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Leading Through Dialogue: Reflections on a Yearlong Mentoring Program in English Education
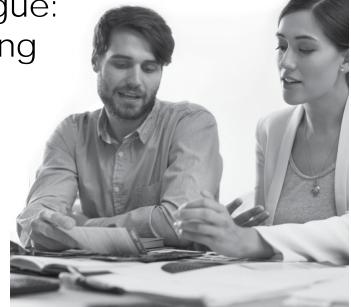
Abstract

Although much deserved attention has been paid recently to the mentoring and development of beginning English and language arts (ELA) teachers in middle and secondary school settings, we know relatively little about effective approaches to mentoring beginning English teacher educators. As a community of professionals dedicated to the teaching and learning of English, language arts, and literacy studies, the mentoring and professional development of English teacher educators occupies an important place in our field; yet, it is an area that has been severely underrepresented in research and suggestions for best practice. Toward that end, we describe how the nature of our extended participation in a professional mentoring program for beginning English education faculty members led to dialogic exchanges in which participants posed questions and developed useful approaches to addressing those questions about ELA instruction. Our review of our online dialogue revealed the need to begin a conversation about the important role that mentors play in leading the development of ELA teachers/teacher educators within our community of education professionals and reminded us that dialogue and trust with a colleague can lead to innovative approaches to questions about being and becoming an ELA teacher/teacher educator.

Keywords: mentoring, preservice teachers, technology

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Although much deserved attention has been paid recently to the mentoring and development of beginning English and language arts teachers in middle and secondary school settings (Bickmore, 2013; Long et al., 2006; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005), we know relatively little about effective approaches to mentoring beginning English teacher educators. As a community of professionals dedicated to the teaching and learning of English, language arts, and literacy studies, the mentoring and professional development of English teacher educators occupies an important place in our field; yet, it is an area that has been severely underrepresented in research and suggestions for best practice. Toward that end, we describe (a) our extended participation in a professional mentoring program for beginning English education faculty members, (b) the types of questions and concerns that were considered in the mentoring of a beginning English teacher educator, and (c) reflections on the dialogical nature of our mentoring relationship. It is our hope that this article will begin a conversation about the important role that mentors play in leading the development of teachers of English within our community of education professionals.

Description of the Mentoring Program

Both Linda and James responded to a call for mentors and mentees, respectively, to join the Conference on English Education (CEE) online mentoring program for new faculty. As part of the CEE's mission to support the transition of English teacher educators from doctoral programs to positions as faculty members, the organization has noted the need to "attend to helping doctoral students prepare for the job search, begin their new jobs and adopt new professional personas, and develop their research and

publication agendas" (CEE Executive Committee, 2007). The online mentoring program responded to this need and provided a mentoring forum and unrestrictive guidelines based on CEE members' past experiences for successful participation in the program. In the first year of the mentoring program, Linda and James exchanged 68 emails; 33,164 words; 32 texts (e.g., videos, journal articles, newspaper editorials); and had one face-to-face meeting and countless opportunities for critical reflection and learning.

The Mentoring Portrait

Linda's career in English and English education spanned 27 years at the high school and university levels before she took on mentoring full-time as a consultant for a state affiliate of the National Writing Project and an advisor to beginning English teachers and teacher educators. As a member of an English department at a mid-size regional university that was part of a larger state system of higher education schools in the East, Linda taught students in introductory courses in writing and literature, as well as humanities and preservice English education. While teaching high school, Linda served as a cooperating teacher for the local university; at the university, Linda served as a supervisor working with student teachers and cooperating teachers at local and regional secondary schools. Her experience in these leadership capacities afforded Linda a long view on the particular role occupied by English educators in our field.

After completing his doctoral program at a large research university in the East, James took his first academic job as an English educator in a Department of English at a mid-size regional university in the South. James regularly taught four courses each semester and supervised student teachers at high schools around the region—a task that, although profoundly rewarding, required hours of travel to and from schools that often served as the only high school in the county for most of the counties in the University's extensive rural service region. Balancing the workload and learning curve that comes with one's first academic position James's family/home life quickly became a focus of many "conversations."

James's Conundrum: Finding Time to Do Everything

My monthly correspondence with Linda frequently featured extensive reflections on my teaching and supervision, administrative responsibilities, research and publishing issues, and advising conundrums. Furthermore, interspersed throughout these reflections were authentic questions that I had about my work, which Linda addressed by offering specific ways in which she has approached such issues and critical questions to consider. For example, upon realizing that I was often spending entire days on the road supervising student teachers and worried that any semblance of a research agenda was quickly disappearing, I asked for some advice on how to get all of the work done. After sending

a link to an article about keeping "idea notebooks" to capture insights for teaching and research, Linda added:

> I kept a recorder in the car so that on those long drives to and from student teaching sites, I could record thoughts, solve problems, etc. When I read this today, I thought of you and your 90-minute drives. (10/27/10)

I quickly took up this practice to develop ideas for conference presentations, readings for my courses, and registration reminders for my advisees using a digital voice recorder, which I still keep in my car for long drives! This one piece of advice helped me to realize what would become a theme in the writing that made up our mentoring relationship: To teach well, you have to become a learner again. The mentoring correspondence was the outlet through which I could learn about my students by bringing stories, successes, questions, and frustrations into a dialogue with Linda, who could reflect back to me perspectives on this learning that would improve my teaching.

James's Goal: Facilitating College Students' Journeys to Becoming Teaching Professionals

In my first semester on the job, I had the opportunity to work with students in the capacity of university supervisor during their student teaching semester. Getting into the schools in the region, meeting teachers and administrators, and observing classrooms at work provided invaluable insight into the cultural "funds of knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that were available in the rural Appalachian communities in which I supervised student teachers. As Shoffner and Pyne (2009) note in their reflection on their journeys to becoming university supervisors, "Each classroom educates again in the ways and worlds of English teachers and high schools" (p. 137). Having never worked with these student teachers in the methods classroom, I was unfamiliar with their personal philosophies of teaching or the specific nature of their teacher preparation courses, and knew that I had a lot to learn logistically as well (e.g., how to complete the observation forms, the state standards that were in place at the time, connecting theory and practice without really knowing which theories or practices the student teachers had been exposed to). One of the first obstacles that I encountered was the tendency of some student teachers to cherry-pick lesson ideas from high-quality resources, but without necessarily thinking through the reasons for using those lesson ideas or how they related to larger lesson and unit goals. I related this concern, which became a dilemma after some of the student teachers with whom I worked did not respond to my initial feedback, which encouraged them to adapt the lesson ideas for their particular students. Linda responded:

> Smagorinsky's concept of conceptual unit design should help them understand that lessons are not isolated activities that can be plucked from the internet but that they should be part of an integrated, purposeful whole. Too often students assume that others' ideas must be better than their own since

the writers are experienced teachers. What they don't realize is that even with excellent resources like those found in NCTE's *Read, Write, Think*, what often is missing is the context for the lesson and the follow-up evaluation. Pointing out that these lessons are written without comment/critique about what worked or didn't, modifications that were later made to the lesson, etc., may help them see that lessons can't simply stand alone and that they as teachers need to understand why they are asking students to perform a specific task and to know why they are teaching a particular concept in the first place. The notion of "planning backwards" is key. If they start with the end goal in mind, this will likely help them develop the appropriate lessons to help them reach that goal. Once they decide where they want to go, they can create the map for getting there. I can remember asking the WHY and SO WHAT questions of my student teachers so often that they learned to anticipate them coming! (11/11/10)

In this exchange, Linda provided much needed support and the affirmation that many teachers need when starting out in a new position. After relating to my circumstance, Linda continued leading in her mentoring role, making suggestions about another of my concerns—the student teacher whose planning was falling short:

> Together with the cooperating teacher, you might have this student submit plans several days in advance; if she fails to do so, she simply doesn't teach. That's hard, but sometimes necessary. … Use this as an opportunity to discuss with [the cooperating teacher] any suggestions she has for how university preparation could be different to meet the realities of her classroom expectations. (11/11/10)

I took Linda's advice to enact an action plan that articulated the precise dates by which this student teacher's lesson plans would be due; this led to a meaningful conversation with the cooperating teacher and student teacher and the realization that the student teacher was overextending herself by working after school every night, which led to perfunctory planning and physical exhaustion. Without setting into motion a series of action steps to ensure the instructional integrity that the student teacher could design and the cooperating teacher's students deserved, the context for this important conversation could not have been established, and the student teaching experience might have ended unsuccessfully for all parties involved.

Mediated Learning: The Value of Dialogic Exchange

In addition to numerous valuable and practical pieces of advice that helped me to help the beginning teachers with whom I was working, the process of engaging in dialogue with my mentor mediated my thinking about ideas I was considering. That is, the process of writing out the questions and concerns I was identifying in my first year as an English teacher educator led me to a potential solution or insights into the complex issues I was addressing with my mentor—a realization that Dawan Coombs

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(university supervisor) and Kate Goodwin made about their mentoring conversations during Kate's first year of teaching (Coombs & Goodwin, 2013).

The notion of dialoguing-to-learn became the driving force of our correspondence and likely kept us engaged in the process. We believe that learning through mentoring is a dialectical rather than a didactic process. As with teachers and students, both mentors and mentees mediate their thinking by responding to others in authentic learning environments. My reflections at the end of my first semester, below, illustrate one instance in which I used the opportunity to write to Linda to work through my own thinking about a topic of concern that week:

> I have enjoyed supervising this semester for two reasons that may or may not coincide with the reasons that energize other supervisors. First, I enjoy staying close to what secondary students and teachers are doing in their classrooms these days. … The second reason why I enjoy supervising is that it gives me an opportunity to see the diverse contexts in which the students in my methods classes will live and work. I'm finding this to be quite important as an "outsider" in [the University's service region]. I must admit, however, that I feel like I have to approach conferencing with student teachers differently in the future if I am going to enjoy the actual "supervising" part of this job. Thus far, I have opened up conferences after each lesson with questions like "What happened today that went really well?" or "Did you notice anything during class today that had a positive effect on your students' learning?" These responses then tend to lead to a discussion of the notes that I took during the lesson. I usually frame my feedback in terms of "I noticed" and "I wondered" language because it fits my orientation toward supervising. I then try to align some of these statements with the areas of instruction that must be assessed using the state standards. After writing this, I realize that I do have a system of sorts, but I wish that I would feel like my feedback actually mattered! (11/29/10)

In addition to mediating my thinking about my own practice, the response above illustrates how I also used the mentoring platform for the opportunity to share the achievements and joys of the profession (e.g., the opportunity to learn about the cultural contexts in which I and my student teachers were working).

The Interdependence of Mentoring and Teaching

Mentors who work in close proximity to their mentees have the advantage of being able to observe and offer immediate feedback during face-to-face discussions where problems and concerns can be addressed immediately. However, online networked mentoring such as that described in this article can be just as productive and valuable. Online mentoring forces mentees to write about their problems and concerns; in so doing, mentees may find that the act of writing about the problem or describing the situation makes the solution visible to them (Ortlieb, Biddix, & Doepker, 2010). When reflection leads to self-discovery, mentors need only listen and then to affirm.

Linda's reflections. One of my goals was to get James to think and to reflect. He was constantly thinking about his teaching, discovering what he was good at, learning how to improve in the areas that needed to be improved. I listened and then tried to find ways to construct advice that built on discoveries that he was making on his own. From the start, I let James set the direction for our mentoring exchanges rather than impose criteria since he knew better than I what his strengths and weaknesses were. In framing my responses, I often did a lot of storytelling by describing similar circumstances in my own teaching career and how I dealt with the circumstances at the time. When I wasn't quite sure that my personal story was applicable, I would look to experts in books and journals for advice that I could pass along. And I asked a lot of questions.

There can be impediments to a successful mentoring relationship since both mentors and mentees take huge risks. Even when mentees seek advice, they can resist being critiqued. And mentors can be paralyzed by their fears of looking incompetent. At first, I feared that I might not be expert enough or that I would give bad advice or that the advice that I did give would be inappropriate. Initially, I measured every word in order to "sound" like as well as be an expert. Frankly, I feared that I wouldn't be able to give James what he needed. And then I relaxed when I realized that we were having a professional conversation from which we both were learning. And it was fun. It was exciting to exchange ideas with another who was as passionate about teaching as I was. As a mentor, I learned to have confidence in my ability to listen and to provide options. I learned that I don't have solutions to all problems nor do I need to. I learned that James was helping me as much as I was helping him grow both personally and professionally.

The end goal for mentors is to provide confidence, independence, and courage. I can distinctly remember the moment when I knew that James no longer really needed me, the moment when he began to think about implementing his own mentoring program with graduate students and early career teachers:

> A colleague and I are also brainstorming ways of mentoring our graduates during their internship year in the classroom and during the early years of their careers. Two negative experiences that have resulted in one graduate "resigning" and another graduate being "pink slipped" have prompted us to think about ways in which we could provide support for early career teachers from our programs if and when they need our support—rather than when it is too late. … Informal gatherings of early career and mentor teachers who have graduated from our program could provide much needed advice and guidance for teachers who are struggling and reluctant, for a number of reasons, to call attention to their struggles. (James, 4/7/11)

James's reflections. Although we could share only a few excerpts of our correspondence from my first year on the job, Linda and I continued our formal mentoring correspondence for two years and continue to check in with each other informally. That relationship would not have been possible without mutual trust. I trusted that Linda would not judge me or expose my insecurities to her or my students, colleagues, or administrators. As Linda established early on in our email exchanges, our relationship would work as an extended conversation between colleagues, one in which we both brought new ideas to the table and learned by writing about those ideas to each other. Finally, I appreciated the opportunity to celebrate with Linda my accomplishments—however insignificant. Although I enjoyed many fulfilling personal friendships with my English department colleagues, outside of professional conferences with others in my field, my professional life as the only English educator at the university felt isolating at times. When a positive review came back from a journal submission, for example, I found the mentoring program to be an outlet for sharing that good news with Linda, who understood my desire to share this news without seeming boastful. If I needed feedback from someone about an idea for an article, I found myself seeking out Linda to provide her perspectives on the piece, which inevitably strengthened the work profoundly and provided another way for me to synergize my research and teaching interests.

My experiences with Linda in the mentoring program helped me to develop a "new professional persona" (CEE Executive Committee, 2007) with which I could begin to approach my responsibilities as an English educator. Mentoring was certainly part of the job as an advisor, supervisor, and teacher. But mentoring didn't end when students took their diplomas. In fact, it could be said that mentoring becomes most important when students are on their own. Linda's response to my ideas reflects the importance of continued work in this area:

> I cannot fully express my excitement about your desire to develop a mentoring support system for your early career graduates. …We definitely need better support systems for our preservice and early career educators at all levels. A recent CNN report quoted the current American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president as saying that 51 percent of new teachers want to leave within the first five years! When surveyed, this group of "Gen Y" teachers said they wanted a more humane/collaborative working environment, access to varied technologies, better support from colleagues and administrators, and more meaningful feedback.

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As you build your program, be sure to think about devoting time to "teaching the mentors" as well. Mentors have to want to do the job, recognize that their role is not to be the problem-solver but the collaborative questioner who can help their young colleague make discoveries, and that their relationship has to go beyond friendship if they are going to provide constructive guidance and support. (4/12/11)

Perhaps one of the most important discoveries we shared is that teaching is complex; it takes a long time to master and involves becoming a learner over and over again. In one of her year-end emails, Linda offered the following:

One thing to remember, learning to teach is an evolutionary process; it's recursive, not linear and for every step back that a student teacher might take, there's always hope that the leaps forward will be big ones. I think we all get impatient with the student teacher who doesn't make the strides that we hope for; I used to internalize that lack of progress and blame myself until I realized that student teachers have to take responsibility for their own learning and it was my role to be a good coach and an honest critic. (12/6/10)

Learning to become a mentor is equally complex to teaching; however, it is essential to the continued growth and professional development of English teacher educators who are responsible for helping prospective teachers prepare for their careers. To make the mentoring relationship work, mentors have to remember that just as there are many good ways to be a good teacher, there equally are just as many good ways to be a good mentor. At the end of the year, James reflected on the experience:

Dialoguing with Linda in these mentoring exchanges helped me become a better teacher as well as a better mentor to my own students. Among the things I discovered was that good mentors share dialogic characteristics: They listen. They evaluate. They avoid judgment. They discuss. They resist telling the mentee what to do. They guide.

Dialogic mentoring programs, such as the one we participated in, can help newly minted teacher educators develop confidence in their abilities to guide their own students as they prepare for the challenges and joys of entering the teaching profession.

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