

Peer TA Mentoring in a Foreign Language Program

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This paper describes a peer-mentoring program in a large language department. Experienced Teaching Associates (TAs) served as peer mentors to novice TAs, providing the type of individualized guidance that new TAs need. The peer mentoring model has several advantages over the supervision-only model, including one-on-one help, multiple classroom visits and meetings, and regular feedback on various aspects of teaching. The experience that TAs share at different levels, as teachers and as students, is also important and plays a positive role in a peer mentoring program. Even though the program described has been instituted in a language department, the model may be useful to departments in other disciplines that also employ a large number of TAs.

Mentoring programs have existed for over four decades at American colleges and universities (Anderson & Shannon, 1995; Barr Ebest, 2002; Siskin and Davis, 2001). The model for mentoring has also existed in international settings such as Brazil and Mexico, where this type of model meets the needs of trainees and new teachers who do not have access to formal training. In academia there are two patterns of mentoring based on hierarchy: faculty mentoring (senior faculty-junior faculty or faculty-teaching associate) and peer mentoring (student-student, faculty-faculty, teaching associate-teaching associate).

Several studies describe mentoring of teaching associates (TAs) by other TAs. Nyquist and Sprague (1998) report on a study by Darling (1986), whose findings included the fact that new TAs resorted to experienced TAs for information regarding not only their program of study but also teaching assignments and other teaching procedures. Nyquist and Sprague (1998) consider that "this reliance on peers as the ultimate authority on teaching can create difficulties" (p. 66). However, in spite of possible problems, we believe that supervisors can take advantage of the trust that exists among TAs. Since they already exchange ideas about teaching, the next natural step seems to be the formalization of this exchange: a peer mentoring program that allows TAs who have experience and who have been positively evaluated to mentor new TAs.

Writing programs such as those described in Martin and Paine (2002) and Weiser (2002) have successfully taken advantage of peer mentors. In Martin and Paine's (2002) writing program, experienced TAs were first invited to mentor new TAs. Later, both novice TAs and adjuncts were assigned to work with mentors. In their investigation they found that although TAs do not mentor tenure-track faculty, senior TAs do include tenure-track faculty in collaborative grading groups.

Weiser (2002) reports on the ambivalence he has faced regarding the use of TA mentors, but offers several good reasons to have peer mentors in a teaching environment. One reason is related to knowledge of the discipline. Weiser reports that some faculty were not as familiar with scholarship in rhetoric and composition as many of their graduate students. In the department described here, as in many other large foreign language departments, tenure-track faculty are not directly involved with language teaching—and thus are not readily available to provide guidance regarding teaching.

Barr Ebest (2002) also reports on writing programs that have successfully used experienced TAs to mentor new TAs. At the University of Massachusetts Amherst and at the University of Arizona, for example, a group of new TAs is assigned a peer mentor that will meet individually and in groups throughout the year. The mentor observes the new TA in the classroom, holds post-observation conferences, analyzes syllabi, assignment sheets and handouts, and reviews graded papers. At Northern Arizona University mentoring is a privilege granted to only a few TAs who are chosen on the basis of their pedagogical skills as well as their openness and their ability to listen.

In this paper, we report on our experience with a collaborative peer mentoring program in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University. The pilot program was established to address some of the problems that arose from staffing over 100 classes in multi-section language courses with instructors who lacked a foundation in foreign language pedagogy. The initiative of the supervisors grew into a collaborative effort with the TAs involved in the project, as well as staff from the Faculty & Teaching Assistant Development office (FTAD). In this paper, we also propose revisions for the future of the program. The peer mentoring model may be useful to departments in disciplines other than foreign language which also employ a large number of TAs.

What Is a Mentor?

According to The Mentoring Group (2004), the broad definition of mentor is “an experienced person who goes out of his/her way to help a mentee set important life goals and develop the skills to reach them” (¶ 2). In the specific context of teacher/TA formation, mentoring has been described in various ways. Anderson (1987, cited in Anderson and Shannon, 1995) defines mentoring as “a nurturing process” in which the mentor not only teaches and encourages the new teacher, but also befriends the new teacher, thus developing a “caring relationship” (Anderson & Shannon, 1995, p. 29). In an attempt to arrive at a definition of mentoring, Shaw (1995) mentions several variations of the term, including “coaching, peer teaching, guidance and counseling” (p. 260). Jacques (1995) believes that considering a mentor as an experienced adviser who guides his or her protégé is better than regarding the mentor as a supervisor. In our view, those two positions—mentor and supervisor—are indeed very different. In the next subsection, we outline the differences between the two positions.

Mentor and Supervisor: Two Distinct Concepts

Maynard and Furlong (1995) point out that the concepts of mentor and supervisor are distinct and argue that we need to move from supervision to mentoring. They indicate that mentoring is an active process because teachers “have an active role in the training process” (p. 12). While the two concepts are indeed different, we believe that supervisors do play an integral role in training by observing classes and offering feedback, providing orientation workshops, and sponsoring professional development opportunities. Nevertheless, supervisors offer guidance in groups while mentors interact one-on-one. Furthermore, supervisors evaluate new teachers, whereas mentors develop a plan of action with mentees according to individual needs.

According to Maynard and Furlong (1995), supervision is supposed to look at “the application of training acquired elsewhere” (p. 11). However, the difference that we see between mentoring and supervision is not related to where the training is acquired, since the TAs in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at OSU all received the same orientation prior to starting their teaching duties at the university. We view this distinction as a reflection of how much time a mentor spends with a mentee and the type of support, practical help, feedback, or encouragement offered, since mentors have the opportunity to observe their mentee’s performance multiple times during the academic year.

In a language program that is staffed by over 80 instructors with two supervisors, it is difficult, if not impossible, to devote 160 hours (equivalent to four weeks) exclusively to the one-on-one guidance that new TAs need in the beginning of their careers. The duties of a supervisor typically include, but are not limited to, coordination of multiple course levels, preparation of the teaching schedule, articulation with other university offices, supervision of student services, resolution of student or instructor conflicts, placement of students in appropriate levels, participation in committee work, and teaching at least one graduate course per year. With this job description, a more creative approach must be sought in order to maximize the teaching experience for new instructors.

A possible solution to the supervisory issue is the mentoring/consulting model. The models of consultation described in Brinko (1997), for example, create mentoring relationships that are comparable to instructional consultation. The distinction between supervision and mentoring is even more pronounced when the mentor is also a peer. While the supervisor ranks above the TA, the peer mentor is a colleague who has gone through the same process before, not that long ago. Peer mentors, therefore, are perceived very differently than supervisors. That difference in perception works to the advantage of the peer mentoring process and helps new TAs develop their teaching skills.

Nyquist and Wulff (1996) approach mentoring as a relationship between peers. However, their view differs from ours in a fundamental aspect: for Nyquist and Wulff, the mentoring relationship can only develop *after* TAs have acquired some experience, implying that mentoring takes place between faculty and TA, and that an experienced TA can be considered a peer to a faculty member. In this paper, we adopt one of the definitions of mentor provided in Shaw (1995): someone “experienced but not very senior...someone committed to good teaching and professional development” (p. 260). This description captures the essence of the relationship between peer mentor and mentee, who share the same general rank but are not separated by many years of seniority. The key word in Shaw’s definition is *experienced*, which does not have to equal many years in the profession, nor does it necessarily entail a hierarchical relationship.

Learning to Teach and Juggling Roles

It is common for new TAs in foreign language departments to go through an initial orientation period or course that ranges from a few days to a few weeks before the beginning of the academic year. In addition to that orientation course, many foreign language

departments offer a methodology course (Rifkin, 2001). This type of course often provides some theory behind the preferred pedagogical approaches in the field. It may also offer some practical tips for the classroom, including materials and lesson plans that may be adapted to each teaching/learning context.

The orientation and the methodology courses aim at preparing new TAs for situations that they will encounter in the classroom. However, learning to teach is a “complex, bewildering and sometimes painful task” (Maynard & Furlong, 1995, p. 10). The development of teaching skills does not generally happen overnight—or over one week. Therefore, it is necessary to offer new teachers continued support, not only in a theoretical course, but also in more practical, ‘hands-on’ ways that will be useful in the classroom. This type of practical support can be accomplished with a peer mentoring program that complements other initiatives, such as workshops and seminars that address teaching issues.

Many universities have general training programs for all national and international students (Rifkin, 2001). In spite of the fact that TAs have attended these general orientation programs, complications arise as they begin to manage their busy schedule and to juggle their obligations as students, teachers, and scholars. In American colleges and universities, it is not uncommon for TAs to find themselves in the middle of conflicting messages: on one hand, supervisors stress the importance of improving teaching skills; on the other hand, professors underscore the value of scholarship and downplay the responsibilities and the skills associated with teaching lower-level classes (Barr Ebest, 2000). Caught between these conflicting forces, new TAs find themselves at a loss. Chaput (2001) captures the essence of this problem faced by TAs when she states that “language teaching continues to be viewed as the problem child of language departments” (p. 191). The tension between the ‘two sides of the camp’ is also raised by Tesser (2005), who reports on a time not too long ago (or has that time really passed?) when professionals did not communicate: those who attended the Modern Language Association conference, dedicated mostly to literature and literary theory, did not want to hear what those who attended the conference for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages had to say, and vice-versa. According to Tesser, the two sides must exchange ideas for the sake of healthy enrollments in foreign language departments across the country; after all, students who learn language and culture in elementary/secondary school and in college will become the literature and linguistics majors that the professors are hired to teach. Peer mentors also play an important role in alleviating the tension that exists between language teaching and literary or linguistic research. They show new TAs how to strike a necessary balance between teaching and

scholarship. As students who are also teachers, peer mentors have been able to find time and energy to dedicate to both activities. They have realized that demonstration of good to excellent skills, both as a researcher and as a teacher, increases their chances of success in a very competitive market. As pointed out by Leaver and Oxford (2001), teachers who also attend school, the very definition of a TA, need to be reassured that the experience they are acquiring is in fact worth their time and effort. This reassurance comes from the job market: a good teacher who is also a strong scholar is more competitive than a scholar who does not do well in the classroom.

The next section outlines the TA support offered before the beginning of the peer mentoring program. It is important to note that this support has been a key component in the training program in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at OSU.

TA Support before Peer Mentoring

Before the creation of a peer mentoring program in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at OSU, TAs already received support through a three-week training session offered prior to the beginning of the academic year. This training included practice sessions and lesson preparation, as well as lectures on language pedagogy and presentations by other offices in the university. Furthermore, TAs also had the opportunity to participate in professional development workshops during the academic year that addressed issues ranging from teaching reading to using online learning platforms. In addition, every TA enrolled in the mandatory teaching methodology course during their first autumn term.

Before peer mentoring, several experienced TAs were assigned to observe classes taught by new TAs in the fall, thus helping identify issues that needed immediate attention. These senior TAs, selected because of their excellence in teaching, were volunteers and did not receive specific training to observe classes, other than their own experience of participating in the orientation workshop and being observed as well.

Given this less than ideal situation, the supervisors proposed the development of a peer observation and mentoring program that would formalize the support provided by more experienced TAs and strengthen the volunteer program. The original proposal called for two experienced TAs to enhance the support provided for new TAs. Funding from the Faculty & Teaching Assistant Development office, matched by funds from the department, made it possible to start the program, which would then continue in following years with departmental financial support. The next section outlines the Peer Mentoring Program.

Peer Mentoring Program and Participants

As mentioned previously, our original proposal called for two experienced TAs to take part in the new program. Upon receiving the notice that we were awarded the grant, an e-mail message was sent to all the experienced TAs in the department to determine interest in helping the new TAs during the following academic year. In that message, there was no information about the grant; that is, the TAs did not know that they would receive financial compensation. Much to our surprise, the response was greater than expected. Six experienced TAs volunteered to enhance TA support. With that response, we decided to include in the program all those who volunteered. Before the program started, we held our first meeting with the participants and informed them that they would receive financial support. We discussed general guidelines and established a timeline for future meetings. Participants were also given several articles on mentoring foreign language TAs. The program participants would take part in the orientation workshop before the beginning of autumn term in order to meet the new TAs and familiarize themselves with the type of feedback that is provided during the practice teaching sessions. At the beginning of the term, the peer mentors would be assigned new TAs with whom they would work during the term. Each term there would be three to four peer mentors participating in the program. Peer mentors would be “on duty” two out of four terms per academic year. No peer mentors would be on duty during summer term. Each of the peer mentors would dedicate a total of 60 hours to the Peer Mentoring Program during the academic year (30 hours/term). These hours would cover the activities shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Hours Spent by Each Peer Mentor (per Term on Duty)

Activity	Hours
Orientation workshop	4 h
Three supervisory meetings	3 h
Observations (6 visits+ 6 follow-ups)	12 h
Mentoring	11 h
Total	30 h

Before the beginning of autumn term, each peer mentor participated in two practice sessions during the orientation workshop, attending vocabulary and grammar practice lessons. These four hours were applied to observations, mentoring, or meetings during the second term of participation in the program. Three meetings with the program supervisors were scheduled for each term. Twelve hours were dedicated to six observations and six follow-up meetings with the new TA. The remaining eleven hours were dedicated to helping new TAs with pre-observation consultations,

lesson planning, suggestions for activities, class management, and other possible issues related to teaching or academic life. With this program, the peer mentors observe and work with new TAs from the very beginning of the training workshop. The new TAs seek assistance and guidance from the peer mentors regarding not only teaching but also other aspects of graduate student life, such as how to balance responsibilities as a teacher and as a student. The supervisors observe classes taught by new TAs only at about the middle of the term, after the peer mentors had the opportunity to work with the new TAs. The supervisors then point out to the new TAs any aspects in their teaching that still deserves attention, and encourage the new TAs to keep working with the peer mentors.

Revisions to the Program

Several revisions were done to the program during that first academic year. During the first year of the program, peer mentors communicated among themselves more often than they did with the supervisors. That was a natural result of the environment. Since mentors share offices, they interact frequently. At the end of the first term, the supervisors decided to take advantage of that frequent contact, and asked one of the peer mentors to coordinate weekly meetings with the other peer mentors. The outcomes of those meetings were then reported to the supervisors and adjustments to the program were made accordingly.

Another point targeted for revision was the participation of the peer mentors in the orientation workshop offered before the beginning of autumn term. The peer mentors now take active part in the workshop from the very beginning. They are introduced on the first day and immediately begin to work with the new TAs, helping them prepare practice lessons. Later in the workshop, peer mentors observe the new TAs as they teach practice lessons. Peer mentors also help the new TAs prepare their lesson plans for the classes they are assigned to teach.

Peer mentors were also given a handbook at the beginning of the workshop that included copies of articles on mentoring, observation forms, a time sheet to track program activities, mentoring guidelines, a copy of the departmental directory, the term schedule, and a copy of the original grant proposal. The training in the beginning of the academic year followed what is mentioned in Shaw (1995)—that mentors needed to “attend a specific course of training” (p. 260) so they would know what to observe in a class and how to conduct post-observation meetings. The supervisory meetings were geared toward providing continued support to peer mentors (Weiser, 2002).

This closer and more active participation in the orientation workshop stems from the need to make the role of the peer mentors clear from the outset in order to avoid incorrect assumptions about the program. In the first year, peer mentors were briefly introduced to the new TAs but no detailed explanation was given as to what their exact role was and why they should work with the new TAs. This may have led to misunderstanding the role of peer mentors: during the first year, some of the new TAs appeared to perceive peer mentors as “spies” who would report all errors related to teaching or classroom management to the supervisors. Although that image seemed to have dissipated toward the end of the first year, it is best to avoid it altogether. The role of peer mentors is to help new TAs succeed, not only as instructors, but also as students. The early and close participation in the orientation workshop makes it clear to the new TAs that the peer mentors are an integral part of the program and are there to help and work with them.

One interesting observation expressed by the peer mentors was the notion that some of the mentors had been placed into the role of “physician” administering aspirins and first aid at the last minute as novice TAs rushed to class without lesson plans. The solution was to assign each peer mentor to a specific course level. These peer mentors would then meet on a regular basis with their assigned new TAs to discuss lesson planning, exam correction, and so forth.

Another lesson learned from the pilot program was that the peer mentors needed a physical space where they could meet with the new TAs—a space that was separated from the other TAs. An office was designated as the Peer Mentoring Center. It is equipped with textbooks, dictionaries, and pedagogical resource materials, as well as a TV/VCR and DVD player to view and critique lessons of the new TAs. The videotaped lessons are an excellent tool for post observation meetings, a starting point for self-evaluation by the new TAs and for suggestions offered by the mentor.

Many of the lessons learned during the pilot program are outlined in the revised guidelines for peer mentors (see Appendix A). Among those, we highlight the detailed “Role of the Peer Mentor” section, which specifies what is and what is not expected of a peer mentor. This section includes suggestions on how to conduct observations and evaluation meetings. A folder has been created on the university server that includes “FAQs” with problems and solutions. A peer mentoring group e-mail account was also created, allowing all peer mentors to receive and respond to TA queries more quickly.

Concluding Remarks

The peer TA mentoring program was well received. In its second year, the program continued with three new peer mentors who came from the ranks of new TAs during the first year of the program. Among the reasons they mentioned for wanting to continue participating in the program as peer mentors were their positive experiences, echoed in comments from other new TAs during the first year of the program:

- “I loved the peer mentoring program! I enjoyed visiting the peer mentors. I used my peer mentor’s feedback when she visited me and it was a reassurance that I was on the right path.”
- “The activities they supplied last quarter were very helpful and you could tell that they were willing to help you.”
- “As a new member of the department, it was great to know that there was someone always there for us. All of them were always ready to answer any questions we had.”
- “Another positive aspect of the peer mentoring program was having them observe our classes. It gave us a chance to review our lessons plans with someone experienced. Personally, I got many new ideas that I quickly incorporated to my classes.”
- “I think it is a fantastic program that should be provided to any new teacher.”

Another sign of success arises from the evaluations of new TAs, many of whom finished the year with stellar comments from supervisors and students. The peer mentors have also profited from the experience. They have reportedly learned quite a bit from the new TAs while becoming, at the same time, more critical of their own teaching. This type of self-reflection is mentioned by Barr Ebest (2002, p. 217), who argues that mentoring gives TAs the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching. Shaw (1995, p. 262) reports that an Oxfordshire head teacher mentions that “in terms of professional development, [mentoring is] the best thing that has happened to [the mentors].” Shaw goes on to argue that mentors feel that they are identified as good practitioners who share good practice. Weiser (2002) also sees professional benefits to the career of mentors, from finding out that not every technique works the same for everyone to contributing insights that have been useful not only to other TAs but to faculty members as well.

In the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at OSU, new and veteran TAs have received help regarding pedagogical methods and approaches, while being encouraged to develop their own teaching style. This enhanced mentoring program has allowed the supervisors to follow the classes taught by new TAs more closely, thus offering them the type of guidance that, many times, they would not have been able to provide. In that respect, the Peer Mentoring Program becomes essential in a department that emphasizes teaching, guidance and support for new TAs.

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Appendix A Mentor Program Guidelines (Revised)

Requirements of a Mentor

- Good teaching evaluations
- A minimum of one year teaching in our department, preferably in a variety of classes
- The ability to create and adapt a variety of activities for classroom use
- Good communication and interpersonal skills
- Good understanding of teaching philosophy and methodology of our department: the communicative approach
- Experience being observed and observing classes
- Well-organized and able to share resources from various courses taught, prompt in following up with instructors regarding observations and consultations, keeping records of instructors' progress and goals
- Available for two terms that do not coincide with scheduled MA or PhD exams.

The Role of the Peer Mentor

- Available for observation, consultation and meetings (30 hours per term, or 60 hour per year).
- Help new instructors transition from the workshop setting into the real classroom.
- Meet with each assigned new TA early in the term to make sure that both understand the goals and expectations of the mentor-mentee relationship from the outset.
- Help new TA with lesson plan.
- Conduct both unannounced and planned observations as required. New TAs must understand that these observations are not optional and may occur at any time. One advantage to announcing the observation is that it potentially lowers the anxiety level of the new TA.
- Take detailed notes during the observation of what happens during the class period. Observation notes should objectively show what activities occur at what time, how much time is spent on each activity, wording the instructor uses, transitions, use of English, pacing, sufficient practice, etc. The notes can also include subjective information like student response and involvement, effectiveness of approach, classroom presence and personality, suggestions to consider. Ask new TA to reflect on lesson and avoid judgmental comments.
- Review the standardized observation form that outlines all the points to consider in a lesson plan with the new TA. The peer mentor need not take notes on this form, but it is a useful tool to go over with the instructor in the post-observation conference.
- Follow up as soon as possible, ideally immediately after the class ends, and discuss the effectiveness of the lesson plan. Were the objectives met? Should the plan have been different? Should it have been implemented differently? Focus on a few (~3) general areas for future growth. If needed/desired, work together to plan the lesson for the next day. The peer mentor may wish to bring some examples of suggested activities for the new TA to consider. One suggested method for observation is the 3-step process.
 1. Meet with the new TA and decide what day the observation will occur. Discuss the lesson to be taught that day and perhaps help with the lesson plan. This allows the peer mentor to see a given grammar lesson, a vocabulary lesson, etc.
 2. Observe the class as planned, and take notes.
 3. Follow up as soon as possible, and compare the lesson plan to what actually happened in class.
- Most new TAs should be observed a second time later in the term. The peer mentor may observe two similar types of lessons or two different lessons (for example, one grammar and one vocabulary) as s/he feels is necessary. Remember the points discussed following the previous observation and track progress.
- Following each observation and feedback session, the peer mentor will upload comments to the Mentoring folder on the server as well as notes from observation and follow-up meeting plus instructor reaction form (if used). This file will contain all observation notes and reports and will serve as a record of the instructor's teaching history within the mentor program and will document the main issues that have been identified as areas for growth. This will be especially useful if a new peer mentor is assigned to a given TA. To save time, notes may also be scanned and uploaded as pdf files.
- The peer mentor may wish to create a resource folder and make it available to instructors. This archive might include actual lesson plans or more general plans—for example, “How to inductively present indirect object pronouns.” The folder might also include clip art, transparencies and other visuals, as well as resources for

communicative and info-gap activities for instructors to borrow or photocopy. These resources are best used in helping the new TA to develop his/her own activities. Avoid simply handing over an activity without first making sure the new TA understands how to use it.

Documents

- Peer Mentor notebook. The documents include the department directory, term schedule of classes, and calendars/ syllabi for elementary levels.
- Class observation forms. These are optional, though potentially helpful in giving guidelines for observation notes as well as points to consider during follow-up meeting.
- Peer Mentoring Program evaluation. This is the evaluation form for the new TAs to fill out to evaluate the peer mentoring process.