

NYS TESOL HE SIG Event

by Lubie Alatraste and Ashley Fifer

The Higher Education Special Interest Group held its second annual event at the New School University on December 7, 2013, sponsored by Longman Pearson and organized and run by HE SIG co-chairs Lubie G. Alatraste and Ashley Fifer under NYS TESOL affiliation. The theme for this year's half-day gathering was "High School to College Transitions: Sharing Experiences to Find Solutions," a continuation and expansion of last year's theme.

The event was well attended, creating a roomful of attendees and strong activist energy. The presentations by the four panelists—Caroline Hellman, NYC College of Technology, CUNY; Shondel J. Nero, New York University; Diana Schwinge, Adelphi University; and Christine Susskind, James I. O'Neill High School—generated a variety of comments and stimulated responses. Each invited panelist shared her work with English language learners (ELLs) as well as the challenges they face daily in their teaching and obtaining adequate student support.

Prof. Hellman spoke of her efforts to meet the needs of second language writers in her native speaker developmental writing class. One problem she addressed was the stigma attached to remediation and how we need to work on removing that stigma. Second, she pointed out that many developmental teachers are not ESL specialists, but are called on to help ESL students. Furthermore, she noted, there tends to be an overemphasis on the five-paragraph essay.

Prof. Nero discussed the issues of responsibility for writing and success that rests with both the instructor and the students when it comes to second/foreign language learning. She made a passionate argument for reconsidering how we refer to native speakers, as there are so many varieties of English. She also pointed out that monolingualism shouldn't be the assumed norm in our classroom or society; instead, she said, we should assume and encourage multilingualism not only in our students, but also in our teachers.

Dr. Schwinge focused on successful programs that tap into ELLs' potential, such as Bilingual Educators in Science and Technology. She also talked about disturbing data related to high school dropouts who do not belong to any group or outreach effort or are part of any community program; these young people are referred to as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). All her topics appeared particularly novel to the audience and received a large amount of attention.

Finally, after looking at how colleges deal with diverse ESL needs, programming cuts, and writing concerns, the panel turned its attention to high schools. Susanne Susskind, the chair of NYS TESOL Secondary Education SIG and a long-serving high school teacher, reviewed a large list of points that related to high school classroom realities: the multiple issues of meeting very diverse students' needs, and learning within a content area but with few or non-existent support systems, funds, or participating parents.

After each panelist's presentations, the audience followed up with questions. This was an engaged audience, clearly concerned with the difficult high school to college transition for all, and in particular for ELLs.

The final stage of the event included a discussion of the issues, moderated by the SIG co-chairs. Based on the comments and suggestions they recorded, future initiatives will be planned and presented to NYS TESOL for further consideration and dissemination.

Please go to NYSTESOL.org and look for the Higher Education SIG. We have our mission statement on the Web as well as our blog. We invite comments and clear suggestions how to join forces with teachers and administrators to make the high school to college transition more successful for second language students.

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