Mentoring Preservice and Early-Career English Teachers in Online Environments

Luke Rodesiler
rodesiler@ufl.edu
Lauren Tripp
laurent@ufl.edu
University of Florida

Given the intensification of teacher work (Apple 41), which seems particularly acute in the English classroom, time available for early-career teachers to connect with mentors face-to-face during the workday and to advance their professional learning is limited (Hargreaves 118). However, the emergence of interactive online technologies that mediate discussion, discourse, and the exchange of resources between individuals (e.g., social networking sites, microblogs, and blogs) offers preservice and early-career English teachers avenues for developing a network of mentors from across the nation who may provide support as they begin their careers. In this brief column, we examine the potential of online environments as sites for mentoring and consider the ways in which established members of online communities and teacher educators may shepherd preservice and early-career English teachers into such environments.

Online Environments as Sites for Mentoring

Thomas M. McCann and Larry Johannessen acknowledge that mentors assigned to beginning teachers are not likely to be sufficient (“Where Are the Good Mentors?” 121). Moreover, given the range of responsibilities often associated with mentoring, McCann and Johannessen encourage beginning teachers to form mentoring networks comprised of experienced teachers, professors, and former classmates (121). By extending one’s network of mentors, beginning teachers may diversify the ideas, suggestions, advice, and resources they receive (Rodesiler and Tripp). With the emergence of interactive online technologies, preservice and early-career teachers may engage in networked learning within online environments to further extend their mentoring networks.

When I worked in school districts to match mentors with new teachers, one consideration was the physical proximity of the mentor to the newcomer. If the mentor occupied a room next door or across the hall, this position suggested that the new teacher had easy access to this important resource in times of urgency. Such arrangements are not always possible, and if we expand our notion of mentoring beyond the assistance of one experienced authority to encompass a broader network of supports for coping with curriculum conundrums, classroom management stresses, and professional responsibilities, we would have to have a block of nearby classrooms to house all of the help. Luke Rodesiler and Lauren Tripp offer ways to tap into a wealth of resources that extend beyond the physical limits of the school by relying on new technologies that represent rich and dynamic networks. A responsibility for mentors at several stages in a teacher’s development will be the modeling of how to join such networks to broaden access to professional resources, advice, and encouragement.

When I worked in school districts to match mentors with new teachers, one consideration was the physical proximity of the mentor to the newcomer. If the mentor occupied a room next door or across the hall, this position suggested that the new teacher had easy access to this important resource in times of urgency. Such arrangements are not always possible, and if we expand our notion of mentoring beyond the assistance of one experienced authority to encompass a broader network of supports for coping with curriculum conundrums, classroom management stresses, and professional responsibilities, we would have to have a block of nearby classrooms to house all of the help. Luke Rodesiler and Lauren Tripp offer ways to tap into a wealth of resources that extend beyond the physical limits of the school by relying on new technologies that represent rich and dynamic networks. A responsibility for mentors at several stages in a teacher’s development will be the modeling of how to join such networks to broaden access to professional resources, advice, and encouragement.
Christine Steeples and Chris Jones describe networked learning as “learning in which information and communication technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (2). It is through networked learning that online environments become prime sites for mentoring. Within such environments, teachers may connect with one another, pose inquiries, exchange resources, and share ideas. For example, the English Companion Ning (ECN), a social networking site for English teachers, provides an online environment where more than 30,000 members can form specialized groups based on areas of interest and engage one another via discussion forums, blogs, and instant messages. Groups formed within the ECN may be likened to communities of practice (Wenger 7), for they are characterized by a shared domain of interest, a practice shared by its members, and engagement in activities that promote learning and interaction. In such communities, beginning teachers may connect with more experienced others who may serve as mentors, even from a distance.

Shepherding Beginning Teachers in Online Environments

English teachers who actively participate in professional learning activities in online environments may act as mentors for preservice and early-career teachers. However, beginning teachers may not participate if they do not feel comfortable or if they feel as though they have nothing to offer in exchanges with inservice professionals, and, consequently, mentoring relationships may never take hold (Rodesiler and Tripp). Thus, we encourage teachers who are active participants online to consider the ways they might support their colleagues who are trying to find their way in such environments. The following strategies may prove helpful in shepherding beginning English teachers in online environments:

- **Follow and/or befriend beginning teachers.** Many online environments, including microblogging platforms such as Twitter and social networking sites such as the English Companion Ning, allow users to connect with others by “following” them or “friending” them. Experienced teachers who are already entrenched in online environments may not feel the need to expand their networks. However, those teachers may demonstrate reciprocity by adding beginning teachers who follow them to their own networks. Such gestures may provide just the nudge beginning teachers need to feel as though they have meaningful contributions to offer.

- **Share materials.** Just as McCann and Johannessen (“The Challenge” 111) encourage classroom teachers to engage novice teachers in conversation about their experiences to foster a sense of collegiality. Likewise, seeking out beginning teachers in online environments and inquiring about their experiences may help them feel as though their experiences are valued and encourage continued participation.

- **Show empathy.** Asking a question is not easy. Turning to another and posing an inquiry may be viewed as an act of imposition (Lindfors 15), and some may see the asking of questions as the revelation of deficiencies (Rodesiler and Tripp). When beginning teachers are bold enough to seek help online, teachers entrenched in online environments may put them at ease by taking an empathic stance (McCann 102) and offering advice or support as appropriate.

- **If merited, promote beginning teachers’ ideas.** The act of reposting an original microblog entry made by another individual is a common practice among microbloggers. When using Twitter, this act is recognized as “re-tweeting.” Such acts serve to promote the ideas shared by others, and they may help to foster a sense of validation and belonging among teachers who are just beginning to participate online.

- **Engage beginning teachers in discourse.** McCann and Johannessen (“The Challenge” 111) encourage classroom teachers to engage novice teachers in conversation about their experiences to foster a sense of collegiality. Likewise, seeking out beginning teachers in online environments and inquiring about their experiences may help them feel as though their experiences are valued and encourage continued participation.
Teacher Educators Doing Their Part

Previously, contributors to this column (e.g., Fiene et al. 92; McCann and Johannessen, “The Challenge” 108) have recognized that teacher education programs play a critical role in supporting the mentoring of early-career teachers. In line with such recognition, we encourage teacher educators to consider the ways they might prepare beginning teachers to participate in networked learning and to capitalize on the affordances of online technologies for developing their own networks of mentors. What might such preparation look like? Teacher educators might consider the following approaches:

- **Model networked learning and mentoring in online environments** by actively participating in teaching-focused social networking sites, by contributing to blogging communities, and by microblogging about issues relevant to teaching and learning.

- **Embed networked learning into the classroom** by creating course-specific hashtags (e.g., #lae6945) that encourage students to participate in synchronous backchannel chat sessions about the topics at hand and that give them an opportunity to experience microblogging in professional contexts.

- **Build up to networked learning online** by first providing students with opportunities to network face-to-face with inservice and preservice teachers at state and regional conferences. Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe contend that, among college students, social networking typically entails interacting online with individuals they already communicate with face-to-face. By encouraging students to make connections at conferences, teacher educators may nudge their students into expanding their networks and searching beyond the local to invite and entertain diverse perspectives on teaching and learning (Rodesiler and Tripp).

- **Partner with colleagues at other institutions** to facilitate synchronous and asynchronous interactions online and to establish connections between preservice and early-career teachers from across the nation.

- **Promote an open learning ethos** by encouraging students to share their practice with others online via blog, microblog, or social networking site.

The emergence of online technologies that mediate interactions and exchanges between individuals offers opportunities for beginning teachers to construct diverse networks of mentors with whom they would not likely connect otherwise.

The emergence of online technologies that mediate interactions and exchanges between individuals offers opportunities for beginning teachers to construct diverse networks of mentors with whom they would not likely connect otherwise. However, for those opportunities to be fully realized, teachers experienced in networked learning and teacher educators must work to support preservice and early-career teachers. When beginning teachers feel comfortable and believe their experiences are valued, they may be more likely to pursue professional discourse with colleagues in the proactive manner that scholars (e.g., Bickmore 89) recommend.

**Works Cited**


Storytelling and the Years After

What happened to your lost stories?
Even with fine wax wings they
disappear from the horizon. A white limb, a
ripple on the sea. Remember Icarus.
Daedalus must have wondered at the
round breasted partridge
perched on a low limb chattering,
rustling short spanned wings as it
watched him bury his only son.

Enter Ovid’s telling. Inside, you’ll meet
Perdix, boy inventor who fashioned
tools of teeth and bones.
Daedalus, murderous builder of labyrinths
cast him off a precipice

Saved by metamorphosis . . .
Pallas transformed his flailing arms to
partridge wings. It’s the tale that
invented Schadenfreude.

Listen to your story, a June bug
hurling its thick brown body at your window.
Inside the living room of forgetfulness the
thud and scrape jars you awake.

You didn’t believe me about the June bug.
Its name is as pert as a toddler’s
sundress but every year it
-crashes toward your light,
calling you out into the night or
driving you under cover.

Drop those twine-bound bales of
notebooks crammed with words no
eyes will fall upon ever.

When words cease—

quivering, restless, immobile, the
-volume fallen behind the shelf is the
very one you’ll need.

Go outside. Now is the fertile time.
Stretch out your arms, allow the air to
move through you. Stories will
streak across the sky. Let them fly
toward the sun. Watch them land like
birds on a wire.

—Amanda Nicole Gulla
© 2012 Amanda Nicole Gulla

Amanda Nicole Gulla’s poetry has appeared in Chronogram, Noctua Review, Quantum Poetry, and other journals. She is
the author of the poetry chapbook A Banner Year for Apples, published by Post Traumatic Press. She is assistant professor of
English education at Lehman College, City University of New York, and her scholarly work has appeared in English Journal,
The New Educator, Perspectives on Urban Education, and other publications. Email her at amanda.gulla@lehman.cuny.edu.