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# DUALITIES OF DUAL ENROLLMENT: NAVIGATING THE LITERAL AND LIMINAL SPACES OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE OUTREACH PROGRAM

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## Abstract

The rise in popularity of dual enrollment/dual credit (DE/DC) programs offers both challenges and opportunities for students and faculty alike. The voices and experiences of faculty, while less often studied, provide insights into the nature of these programs and the ambiguities and liminalities they create. This reflective essay, while presenting the experiences of only one faculty member in only one of these programs, may be useful for faculty, administrators, and students.

**Keywords:** dual enrollment, dual credit, outreach, community college, high school

I found myself frantically calling the front desk at Little River High School at 8:50 one snowy morning, hurtling west on Highway 56 at the fastest I dared.

“Hey, uh, this is Lael Ewy, and I teach the second-hour college comp. class for Hutch Community College, and I’m going to be a few minutes late.”

The voice at the other end was calm, as any successful school secretary’s must be.

“OK. I’ll let the kids know and make sure the room is open. Stay safe!”

I did. My car has good traction control and decent tires, and my role requires enough windshield time to make for an experienced driver.

The role of an instructor in a community college outreach program requires planning, patience, and the sort of flexibility to throw all of that to the wind at the flash of a text or the appearance of an unexpected squall while responding to the complexities and ambiguities these programs present.

## Where Have We Been?

### Definitions

“Outreach” is only one term for programs that allow high school students to bank college credits from local institutions. Most people are familiar with International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs, but these represent a different category. Based on set curricula and meant to fit with existing high school culture, IB and AP programs present the level of academic rigor of a postsecondary class but are not taught under the aegis of a college or university.

Dual enrollment or dual credit programs (DE/DC)—“Outreach” in the parlance of Hutchinson Community College (properly shortened to HutchCC according to our communications team)—are mirrors of the courses college freshmen would be likely to take their first academic year.

Usually focusing on common general education classes (e.g., English composition, speech, and college algebra), these courses are taught through dedicated programs via local or regional community colleges or public universities, often alongside career or technical education programs. They are taught either by qualified (Master's or above) high school teachers or, as in my case, by faculty from local colleges. Some classes are "blended," which means an on-site teacher does all of the in-class instruction, and the "teacher of record," working for the local college, grades the work and provides feedback online.

The teaching modes in DE/DC programs can take many forms: in-person classes at high schools themselves, online courses, through videoconferencing at dedicated camera-and-microphone-equipped rooms at satellite campuses, or various combinations of these. I have taught classes that included in-person students at a HutchCC satellite campus and students Zooming in from two high school classrooms in nearby towns. Most of these courses are marketed to high school students first, but if there is a slot in a class that meets at a satellite campus, I might have students in the room ranging in age from 16 to 65.

Thus, preparation is key.

While most DE/DC courses use common syllabi shared by, say, all of the composition classes at the accredited college, academic calendars vary by high school. Since any given instructor may teach at half a dozen regional high schools, she must plan according to half a dozen academic calendars. Fortunately, those schools publish their calendars on their websites prior to the start of the academic year, giving the instructor a clear idea of what to expect.

Except when they don't.

### **On Schedule**

The school schedules published at the beginning of each academic year are baselines from which variations on the theme are played. My first year working in the Outreach program saw one high school at which I taught add inservice days late in the fall semester due to delayed union contract negotiations. I have shifted class start times due to conflicts with AP classes, and when one particularly small school at which I teach sends a team to a state tournament (any team), literally the whole district shuts down, trundles onto buses, and follows the team to cheer them on. School spirit is great, but this sort of thing also has me scrambling to revise my lesson plans. Inclement weather is a given in Kansas, but my situation is complicated by the fact that it is also local: the same weather system that leaves the main campus dry can dump six inches of snow on a remote high school or satellite campus. Severe weather has me scanning media and email and text threads to see where I need to be and to reconsider whether or not I need to invest in an all-wheel-drive car. And then there are the realities of teaching the higher-achieving, more engaged tier of students at each high school and finding that only three out of the fifteen students will be in class because the choir will be at a competition 100 miles away—and the higher-achieving, most engaged students are, of course, in choir.

The lesson here is not only to always have a plan B but to always be able to scrap that at the last minute, to push back lessons, due dates, and learning units, and always to be ready to give a handful of students a "work day" so they can get things done while we wait for the rest of the class to come back from their extracurricular adventures.

### **On Being Liminal**

Being a teacher in a dual enrollment program means being neither here nor there—or rather, both here *and* there. It means being *in* everything but not *of* anything. The word "liminal" is used frequently when describing the role, for example, by Russo (2020), McWain (2018), and Wilkinson (2019). Since I teach at several different high schools, I carry laminated identity cards from those

schools in order to access the buildings (to “badge in” and “badge out”) and to show other teachers and administrators that I belong there for the three or so hours a week I am on campus. This is a necessity in the age of heightened security at public schools—a constant reminder of the reality of school shootings, even at rural schools, even at schools that have their own trap-shooting teams, schools to which students routinely drive pickups with filled rifle racks in the back windows. In order to be aware of changes that may affect me, I am signed up for the high schools' email lists, the districts' texts. Ninety percent of these communications have nothing to do with me, but I end up with a sample of the schools' cultures, of which teachers get the shout-outs, which ones routinely make their students late to other classes. I “know” these people the same way one might know someone exclusively over social media, except I am the eternal lurker: for what purpose would I ever interact?

My situation also creates other issues, though: if a high school has a lockdown drill, a tornado drill, or a fire drill I need to know what the building protocol is, and, for the sake of the students and good Outreach relations, follow it. But it may also just get in the way: if a lockdown drill goes past the class time, I usually need to leave in order to meet some other class at some other campus. Officially, I'm out, but what do I do with the kids? Just leave them there in a dark classroom, waiting for the all clear?

The same situation with only slightly more connection applies to my relationship with my employer as well. My office is at a satellite campus (Newton, Kansas), some of my classes are at another (McPherson, Kansas), and my other classes are scattered across a variety of high schools, some of which I never set foot in, serving those students either over Zoom or with “blended” classes consisting of a classroom teacher doing the fun part, and for which I just grade the course materials via our online learning platform.

During an average academic year, I am on the main campus in Hutchinson, Kansas only a handful of times; I use videoconferencing to attend department and committee meetings. I have colleagues, but it is difficult to establish collegiality. I am a faculty member of Hutchinson Community College in more or less good standing, but I am forever marginal, limning the edges of its service areas, pursuing its mission but not exactly one of the crew.

This ambiguity extends to my place on the organizational chart. Officially, I report to the co-chairs of Department 3, Fine Arts and Humanities, but my schedule is set by the Outreach team. Professionally, I am evaluated by Department 3, but Outreach also evaluates the courses I teach. Outreach serves the needs of the high schools and their communities, which aligns with the mission of the college, but which also sometimes creates friction when we who teach in these programs enforce college-level academic standards and expectations for attendance and communication with parents (or a lack thereof). I joke about certain standards or expectations, about materials that contain more sex or foul language or high-level thinking than high school students are used to, with a shrug and the tagline “Welcome to college, kid,” but it also isn't fair to throw a perhaps sheltered student into this situation without some support and some explanation, which I also have learned to provide. (For examples, see the “Navigating Difference” and “Where We Are” sections below.)

It is difficult not to try to serve two masters here—including the high schools, maybe three or four. In order to make the situation work, I have to be creative at times, adjusting lessons and writing prompts to make them more relevant to the lives of my students, providing more activities in class than I would in a “normal” college classroom. I get students moving around and working in small groups. I run Kahoot!s and often gamify lessons that would otherwise be more straightforward lecture or textual analysis.

## Navigating Difference

Some differences, though, are hard to breach: public school students have gotten used to a minimal amount of homework, but in college, *all* the work is homework, and class is generally the location of enrichment, discussion, lecture, the place to add perspective to the material. I have had to throw all that out the window: we routinely read through course materials in their entirety, and I often reserve class time to finish assignments posted online. I also use our online learning platform as a place to upload the products of class activities, creating quick and easy formative assessments and giving students an incentive to participate; public school kids will not do anything unless they get “points” for it. One-to-one technology (school district-supplied laptops) makes this possible, but it also creates barriers: so locked-down are these computers by districts terrified that students will look at porn or guns that students often cannot open the links I use for enrichment. In one memorable example, the McPherson district blocked access to *The New Yorker*, from which I had linked a benign but descriptive article on monster trucks.

Since it takes both time and often substantial effort to get their IT departments to unblock web sources, I often just have students do research on their phones, putting me at odds with increasingly draconian public-school anti-cellphone policies. As often, I just tell students that, when they are doing research and run across a blocked source that otherwise looks good, they should send me a link and I will print the page to a .pdf and send it back. It is a clunky workaround. No student has sent me a link to porn yet.

When it comes time to assign grades, other differences emerge: most college teachers think nothing of flunking a student who ghosts the class or underperforms. While it is not necessarily true that public schools will pass everyone, there is substantial pressure to “get students through,” and so due dates and what constitutes a “D” may slide. In public schools, a “D” is passing, the bare minimum to which disengaged students aspire. In my composition classes, a “C” is required to move on to the next level, leaving the “D” students with credit holes to fill the next semester. Likewise, if students fail to pass my college class in the spring of their senior year, it is possible they will not be able to graduate, as the high school credits my class was to provide are not there. In a normal college situation, this would not be considered the teacher’s problem, but in DE/DC programs, it constitutes something of a crisis.

In public school classrooms, much effort is put into “engagement,” and failure to get all the students on board with the lessons at all times is considered a failure by the teacher. In college, if a student chooses to play games on their laptop or text their friends all through class, many teachers will just think “Hey, that’s on you kid. It’s your money, and you can spend it as you like.” While declining enrollment in higher education is changing that situation somewhat, the onus for giving a rip about one’s education and the responsibility for engagement are still primarily on the student. In order to address these differences, I often explicitly state what students will be responsible for and why. If an assignment is ambiguous, I try to point out to students that this is purposeful: “*You* get to decide how long this paper should be given the expectations of the prompt.”

This solution is imperfect since most of the students I serve have never had to make these choices before. In order to achieve a standard outcome, public school teachers have had to create standardized student experiences. The formulaic writing of ChatGPT looks good to students because it is an idealized version of what they have been taught to write.

Classroom standards for “seat time” are set in public school classrooms by the Carnegie unit, in the college classroom by standards for a credit hour that may or may not involve actually sitting in class. Because my students receive both college and high school credit, my classes run longer in the year than those on the main campus and are supplemented by online materials. While I do get paid extra for that work, my extended academic year further distances me from the main campus community. But the situation also leads to confusion: my classes typically start a week after students’

high school classes and end a week or two before, leaving some students literally not knowing where to go a few weeks out of the year or expecting me to accept late work after my grading deadline.

### Where We Are

This clash between academic cultures and expectations has led to criticism of the quality and lack of equity of DE/DC programs. This criticism is not without merit. The vast majority of the students I serve are middle class, white, and would be destined for college no matter what. Many already have colleges picked out (not the one for which I teach), several each semester already having secured athletic or academic scholarships. Matherly (2023), writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, cites Fink's assertion that DE/DC is a "program of privilege," serving primarily white, wealthy, and English-speaking populations and allowing them to rack up college credit at little to no cost. These issues are explored more deeply by Hooper and Harrington (2022), who identify a variety of factors, from barriers to access to lack of institutional support for diverse learners.

Mangan (2016) explores questions about the academic rigor of DE/DC programs: are the high school students signing up for these programs academically prepared for college work? Will instructors "dumb down" these classes in order to meet unprepared students where they are? Are the students who enroll in them intellectually and emotionally mature enough to handle the work (and its concomitant stress)? In a qualitative survey, Ferguson, Baker, and Burnett (2015) found that teachers perceived their DE/DC enrolled students' abilities and maturity levels to be as high as those of traditional college students, though, notably, only 3 of the 15 surveyed had taught at both high school and college levels. These same teachers reported that there was no difference between the design of college courses and the DE/DC courses they teach.

My experience is similar, but with a caveat. Aside from the aforementioned differences in the classroom experience, the online course shells I use with my composition classes are the same ones that other HutchCC students use; indeed, a certain level of standardization for required general education courses is a common feature of higher education. Having taught at both colleges and at a high school, I pitch my composition classes at the level expected of a "grade 13"/lower division college class. Maturity and academic preparation, though, vary by student: most of the students enrolled in my courses are intellectually able to do the work, even if they are not always prepared for the time commitment it requires. As most Outreach students at HutchCC are planning on going to college, many already have experience with college-prep classes, honors courses, and advanced-placement programs.

Some, however, are neither academically nor emotionally prepared, with a handful academically prepared but not emotionally prepared. Behavior issues are common in ways that would not seem typical of college classes. However, using an online 200-level literature course at Wichita State that I also teach as a comparison, many of the "traditional" college students enrolled in that course are also not academically prepared for college level work, and a reduction in emotional maturity for Gen Z and Gen Alpha students is generally understood (Twenge, 2017). Possibly, any lack of preparation or decline in maturity notable in DE/DC students is just part of a larger trend.

### Getting It Out of the Way

Perhaps the more worrisome problem is what DE/DC classes reveal about general education classes, both within the organization and out of it. Speech, college composition, college algebra, and basic psychology classes, the ones most typically offered in DE/DC programs, come off as necessary evils, courses that need "taking care of" (Hassel, 2012, p. 1), and "getting out of the way" before the real education, the one geared towards students' interests and career goals, can begin. I cannot claim to create very many English majors in my first and second level composition classes (though I have warned a few students they de facto already were), but I do think that what



we offer in these classes has real value. From the most basic skills, like learning to use a semicolon, to more complex, like learning different patterns of formal argumentation, composition classes not only make students better writers but more attentive and better thinking people. There is a reason, after all, that general education classes are still required. Even if a student is destined to be a welder, that welder will have to communicate with coworkers and create documentation. If she goes out on her own, she will have to write business proposals and, if her firm gets big, create quarterly and annual reports. We do not just prepare students to write well for other classes—though that, too, is an important part of what we do.

I cringe, then, when students say, on the first day when we go over why they signed up for the class, that they want to “get it out of the way.” It gives me a chance to preach a bit, but even a semester’s worth of sermons will not necessarily convert people from 12-years’ worth of proselytizing by the One True Faith of the strictly economic value of education.

### Where We Might Go

None of this is to say that DE/DC programs do not provide the fulfillment of teaching and even some touches of the sublime. By focusing on students at a critical time of their lives, DE/DC teachers are able to help students make important decisions about their futures and, hopefully, instill in them a little more confidence and perspective than would be typical of most entering freshmen. It is still possible to create positive academic relationships with students, even with the barriers of distance and time. By adapting teaching practices to something closer to what DE/DC students are used to, and by ratcheting up academic expectations more gradually than in a traditional college class, by being clear about why we are studying what we are studying, and by remaining flexible in terms of the academic calendar, DE/DC instructors can achieve something close or equal to what students will experience their freshman year on campus.

Further, there is little more beautiful than having moon-set on the left and dawn on the right as I ply my way north on I-135, and there is little more satisfying to see than a student finally “get it,” as I typically have the same students for Comp. 1 and Comp. 2.

With DE/DC programs increasing in enrollment (Matherly, 2023), it behooves us to face the challenges they pose and leverage opportunities for these programs to be conduits for students to move toward greater levels of achievement, not just to more credits earned.

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