Susan Spangler

With a Little Help from Their Friends: Making the Transition from Student to Teacher

Any of us in education can point to a specific teacher, professor, or advisor who helped us on the journey to where we are today. The rich relationships formed with such mentors are often spontaneous, unplanned, serendipitous, and I think all of us would agree that they are among the most important relationships in our professional lives. Given their importance in our development as teachers, it is odd that in the scholarly literature about mentors, there is no consensus or concise statement about what mentors are or what they do. Certainly we expect mentors to be positive, respectful, patient, encouraging, and wise, but at times we also need them to help us look critically at ourselves, employ problem-solving strategies, and anticipate any situation that may result from our actions. Thomas M. McCann, Larry R. Johannesen, and Bernard P. Ricca state what I believe is the bottom line: Mentors share “the kind of knowledge that gives the experienced teacher a distinct advantage over the new teacher” (114). In essence, successful mentoring helps novices think and act like experienced teachers, and there are as many types of mentoring as there are mentoring methodologies.

In the program where I teach English Adolescence Education to future teachers, mentors individually advise, guide, and teach students and help them transition from course to course, from year to year, and from role to role as they become novice teachers. In addition to the individual and sometimes chance mentoring that occurs, however, we have implemented programmatic mentoring in the form of a student teacher seminar that we hope eases the transition from student to teacher that occurs during the professional year and keeps them firmly connected to their peers and university mentors just a bit longer than most student teachers are. The mentoring that occurs in the seminar comes mainly from the student teachers sharing their experiences with each other and working together to make sense of their classrooms in the context of the theories they’ve learned in the university. The important action in this program is collaboration with others who face similar experiences, and our example at the university can extend to the schools with the help of teacher-leaders in a variety of ways, which I discuss below. This mentoring directly contrasts with the individual kind students get throughout the program and adds another layer to their knowledge base, which will help them think and act like experienced teachers.

**SUNY Fredonia’s Program**

SUNY Fredonia’s program in English Adolescence Education is a small but vibrant one. We average 20 graduates a year, and five full-time faculty handle the nine pedagogy courses we offer in the English department as well as rotate in supervising each intern’s two student teaching placements. Because of the program’s size, instructors usually encounter students more than once in the pedagogy courses, and there is plenty of opportunity for individual students to develop mentoring relationships with individual professors during their coursework.

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In years past, after completing three and a half years of concentrated coursework and engaging in close contact with their mentors, students went off to student teach in local schools. Despite intense preparation through coursework and field experiences, some still found the student teaching experience, not surprisingly, to be quite a shock (Corcoran). For our faculty, the decreased contact with students during their teaching internships was not enough to maintain healthy mentoring relationships with full-time faculty, and we had a hard time with the idea of just pushing our fledglings out of the nest to fall or fly with much less support than they were used to. In their internships in the past, student teachers relied on their cooperating teachers, whom they had known for only one semester, and one university supervisor, who may not have taught any of their pedagogy courses, because adjuncts, in addition to the full-time faculty, figure among our supervisors.

One of the “quick fix” strategies that several of the supervisors had implemented to compensate for the reduced student contact was a one-time, voluntary evening meeting for all their student teachers (usually four or five) during that placement. The purpose of the evening was to allow the interns to meet with their cohorts, whom they were no longer seeing on a regular basis, and to talk about their common experiences in student teaching. Those of us who created this mini-seminar found that the student teachers appreciated the time together because they realized that they weren’t the only ones feeling stress, uncertainty, or extreme fatigue. The bond that they formed, even temporarily, with others in their same situations provided significant mental relief during the placement.

Based on these experiences and our desire to regain the close connections we had built with our preservice teachers in their regular coursework, my colleagues and I decided to implement a student teaching seminar in our program. Because my research closely related to the issue, I volunteered to write the course proposal and pilot the course, inspired by an article in English Education (Meyer and Sawyer) and guided by the Conference on English Education Position Statement on the Roles of Methods Courses and Field Experience in English Education1 as well as NCTE/NCATE Program Standards for Initial Preparation of Teachers of Secondary English Language Arts.2 These sources indicate the need for teacher preparation programs to help preservice teachers transition from student to professional through encouraging reflective inquiry, building professional communities, and providing opportunities for guided experience. The proposed student teaching seminar would be devoted to helping students negotiate the “two-worlds pitfall” (Feiman-Nemser and Buchmann 53), the world of the university and the world of the secondary school, as well as the threshold between student and teacher, so that these worlds would form a dialogic rather than antagonistic relationship. Our goal was to ease the transition between the two worlds by providing student teachers a forum in which mentoring takes the form of cohorts and an experienced instructor sharing the kind of knowledge that would transform novice teachers into experienced teachers.

The Student Teaching Seminar

Our program’s pedagogy sequence culminates in student teaching experiences and the student teaching seminar. The course objectives of the seminar have already been introduced and addressed in other pedagogy courses, and because student understanding of the objectives has been scaffolded throughout the program, the kind of mentoring that occurs in the seminar is more learner-initiated and self-directed. The seminar’s objectives help our program assess several NCTE/NCATE goals:

- To create a teacher learning community
- To develop an inquiry-oriented stance toward knowledge and teaching
- To bridge the perceived gap between pedagogical theory and teaching practice

The relatively simple course requirements relate directly to those objectives. Students attend an evening class once a week (to foster a teacher learning community); they keep a student teaching journal (to develop reflective practices); they present a “teaching inquiry” to the rest of the class, research

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countered in their pedagogy courses but on which they need a refresher or deeper study now that they are in the classrooms. The concepts and information they already know about the topic are not merely theoretical anymore, and they want to discuss the topic in light of their experiences. This semester, we have discussed how to responsibly and effectively teach grammar, design rubrics, practice differentiated instruction, and evaluate class participation, in addition to the inquiries the students have presented on homework policies, student motivation, needs of Native American students, ELL issues, and teaching controversial texts. Each week presents an opportunity for students to become aware of scholarship on an issue and then negotiate their understanding with their own classroom experiences through dialogue with their cohorts. Each teacher’s experience adds to the others’ knowledge base that they will take into their classrooms the next day and gives them additional experiences to inform their decisions in the classroom. In essence, through their sharing, they leverage the kinds of knowledge that allow them to develop more quickly the advantages of an experienced teacher.

Benefits of Programmatic Mentoring

In developing an inquiry-oriented stance toward teaching and learning, the students consult journal articles, interview other teachers, and consult other mentors for their research, all effective practice for what they will need to do during their first year of student teaching. McCann, Johannessen, and Ricca discuss the need for building networks of support with a variety of peers, veteran teachers, and other resource persons (123), and the inquiry project allows students to begin building networks. When I asked my students how the course had acted as a mentor for them, the majority of them said they appreciated the chance to talk with each other about their experiences. One, Evan Giacomin, said, “The ability to talk through problems and issues with a group of students experiencing the...
same things is just a nice mental safety net . . . .

The course has acted as a mentor in the sense that it has reinforced the importance of networking in my future as a teacher.” Evan goes on to note that surviving as a teacher requires adaptation and change: “The best way to do so is to establish a network of fellow teachers to talk things through. [The course] has reinforced how important it is to have a network of teachers who are just as passionate as you are.”

Students in the course learn that they have the ability and resources to solve their own problems, but they are not really doing it alone, and that’s the point. Students in the seminar have responded positively to learning along with their friends. Emily Paccia said, “Many times when student teaching, we [speaking for the class] think we are the only ones with certain problems we are facing. This class helped show me that many other student teachers are having similar issues, and we were able to get new ideas on how to deal with these issues.” While Singer and Zeni have experienced success with online communities for preservice teachers, our student teachers valued the face-to-face time with others who are struggling; they felt supported in embodied and personal ways that often feel absent in online communities. Student Stephanie Roosa addressed the online strategy, saying: “Certainly you can research how various theory has fared with other teachers on the Internet, but actually hearing how things went with peers felt so much better. They’d received the same training as I had, so it was easier to relate.” Class member Chase Bortel responded to the “intimate environment” of the course: “This class has provided the most personal space to share, talk about, and creatively address not only large problems (how to inspire, teach, and reach) but also to vent and bond over issues such as the expense of new ties and the dangers of drinking hot coffee and walking at the same time.” Through the course, the students create an energetic learning community in which they can all thrive. They act as mentors to each other, and the course provides programmatic support for them.

The course also helps student teachers build professional communities, as the CEE Position Statement recommends. An option that many students take for reporting their inquiry findings is a conference presentation. By sharing the results of their research, the student teachers develop an understanding of the importance of participation in the larger field of English teaching and other learning communities. The other students in the course are exactly the kind of audience they would find at the NCTE Annual Convention, a group of interested classroom teachers looking for ways to enhance their own teaching. In presenting their research to their cohorts, they begin to see themselves as credible participants in the larger English education community. This year, several of the student teachers proposed a panel for the NCTE 2012 Annual Convention on teaching grammar and were delighted to be accepted. The course mentors novices to enter into the conversation about teaching and learning with confidence.

Contrasted with the usually small number of people involved in mentoring student teachers (the classroom teacher and university supervisor), the sheer number of people involved with the course is a benefit to the students, as student Jessica Halt suggests, saying that the course provides “an excellent support system of professors and peers that allows us to work through problems with a greater number of people than perhaps we normally would. It also gives good opportunities to discuss problems that our cooperating teachers pose or have difficulty helping us with.” The more people involved, the more experiences shared, the more knowledge gained, the more mentoring takes place.

Because the program is small, we have the ability to match student teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors by their abilities, personalities, and strengths. Sometimes, however, those matches don’t work as well as we intend them to, and in those cases the student teaching seminar also acts as a safety net.

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“Discussing student teaching with my supervisor and cooperating teacher is different because I cannot be completely honest with them. Both are friends [with each other] and have told me so. When I write in my journals for my supervisor, I feel like I cannot be completely honest.” In Nicole’s situation, the friendship between her cooperating teacher and university supervisor inhibited her ability to talk frankly about her relationship with either, but the student teaching seminar still provided her an outlet for honest reflection. If individual mentoring relationships among cooperating teacher, university supervisor, and student teacher fell through, for whatever reason, the programmatic mentoring in the student teaching seminar still supports our novices.

Certainly, our program created the course to help mentor students, but the student teaching seminar has reciprocated in helping our program. Besides being a place where we can officially document and assess NCTE/NCATE teacher preparation standards, the course is also a way to address concerns in our program we haven’t addressed previously or perhaps even known existed. For example, the course has helped our program in the kind of feedback I am able to give to my English education colleagues and university supervisors working with our student teachers. Based on the topics the student teachers suggest for presentations and the issues they discuss weekly, I have seen where our program needs to focus instruction during coursework, and I have advised colleagues on specific topics to address in their pedagogy courses. When I heard concerns student teachers had about their university supervisors, I collected their suggestions on helpful and not-helpful behaviors of supervisors and shared it with all the supervisors at one of our meetings. When I heard concerns about cooperating teachers, I suggested finding alternate cooperating teachers for our program to draw on in the future. We hope that the seminar has provided a collaborative mentor experience for our teacher candidates, and that their contributions to the seminar have informed our efforts to improve our teacher preparation program.

How Teachers Can Facilitate Collaboration

At the university, we depend on excellent cooperating teachers to continue the work we have started in helping tentative novices transition to confident classroom teachers. Since collaboration with others who are experiencing similar circumstances is a main factor in this kind of programmatic mentoring, classroom teachers can help in a variety of ways. First, if there is not a seminar available for teaching interns, cooperating teachers can introduce them into collaborative relationships, even if that means working across departments or through online communities. Often, more than one student teacher is placed in a school, and allowing those novices time and space to talk, whether they are working in the same discipline or not, will encourage reflection and development as collegial professionals. If face-to-face meetings with other student teachers are not possible, teachers can encourage their interns to make use of their own social media groups or NCTE's Connected Community for New Teachers. If a seminar is available for interns, teachers can act as valuable resources for their research by staying current in best practices for teaching English language arts and by modeling those practices in their classrooms.

One of my greatest frustrations as an English educator and student teacher supervisor has been the disconnect that seems inevitable as students move from their college classes into their school classrooms. The student teaching seminar, however, has provided a bridge to connect college faculty and
student teachers much more effectively than mere “observation” can allow. Since the student teachers bring the issues to the table for discussion with one another and since they share their knowledge and experiences with each other, the seminar provides an opportunity for our student teachers to transition from novice to professional. In the end, the seminar’s mentorship is about more than one coach or guide directing unknowing and unformed pupils; it’s about the symbiotic relationship that mentors and mentees—the students themselves—develop together through genuine exchange and through a keen focus on relevant, real-world problems (Eble and Gaillet). The student teaching seminar has provided a transformative space for our program, mentoring tentative novices as they prepare to be transformative teachers.

Notes
1. CEE Position Statement: What Do We Know and Believe about the Roles of Methods Courses and Field Experiences in English Education? (http://www.ncte.org/cee/positions/roleofmethodsinee)
2. NCTE Program Standards Goals (http://www.ncte.org/cee/ncate/program)

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