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# Of Thresholds and Springboards: Teaching Them, Teaching Each Other


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## **Cover Page Footnote**

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

## Of Thresholds and Springboards: Teaching Them, Teaching Each Other

E.A. Williams, *University of St. Francis*  
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*Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students.*

—Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

The past two decades in composition studies have seen an increase in scholarship devoted to the course typically referred to as the composition practicum, especially to the relationship of the faculty who teach the course to the new teachers who are enrolled in it. The questions raised in this area of scholarship include: Should there be “several faculty contributing their own approaches to teaching the practicum” in a single program, as Belanger and Gruber (2005) suggest (138)? How important is it that whoever teaches the practicum be what Marshall (2004) defines as a professional in composition studies pedagogy (1-17; see also, Stenberg 8-11)? How can a practicum help a new teacher of writing use composition theory in creating a curriculum that, as Stancliff and Daly Goggins (2007) write, “models the learner-centered practices that so many of us want new teachers to take into their own undergraduate classrooms” (12)? Do administrative or faculty attitudes encourage resistance to this course, and if so, how? Is there an institutional tendency, as Stenberg (2005) claims, to think of new instructors as “‘empty vessels’ who are in some way deficient,” despite bringing their own “complicated pedagogical history to the classroom” (64-5)? These are but a few of the questions that scholars have investigated recently.

One issue that has received more limited treatment is the relationship between the faculty who teach practicum courses and the advanced masters and doctoral students who may assist them. This isn’t an uncommon arrangement, despite the relative lack of attention to it in the literature. As the scholarship reveals, the particular duties of the practicum assistant differ widely from institution to institution. In some programs, a few advanced teaching assistants work with small groups of instructors who are new to teaching or who are new to the program but have some basic experience with teaching; these teaching groups may or may not be used in addition to a practicum course. In another model for practicum assistantships, an advanced Teaching Assistant or graduate student assists the faculty member with the (often overwhelming) duties of teaching the practicum, and the faculty member mentors the assistant in teaching and administering a graduate-level course on composition pedagogy. Of particular interest in this body of scholarship is the question of mentorship. Long, Holberg, and Taylor (2002), for example, contrast an “apprenticeship” model of mentorship in which assistants are on the disempowered end of a unidirectional power structure—less mentees than “gofers”—with a “collegial” model in which assistants are endowed with administrative duties and have the power to shape the programs they administer. Certainly, the mentoring relationship between the practicum faculty and assistants warrants further investigation, since its consequences exceed the two individuals involved and extend to the group of new teachers to whom they are immediately responsible and to the program in which they teach.

Before we discuss our mutual experience in this course, however, we wish to make clear from the outset that our course was considerably more than “just a practicum.” Its official title was, in fact, “The Study and Teaching of Writing,” and in our graduate catalogue, the course was described as “a survey of major concepts and issues in the study of writing, especially as applied to teaching composition. Practices in writing pedagogy are also discussed, and students’ teaching of composition is observed and explored” (University). Yes, our course was undeniably a practicum, but it was much more than that. And yes, we are quite aware of and sensitive to the representational issues raised by Dobrin (2005) in *Don’t Call It That: The Composition Practicum*—the title of which says much about how the practicum is still widely discredited as a “how to,” “nuts and bolts” introduction to writing instruction. This was not the course we taught. But for purposes of convenience, we will refer to our course using the familiar, shorthand term, *practicum*, and trust our readers to keep in mind that our course was also “an introduction to composition theory ... to pedagogical theory, to histories of composition studies ... and to larger disciplinary questions about writing,” to borrow from Dobrin’s inventory of *what else* the composition practicum typically entails (2). Having made this qualification, then, we offer a little more context about our circumstances.

In the fall of 2010, we found ourselves co-teaching our version of the traditional practicum. Frank is an associate professor, and at the time, Erin was a doctoral candidate. In our program, the assistant—under the title “Faculty Intern” that semester, which was changed in subsequent semesters to “Teaching Mentor”—fits into the second assistantship paradigm (mentioned above) as an advanced graduate student who gains professional experience with teaching a composition practicum by assisting the faculty member assigned to teach it. Our practicum, as we have just noted and further explain below, is a course in both the study and teaching of composition, and it entails administrative and mentoring responsibilities, which Frank and

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Erin shared that semester. As part of our duties, we conducted teaching observations of all new Graduate Teaching Assistants (as they are titled in our department), reviewed one set of their graded student papers, and advised them on the assignments they developed for one unit. An individual conference with each teaching assistant followed each of these administrative tasks. We also consulted with teaching assistants about student problems and successes, lesson planning, and other everyday pedagogical issues. In this respect, Erin was very much a junior colleague to Frank in the practicum, but because she was, in reality, still apprenticed—that is, because she was not Frank’s peer—she did not share his teaching or grading responsibilities.

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

### Locations

*Erin*

One of the first conversations that Frank and I had about this position after I agreed to serve as the Faculty Intern was about our respective locations in the contexts of our mentoring relationship and our shared responsibilities. Having a mutual understanding of our respective and shared locations was key to maneuvering effectively in these contexts. The most immediate and perhaps delicate of these contexts was our mentoring relationship, but thankfully it was also the context with the longest history since Frank had been my professor, my masters exam director, and a member of my dissertation committee. In offering me the opportunity to collaborate with him in teaching the practicum, Frank was graciously offering me a new opportunity to learn from him as an instructor and administrator. Frank anticipated some of the problems of location that could emerge in these teaching and administrative contexts if we didn’t discuss them early on. In other words, he worked from his location as my mentor in a previously existing context to make it possible for me to learn as much as possible in a new context as his mentee. His foresight in initiating this conversation helped me to understand my own location as his mentee and junior colleague.

In that early conversation, we had to come to a mutual understanding of the implications of my location between him, as a tenured faculty member, and the new teachers that we were mentoring. We had to strike a balance between my appearing to be just another graduate student—someone to whom these new teachers might take their casual complaints about the course and its tenured instructor—and my appearing to be purely an administrator who cared only about monitoring their teaching. Because the Faculty Intern had no instructional responsibilities in the class, I used my presence as an auditor in the class, which met twice weekly, as an opportunity to demonstrate that Frank and I were a team when it came to the course and its administrative responsibilities. We didn’t always have the same responses to the everyday pedagogical issues that the new teachers wanted to discuss in class, but Frank helped to situate me as part of the instructional team and as a colleague by asking me directly for my input and then affirming my authority by explaining to the new teachers how my suggestions could be suitable alternatives to his own. In looking back, I realize that I couldn’t have struck that balance by myself; my location as a point between the new teachers and the tenured faculty had to be continuously and clearly validated by Frank as the semester progressed.

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

*Frank*

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

In her opening comment, Erin alludes to finding herself in the middle of a paradox, aware of performing the dual roles of mentee (to me) and mentor (to our new teaching assistants). Of course, it is not possible to understand Erin’s rather vexed

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location (and mine, too) without some basic familiarity with academic hierarchies. Erin occupied a muddled middle because, at the time we taught this course, she was both a graduate student and an instructor of graduate students—an unusual situation, to say the least, and certainly one that was negotiated in subtle ways over the course of that term. But, I often wondered, were our new teachers aware of this departure from the usual order of things?

I suppose what we're talking about here is the question of legitimacy—or perhaps more accurately, the classroom authority that derives from legitimacy. In many ways, what Erin and I struggled with paralleled a similar challenge that our teaching assistants faced. New teachers, many of them with no teaching experience whatsoever, often have considerable anxiety about their classroom authority, and many soon learn that such authority varies according to gender, race, age, experience, and of course, their location within the academic hierarchy. Based on what I have observed, especially over the last decade or so, some first-year students have now begun to question their 101 teachers' authority based on whether or not their teachers are fully credentialed professors. While it would be easy to dismiss this complaint as the sort of casual grousing that inevitably occurs among students, I think it instructive to note that college ranking agencies consider this a factor as well, and include the percentage of sections taught by teaching assistants and part-time lecturers as one of their evaluative criterion. As it turns out, some of our first-year students and ranking agencies share at least one guiding assumption—namely, that good teaching directly corresponds to academic rank, credentials, and location within the hierarchy. I think this is a highly questionable assumption.

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

#### Erin

Frank wonders whether I encountered any resistance from the practicum students because I was relatively more proximate to them, both professionally and personally (most of our program's new teaching assistants are in their mid-to-late twenties, as was I when I served as the Faculty Intern). I couldn't guess as to the motivations behind any resistance I encountered, which was negligible, but it's quite possible. When I did encounter resistance from the new and experienced teachers whom I mentored, it usually had to do with whether that person and I had differences of opinion about how best to handle a classroom or pedagogical situation. In general, my philosophy regarding my administrative and mentoring duties was that diplomacy was the best way to respond to resistance. For example, when faced with resistance to suggestions about how to restructure a tricky class activity or clarify an over-written assignment, my first task was to understand what the instructor's original intent for the assignment was by restating my understanding of it to the instructor. Then I discussed with the teacher a range of possible approaches that could make the activity or assignment more effective while still honoring the instructor's original intentions and, if needed, helping the instructor to bring those intentions in line with the objectives of the unit and the course. My experience as the recipient of this sort of mentoring told me that this was the best way to help instructors who are new to teaching or new to our program learn how to adapt what they know about writing, the classroom, and their own students to teaching the first-semester composition course in our program.

The resistance I encountered occurred during the private conferences I held with the new teachers in my office about their teaching observations, sets of graded papers, and assignment drafts. I can't recall any time at which I met with overt resistance in the classroom. There, Frank was physically present to remind the new teachers of the fact that he authorized my location in the hierarchy. In my office, however, it was probably easier for instructors to see me as one of them and to forget the tension between us since I was not, in fact, one of them. It took some time and reflection for me to realize that when I encountered resistance, it was usually more about my administrative and pedagogical *authority* rather than (or as much as) my *ability* to offer good advice. I also realized that I couldn't take resistance personally. The new teachers couldn't be expected to know about the months of training and years of study that preceded my internship. Frank and I presumed that we didn't need to have a class discussion about my professional background, and rightly so. The new teachers weren't in a position to judge for themselves whether my training was sufficient to help them. It made sense, then, that the practicum students' frustrations could lead them to question my authority, just as they might any other instructor or mentor with whom they might be frustrated. I considered that my responding defensively or allowing these questions to undermine my confidence would only exacerbate tense situations and threaten to undo all the work that Frank and I had done to establish my authority and create an atmosphere in which the new teachers could feel comfortable expressing their concerns and frustrations related to the practicum.

The contrast between the classroom and the office also taught me that that the physical location in which mentoring happens affects the ways that new teachers react to their mentors and administrators. The closer proximity, personally and physically, of being in my office was more often than not an opportunity for the new teachers to be heard as individuals, to get personalized guidance, and to have their particular concerns addressed. Even though the closer proximity also meant an increased risk of sorts, it was an invaluable part of the mentoring experience, which always entails risk. I have wondered since then if my experiences are common for more experienced faculty and administrators. I wonder if I was (or am still) looking at

my experiences from the point of view of a graduate student or that of a junior administrator, and if I managed in the end to find a balance rather than a schizophrenia<sup>1</sup> between the two roles.

#### Frank

I was struck by your use of the term *schizophrenia*, Erin, to describe your sense of being pulled in two opposing directions at once, or rather, of having to perform two contrasting roles simultaneously. Your word choice reminded me of a distinction I have noticed several times over the years. How or where I came by this nugget, I don't recall, but I am aware that one way schizophrenia has been redefined is to claim that it is not a break with reality, but rather, *a break with sincerity*. It would be hard to gainsay the fact that we both had plenty of reality to deal with as we taught this practicum! Truth be told, neither of us could afford to have a break with (or take a break from!) the reality—or realities—we faced in this course, especially the reality of helping new instructors overcome their doubts, fears, traumas, and daily crises so that they might become more effective teachers of writing. I am, as you know, describing the unofficial curriculum we wrote as we taught the class, the one that didn't appear on the syllabus and, for the most part, couldn't have been known ahead of time.

But the question of sincerity remains an interesting one to think about, especially in the way it is naively assumed that people are either sincere or they're not, and that's the end of the story. Minimal attention is given to the possibility that the roles we are required to fulfill come with readymade, pre-established forms of sincerity, and thus, when asked to perform conflicting roles—namely, of teacher *and* student, mentor *and* mentee, peer *and* advisor, “graduate student” *and* “junior administrator”—we just might find ourselves up against competing versions of what it means to be sincere, or, in other words, what it means to be earnest, forthright, consistent, and appropriately trustworthy in our dealings with others. The maddening thing here is not so much a break with sincerity, but rather, the challenge in finding a flexible way to be sincere when called upon to be so many things to so many people.

From a comfortable distance, then, I admired your ability to balance your various roles, duties, and audiences. And as I write these words, I am aware that much of what you describe above would simply never happen to me, at least not at this moment in my academic career. My qualifications are never questioned these days, though I admit my judgments sometimes are (he said, laughing to himself). And yet, I too found myself in a predicament similar to yours, that is, of having to perform multiple roles—roles that sometimes worked against one another and, for that reason, left me confused, a little less surefooted than I like to think I am.

The difference between our experiences, I think, might be this: The source of your role conflicts could be linked to the many persons and groups you were answerable to, and therefore asked to perform for—department and writing program administrators, our new teachers, other graduate students, and, of course, yours truly. The source of my distress, on the other hand, could be linked to the multiple roles that I had to perform for one person, yourself. As you know, in various moments I was your teacher, your student, your mentor, your mentee, supervisor, helping hand, friend, nemesis, colleague, dissertation committee member, and sometimes confidant. And as if this were not enough, you may now add to this list, co-author.

I am sure that I did not manage all of these roles successfully. In fact, I am quite certain that there were times I took on a certain role, say that of mentor, when it might have been better had I enacted a very different role, say that of friend. Recalling those missteps, I am heartened by this knowledge—that most of our best moments were the surprises, the random confusions we faced, the impossible double-binds we overcame, and, to draw upon your metaphor once again, the “schizophrenia” we experienced separately and together. Or, as Mrs. Malaprop might say, the “nice derangement” we discovered in teaching this course.

#### Tensions

##### Frank

I suppose one of the ways to make any discussion of tensions more agreeable (and thus less tense!) is to modify that plural noun with its now predictable, almost obligatory adjective, *creative*, as if to suggest all tensions are generative of insight and inspiration. Maybe we'll get around to those creative tensions later, but I would like to start this section off with an inventory of the not so creative tensions that accompanied our course. Some of these may be endemic to the practicum, regardless of where it is taught; some may be specific to our institutional context; some may have emerged only in our particular course, possibly as a consequence of things we did, as well as things beyond our control.

First, one venerable hurdle we faced, and one that long preceded us, is that the practicum is compulsory. We could do nothing to escape the fact that our practicum is one of two courses required of all teaching assistants, the other being English 800, a course that, at the time, was entitled “Introduction to Graduate Study in English.” As with most universally required courses, neither of these are always beloved by grad students, even though the usefulness of the practicum is, for many, more immediately obvious. In any case, some of our students did not especially like the fact that they were required to take this course, usually because, as has often been said to me, there were other courses that far better reflected their individual scholarly interests. Fair enough. I actually have some sympathy for this position. And maybe there's a kind of curious justice built into this

<sup>1</sup> The authors wish to make clear that they in no way intend to use this term in a derogatory fashion. In using this expression, Erin alludes to Mountford's (2002) observation that a graduate student or faculty member can identify “as a teacher, activist, and scholar [and] maintains skepticism about upper administration,” while “a WPA must embrace a different model of work or suffer schizophrenia” (44). In this article, we draw on the notion of schizophrenia as a condition in which one “finds him or herself in a communicational matrix, in which messages contradict each other” (Gibney 50).

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

That said, there was also a predictable trajectory that happened over the duration of this course. Because our new teachers were *brand new teachers*, most of them having no prior classroom experience, we were the people who somehow got them through that first class, that first week, month, unit, and semester. We provided them with a common syllabus, resources, encouragement and support, stage directions, tricks of the trade, and in the process, I believe, a lot more confidence than what they possessed the week before classes began. But as I said, this was a trajectory. By the end of the semester, many had long departed from the common syllabus, others were writing their own assignments, and still others were busy experimenting with our course design. I can't honestly say I was always happy with these developments, but on the other hand, many of our teachers were exercising their autonomy as teachers, testing new classroom ideas and activities, taking pedagogical chances. It's hard to be too upset about that. After all, the goal of this course is eventually to make ourselves unnecessary. It's just that some may have concluded we were unnecessary long before we concurred with their judgment!

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

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

Finally, then, there were the tensions that resulted from our choice to design a first-year writing course that incorporated new media and new technologies. To be sure, instructional technology on our campus has made incredible advances over the last several years, but at the time we taught this course, there remained stark differences from one classroom to the next. Some of our instructors taught in “state of the art” classrooms; others, however, did not, and found themselves pushing a media cart from one location to the next. In addition, we had to devote more instructional time than we originally planned to the task of acquainting teachers with available online resources, the array of digital tools that could help their students successfully complete the writing assignments given to them. There were, of course, a predictable number of technical problems, but on balance, this aspect of the course, I happily admit, went far better than I ever imagined. But this was mostly due to your knowledge, your skills, and your forbearance—not only your patience with our new teachers, but with your co-instructor!

*Erin*

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

From my perspective, the tensions that you, our new teachers, and I experienced in the practicum were very much the product of differences in institutional and disciplinary positions and their concomitant power differentials. More plainly, given how much everyone involved invests—professionally and personally—in any practicum, it's a miracle whenever a practicum concludes without acrimony. Of course, tensions do not have to be acrimonious; as you mentioned earlier, they can be *creative*, both in the sense of being *productive* and in terms of forcing people in otherwise difficult situations to *be* creative in finding solutions.

Here, I want to highlight some of what I think helped us both to be creative and productive in coping with the tensions of mentoring, teaching, and administering the practicum. But first, I want to remark upon a notable *absence* of a tension that particularly stands out to me as I look back at that semester. You explained that you selected me from a list of potential candidates because of my background and experience, particularly with new and digital media, and because you and I had a history of working well together on various projects. Lucky us to have had previous mentoring and training experience, and lucky me to have had the right skills and interests at the right time! But surely this is rare. It's incredible to me that no one in our program demanded an interviewing process. After you offered me the job, I wondered if I should feel guilty about having been selected, but no one seemed to object. Even now, I wonder if there were any unspoken hard feelings about it from my graduate-student colleagues with comparable experience. Since then, an interviewing process has been implemented to fill the position (and granted, the position description has changed since then to be a solely administrative mentoring position with no pedagogical duties). But I wonder which is better, since interviewing for the assistantship would have essentially been interviewing to be a mentee, which seems an odd way to arrange that relationship. Perhaps that's why no one raised concerns

then.

The selection of someone to fill the position of faculty intern wasn't even the first of the institutional tensions that we had to address. Justifying funds for the assistant position, as our readers might imagine, has been difficult. Since the position was first created several years ago, making the case for *two* instructors—one of whom is a member of the graduate faculty—to teach twenty students has not always been easy. Thankfully, we have an usually supportive and empathetic department, and the difficulty of explaining the benefits of a practicum assistant to those outside our field has never been as tense as it could be in other departments or institutions. On the whole, our department and our College recognize the value of supporting graduate-level faculty who devote so much of their time and energy to training all of the university's newest teachers of writing.

Nonetheless, having a graduate student to assist with planning, teaching, and fulfilling the administrative duties of the course is an investment that we are thankful our administrators find worthwhile, since, among other benefits, it gives the assistant the sort of experience that is an asset for the professionalization of a new academic like me. It was a great opportunity for me to be mentored in teaching at the graduate level as well as with administration and mentoring.

*Frank*

It occurs to me that this might be a good time to interject a bit of history about our program—and by history I mean both ancient history (relatively speaking, of course), and recent history, especially changes that occurred within the last decade or so.

Since arriving here several years ago, I have always been proud of the fact that one of the founding figures of modern composition studies, Albert R. Kitzhaber, taught at the University of Kansas during the mid-1950s to early 1960s. In fact, and rather amazingly, Kitzhaber described in detail our TA training program in an article published in *CCC* in 1955. In revisiting that article, I was struck by how much had changed since then, but also by how much had remained the same. (Yes, I know how perilously close I am here to uttering a cliché.) We still place great emphasis on the rhetorical tradition, even though Kitzhaber's course was more classically oriented in that respect; we still seek to balance practical concerns with theoretical ones, though it should be said that these two emphases have shifted over time, and continue to shift depending on who teaches the course; we still find ourselves teaching teachers whose primary interest is not composition, though in Kitzhaber's time, his students were overwhelmingly devoted to literary studies, while in our time, such students tend to avidly pursue creative writing; we still want “to put our young teachers in the way of good ideas that would stimulate them to think seriously about the teaching of composition,” even though what counts as “good ideas” has understandably evolved over time (196). And finally, like Kitzhaber, we realize that this course is freighted with two characteristics that make it especially hard for those assigned to teach it—a disproportionate workload and the idealism that those who teach this course often bring to it.

I can speak to these last commonalities out of personal experience. Kitzhaber mentions that at the time of his writing, our program had two courses whose primary purpose was to train new teachers, a first and second semester course, each of which provided the new teacher with one hour of academic credit. Taken together, the two courses required of new teachers provided fewer credit hours (2) than one regular course taken in any given semester (3). And considering what Kitzhaber tells us about required readings, writing assignments, discussions, etc., it seems unlikely that his new teachers worked any less in his course that they did in their other courses.

When I first started teaching at KU, English 801, the practicum, was strictly that—a practicum and nothing more. New teachers worked from a common syllabus, met for two hours each week to discuss their successes and failures, questions, ideas, activities, challenges, and occasional traumas. There may have been an occasional assigned reading, but never more than one a week, and always one based on a pedagogical theme. Very little, if any, graded work was required, since the course was “pass-fail.” New teachers received two hours of academic credit for the fall practicum, and one hour in the follow-up version that occurred in the spring semester. The instructor was required to file classroom observation reports for each new teacher and was also asked to evaluate a set of every teacher's graded papers. In order to introduce new teachers to composition theory and scholarship, a different course (English 780) was required in the spring semester. Among first year teachers, there was some occasional resentment at having to take the 780 course, since most did not see its relevance to their particular scholarly interests—nor, in some instances, to their teaching practices.

As I mentioned, the two qualities of this course that always seem to be in abundance are its work requirements and its idealism—and oftentimes the latter has a direct bearing on the former. I can speak to this firsthand, too. After a few years of familiarizing myself with the arrangement just described, I proposed a different approach. So that we might keep theory and praxis together, I argued that 801 should do double-duty as both a practicum and an introduction to the field of composition studies. The new 801 would become a three hour course, and even though students would still be required to take a one hour follow-up practicum the following spring, they would no longer be required to take English 780, since the purpose of that course would now be fulfilled by the new 801.

As you know, that argument prevailed, and the course we taught was essentially the one I proposed. Looking back, I now wish I had not been so persuasive. My idealism, I confess, got the better of me. At the time, I was concerned that to require a “stand-alone” practicum was to be complicit in the routine de-intellectualizing of pedagogy that, I observed, seems to occur most everywhere, and that I did not wish to aid and abet. While I still hold this view (in theory anyway), I have reluctantly concluded that my proposed change was a mistake because it created a model (or should I say, a *monster*?) that,

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

*Erin*

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

And these new teachers had plenty of tensions that they needed help dealing with, too. Some of them had a great deal of difficulty balancing time and priorities, and since you were one charged with final grade evaluation, we decided that it would be your responsibility to discuss these concerns in the practicum with (the relatively few) students for whom this was a serious problem. The new teachers regularly came to both you and me for advice about frustrating or confusing situations, such as how to deal with a problem student, or a disastrous class meeting, or a challenge to their authority, or attendance problems, or a too-friendly student. While these were no doubt unpleasant situations at the time, I look back on them as creative tensions, too, because it was through dealing with these situations individually during our practicum meetings that the new teachers built up a cache of ideas about how to negotiate such trying situations. They came to know themselves as teachers by working through this adversity, with our assistance and guidance. I received the same assistance and guidance from you, as I learned about and assisted with this course. And you and I both continued to test and refine our own pedagogical philosophies and notions about how to teach a course like English 801.

### Conclusion

Looking back over our conversation, we are struck by a number of themes that emerged in this discussion. First, there seems to be a pattern of tiered, repeated alignments in the situations our teachers faced with their students, and what we faced with our new teachers. Among other things, we observed that just as our new teachers had to deal with captive first-year students, we had to do with our teachers who were required to take our course. Along these same lines, we wondered if the casual questioning of authority that some first-year students have learned to direct toward their instructors (e.g., "She's only a TA, after all!") might also be at play in our new teachers' interactions with Erin (e.g., "She's only one of us, after all!"). We could not help but wonder if there might be some pedagogical value to be discovered in these symmetries. Is it possible (or even advisable) to suggest to new teachers that the resistances they may feel about the practicum originate in the same sources as the resistances their students feel toward them? Knowing this as co-instructors, we have come to realize that we need to be mindful of how we model our responses to student resistance, since, clearly, we teach too when we model. And though our new teachers may not have realized this that first week of classes, it is impossible to teach for any length of time without encountering *some* resistance from *some* students. As most teachers know, this is a pedagogical fact of life, regardless of the course.

Another insight that emerged from our dialogue is that in arrangements like our own, it helps if both faculty member and assistant have some knowledge of the history of the course, and of the writing program, at their home institution. Among other things, we think this knowledge could help instructors avoid what might be called the two great Groundhog's Day temptations—the inclination to regard one's practicum course as either utterly original or utterly scripted. It is, of course, neither of these things. We were fortunate enough to have some of our program's early history chronicled in the published literature, but any instructor new to this course would be well-advised to learn as much as he or she can about the history of the course—its traditions, its changes, its inherited practices, its controversies, etc., at their respective institutions. Taking time to learn such histories will enable those assigned to teach the course to understand its continuities in ways they might not have noticed otherwise. To have this knowledge is to have a deeper understanding of why the practicum is sometimes a site of struggle and controversy, but also a site of enormously important and productive learning. Certainly, we had our fair share of bad moments, random confusions, little emergencies, delightful surprises, assorted victories, and much needed laughter between ourselves and with our new teachers. But, in retrospect, we understood that even these particulars of our experience were part of something larger than ourselves, something that preceded us and something that endured, and will continue to endure, long after our one

semester together. We think that that *something* needs to be known, as best it can, by those who teach this course.

Finally, we would like to close with a reflexive confession of sorts. At various junctures in the composing of this dialogue, we sometimes found ourselves stymied by how to refer to those enrolled in our course. Indeed, they were our students, but to call them that (or *only* that) seemed to discredit what we both felt was their more important role as teachers. To address this problem, we decided to call them "new teachers," and to use that term throughout our text, even though we knew it was incomplete: Our "new teachers" were obviously our "new students" as well. As we noted above, the same doubling accompanied the twin roles that Erin performed, too. As an advanced doctoral candidate, our new teachers realized that, like them, Erin likewise was a graduate student. But they knew her as a co-instructor in their practicum as well. For those enrolled in our practicum, then, Erin was teacher *and* student, and sometimes both at once. And even Frank, who enjoys the luxury of not being *officially* identified as a student, knows all too well that he learned much from these new teachers, and even more from Erin. His only regret now is that he may not have told others how much he learned from them.

But rather than be too vexed by this duality of role, we now wonder if maybe we could have made good use of what up to this point, we had only considered a problem. Maybe we missed an opportunity to address what Freire (2006) calls "the teacher-student contradiction" with our class; maybe we could have thematized this very contradiction as a feature of our pedagogy. Certainly, in our experience, the "teacher-student contradiction" was everywhere to be found, a seemingly inescapable feature of this course—and of our specific arrangement. In fact, we would argue that the practicum, wherever it is taught, constitutes an especially promising site for an exploration of Freire's basic idea. And from our present vantage, we now entertain the possibility that by *not* addressing the teacher-student contradiction in class, we may have unintentionally fostered its continuance. We recall that many of our new teachers did an admirable job of compartmentalizing their dual roles as teachers and students—so much so, in fact, that for some, these roles became too rigidly interpreted, distinct, reified. In retrospect, then, we believe there may have been some missed opportunities to broach with our class the positive value of understanding that they could be, simultaneously, *both* teachers *and* students. But that is a value that has to be cultivated, educed, not merely assumed.

It is perhaps unavoidable to reflect upon things we would change at the same time that we recall what we celebrated, hoped for, and think we accomplished. While Erin wished for more time in the classroom to teach composition theory and pedagogy to the new instructors, she realizes that she grew as a teacher and colleague by working with instructors individually throughout the semester. And while Frank regrets that he did not look for more opportunities to reverse the institutional roles assigned to Erin and himself, he wonders how they each might have likewise exchanged roles with their new teachers. On several occasions, for example, he and Erin learned a great deal about their new teachers' intellectual strengths and interests. Looking back, Frank wonders if he and Erin might have helped new teachers incorporate their particular strengths and expertise into our common syllabus—or, at the very least, find some structured opportunity for new teachers to share their knowledge with each other and with us. This means, of course, a receptivity on the part of Erin and Frank to learn from—and learn more about—what new teachers already know and, importantly, to illuminate the pedagogical value of that knowledge.

Still, despite what we might have done better, our conversation is about what we learned from teaching this course together and, moreover, what we learned from writing about that experience. We hope our readers learned something, as well, in this modest retelling of Erin and Frank's most excellent adventure.

Frank: Anything else, Erin?

Erin: No, Frank, except to say that I wish our readers an experience as rewarding as ours!

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