International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education 2010, Volume 22, Number 3, 308-319
http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/ ISSN 1812-9129

Educating Reflexive Practitioners: Casting Graduate Teaching Assistants as Mentors in First-Year Classrooms

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Reflective practice has become a mainstay in many inquiries into teaching and learning, presenting reflective practitioners with the challenge of accounting for their own institutional positions when interpreting student performance in the binary teacher-student configurations of most classrooms. This study analyzes the perspectives of TAs cast as mentors to students in a unique trinary configuration of instructor-mentor-student. During four semesters, TAs in English mentored first-year university composition students by attending all classes alongside them, conducting intake interviews, and following up with numerous out-of-class conferences during the semester. Using standardized end-of-term evaluations by mentors supplemented by focus group transcripts and administrators' field notes, analysts determined that mentors' ranges of actions in the classroom and course enabled them to "think through" the perspectives of both instructor and student to develop "positional reflexivity." That is, mentors incorporated the factor of institutional position into reflexivity about teaching and learning to gain insight into such issues as interpretations of student performance, power dynamics that inflect students' senses of agency, the challenges of transitioning to college, mentors' own professional goals, and more. Implications are drawn for leveraging this unique form of TA training to enhance learner-centered approaches to teaching when TAs later find themselves teaching their own courses.

"Reflection" has come to figure heavily in much current theory and practice in teaching and learning. Overviews of definitions and uses of the term have traced origins to Dewey (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Rodgers 2002) and noted its value in student teachers' learning and in teacher training more generally (Hatton & Smith 1995; Kreber 2006; Schulman 1986; Ward & McCotter, 2004). As Dees, Kovalik, Huffman, McClelland, & Justice (2007) have noted, teacher reflection, formerly the province primarily of K-12 instructors, has spread to university settings (2007, p. 130), which helps account for a proliferation of nuanced uses. Kreber (2006, p. 91) observed the following: critical reflectivity (Brookfield, 1995; Andreson, 2000), critical reflection (Kreber 2003), and reflective critique (Glassik, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997). Clearly, research and different theoretical approaches have engendered many ways to tap reflection to boost self-awareness as a teacher, which in turn can prompt revision of approaches to teaching and professional development.

Reflective teachers thus become self-analysts, faced with a challenge depicted by D. Schön in his highly influential work *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*: "The phenomena that [the practitioner] seeks to understand are partly of his own making; he is in the situation that he seeks to understand" (1987, p. 73). Even as this "self"-analysis is ongoing, so is an (explicit or implicit) analysis of the "other"—students— thus presenting yet another challenge of both ethical and epistemological dimensions: how to account for one's own roles, predispositions, biases, filters, and the like, as one interprets reflective teaching practice? For qualitative researchers, one answer lies in exercising *reflexivity*, which, like reflection, has taken on numerous dimensions.

Generally understood as an endeavor in which "the subject/researcher sees simultaneously the object of her or his gaze and the means by which the object (which may include oneself as subject) is being constituted" (Davies et al., 2004, p. 360), reflexivity can be leveraged when writing up research to re-think how instructors and students are constituted in past, present, or future classrooms (Day, Kaidonis, & Perrin, 2003). When articulated to a feminist tradition in teaching, reflexivity entails a "practice of observing and locating one's self as a knower within certain cultural and sociohistorical contexts"(Sinacore, Blaisure, Healy, & Brawer, 1999, p. 267), and may become part of teacher training by focusing on "pupil experience" (Kramer-Dahl, 1997). As part of a dialogical practice of teaching, reflexivity may emerge from personal, "reflex" moments in the classroom that can ground a dialogue linking tacit knowing and explicit knowledge (Cunliffe, 2002). The tugs between the personal and the epistemological clearly play a role in reflexivity, and Willig makes the distinction:

> 'Personal reflexivity' involves reflecting upon the ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. . . . [E]pistemological reflexivity encourages us to reflect upon the assumptions (about the world, about knowledge) that we have made in the course of the research, and it helps us to think about the implications of such assumptions for the research and its findings. (2001, p.10)

In the realm of ethnographic inquiry—a methodology that drives much teacher-research either explicitly or implicitly (Ray, 1993)–reflexivity "enables ethnographers to see their research within historical and structural constraints that result from asymmetrical power distributions" (Heath & Street, 2008, p. 123). When we reflect on our students' performances in our own classrooms, this consideration of asymmetrical power distributions is vital: we are always hampered in gaining insight into students' perspectives and experiences by the power differential, in the information we receive from students and in the ways our own *position* as teachers in the classroom and college or university hierarchy influences our interpretations of them. Hence for teacher-researchers, the two overlapping roles of teaching and researching—each invaluable in elaborating a learner-centered pedagogy--can be merged productively by taking "reflective practice" into the realm of "reflexive practice" with a particular emphasis on positional reflexivity.

In *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology,* Bourdieu & Wacquant identify this last kind of reflexivity, referring in their definitions to "the position that the analyst occupies," and noting "the points of view of sociologists, like any other cultural producer, always owe something to their situation in a field where all define themselves in part in relational terms" (1992, p. 39). The "relational terms" of the classroom are strongly predetermined by the respective institutional statuses of students and teachers, and as Lave & Wenger have argued, probing the relational terms in any situated learning is key to developing a "learning curriculum" (1991, p. 97). We can benefit from probing positional reflexivity when an opportunity arises to shift the terms of relationality. The research that follows resulted from such an opportunity, when TAs were teamed with first-year composition instructors and cast in the roles of writing mentors to all students in the class. The shift away from the binary positions of instructor/student that the introduction of a new actor into the classroom created, along with the need for these mentors to figure out their own positionality between instructor and students, offered an opportunity to analyze reflexivities related to teaching and learning.

Researching such reflexivity also enabled a probing of this novel configuration of the TA. Although a portion of TAs in university settings teach independently, those TAs who are assigned to work under the supervision of a lead instructor frequently fulfill such duties as grading student assignments; conducting seminar or lab sub-sections, either in traditional classrooms or online; meeting with students in need of additional tutoring; and delivering an occasional lecture (Goodlad, 1997; Muzaka, 2009; Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998). In short, the TA's primary responsibility is usually to lighten the professor's workload (Park, 2004). However, as these TAs constitute the future of the professoriate and often bring to their positions a strong interest in teaching, TA-ships could be more intentionally configured to meld their instructional duties with research on learners' performances *in situ*, and thus bring reflexivity as an educational practitioner into TA training. In the study presented below, with Teaching Assistants re-positioned as both (1) mentors to students and (2) researchers of student performances with respect to course expectations, data were gathered from mentors and instructors to probe this question:

> In these "trinary" classrooms, in what ways did mentors reflexively consider teaching practices through the perspectives of the organizational others—instructors and students?

Background: Program Inception and Administration

In the spring of 2007, the English Department at a public university in Hawai'i was given a package of support to team MA and "apprenticing" Ph.D. graduate students in English with instructors to teach first-year composition (FYC). At this university FYC is a general education course conceived as students' "foundation in written communication." Because this unique teaching situation was part of a pilot initiative funded by the Chancellor's office at the university and supplemented by a one-year grant from the National Education Association, administrators sought to document and assess the initiative in multiple ways. To prepare for this pilot, the English department ran two pre-pilot sections in the fall of 2006 in which all twenty students were tutored in a version of "on-location tutoring" that embedded tutors in classrooms (Spigelman & Grobman, 2005). These pre-pilot sections were monitored and yielded insights on individual conferences, providing a basis for standardizing conference documentation logs (Bruland, 2007). During the spring of 2007, four pilot sections were run, in which the graduate students working with all students in the section were formally designated as *mentors*. Data collected on these conferences yielded insight on the roles that were co-constructed by mentors and students in individual conferences (Henry, Bruland, & Omizo, 2008), enabling subsequent training to prepare mentors for such roles.

The scholarship on mentoring is vast, spanning both educational and corporate scenarios and addressing many configurations for mentoring, both formal and informal. To refine the conceptual framework of this mentoring initiative, administrators

supplemented their own findings on the pre-pilot sections with scholarship outlining mentoring origins (Colley, 2002; Roberts & Chernopiskava, 1999), definitions (Mullen, 2005), attributes (Roberts, 2000), key practices (Chan, 2008) and constructs (Nora & Crisp, 2008). This research also underscored the importance of structuring the mentor-mentee relationship as supportive and non-evaluative, and so it was decided as formal program policy that mentors would not grade student writing. These mentors were instead tasked with attending all classes and participating in class activities, taking notes in the dual roles of model note-taker and researcher of student learning, and conducting regular individual out-of-class conferences with all enrolled students.

To prepare instructors and mentors for the first official semester of the pilot, the initiative director and research/administrative assistant provided a two-day, pre-semester workshop during which they accomplished the following with mentors: discussed a formal job description (as 1/4 TA-ships); presented the array of possible roles that mentors had filled the preceding semester; provided a standardized log for documenting student conferences; instructed mentors in fieldnote taking during class sessions in their dual roles as teachers and researchers focused on their students' performances; and provided a panel of the four mentors from the previous spring, including a presentation by one of them on "motivational interviewing" techniques to be used during intake interviews that mentors were instructed to hold with students. (The 5,000+ mentor logs submitted from Fall 2007 through Spring 2009 have documented individual conferences that last from two minutes to over two hundred minutes, reflecting in many cases a "talking within" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 109) the practice of writing—supplementing the "talking about" writing of the classroom with one-to-one conversation grounded frequently in the mentors' own approaches to writing.)

Instructors' workshops also included discussion of mentors' job descriptions and standardized logs for individual conferences; discussion of possible roles that mentors would fill during those conferences; a reminder that mentors would be both mentoring students and analyzing their own performances as mentors vis-à-vis the performances of their student mentees as part of their note taking in the classroom; and suggestions to solicit writing samples from students early in the semester so that instructor and mentor could already chart possible mentoring to be needed. In addition, instructors and mentors were given time to confer over the syllabus and to make the mentor a formal part of it, emphasizing the value of individual conferences as a form of supplemental instruction. Because mentors and instructors affirmed the value of these pre-semester workshops, they were institutionalized for subsequent semesters.

Methodology

All program-related research underwent IRB approval. This study's primary data set consisted of end-of-semester surveys completed by mentors. Secondary data sources, which were used to triangulate findings from the surveys, included administrator fieldnotes from beginning-of-semester instructor workshops and biweekly mentor roundtables, transcripts from five focus group interviews with mentors, and students' anonymous end-of-term evaluations.

Research Participants and Data Collection

From 2007-2009, graduate teaching assistants were formally positioned as "mentors" in 65 sections of first-year composition offered at the university. Program participants included approximately 1,250 students (with the strong majority in their first year of college), 48 instructors, 29 mentors, and 2 program administrators. The average mentor-to-student ratio in these courses was 19:1. The instructors, all members of the English Department, spanned a number of institutional positions ranging from full professor (14% of the total mentored sections), to associate professor (20%), to assistant professor (9%), to Ph.D. student (27%), to lecturer (11%). Mentors, who were also affiliated with the English Department, occupied the institutional statuses of unclassified graduate student (5% of all mentored sections), MA student (88%), and first-semester Ph.D. student (8%). After one semester of mentoring, these Ph.D. students moved into the role of instructor. Whereas Ph.D. students occupied the position of mentor with "instructorhood" in their immediate futures, the MA mentors also saw themselves as preparing for future teaching roles, as 96% of the total mentors responding to an anonymous survey claimed that they intended to teach after completing their graduate degree. (All of the Ph.D. students who transitioned from "mentors" to "instructors" requested to be paired with mentors of their own in subsequent semesters.) As mentors entered the program at different stages in their degrees, their participation ranged from 1 semester (7 mentors), to 2 semesters (13 mentors), to 3 semesters (7 mentors), to 4 semesters (2 mentors). In cases where mentors served multiple semesters, program administrators attempted to pair them with instructors of different institutional positions, scholarly orientations, and cultural backgrounds in order to maximize their exposure to various approaches.

At the end of each semester, questionnaires were delivered to mentors online via SurveyMonkey. These

questionnaires asked them to provide feedback on their experiences in the program to the administrators and were anonymous. In the program’s first two years, 50 of 62 possible surveys (81% rate of return) were submitted. (In three cases, mentors served in two sections at once, but they were asked to complete only one survey per semester.) All verbatim examples in the Analysis section come with the respondent's explicit permission.

Researchers/Program Administrators

As stated above, the primary data in this analysis were garnered through anonymous channels from the mentors, providing feedback that in nearly all cases was worded in such ways that individual mentors could not be identified. In roundtable meetings prior to the administration of the survey, administrators emphasized their own roles as researchers who were eager to receive data in all dimensions, whether an apparent "positive" or "negative" reflection on the *initiative* itself. These online surveys directly solicited suggestions for improvement of the initiative, moreover, and a number of such suggestions were provided—some of which have already been folded back into practice.

Functioning in the dual roles of administrators and researchers while occupying the institutional positions of associate professor and Ph.D. student, we, too, were multiply positioned. At the inception of this project, Bruland was working as an "apprentice" to Henry in a section of first-year composition and together we positioned her as a mentor to the students in this class (even though the term "mentor" was not used at that time). Our collaboration evolved with the initiative, to the point that Bruland identified this topic as that of her dissertation, a fact that became known among mentors and many instructors alike. We also brought to this initiative a commitment to teacher-research that places students and student learning at its center, a commitment that we identify as an important element of our reflexivity in this university. As Caucasian instructors, we are in the ethnic majority among our departmental colleagues, yet we are in the minority with respect to student body demographics. We believe strongly in the mentoring initiative's power to help first-year students persist and succeed based on data from mentors and from students' anonymous end-of-term evaluations, and we acknowledge this bias. In our analysis, we have embraced all data, whether or not these data align with this belief.

Data Analysis

Analysis drew upon two questions on mentors' end-of-term evaluations: (1) This past semester, what did your English 100 students teach you? and (2) This past semester, what did you learn from working with your assigned instructor? (This second question was added in the program's second semester: thus question 1 garnered 50 responses and question 2 garnered 36.) All responses were first categorized for whether they included elements of reflection, positional reflexivity, both, or neither. To qualify as demonstrating “positional reflexivity,” a comment needed (a) to address specifically some element of institutional status and/or relationships among classroom actors and (b) to probe teaching and learning dynamics as inflected by that status and/or relationship. Reflective comments, on the other hand, analyzed teaching and learning practices in ways not explicitly related to institutional status or relationships.

Once those comments that addressed “positional reflexivity” had been identified, they were isolated for further analysis in a second stage. This second stage of analysis proceeded through iterative reviews, beginning in the first review to code comments as they related to the research question. This "descriptive coding" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57) identified initial categories of positional reflexivity that could be used to include other practices. Once the descriptive coding established these initial categories, subsequent review of all comments was undertaken by each analyst to validate the categories. This "respondent triangulation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993, p. 230) enabled the adjusting of categories or creation of new ones to accommodate *all* assertions relative to positional reflexivity. This process enabled the definitive stabilizing of categories presented in the Findings. In the Discussion section, analysts further reviewed these findings via "technique triangulation" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1993, p. 231) by consulting the three other data sources previously identified. Unless otherwise noted, all mentor comments analyzed in the subsequent sections specifically come from this second round of coding which included only those comments that embodied some degree of “positional reflexivity.”

Findings

Whereas mentors’ job descriptions mandated reflection (through tasks such as taking fieldnotes, keeping conference logs, attending roundtable discussions), the exercise of reflexivity more generally or positional reflexivity more specifically was not an explicit part of training or roundtable agendas. However, analysis of those comments by mentors that referenced institutional position revealed that they did leverage positional reflexivity by "thinking through" the positions of students and instructors. Here, the phrase “think through” takes on double meaning: (a) mentors reflect *about* the positions of students and instructors in

higher education; (b) mentors also embody a unique position in this trinary classroom arrangement that enables access to the perspectives of "others" and to insights about teaching and learning not easily available in academic settings organized around the traditional teacher-student binary. As the strong majority of mentors served more than one semester, many of these mentors completed the end-of-semester survey more than once; it is possible that mentors' second, third, or fourth completions of the survey rendered insights and degrees of reflexivity that would not have been available after only one semester of mentoring.

Mentors' Reflexivity through the Position of Student

The 50 total comments in response to the question, "This past semester, what did your English 100 students teach you?" ranged from 1 to 212 words. Coding these comments according to the criteria for positional reflexivity enumerated above revealed the following: 22 of the comments (44%) included evidence of reflection; 47 of the comments (94%) included evidence of positional reflexivity; and 3 of the comments (6%) were deemed uncodable due to brevity and/or generality. Many of the comments (22 or 44%) demonstrated both reflective and reflexive dimensions. Analysts isolated and categorized those comments indicating a positional reflexivity with respect to students, revealing seven different categories. These categories were grouped for three different domains of findings that this "thinking through" enabled: surrogate experience and its capacity to inform interpretations of student performance; curricular and programmatic challenges encountered by students; and implications for mentors' professional development into learner-centered instructors. These domains and the categories comprising them are explained below with examples of mentors' comments to illustrate each.

Surrogate experience and its capacity to inform interpretations of student performance. Included in this domain of findings were those comments that recalled mentors' own experiences as students as linked to those of their mentees, with insights into interpreting students' performances more broadly than would be possible based only on a reading of students' papers.

Re-visiting the experience of the first-year student. "They taught me that being 18 as a new freshman is hard," said one mentor. "I learned that many freshman are hesitant to talk to their Professors because of the age difference and because they find the Prof's intelligence to be somewhat intimidating." Said another: "My English 100 students reminded me that transitioning from high school writing to college level writing is a daunting task. Students must 'invent the university' (Bartholomae) and attempt to write like experts when they really are novices." Noting the ways in which technology has inflected first-year students' experiences, a third mentor observed "that incoming students are incredibly technologically-savvy and rely on the internet as a major, or sometimes only, source of information. They are also worried about the transition between high school and college more than we probably imagine, and are very ambitious in general!"

Re-interpreting student performance. Mustering a reflexive analysis of task-representation and performance, one mentor noted "[t]hat the simplest of tasks are at times the most difficult to comprehend—for a first year student. So, not to take for granted—assume that a student's work is always based on their ability to perform, but rather that at times they need someone else to explain the assignment at hand, in a different way." Another mentor probed assumptions based on reading a student's writing, saying that "[t]hey taught me, among other things, that I can't assume too much after reading one example of a student's work or hearing one in-class conversation, because I was wrong just as often as I was right." Focusing on the challenge as a teacher of ascertaining a learner's skill set, a third mentor said: "They taught me that I may have been overestimating their skills a little bit. Not that they disappointed me or anything like that, but I realized that I had assumed that they knew things that they didn't."

Curricular and programmatic challenges encountered by students. This domain of findings includes those comments that identified challenges that might not be apparent to a teacher without the degree of access to students' perspectives afforded to mentors.

Considering influences of geography as they inflect pedagogy. "This semester, my English 100 classroom was diverse in terms of each student's place of origin, and I had to learn to tailor my approach to each student in a way such that they would be able to engage with the material even if they did not necessarily understand it as if they were 'from here'," said one mentor, adding that "we must always find ways to make our approaches translatable and meaningful to different kinds of students." Another mentor articulated reflexivity by noting that "I've definitely learned a lot about the politics of [place] and the institutional context that we are in, which has been invaluable."

Re-thinking the course or curriculum from a student's perspective. Focusing on the need for a "coach" to help students understand assignments, one mentor said:

> My students have taught me that task representation is a complex thing. Though an instructor might explicitly articulate their expectations—during a lecture or on a two-page assignment handout—students STILL need guidance through the many stages of the writing process. We cannot throw an eighteen yr. old into a 100-level composition classroom and expect them to have all the skills to succeed on their own; freshmen need coaching and encouragement along the way. Don't get me wrong, they might be extremely intelligent, articulate—but the problem is in the fact they haven't learned an effective, processed approach to writing.

Another mentor linked individual personality traits and past experiences to a learner's challenges: "I need to be more sensitive to the shy or reluctant students who'd like to use the Mentoring Program, but are reluctant to do so because of past experiences with English or other tutoring programs." A third had gleaned how difficult it can be for students to discern teacher expectations and academic conventions: "There are times when you can't be completely descriptive, as opposed to prescriptive, because students do need to know the guidelines and expectations of University writing--something that you don't really arrive at 'naturally' or by getting instructor's corrections on your paper." Underscoring the complexity of reception in communicative acts, a fourth mentor noted that "no matter how clear the instructor may sound in the classroom, some students are still baffled."

Acknowledging dissonance between mentor program goals and individual students' goals. "Not every student wants to do their best in improving their writing and getting a good grade from the course," noted one mentor. A second mentor linked students' predispositions based on previous English experiences to the challenge those predispositions present for a teacher: "Some students loathed English because of past experiences--it was hard to break through those experiences." A third mentor saw the dissonance between program goals and students' goals as a teaching-and-learning challenge: "This past semester, my students taught me that I cannot force anyone to accept my help. I need to work harder on making seeing the mentor more 'common sense' and less obtrusive."

Implications for mentors' professional development into learner-centered instructors. In this domain are included those comments that reflexively viewed institutional position with an eye to professional development as a teacher.

Acknowledging the subject position of student as an enduring quality in one's institutional life. "They also taught me that I haven't really come as far (emotionally, psychologically, professionally, what have you) since my freshman year as I previously thought I had," said one mentor. A second mentor developed this thought in more detail:

> Many of the students I worked with this past semester had personal issues with college life and time management. As I listened to their concerns and talked it out with them I realized I myself had the same problem. Every time I suggested to the students to set their priorities, I was telling myself the same thing. This issue was magnified as finals week came into view, and I worked with the students in setting and balancing priorities between school work, personal life, and part-time jobs.

De- and Re-constructing one's own professional goals or orientation. Such reflexive thinking about institutional subjectivity led mentors to glean ways in which the mentor-mentee relationship opened doors for their own development, as in this comment: "Seriously, they taught me to become a better person. I used to be a very snobbish academic in the so-called ivory tower. Working closely with them made me reevaluate my roles as a future teacher and researcher." A second mentor looped such reflexive thinking back into career considerations:

> They taught me more than I think I taught them. I felt that they reaffirmed for me the reasons that I entered into the mentoring program at [the university]. I was initially curious about teaching as a career to supplement my creative writing endeavors. Having that label placed upon me makes me aware that I need a "real" job. I have always wanted to teach and this experience with the students made me more confident in my choice not only as a supplement, but as a viable exchange between myself and the first year learner.

Taken together, these three domains of reflexivity show mentors thinking through the positionality of students as learners to identify important elements that might figure in a reflexive practitioner's repertoire of teaching. In the following section further elements were identified by thinking through the positionality of instructors.

Mentors' Reflexivity through the Position of Instructor

The 36 comments in response to the question, "This past semester, what did you learn from working with your assigned instructor?" ranged from 6 to 170 words. It should be noted that throughout training,

mentor roundtables, and informal discussions, administrators had requested that mentors suspend judgment of instructors' pedagogies; instead, mentors were to focus their energies on improving students' performances within the parameters of those pedagogies. Thus, this end-of-semester survey was the first instance in which mentors were asked to comment explicitly on instructors' pedagogies. While carefully keeping instructors' identities anonymous (in all but one case), mentors almost always responded to this question with descriptions of their assigned instructor's approach to teaching and orientation toward students. Drawing on the same operationalized definitions of "reflection" and "positional reflexivity" noted above, analysts arrived at the following results: 21 of the comments (58%) included evidence of reflection; 29 of the comments (81%) included evidence of positional reflexivity; and 2 of the comments (6%) were deemed uncodable. Sixteen (44%) of the comments included both reflective and reflexive dimensions. Reflective comments addressed such topics as delivering instruction, using effective examples, running successful classroom activities, creating writing assignments, assessing student work, responding to student writing, structuring groupwork, facilitating discussion, increasing engagement, managing time, managing student behavior, and creating effective classroom policies and consequences.

Several mentors prefaced their comments with analyses of how their conclusions were influenced by their unique positionality, including the benefits of being able to observe the teacher and students without fully occupying either position within the traditional educational binary, as in the following example:

> Because of the 'observing' aspect that goes along with the mentor's role we are hyper-aware of all classroom dynamics--both of the teacher and of the students. We are able to see what the students are "connecting" to and what they aren't and make modifications (in our head) for future use.

In the strong majority (71%) of their comments, mentors cited something they had learned from their instructors as positive examples, often noting that they planned to imitate their instructor in future teaching scenarios. In two cases, mentors wrote about approaches they deemed to be effective but did not plan to use themselves, as in the case where one mentor wrote:

> My assigned instructor's approach is quite different from what I imagine my own approach would be in teaching an ENG100 classroom; thus the instructor was able to provide me with opportunities to think and see beyond my own otherwise narrow focus.

In mentor roundtable discussions, mentors often positioned themselves as admirers but not necessarily imitators of their assigned professors, displaying reflexivity in admitting that they would not attempt to "pull off" the instructor's approach because they did not have the same scholarly expertise, discursive experience, personality, or pedagogical goals as the lead instructor. A few mentors (n=5) also claimed to have benefitted from observing and analyzing what "didn't work," either for individual students or the class at large.

Those comments indicating a positional reflexivity with respect to instructors were isolated and categorized, revealing six different categories. As with the categories of reflexivity enabled by thinking through student positionality, these categories were grouped into four overarching domains of findings: integrating first-year experiences into classroom pedagogy; recognizing how instructor attitudes toward and beliefs about students influence pedagogy; contemplating professional conduct as it shapes teaching and learning; and analyzing alignment between mentor and instructor expectations.

Integrating first-year experiences into classroom pedagogy. This domain includes categories of comments focused on the specificity of first-year courses and first-year experience more generally as they require instructors to adjust approaches that have proven successful in upper-division and graduate courses for first-year students.

***Articulating classroom persona and policies to the institutional position of first-year course instructor*.** "Some instructors that are fantastic with upper-division students aren't as effective with FYC students," commented one mentor, and a reflexive comment from another expanded upon this observation: "From my instructor, I learned that a classroom persona was extremely valuable in the repertoire of the composition educator." Focusing on "rapport" as enabled (at least partly) by a classroom persona, a third mentor commented: "The instructor had a very good rapport with the students, and I learned much about how one can position oneself in a way in which students are less intimidated and are therefore more likely to speak and be engaged in the classroom." A fourth discerned ways to draw on reflexivity in elaborating course policies: "Even well-meaning students make mistakes such as missing/skipping too many classes, especially incoming freshmen, but for a process class like ENG 100, where you need to see their progress through draftwork and revisions, it is crucial to work a clear attendance policy into the syllabus."

***Fostering learner-centered classroom dynamics*.** Tapping their positions to reflexively analyze classroom

dynamics, mentors revisited familiar teaching scenarios to shift focus to the learner, as in this mentor's comment: "My instructor created an atmosphere where students felt comfortable with voicing their own ideas without feeling intimidated. The ability to connect with the students enriched my own ideas about how I want to approach my own teaching of a class." A second mentor reflexively tracked the outcomes of such re-positioning:

> I learned how to ask a question and WAIT for an answer. The instructor I worked with had an infinite amount of patience, and I often commented on it. Oftentimes, teachers ask questions and invariably answer them themselves - but not this time! My instructor always waited for a student - any student - to answer - always! And while we began the semester with an awful lot of silences, we finished like gaggling geese.

Recognizing how instructor attitudes toward and beliefs about students influence pedagogy. Among the most difficult goals for the reflexive practitioner is that of monitoring one's own attitudes and beliefs about students as they shape pedagogy. In this domain are included mentors' comments that indicate a heightened reflexivity about attitudes and beliefs as afforded by their unique positions in the classroom.

Pondering how instructors' attitudes position students with regards to the course and the institution. One mentor noted an instructor's performance that clearly took into account the pragmatics of scheduling: "I would never have thought anyone could keep eighteen tired students not only awake but interested at 7:30 in the morning, but he did, week after week." A second mentor linked her or his learning as a pedagogue directly to perceptions of students: "I learned to be more engaged in my students' work/their writing. I learned to see each student as an individual, a young person who has something important to say and contribute to the college community of [the university]." A third noted the power of first impressions: "An instructor's first impression can set the tone for the entire semester."

Recognizing instructors' efforts to engage students (and students' responses). Closely related to an instructor's apparent attitudes towards and beliefs about students are the behaviors that reflect them. One mentor reflexively considered such behaviors and witnessed results:

> The instructor was trying to assist his students every way he could for the course assignments and whatnot. He was very open-minded and rather flexible than strict with the students and I find the students genuinely like him. He also tried to look at things from the students' perspective and understand them as much as possible, and yet did not lose his authority as an instructor and facilitator.

A second mentor identified in an instructor's behavior an "optimism" about students:

> How to be more understanding, how to enhance student understanding through a more narrative-flavored format (i.e. story-telling), what kind(s) of writing prompts students best and least respond to, how to leave comments on student papers (by looking at model comments from the professor), what it means to truly "believe" so optimistically in students.

Contemplating professional conduct as it shapes teaching and learning. This domain of comments consists of only one category, yet mentors probed professional conduct from a variety of perspectives, contemplating both positive and negative examples of professionalism as perceived by the mentor. One mentor noted the value of class preparation: "Coming to class with a workable plan was a point she made every session and it showcased her ability as an instructor." A second mentor noted a counter-example, prompting a reflexive comment on power dynamics in the classroom as they inflected student agency:

> Since the instructor I worked with was not the most professional, I really learned about the power of the instructor and the classroom space. This has made me think a lot about the power dynamics in the classroom and the potential abuse of power. I think I've taken for granted how little agency undergraduate students feel that they have. It's got me thinking a lot about the ethical and moral limits of what we should or shouldn't do as instructors. I've definitely learned a lot about professional conduct.

A third mentor offered a contrasting example on professional conduct that focused on work ethic and a "habit of being":

> Professionalism is more than simply taking one's job seriously and with passion. It is an active, 24-hour self-awareness and self-assessment of work ethics and mentor pedagogy. It is a habit of being mindful and ethical of how I act, how I express myself as a mentor and educator. Because of our collaboration and rapport, I feel I have picked up

> on many of such habits from my instructor, and I'm very grateful.

Analyzing alignment between mentor and instructor expectations. Like the previous domain, this one consists of only one category, yet it signals the value of making reflexivity part and parcel of ongoing practice as the parties involved keep expectations at the forefront of awareness:

> Instructor and mentor expectations need to match in order for the semester to go well. Experience with different instructors is useful, but it can take a month or two to adjust to one another if you've never worked together before (e.g., in a course where the mentor had the professor as her instructor or had the professor as an advisor).

Like the domains of reflexivity identified in the previous section, these four domains of reflexivity show mentors thinking through the positionality of instructors as teachers to identify elements that might figure in a reflexive practitioner's repertoire of teaching. In the Discussion we probe ways in which positional reflexivity might be consciously incorporated into TA training and ways to tap such training to foster future learner-centered instructors.

Discussion

Incorporating Positional Reflexivity into TA Training

As with much qualitative research conducted without a control group, it is impossible to attribute the positional reflexivity developed by mentors in this study uniquely to the mentoring experience. Claims to generalizability of findings are therefore difficult to make. Yet the internal validity of this research achieved through data triangulation, coupled with easily-imagined similar configurations of TA training in other settings, make the results of this study compelling in the realm of what Miles and Huberman, drawing on Schofield, characterize as "what may be" and "what could be" generalizable to other contexts (1999, p. 279). The array of categories and the quality of mentors' insights into teaching and learning when thinking through the institutional positions of instructor and student suggest at the very least that incorporating occasions for positional reflexivity into teaching and TA training in other settings can enhance practitioners' conceptualizations of pedagogy as it takes form within their disciplines.

By taking reflection into the realm of reflexivity, mentors tap a valuable tenet from research methodology to augment their understandings of teaching and learning. Leveraging personal and epistemological reflexivity as an instructor undoubtedly renders the practitioner more careful when conceptualizing courses, designing syllabi, or planning lessons. Positional reflexivity augments these categories of reflexivity in important ways. For example, the positionally-reflexive TA has had an experience that could well inform those moments later when, despite careful conceptualization or planning, the actual course falls short of expectations for teaching and learning. This practitioner, having thought through the positions of *both* teachers and learners during TA training, brings an enhanced perspective to those future challenging pedagogical situations that could well enable learner-centered solutions to ensue.

As the comments from mentors demonstrate, moreover, positional reflexivity in many cases actually surfaces topics that call for personal and epistemological reflexivity, too. Like the dialogism that emerged from Cunliffe's (2002) reflex moments in the classroom linking tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge, a similar interplay might emerge through positional reflexive thinking. The discussion that follows revisits insights afforded through mentors' positional reflexivity to elaborate on the value of experiencing such reflexivity for TA teachers in training.

Of undeniable value to future teachers is the realization that student performance as evidenced through conventional channels for evaluating it does not necessarily represent aptitude and in fact may derive from many factors having little to do with aptitude. As Dees, et al. have noted, students' understandings of the teaching and learning in a given classroom may "conflict, complement, or intersect with" a teacher's understandings (2007, p. 131). TAs with experience in positional reflexivity might plan syllabi and course activities that supplement conventional scenarios of assessment with other performances, thus garnering more information about students' understandings of teaching and learning expectations. In our own field of composition studies and its heavy emphasis on process, instructors often require students to supplement submitted compositions with commentary on their composing processes that shed new light on performance. Reflexive practitioners in any field might incorporate similar approaches to performance and its appraisal to enable greater entry into learners' perspectives and understandings of the task with which they are being presented. Such process exchanges might even become dialogic and could be structured intentionally in a register intended to "humanize" instructors and make them less intimidating. The discussion forums and chat rooms that accompany many new learning technologies

might be self-consciously shaped by instructors to such ends. Mentors' comments alluding to students being intimidated by instructors were frequently validated in students' end-of-term anonymous evaluations of the initiative, indicating a potentially counter-productive effect of institutional status on learning. Reflexive practitioners, having been sensitized to this fact, can perhaps self-consciously enact a personal reflexivity in such dialogues all the while remaining attentive to moments when their students, performing within this new scenario, alert them to opportunities to exercise epistemological reflexivity—whether as part of the dialogue or as part of subsequent teaching and learning activities.

In the realm of personal reflexivity, the issue of student "difference" has received much attention in past decades, opening doors for re-thinking approaches to learners who, belonging to a subgroup marked by race, class, gender, etc., might benefit from pedagogical approaches not immediately apparent to an instructor who is not a part of that subgroup. In mentors' comments another category of difference surfaced: geographical provenance. At first glance, such a category might seem idiosyncratic and perhaps unique—and therefore of little interest to teachers in other locations. Yet from another perspective, this category of geographical difference can invite epistemological reflexivity across the disciplines, as a globalized economy places new kinds of challenges on engaging the values of specific locales. Instructors who are positionally reflexive within an institution and who have learned from local students' perspectives might forge links to extra-institutional initiatives that ground pedagogy quite literally. Such chances for eliciting enhanced student engagement have been borne out by other similar teaching and learning forays in the realm of experiential learning.

While these anonymous surveys rendered a number of insights into mentors' perspectives and experiences, findings from such a data collection instrument include at least the following two limitations: (1) anonymous surveys do not allow room for further probing of responses; and (2) a single survey is not adequate for capturing respondents' longitudinal development. While asking for responses immediately after a semester's end means that mentors are still quite close to the experience, it also means that they are unable to speak to how the experience as mentor-researcher has impacted later teaching and learning scenarios.

Implications for Mentors' Professional Development into Learner-centered Instructors

In order to understand how TAs' experiences as mentors shaped their beginning teaching careers, program administrators conducted a focus group interview with five former mentors who were now filling the ranks of instructors. These former mentors, who were currently in their first or second years of teaching in university or community college settings, all spoke of building rapport with their students as a primary pedagogical consideration. In order to build this rapport, many repeated or modified practices they had used as mentors: some regularly reflected in writing about their individual students' performances, adopting the mentor program tenet of "wondering about students"; others conducted one-to-one "intake interviews" in the opening weeks of the semester to learn more about their students' interests and decrease intimidation; all relied heavily on individual conferences with *all* students (and not just those students already inclined to seek help) as a central pedagogical practice; and finally, all five described themselves as intentionally working to create an approachable teaching persona and a comfortable classroom environment. These mentors-turned-instructors noted that the kinds of rapport they could build with students as an instructor were different than when they had occupied the role of mentor, largely because of their additional authority as assessors. In fact, most admitted that the element of "instructorhood" that mentoring had least prepared them for was assessment. Although having to sanction certain grading criteria and then apply them to students' work proved initially challenging for several of these new instructors, they all felt that they had grown reasonably proficient as assessors within a short time. Conversely, graduate students in traditional teaching assistantships emerge having spent a large portion of their TA hours assessing student work (Park, 2004) rather than gaining practice in the more complex arts of building rapport, interpreting student performance, and observing closely how students respond to various assignments and course policies.

Trask, Marotz-Baden, Settles, Genry, and Berke (2009) have observed the value of mentoring graduate students into learning-centered instructors who are prepared to contribute to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. The research reported here extends this idea by casting graduate students not only as recipients of mentoring, but also as mentors to students in their own right. Such positioning of graduate students enables them to envision their current and future classrooms as scenes of situated learning in which structures of social practices—including, for example, the practice of interpreting student performance—can be problematized to enhance teaching and learning. By positioning TAs as researchers of student performance, the mentoring role orients future academics to see not only their immediate disciplinary areas of expertise as worthy of scholarly inquiry but also teaching and learning more generally. (In the first four years of the Writing Mentors Program, eleven mentors have

presented their research on student learning at our college's annual peer-reviewed graduate student conference; in 2010, eight current or alumnae/i of the mentoring program presented at the national peer-reviewed conference on teaching composition, the Conference on College Composition and Communication.) By stoking reflexivity, mentoring prepares future instructors to conduct themselves as professionals who are continually attentive to the enlarged responsibilities that their institutional positions of privilege and power demand. Such initial TA training establishes a unique orientation to teaching and learning that equips future tertiary instructors with tools to render their teaching as successful as their disciplinary scholarship.

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