing mentors. Cru-

cial to the large-enrollment course's success at our university is a mechanism for training and supporting writing mentors. The nine writing mentors come to every section of the large class and also lead the students for an additional two hours per week in small-group workshop activities and discussions. They interact with students and respond to their writing more often and more directly than the instructor does. The mentors themselves are often future teachers, and they work with the instructor each week designing writing activities and assignments, brainstorming potential student issues, discussing future readings and course goals, and norming and developing mutual plans for responding to student writing. In this way, the jumbo course also serves as a space for mentors' professional growth and reflection as future teachers.

Writing mentors begin with an upper division course called *Theories and Practices in Tutoring Writing*. The course provides a foundation in situated theories of learning, theories of literacy, and research in the teaching of writing; it exposes mentors to the range of discussions and research surrounding first year writing courses and students. The course also includes a practicum component in which mentors intern with experienced writing mentors—graduates of the *Tutoring Writing* course—in the small group workshops. In the subsequent semester, after passing the course with a “B” or better, they may apply to become paid mentors in our program.

The course and the practicum allow mentors to compare what they are noticing through their internships with the theories they are reading in class. Often in our general education courses, mentors are recruited based on their successful participation in an instructor's course. These successful students are asked to return to the class as more capable peers. But in these scenarios, it can be challenging for the returning students to understand the theories and practices that undergird the design of the class. Further, “success in the class” does not always translate to “success in mentoring”; it can be challenging to push back on structures of a course when those structures worked well for the student mentor. In fact, we have found that mentors who claim to struggle with writing often make the best mentors: they can more easily understand the challenges because the structures of a class simply did not work for them. Our *Tutoring Writing* course allows us to think through the theories and practices informing the design of our first year composition classes and to imagine together how we might rethink structures and activities when they do not appear to be supporting student writers. In other words, our writing mentors see both the staging of the class itself and what's behind the curtain.

Theoretical Rationale

Our program has a long history of support for peer feedback, collaboration, and mentorship, both in FYC and our adjunct workshops—and in using fac-

ulty administrative roles to challenge and expand the traditional roles given to writing instructors. But even though students often give thoughtful feedback on each other's drafts, that work is generally outranked by the instructor's more definitive evaluations. We don't blame students for prioritizing in this way; they know who ultimately gives the grades. But this overreliance on instructor feedback seems to be exacerbated by a system that doesn't allow them to be more authentic "responders to writing." We wondered if students would come to see themselves as more valued responders if writing expertise were more distributed throughout the group, based on the size of the course. With nearly one hundred students in each jumbo, we had to imagine new ways of distributing the tasks associated with feedback across people, spaces, and digital platforms so that students would be better positioned to rely on each other as they proceeded through the course.

We want to emphasize that the jumbo course is not simply a traditional FYC with more students: it is not a scaled version of the traditional course. The jumbo is designed for the affordances of the size, including attention to a network and to practices that allow students to be seen and heard in a large group. In the world, writing circulates across networks, platforms, readers, and critics: we are interested in the ways in which a large class can approximate complex systems of production and circulation and disrupt the primacy of the teacher-student dyad (Trimbur).

Our overarching goals for the jumbo FYC course include:

1. Provide professional development support for future teachers: A central component to the large course design is an emphasis on support for future teachers and graduate Teaching Associates so they experience a collaborative environment in the teaching of writing. Faculty and mentors collaborate in responding to student work. We meet weekly as a team to discuss responding to student writing, designing assignments, and creating activities that support student learning.
2. Create stronger connections between the FYC course and the adjunct workshop: By embedding the mentors in the large course, the writing mentors see "the whole" program. Typically, mentors in our program do not attend the first year class with the students who are enrolled in the workshop. In the jumbo, the mentors participate in the first year writing course first hand, and not simply by hearing about the course from FYC students. Mentors and students participate in the "regular" first year writing course together.
3. Develop assessment practices and research agenda in the FYC program: Another major component of the design is to develop

undergraduate and graduate opportunities for research in the program. Graduate students have already presented research at conferences such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

4. Make “remediation” invisible: Any student can enroll in the large course regardless of recommended course placement. Every member of the class is supported by the two hour, mentor facilitated workshop. The concept of “remediation” and pedagogical practices associated with it are absent from the structure of the course.
5. Take a proactive stance towards the rise in caps for FYC: In the jumbo model, the instructor is not as central to revision work and can rely on mentors and peers to share the workload. The course follows a “community of practice” (Wenger) model by creating small learning communities, embedding mentor support, and developing FYC students and mentors into capable peer responders to writing.
6. Improve the use of and support for digital writing: we aim to create a course that is a model for best practices in critical digital pedagogy.

Epic Learning

The jumbo model affords a focus on the relationships that can be formed when people work side by side on similar tasks and support each other’s growth. Pedagogical practices like students’ curation and publication of other students’ work, for example, increase opportunities for students to become caught up in, “entangled,” in each other’s work. As Jaxon notes, students pursue “inquiries of their own design, inquiries that matter to them and begin to matter to their classmates as well.” The sheer number of students involved is part of what makes this powerful.

Indeed, both the large class and the built-in workshop space share structures and activities that promote what Jane McGonigal calls “epic scale,” which helps us identify elements of *epic learning* in and through writing (49). It may be that no writing course can ever match the intensity of a campus wide tournament of Humans vs. Zombies or the grandeur of *World of Warcraft*. But in terms of this course, the language helps us think through how writing and writing pedagogy both make large class spaces feel intimate and encourage small groups to feel empowered. In *Reality is Broken*, McGonigal argues that the best online and face-to-face games, far from being transitory bits of meaningless fun, create deep learning experiences in which players voluntarily work together within a set of rules to establish goals and give each other practical feedback on their performance (also see Gee). In these scenarios, she argues, the satisfaction we receive from carving out meaningful moments of play, and perhaps being successful,

forms strong bonds between us and other people that enable future action. For McGonigal, “epic scale” refers to the moment when we as participants in a project realize that the actions and environments we join are “bigger than ourselves” (98). While many examples are drawn from online games like *Portal* and *Halo*, her argument extends to crowdsourcing and “real life” applications like Foursquare, or distributed computing platforms that create protein folding simulations to search for actual cures to Alzheimer’s or Huntington’s disease. Epic scales not only “encourage wholehearted participation” but also “provide mechanisms for the exchange of expertise” (Jaxon). McGonigal argues, “And the chance to do something you’re good at as part of a larger project helps students build real esteem among their peers—not empty self-esteem based on nothing other than wanting to feel good about yourself, but actual respect and high regard based on contributions you’ve made” (131). We witness this entanglement in our jumbo course: the students’ desire to be scholars, to find out things, and to share their findings with peers.

We’re struck by the conceptual similarities among Grego and Thompson’s Studio model, McGonigal’s work on games, and situated cognition in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger). Taken together, they lead us to view learning as irreducibly social: tied to real communities and contexts, goal-oriented, participatory, and potentially epic in scale. Knowledge is not (only) in the head of individuals; knowledge is shared and “distributed” across people, spaces, and resources (Cole; Hutchins; Lave and Wenger; Salomon). For this reason, we do not view our role as a professor as someone who delivers content, but instead, as someone who curates artifacts and constructs learning spaces so that students can make meaning themselves. In the jumbo, the instructor’s role is to curate texts, classroom structures, discussions, and activities so students can choose from a range of options, and hopefully, find their own purposes for learning, reading, writing, and research. Students are not mucking around in the dark—the instructor still holds a disciplinary expertise that informs text selections and potential ideas for class consideration—but students have opportunities to use those texts as a way to solve problems and consider what use they might make of the content and ideas presented to them.

As in McGonigal, our program imagines learning, at its best moments, as inevitably connected to play (Vygotsky 96-101). We do not mean “play” in a free spirited or trivial sense; we mean focused, forget-what-time-it-is, completely-engaged-in-an-idea kind of play (on this also see Csikszentmihalyi). Instructors sometimes create structures in educational contexts that ignore or purposefully remove the enjoyment that comes from learning. Often, learners have to imagine something they do outside of school—bake, play guitar, restore old cars, organize concerts—before they recognize that learning need not be (or most often is not) a chore. For this reason, we’ve adopted a Vygotskian

view of learning and play as authentic parts of being human, not something only done in school but both “life-sustaining and inevitable . . . reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing” (Wenger 3). This philosophy—that learning is natural and students are quite good at it given the opportunity—informs both teaching practices and writing program design. In terms of the jumbo, we see the course as a large activity space where students write, read, talk, make, upload, download, and share; and, a studio space “where activities of production are undertaken individually but in a place where others are working and discussing their work simultaneously, where teachers provide, along with other students, guidance, suggestions, input” (Grego and Thompson 7). This sense of learning as (potentially) epic and writing as (a form of) play arguably has potential for teachers of writing interested in creating authentic writing spaces.

Jumbo Workshops

The workshop groups are a critical part of creating participation structures for learning. A typical workshop asks students to not simply continue the work of the jumbo space but add to it: to read together, write blog posts, gather both primary and secondary research, write drafts of major assignments, give feedback on drafts, create portfolios, and sometimes prepare to lead conversations in the larger class. In this way, the workshop reproduces and extends the activities of the larger section, with more opportunity to ask questions and focus on individual concerns. It is important to note that we see both the large class time and the smaller workshops as activity spaces; we are always doing the work of the course. But the workshops, and specifically the mentors, create a space that is “outside-but-alongside” our large class. The smaller group can complain, question, praise, and bond more easily than they might at in a sea of one-hundred students. As students note, the workshop space allows them to ask clarifying questions, get individual attention, and create friendships with peers. These friendships, and the role they play in supporting each other’s writing, spill over into the larger class; the larger class still not only feels intimate, it feels connected and meaningful.

As in the games McGonigal discusses, the design here is highly attuned not just to accomplishing particular writing goals but also to the creation of community. Students learn and perform best when they feel supported, when they feel they are seen and heard. Many of the online spaces we use to encourage participation also help create a rich classroom community. Through tweets, online posts, and through their contributions to our class content, we get to know our students. It is in their tweets and informal posts that we learn who is a champion wrestler, who is a drummer, who is an orphan. The data from student interviews support our findings: their attendance, their performance,

and their participation are robust because they have a valued identity and multiple avenues for sharing their work in our large class.

One more point about noticing, which is an iterative social practice in the jumbo that is consistently modeled and supported for mentors and students: we were concerned, at first, at the possibility of students feeling lost in the numbers. That has not proved to be a problem: routines in the classroom set up opportunities for noticing. We create structures — small teams, public blogs, consistent exchanges of student work, featured work — which model and support noticing. The experience of being noticed, either by the professor, the mentor or a peer, in a class of one-hundred is more powerful than being noticed in a class of twenty.

The idea of community carries over to the work students do with their peers. In the large class we have a variety of structures that contribute to a classroom environment where peers are seen as colleagues. On the first day, each student is assigned a permanent research team. The students in their team become their partners for the rest of the semester. During their first meeting, teams are asked to reflect on a time when they were part of a productive and a not-so-productive group. We talk about material conditions that support effective group work, so that together they create group norms, which are conditions under which someone can get “kicked out” of the group. Together teams decide how many times a colleague is allowed to show up for class unprepared or how often they want everyone to check our course website. Once groups create these norms, they often refer to them, at times pointing to an agreed upon statement with a fellow peer and reminding him or her of the group’s expectations. If a peer is asked to leave the group (which happens to one or two students every few semesters), they sometimes ask to join another group that fits their expectations about participation more closely. This opportunity to write rules for oneself and contribute them in service of a group provides pockets of ownership within a potentially overwhelming space. Through groups, digital platforms, and the sheer volume of feedback students give and receive, they come to trust their peers and mentor—not just their teacher—as important partners in their learning.

Weekly Mentor Meetings

Throughout the semester, the jumbo instructor meets weekly with mentors to discuss issues related to the teaching of writing. The mentors in the jumbo course collaborate with the instructor to plan class activities, read and give feedback on student writing, and design their weekly workshops. A typical meeting begins with a brief check-in where mentors share the successes and challenges of the previous week’s workshops. In this check-in, we often discuss the progress of particular students and brainstorm together ways of sup-

porting students who may be struggling. Then together we make a plan for the week's activities and divide up responsibilities; it is not uncommon for a mentor to lead a component of the large class activities. For example, if a mentor is particularly proficient in using Google Scholar, we may plan a 5-10 minutes activity in the large class that is led by the mentor. Students can then spend time using this resource to search for research while we are all in the same room together.

These weekly meetings also allow time for the instructor to model and support mentors in giving feedback on student writing; in fact, this is a significant part of their professional development as future teachers. Typically, we spend a lot of the time simply reading student work and sharing what we're noticing: where are students making smart moves in their writing and what holes are we noticing as a whole class? We often then offer up a couple student examples to read together. We use these examples to discuss ways of approaching feedback and we collaboratively write the feedback on these particular drafts together. Other times, the instructor provides feedback on one or two student drafts and then explains her decisions and choices to the mentors, as a way to model feedback in a particular assignment.

Critical Reflection

Consistently, students who take our jumbo class are passing the course in their first attempt: this is true for students who score "low" on placement measures as well as the students who place high. And when asked about satisfaction with the course, 99% report they are satisfied or very satisfied with the class, and further, would recommend the course to a friend. But more importantly, survey and interview data suggest that students are developing ways of talking about their writing practices and growing confidence as writers.

This confidence, and student awareness of a range of writing practices at their disposal, leads to thoughtful drafts, multiple revisions, and solid papers and multimodal products. What the work in the jumbo suggests to us is that it is possible to create a meaningful and rigorous large class that maintains a sense of intimacy and community.

The research we've conducted on the jumbo course provides evidence that 1) students are doing more writing, not less. The division of labor among students, mentors, and the instructor allows us to create a space where students write all the time: in both the large class and smaller workshops, on blogs, social media platforms, and Google Docs. This runs counter to many of the claims we read about large class sizes (Horning). Further, we are able to provide feedback more quickly, which encourages momentum in students' revision practices; 2) students are focusing on audience and a broad range of readers. Students develop a professional stance toward editing because they

come to understand why this practice matters; they have a real audience of mentors and peers who value their ideas. The community that mentors build in the workshop, and carry over into the large class, supports their growing sense that writing matters; and 3) students are developing a sense of play in relation to writing and the work of the university. They come to see writing as a means to learn and to share what they are learning with others in formal and informal structures.

One area that invites our ongoing reflection is the relationship between students and writing mentors. Based on follow up interviews with students and mentors, we know that when mentors are flexible in the roles they play in class and workshop, they help create a feeling of common purpose, that someone cares. Mentors write alongside the students, read alongside the students, and sometimes complain about the work alongside the students. They function as peers, near-peers, more capable peers, and sometimes as instructors. In our mentor meetings we often discuss these “mentor identities” and think about the affordances of these various ways of being. For example, we know there are times when it is helpful for a mentor to commiserate with a student about procrastination or share a time when they too struggled with an assignment. Other times it is helpful to the group if the mentor can function more like a teacher, perhaps reminding a student that it is disrespectful to the group to show up late. Based on the situation, mentors can embrace, modify, or reject the authority that the writing instructor gives them. The students appreciate the balance of having someone they can confide in, but also someone who will create a workshop space that is productive and not a glorified study hall. At the same time, navigating these roles can be challenging for mentors, especially depending on where they are in their own education (juniors, graduate students, student teachers, etc.). As part of our professional development with mentors, we think carefully about the importance of multiple mentor roles and the need to shift roles even within the same workshop session.

Student interviews and course evaluations show us that bonding occurs in the workshop space because the mentors are not graders or assessors of the student writing. The mentors, and the other peers in the workshop, give feedback on writing, but they do not grade the writing. This is important because students tell us that it allows for a relationship where a student can feel vulnerable: she can say to a mentor and her peers that she is confused by an assignment without worry that this will influence a grade. She can work out the confusions, concerns, and frustrations with others who are in a similar position.

Through workshops, small groups, and mentors we are able to make a large class seem small. We offer our structure as a way to play with participation, community, and the distribution of expertise among teachers, mentors, and writers. We would hope that administrators and faculty who

are interested in large class models would consider the variety of structures and support we've offered here; many of these structures, like our upper-division course for mentors or our corequisite workshop, arguably need to be embedded in a campus culture long before one can launch a jumbo writing course that depends on them.

Note

California State University, Chico is a comprehensive university in the CSU system with an undergraduate population of about 17,000, 97.5% of whom come from California and over 50% from counties in Northern California ("Chico Facts"). In 2014, the campus became a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). Many of our students are also returning or first generation college students.

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