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"Hanging Out": Cultivating Writing Groups Online

Tanya R. Cochran, Rasha Diab, Thomas Ferrel, & Beth Godbee

It's Monday morning, 8:30 a.m., when Thomas gets the expected ring to join the hangout. Beth and Rasha are already present, chatting about the weekend and what awaits in the coming week. Thomas joins in—adding what he hopes to accomplish during this morning's collaborative writing time—and by then, Tanya has also joined, finishing breakfast in the process. For the next three hours, we all settle down to work independently, but in shared space.

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We are lucky to live in a time when technology makes remote collaborations easier than ever. As collaborators, colleagues, co-authors, and friends who work in four different states, we especially value google hangouts for hosting our weekly writing meetings. Just as writing group members often meet in person in coffee shops, libraries, or other spaces to negotiate the complexities of writing, we meet at least weekly (and oftentimes daily) online to write toward pressing projects. Like skype and other communication tools, google hangouts not only allow us to hear and see each other, but also to share screens when brainstorming, troubleshooting technology, answering how-to questions, and sharing passages from our texts when revising and editing. Paired with google docs, these hangouts additionally help us manage shared files, work collaboratively on a single one, and keep records of previous drafts.

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Today Rasha is running late--still recovering from the long flight back from Egypt. When she arrives, she messages in the chat box before stepping away: "I'll make a cup of tea, as tea can magically heal anything." Meanwhile, Beth is giving Thomas feedback on his methodology chapter; Thomas takes notes, interrupting to ask questions as needed. Tanya gives her cat Calliope medicine, and once she has finished, Beth begins to ask about recent and upsetting events in the news. We spend a few minutes processing the social injustice we see around us before shifting into individual writing tasks we've set for the day.

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A common challenge with writing is holding space for focused, diligent, ongoing, and committed work. As a group of four people, we have created a "critical mass," allowing the hangouts to continue even if/when one or more of us has a scheduling conflict and is unable to make the writing group. We believe it is essential to deliberately and

consistently choose to protect time for writing, especially when other responsibilities connected with teaching, service, and life in general can (appear to) be more immediate, more pressing. To make the long-term investment in scholarship and writing part of our short-term and daily plans, we prioritize our hangouts as already-scheduled meeting time, and we schedule in longer blocks (3+ hours), while still honoring the changing circumstances of our lives, which means we may sometimes need to leave early, come late, or miss a week.

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For the past hour, we have been working silently. The soundtrack involves keys clicking as three of us type, low-volume jazz playing in one of our rooms, occasional cat meows, a garbage truck collecting trash, a microwave beeping when hot water is ready, and pen scratching on paper while one of us handwrites. Tanya interrupts, "I need to head to campus now. Meeting in fifteen minutes."

Thomas looks up from his screen. "Have a great day. Good luck with student conferences."

"Ok, Tanya, may the day be beautiful," Rasha smiles.

"Bye, Tanya! See you tomorrow," Beth says without looking away from her draft.

As Tanya leaves the hangout, Thomas asks, "Are we okay to stay on for another thirty minutes or so? I have until eleven today."

"Yep."

"Sounds good."

The scene continues with writers back in action.

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We honor these hangouts because we are able to invest in ourselves and our work by:

1. **Creating a refuge** from the pressures to perform a particular role or to compete for limited resources in order to invest in shared success and professional solidarity;
2. **Thriving intellectually** to realize our capacities and to strengthen our relationships across physical and institutional distance;
3. **Holding a creative space** for brainstorming, incubating, and developing writing projects while developing a repository for ideas about new projects and future collaborations;
4. **Maintaining momentum** for our shared writing projects even when other projects, teaching, and service take immediate precedence;
5. **Providing just-in-time support, mentoring, and processing** of the clamorous, eventful life of the writer, including research as well as teaching, service, familial duties, and other responsibilities and situations (e.g., thinking and strategizing with in-discipline colleagues not present at our home institutions); and, ultimately,
6. **Enjoying a *live* and *life-giving* writing environment** where we can think out loud and share spoken and written ideas with engaged, supportive, and sympathetic readers.

Underlying these investments is an understanding that collaboration is by its very nature a relational act, and hangouts allow us to cultivate and harvest our life-writing relationships. Hence, we value the hangouts as collaborating even when we're not directly collaborating because our process is like turning the compost heap of organic

material: we mix ourselves together, breathe air into each other's work, and inevitably become together the fertile soil from which we all grow.

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Today we celebrate. Thomas exclaims that he has finished his methodology chapter and feels energized to begin the next step of writing about his interview data. Tanya shares her relief that a third and final draft of her most recent essay is off to the collection's editors. Beth, Rasha, and Thomas announce a major step they have accomplished with their co-authored book project: identifying an enthusiastic publisher. And we all delight over the contributor copies we just received in the mail--a new book by more of our colleagues and friends that includes a short piece we created together about our collaborations. This is the fruit of hanging out, and it tastes very, very sweet. Acknowledging these celebrations is part of what makes the long process joy-full and ease-full. The process continues.

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'Alas, Not Yours to Have': Problems with Audience in High-Stakes Writing Tests and the Promise of Felt Sense, **Peter H. Khost**

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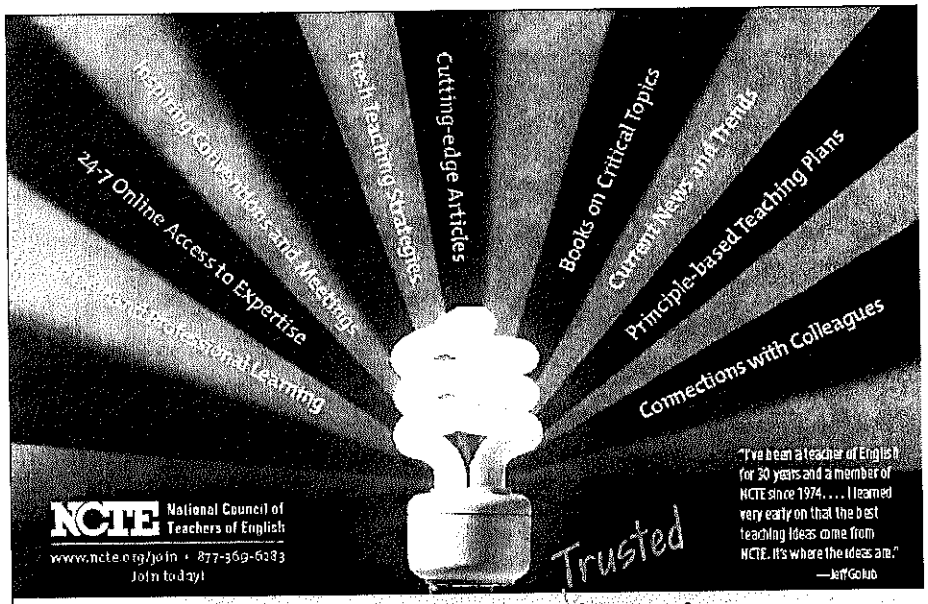
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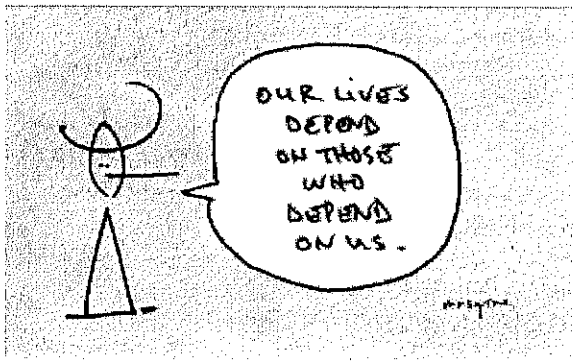
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EDITORS' MESSAGE

This issue features a five-essay special-topic section on rhetoric and ethics, inspired by a panel of AEPL friends who presented at the 2015 Conference of College Composition and Communication. Presenter Paula Mathieu specifically connected rhetoric and ethics to the research that Christy Wenger and other AEPL members in the Writing and Mindfulness Network have been doing. The topic recurred in several presentations at our 2015 summer AEPL Conference in Estes Park, CO, with its commemorative discussions of James Moffett's influence upon how we teach.



As usual, Laurence Musgrove's inimical Tex sums up the basic premise of our section topic with laconic precision: the inevitability of human interdependence. This premise seems particularly compelling as the ongoing presidential campaign strains the outmost limits of rhetoric and ethics alike.

Appropriately, John Duffy leads with a strong call for writing pedagogues to recover the ancient rhetorical concept of *arête*—virtue—which found its most widely received articulation in Quintilian's assertion that rhetoric must exemplify the good person speaking well. *JAEPL* readers have long espoused this ideal with their insistence that we cannot separate language instruction from our values or from the human spirit that seeks a common good for all. We know you will find Duffy's call inspiring as well as affirming.

Lois Agnew, longtime reviewer for *JAEPL* manuscripts, follows with an examination of how an academic program might not only center upon rhetoric—as many composition programs in the nation do—but how such a program might place ethical training at the center of its mission as well. Ever a pragmatic idealist, Agnew reveals the fine quality of administrative thinking that must go into such a project.

Paula Mathieu, another composition program administrator, argues for the role that mindfulness plays in sustaining the connection between rhetoric and ethics, especially in the task of training new teaching assistants. She expands upon the same clear connections among mindfulness, spiritual writing, and neuroscience that many *JAEPL* contributors have done as she maps out her philosophy of writing pedagogy.

Taking up this philosophical thread, Scott Wagar weaves it into an argument for claiming composition studies as a spiritual discipline. He invites the kinds of reflection, compassion, and connectedness that even agnostics or secularists won't dismiss because of the sensible ties his claims make to humanistic ethical systems of belief. Erec Smith's fascinating work with the second chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* takes Wagar's argument beyond the realm of Western thinking, creating another link to the East-West dialog that AEPL has fostered from its beginnings. Smith sees a striking similitude between the