2014

Of Thresholds and Springboards: Teaching Them, Teaching Each Other

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The authors wish to express their appreciation to the students enrolled in our English 801 practicum in the fall of 2010. Our new teachers taught us much about teaching, and for this we are grateful. We are also thankful for the support we received from the First- and Second-year English program and from the English Department of the University of Kansas.

This article is available in Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol3/iss1/11
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Education must begin with the solution of the student-teacher contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.

—Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed

The past two decades in composition studies have seen an increase in scholarship devoted to the course typically referred to as the composition practicum, especially to the relationship of the faculty who teach the course to the new teachers who are enrolled in it. As the scholarship reveals, the particular duties of the practicum assistant differ widely from institution to institution. In some programs, a few advanced teaching assistants work with small groups of instructors who are new to teaching or who are new to the program but have some basic experience with teaching; these teaching groups may or may not be used in addition to a practicum course. In another model for practicum assistantships, an advanced Teaching Assistant serves as a mentor for individual faculty members—both the (often overwhelming) duties of teaching the practicum, and the faculty member mentors the assistant in teaching and administering a graduate-level course on composition pedagogy. Of particular interest in this body of scholarship is the question of mentorship. Long, Holberg, and Taylor (2002), for example, contrast an “apprenticeship” model of mentorship in which assistants are on the disempowered end of a unidirectional power structure—less mentees than “gofers”—with a “collegial” model in which assistants are endowed with administrative duties and the power to shape the programs they administer. Certainly, the mentoring relationship between the practicum faculty and assistants warrants further investigation, since its consequences exceed the two individuals involved and extend to the group of new teachers who are simultaneously responsible and to the program in which they teach.

Before we discuss our mutual experience in this course, however, we wish to make clear from the outset that our course was considerably more than “just a practicum.” Its official title was, in fact, “The Study and Teaching of Writing,” and in our graduate catalogue, the course was described as “a survey of major concepts and issues in the study of writing, especially as applied to teaching composition. Practices in writing pedagogy are also discussed, and students' teaching of composition is observed and explored” (University, 4). Yes, our course was undeniably a practicum, but it was much more than that. And yes, we are quite aware of and sensitive to the representational issues raised by Dobrin (2005) in Don’t Call It That: The Composition Practicum—the title of which says much about how the practicum is still widely misconstrued as “how to” “rites of passage” and is thus “introduction to writing instruction. This was not the course we taught. But for purposes of convenience, we will refer to our course using the familiar, shorthand term, practicum, and trust our readers to keep in mind that our course was also “an introduction to composition theory ... to pedagogical theory, to histories of composition studies ... to new media and digital rhetoric” as they are titled in our department; we will also consult with teaching assistants about student problems and successes, lesson planning, and other everyday pedagogical issues. In this respect, Erin was very much a junior colleague to Frank in the practicum, but because she was, in reality, still a doctoral candidate, she was not Frank’s peer—she did not share his teaching and administrative and mentorship duties—to offer guidance and support with authority.

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Winter/Spring 2014

Frank

Erin shared that semester. As part of our duties, we conducted teaching observations of all new Graduate Teaching Assistants (as they are titled in our department), reviewed one set of their graded student papers, and advised them on the assignments they developed for each one. An individual course with each for one unit. An individual course with each for one unit.

The positive results, and the need for more discussion about such assistantships, inspired us to attempt to convey some of what we learned as a result of our collaboration. Here, we will relate the difficulties we faced and the satisfactions we experienced as we negotiated (and re-negotiated) our relationship over the course of that semester. Our approach is one that might best be described as a reflective dialogue written around two major topics: the mutual understanding that we found formative to some of the events, problems, and insights we experienced that semester. Our hope is that this retrospective will be useful to other practicum faculty and assistants as they negotiate similar circumstances.

Locations

One of the first conversations that Frank and I had about this position after I agreed to serve as the Faculty Intern was about our circumstances. In retrospect, I remain convinced that our practicum would not have been as successful as it was without the many contributions that Erin made—not only technical contributions, but pedagogical and scholarly ones as well.

In that early conversation, we had to come to a mutual understanding of the implications of my location between him, as a tenured faculty member, and the new teachers that we were mentoring. We had to strike a balance between my appearing to be more or less a part of the instructional team and as a colleague by asking me directly for my input and then confirming my authority by explaining to the new teachers how my suggestions could be suitable alternatives to his. In the end, I realized that I couldn’t have stood that balance by myself; my location as a point between the new teachers and the tenured faculty had to be continuously and clearly validated by Frank as the semester progressed.

At the same time that I was learning about how to locate myself as both a mentee and a junior colleague, I was also acting as a mentor to the new instructors whom Frank and I oversaw in the practicum. While it may seem to be a contradiction—a mentee who is also a mentor—one is hardly a beneficial arrangement. Without having a mentor to help me understand and structure the contexts in which I interacted with these new teaching assistants in our program, it would have been quite a bit more challenging for me to understand what the nature of my interactions with new teachers of composition should entail. Frank helped to understand myself as someone who was close enough to the experiences of the new teachers—a graduate student and former teaching assistant myself—to be empathetic while also distant enough—by time, experience, and administrative and mentorship duties—to offer guidance and support with authority. Frank

When I was first presented with a list of experienced teaching assistants who might be suitable to assist in the teaching of the practicum, and when I saw Erin’s name on that list, I knew immediately who would be my choice. As Erin mentioned, we already knew each other from earlier courses, and I was well acquainted with her intelligence, her good humor and her professional abilities. As I also mentioned, this was an important knowledge. Frank, I did not have. This knowledge, as I anticipated, would prove beneficial to the success of our practicum, especially since I had redesigned the 101 common syllabus to include an emphasis on applications of new media to visual rhetoric. And while, early on, I may have flattered myself, believing that I could address any and all technical problems that arose with this course, it soon became apparent that this clearly was not the case. In retrospect, I remain convinced that our practicum would not have been as successful as it was without the many contributions that Erin made—not only technical contributions, but pedagogical and scholarly ones as well.

In her opening comment, Erin alludes to finding herself in the middle of a paradox, aware of performing the dual roles of mentor (to me) and mentor (to our new teaching assistants). Of course, it is not possible to understand Erin’s rather vexed
location (and mine, too) without some basic familiarity with academic hierarchies. Erin occupied a muddled middle because, at

Frank wondered whether I encountered any resistance from the practitioners because I was relatively more proximate to them, both professionally and personally (most of our program’s new teaching assistants are in their mid-to-late 20s, as was the Faculty Intern). I couldn’t say as I’ve not been to enough conferences to be able to compare the resistance I encountered, which was negligible, but it’s quite possible. When I did encounter resistance from the new and experienced teachers whom I mentored, I usually had to do with whether that person and I had differences of opinion about how best to handle a classroom or pedagogical situation. In general, my philosophy regarding my administrative and mentoring duties was that I needed to respond to the resistance. For example, when I observed that I had not yet restructured a tricky class activity or clarified an over-written assignment, my first task was to understand what the instructor’s original intent for the assignment was by restating my understanding of it to the instructor. Then I discussed with the teacher the many persons and groups you were answerable to, and therefore asked to perform for—department and writing program directors, the many persons and groups you were answerable to, and therefore asked to perform for—department and writing program directors, and many of our first-year students and ranking agencies share at least one guiding assumption—namely, that good teaching directly corresponds to academic rank, credentials, and location within the hierarchy. I think this is a highly questionable assumption.

Tensions

I wonder: Did our new teachers, then, look upon Erin in the same way that possibly some of their students look upon them? Did they question her instructional authority, say, because they knew that she too was a graduate student, someone in the process of finishing her doctorate? Erin might be able to answer these questions better than I, but among our new teachers I noticed nothing but respect, appreciation, and positive regard for Erin. Certainly, this had much to do with Erin’s enthusiasm, dedication, and professionalism. But I think the fact that we all have had something to do with the fact that neither of us made her authority an issue that had to be explicitly addressed. We simply proceeded on the assumption that she and I both possessed authority for the class we were teaching, and that was that.

Erin

The difference between our experiences, I think, might be this: The source of your role conflicts could be linked to the many persons and groups you were answerable to, and therefore asked to perform for—department and writing program administrators, our new teachers, other graduate students, and, of course, yours truly. The source of my distress, on the other hand, is that everyone, including myself, had come to the table with a preconceived notion of role: that I was your teacher, your student, your mentor, your mentee, supervisor, helping hand, friend, nemesis, colleague, dissertation committee member, and sometimes confidant. And if this was not enough, you may now add to this list, co-author. I am sure I did not manage all of these roles successfully. In fact, I am quite certain that there were times I took on a certain role, say, that of mentor, when it might have been better had I enacted a very different role, say that of friend. Recalling these missteps, I am heartened by this knowledge—that most of our best moments were the surprises, the random encounters, the impossible double-binds we overcame, and, to draw upon your metaphor once again, the “schizophrenia” we experienced separately and together. Or, as Mrs. Malaprop might say, the “nasty detourage” we discovered in teaching this course.

Frank

I suppose one of the ways I make any discussion of tensions more agreeable (and thus less tense!) is to modify that plural noun with its now predictable, absolutely obligatory adjective, creative, as if to suggest all tensions are generative of insight and inspiration. We’ll maybe get around to those creative tensions later, but I would like to start this section off with an important (and I hope for you an unambiguously clear) distinction. I was your teacher, your student, your mentor, your mentee, supervisor, helping hand, friend, nemesis, colleague, dissertation committee member, and sometimes confidant. But if this was not enough, you may now add to this new teacher, your student, your mentor, your mentee, supervisor, helping hand, friend, nemesis, colleague, dissertation committee member, and sometimes confidant. And if this was not enough, you may now add to this list, co-author. I am sure I did not manage all of these roles successfully. In fact, I am quite certain that there were times I took on a certain role, say, that of mentor, when it might have been better had I enacted a very different role, say that of friend. Recalling these missteps, I am heartened by this knowledge—that most of our best moments were the surprises, the random encounters, the impossible double-binds we overcame, and, to draw upon your metaphor once again, the “schizophrenia” we experienced separately and together. Or, as Mrs. Malaprop might say, the “nasty detourage” we discovered in teaching this course.

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Frank

I was struck by your use of the term schizophrenia, Erin, to describe your sense of being pulled in two opposing directions at once, or, rather, of having to perform conflicting roles simultaneously. Your word choice reminded me of a distinction I have noticed several times over the years. How or why I came to this nugget, I don’t recall, but I am aware that one way schizophrenia has been redefined is to claim that it is not a break with reality, but rather, a break with sincerity. It would be hard to know what role I believed I was being called upon to play, but I do know that being able to have a break with (or take a break from!) the reality—or realities—we faced in this course, especially the reality of helping new instructors overcome their doubts, fears, traumas, and daily crises so that they might become more effective teachers of writing. I am, as you know, describing the unofficial curriculum we wrote as we taught the class, the one that didn’t appear on the syllabus and, for the most part, couldn’t have been known ahead of time.

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Erin

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Frank

Frank

Winter/Spring 2014
arrangement. If our new teachers have to teach captive first-year students, and therefore confront their own students' resistances, maybe it's right that we have to do the same. At the very least, there's an illuminating symmetry to this order of things.

That said, there was also a predictable trajectory that happened over the duration of this course. Because our new teachers were brand new teachers, most of them having no prior classroom experience, we were the people who somehow got them through those first few days, that first class, that first week, month, unit, and semester. We provided them with a common syllabus, resources, encouragement, productive expectations, tricks of the trade, and in essence, a lot of the support that many of the professionals had when they possessed the week before classes began. But as I said, this was a trajectory. By the end of the semester, many had long departed from the common syllabus, others were writing their own assignments, and still others were busy experimenting with our course design. I can honestly say I was always happy with these developments, but on the other hand, many of these teachers were exercising their autonomy as teachers, testing new classroom ideas and activities, taking pedagogical chances. It's hard to be too upbeat about that. After all, the goal of this course is eventually to make ourselves unnecessary. It's just that some may have concluded we were unnecessary long before we confronted our judgment with their own!

I am speaking here of what I think are attitudes that roughly align with their scholarly interests and specialties. Obviously, rhythm and composition classes, along with language studies, tend to be more favorably disposed to this course than students who hail from other specialties within English. And this is even more understandable, given that the fact our practicum doubles as an introduction to the field of composition studies. Beyond this group, though, it is not unusual to encounter some resistance to the course from students who have no knowledge of, or particular scholarly interest in, composition studies.

Part of the usual resistance to this course happens because we ask students to surrender—or, at the very least, to question their assumptions about writing instruction. Such statements are familiar enough to anyone who has ever taught a practicum: the idea that the overriding concern of any writing course ought to be good grammar; the idea that literary texts, because they are considered exemplary, are the only texts that should be used to teach writing; and of course, the idea that writing cannot really be taught at all—or to put the matter bluntly, one either knows how to write or one doesn't. A very romantic sentiment that, but also a very debilitating one, too, especially for those first year students who, unfortunately, might believe the same thing. While these ideas have long been discredited in our literature, they have not been discredited in the minds of some of our new teachers, and the work devoted to challenging these shibboleths will, on occasion, provoke resistance.

Finally, there were tensions that resulted from our choice to design a first-year writing course that incorporated new digital media. To be sure, instructional technology on our campus is no more available advantageous than it was several years ago, but at the time we taught the course, there remained stark differences from one classroom to the next. Some of our instructors taught in "state of the art" classrooms; others, however, did not, and found themselves pushing a multimedia cart from one location to the next. We had to develop more instructional time than originally planned to teach these digital tools. Moreover, many of our teachers with available online resources, the array of digital tools that could help their students complete the writing assignments given to them. There were, of course, a predictable number of technical problems, but on balance, this aspect of the course, I happily admit, went far better than I ever imagined. But this was mostly due to your knowledge, your skills, and your forbearance—not only your patience with our new teachers, but with our co-instructor, Erin.

I'm sure that anyone who's reading this exchange of ours, Frank, will be incredulous about the fact that we still get along well enough to be co-authors, but in fact, we do. Hopefully, this article will help others to have the same enthused, productive relationship that we've enjoyed even after similarly high-stress collaboration and mentoring situations!

Erin

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practically speaking, was remarkably honest and frustrating for everyone concerned. It is difficult to explain to others—administrators, faculty, graduate students, even done who has not taught the course—just how much shear labor is involved in managing the course that does it says it does. And without the help of an assistant, or administrative intern, or teaching mentor—whatever the honorific du jour—the course is nearly unmanageable. In fact, I do not think it possible that any instructor could effectively manage this course alone. It should come as no surprise, then, that our writing faculty are currently revisiting this course to find other ways of easing the burden of teaching it.

Erin

As I recall, you insisted that I be familiar with Kitzhaber’s work for my master’s exam! I’m thankful for your foresight in that regard because it gave me a sense of how important our practicum is. I, as a newly hired teaching assistant with no teaching experience whatever, appreciated having the practicum elements of the course combined with an introduction to composition theory. When our program recently surveyed experienced teaching assistants, we found overwhelming support for the practicum as a pre-requisite for teaching composition, according to our program’s values and goals; it gives them pedagogical training that will inform their teaching for the rest of their teaching careers, even if they plan to teach in areas other than composition studies; and it helps them on the job market because successful completion of the course provides clear evidence of thorough training in composition studies and pedagogy and prepares them to speak about their teaching philosophies and experiences clearly and competently. But it is a demanding course for instructors and students alike, and both really do benefit from having the intermediary assistant there to help manage the tensions that come with the course. For me, this was a productive tension, because it provided me with the opportunity to learn from you and to think about the course, too. I mentioned.

And these new teachers had plenty of tensions that they needed help dealing with, too. Some of them had a great deal of difficulty balancing time and priorities, and since you were one charged with final grade evaluation, we decided that it would be your responsibility to discuss these concerns in the practicum with (the relatively few) students for whom this was a serious problem. The new teachers regularly came to both you and me for advice about frustrating or confusing situations, such as how to deal with a problem student, or a disastrous class meeting, or a challenge to their authority, or attendance problems, or a problem. The new teachers regularly came to both you and me for advice about frustrating or confusing situations, such as how to deal with a problem student, or a disastrous class meeting, or a challenge to their authority, or attendance problems, or a problem. The new teachers regularly came to both you and me for advice about frustrating or confusing situations, such as how to deal with a problem student, or a disastrous class meeting, or a challenge to their authority, or attendance problems, or a problem. The new teachers regularly came to both you and me for advice about frustrating or confusing situations, such as how to deal with a problem student, or a disastrous class meeting, or a challenge to their authority, or attendance problems, or a problem.

Looking back over our conversation, we are struck by a number of themes that emerged in this discussion. First, there seems to be a pattern of tiered, repeated alignments in the situations our teachers faced with their students, and what we faced with our new teachers. Among other things, we observed that just as our new teachers had to deal with captive first-year students, we had to do with our teachers who were required to take our course. Along these same lines, we wondered if the casual questioning of authority that some first-year students have learned to direct toward their instructors (e.g., “She’s only...”)

Conclusion

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