Because high school courses are viewed by students as being concerned with mastery of content knowledge alone, they may enter college assuming that, having received good grades in high school, they have a grasp of necessary foundational knowledge of the disciplines needed to do well in college courses. They are often under-prepared for the more conceptually oriented curriculum they encounter. This mismatch in worldviews, in ways of thinking about a discipline, leads to jarring disconnects and frustrations for students and instructors alike. (Conley, College 75)

When I came to College Now at LaGuardia in 2002, it was with great enthusiasm and little experience with high school teaching. Prior to taking this position, I had taught English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at a French university for five years; and, English as a Second Language (ESL), English for Special Purposes (ESP), reading, writing across the curriculum, and research writing at various branches of CUNY for twenty-five years. I had been involved in teacher-training projects throughout these years. Clearly, I had had time to reflect on issues in second-language acquisition, on my teaching, and on how it impacted my students’ learning. I was able to articulate a philosophy of teaching and learning; I had an understanding of the nature of academic work.

I knew of College Now as a CUNY-wide initiative designed to offer college-like experiences to high school students who might otherwise be less likely to enter college or to achieve college success. I came initially to coordinate and teach in the Bridge Connection, a new program conceived to support English language learners at Newcomers High School in their learning of academic subjects: social studies in particular. This precollege program was to serve as a bridge to regular credit-bearing College Now courses, and as such, a bridge to college. I felt confident that my background would enable me to meet the challenge of preparing high school students for college.
I had honed my concept of academic work at the CRAPEL (Centre de Recherches et d’Applications Pédagogiques en Langues, Université de Nancy II), an institute dedicated to the principle of learner-centeredness and the promotion of learner autonomy. In its simplest definition, learner autonomy is the ultimate goal of an approach in which teachers and students share responsibility for learning to learn. In practice, promoting learner autonomy means engaging learners’ preconceptions about language and learning, eliciting and sharing the cognitive, metacognitive, and social strategies that enable them to compensate for what they do not understand or cannot express, in order to surpass their actual level of communicative competence as they continue to learn. The intended result of such a paradigm shift (described in Henner Stanchina, and in Henner Stanchina and Holec) is the students’ simultaneous acquisition of both language and learning competence; students define their communicative needs and progressively take control of their own learning. Since the learning strategies they develop in this process are transferable to new contexts, students gain the potential to become lifelong learners. A learner-centered approach, then, is one in which learning to learn is central; knowing how people develop and learn indispensable. This simple, self-evident principle that teachers need knowledge of the learning process, need to apply this knowledge in structuring learning experiences for their students, and need to explicitly teach students how to learn has profound effects on teaching and learning when it is implemented. It conditions the way we view academic work, no matter what content we teach. And, because it is grounded in cognitive research, it endures.

Cognitive research provided me with theories about the nature of knowledge. “The most cited distinction is between knowing that and knowing how. Knowledge in general is seen as both a product or integrated collection of factual information and a process or set of procedures for knowing” (Hagen, Barclay, and Newman 19–20). Knowledge, then, is an interaction “between what is known and what is done” (21). Studies in cognition and metacognition related to reading comprehension propose training children with reading comprehension problems to become more strategic, “more active in their comprehension-fostering activities” (Brown, and Palincsar 10). Applications of cognitive research to the teaching of language-minority children use an instructional model that “integrates academic language development with content area instruction and learning strategies” (Chamot and O’Malley v). Chamot and O’Malley’s model derives from the same theory that schema or
declarative knowledge is actively constructed through the interaction between what we already know and the new ideas and experiences we encounter; that procedural knowledge, or what we know how to do, develops as we gain mastery over a sequence of actions through practice with feedback, until we achieve automaticity or expert performance (12–18). This concept of expertise underlies cognitive apprenticeship teaching methods which are “designed to bring . . . tacit [cognitive and metacognitive] processes into the open, where students can observe, enact and practice them with help from the teacher and from other students” (Collins, Brown, and Newman 458).

It was this view of learning that had structured my teaching as I trained students to use strategies; to apply their background knowledge to various tasks; to formulate meaningful questions and read/listen with a purpose, generating, confirming, and revising their hypotheses; to make inferences; to predict, paraphrase, and summarize; and to monitor their comprehension and language production. It was this view of learning that had sustained my interest as I sought ways to externalize the internal process of learning so that students could gain insight into what they were doing and feedback on how to do it differently. By reflecting on their own learning process and not just displaying the product of their learning, my students came to change their schema for reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English, and I came to confirm that working from a “core set of learning principles ” (Bransford et al. 23), regardless of the content of one’s teaching, is the way to do exemplary academic work.

This view was again reinforced in studies on learning disciplinary ways of thinking, which suggest that “disciplines need to be more involved in the research on how people think and how students learn” a given content (Middendorf, and Pace 2). Middendorf and Pace describe a metacognitive process in which instructors in various disciplines are asked to distance themselves from their own automatized ways of thinking and solving problems in their fields so that they can “reconstruct the steps that they themselves do” when solving problems similar to those they assign to students (5). The goal is to explain and model in detail how an expert would go about solving a problem in a particular discipline, to provide students the opportunity to practice the task with feedback, and to evaluate their performance.

Once a particular set of skills has been mastered by most of the class, the instructor can begin to generate more complex exer-
cises that provide the occasion for synthesis and application. And throughout this process, the instructor can make strategic decisions about the subject matter used in these exercises to be sure that the time spent on these skills reinforces the most essential topics in the course. (Middendorf, and Pace 8)

In other words, the pared-down course content serves to support the disciplinary ways of thinking and solving problems, just as the content of my teaching provided the vehicle for the acquisition of learning strategies. I took comfort in the concordance of all these views.

And then, through my work in College Now, I went back to high school.

The transition was disorienting and disheartening; the practices I observed so dissonant. The very structure and focus of the high school day – the chaos, the decibel level, the 40-or-so-minute periods that organize each day and fragment learning as students are herded from one self-contained subject area to another, the obsession with standardized test results that leads teachers to rush through their curricula in a mad attempt to “cover” inconceivable amounts of factual information in chronological order, without allowing themselves to provide time for students to process or to see connections within or across disciplines, or to engage students in extensive in-depth reading, thinking, talking, writing or questioning – are impediments to the accomplishment of good academic work. Despite the increasing numbers of students whose native language is not English, there is often little communication between ESL and other academic departments, and little shared responsibility across the disciplines for the explicit teaching of academic, informational reading and expository writing, which are so critical to students’ success in college. Instead, both the level of challenge in high school classes and teacher expectations for sustained intellectual effort and performance may be lowered.

The many extraordinary teachers and administrators I know in our College Now partner high schools understand this and seek their own individual solutions for change. But as the education system bears down, many devoted, skilled, talented teachers may eventually acquiesce in the myth that “covering” the curriculum in a linear race against time will help students pass their exams and graduate from high school. Thus does the transmission model of teaching persist, though it fails not only to guarantee student success on standardized tests, but also to prepare students for the rigors of college-level work.
My own difficult transition from college to high school, the acute case of disconnect I experienced, the “mismatch in worldviews” cited above, is largely rooted in these differing concepts of academic work. In elaborating this difference, Conley reports that

the college instructor is more likely to emphasize a series of key thinking skills that students, for the most part, do not develop extensively in high school. They expect students to make inferences, interpret results, analyze conflicting explanations of phenomena, support arguments with evidence, solve complex problems that have no obvious answer, reach conclusions, offer explanations, conduct research, engage in the give-and-take of ideas, and generally think deeply about what they are being taught. (National Research Council qtd. in Conley, Toward 6)

Further, Conley affirms that these habits of mind, or “‘key cognitive strategies,’ have been consistently and emphatically identified by those who teach entry-level college courses as being as important or more important than any specific content knowledge taught in high school” (Conley, Toward 5).

Intervening at the juncture of high school and college, College Now is uniquely positioned to see the disconnect from a broader perspective. LaGuardia’s College Now program currently serves about 1,500 students per semester in 20 high schools in Queens. Most of the students take courses taught by high school faculty at their high schools. Some of these courses are enhanced by the participation of LaGuardia faculty. To serve smaller, neighboring high schools, we have developed an array of “campus cohort” courses taught only for high school students on the LaGuardia campus. All courses are sequenced to allow students to enter at varying grade and ability levels. Thus, we offer electives to tenth graders, including English language learners struggling with academic English while learning content. “Gateway” courses, with slightly lower entry-level criteria, serve as a pathway for students who might not initially qualify for regular College Now courses. Once students have demonstrated their ability to succeed in cohort college-level classes, they can enroll in LaGuardia’s “College Connection” program in which they take regular classes at LaGuardia, measuring their own performance against that of college students. Throughout the different configurations of our course offerings, the challenge remains constant: to understand and ease the transition from high school to
college, despite the lack of intentional alignment between the two. This work already happens through classroom teaching and through cross-institutional conversations in professional development meetings with faculty.

However, an attempt to reconcile the discrepant views of academic work and meet the challenges of readying high school students for college requires that more work be done. For example, while our College Now courses are sequenced in terms of entry-level criteria, this sequencing does not ensure that each individual course identifies the key content, the “big ideas” of a discipline, or systematically develops in students the strategies or habits of mind – analysis, interpretation, problem solving, and reasoning – they need to participate in disciplinary ways of thinking (Conley, Toward 5). Nor does it ensure that common, measurable exit standards are applied across the board. To achieve these objectives, we need to collaborate with faculty to define the essential concepts of a discipline and, focusing on the learning process, to find ways to make the invisible process of learning visible. We need to enable teachers to observe and monitor student learning, provide effective and timely feedback, and externalize their own expert meaning-making strategies, modeling for their students what they know and how they come to know it.

Working with teachers in the Bridge Connection program at Newcomers High School on the premise that less content is more, that thinking historically and reading and writing competently presuppose the requisite cognitive and metacognitive processes, and that “writing may be by far the single academic skill most closely associated with college success” (Conley, Toward 5), we are currently looking at student writing as a window into student thinking and as a reflection of the design and scaffolding of writing tasks as well as the role of feedback. So far, the simple juxtaposition of teacher tasks and student responses has been rich and revealing. In one case, we examined a prewriting brainstorming activity and the resulting essays. The evidence led us to conclude that the prewriting activity needed to be redesigned if it were to elicit the kind of in-depth, supported, well-organized writing required in college. This activity pointed out the need for teacher intervention to scaffold the process, to embed the critical habits of mind when students are still thinking through the question; the need for building task knowledge so that students understand the expectations underlying good academic writing; and the need to weave in diagnostic and formative assessments throughout the course. In another discussion, we focused on finished
essays that competently presented, in three neat paragraphs, Darwin, Galileo, and Martin Luther as revolutionary thinkers, yet failed to connect them within the context of the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution. How much further would the students have to go in order to achieve a higher standard of writing, and how do we encourage them to persist in this drafting process? These and many other questions about how we support students’ reading, writing, and learning across the disciplines need to be addressed. One of our goals is to design a rubric that identifies not only the key content knowledge but the complex skills and strategies, the habits of mind we want students to demonstrate as they move from one level to the next within the precollege Bridge program to College Now, and then, to college.

Using Newcomers High School as an incubator for a new pedagogical approach, we hope to enlist the support and collaboration of our College Now faculty at LaGuardia. Such a collaborative effort would make particular sense in light of the affiliated status recently conferred on Newcomers High School which sends approximately half of its graduating class to LaGuardia. Our populations are strikingly similar. A sustained conversation – high school and college instructional faculty sitting down with each other as equals – would help us all to clarify our expectations regarding what students should know and be able to do at various points on the continuum from high school to college, and to develop a coherent plan. Within College Now, a definition of the necessary knowledge and know-how would strengthen the sequence of courses we offer and ensure that in offering students their first opportunity to take a college course, we truly offer them a college course. A common purpose would also allow high school and college faculty to reflect on their assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning and determine whether these beliefs are enacted in their classrooms. Given LaGuardia’s record on learning communities and the combined knowledge and expertise of faculty from both institutions, this goal seems attainable. According to Conley, it is also promising: “Ongoing communication across institutional boundaries using the language of student learning as a common point of reference can facilitate more student movement across those boundaries” (College 77).

We, and our students in College Now, are straddling two worlds. The challenge – and the opportunity – to discuss and define exemplary academic work that will begin to bridge the gap between high school and college awaits.

I invite you to the table.
Works Consulted


