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Becoming a Mentor Teacher and Teacher Educator

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When I was teaching high school, my principal, Dick Sagor, took me aside and asked if I would be willing to mentor a student teacher. I said, "Let me think about it."

Bob Hamm, whose classroom was next door, had worked with many student teachers. He told me a student teacher was an "opportunity to give something back to the profession."

Ward Lewis, across the hall, warned, "You never know who you will get!"

Pat Cole advised, "The student teacher I had last year could hardly write a sentence and barely spell."

I was in my fourth year of teaching high school English and, even though I was working awfully hard and recognized that my lessons were still far from perfect, I was finally sensing that things were under, at least, moderate control. The fact is that I loved my classes. I had taught several courses three or four times, and the units were old friends. My radar for students was so much better than when I started out. I could sense when one of my at-risk sophomores didn't understand the writing assignment, and, thus, I could anticipate interruptions and head them off. There were still intense hallway conversations, but most of the time classes were productive. Nights and summers I had finished my Master of Arts in Teaching in English and education and earned professional-level state certification. As emphasized in my graduate course work, I was working especially hard to create good discussions in my classes. After several months of guided practice, even my ninth graders were listening to each other's ideas about *Romeo and Juliet* and *Great Expectations*. Even though I longed for the increased prep time that I thought having a student teacher might make possible, I didn't want a student teacher to "mess up" my classes or come between me

and the students I enjoyed working with. With all of this in mind, I turned down Dr. Sagor's invitation to take on an intern.

The next year he was back. "Allen, what about a student teacher? It can be a learning experience..." I am not sure why the question seemed different that year. Maybe I was now ready for a new challenge.

I thought to myself, "Well, I can't spell, either..." Out loud, I said, "OK, I'll try it."

I actually feel sorry for my first intern teacher, an older, non-traditional student with two kids in junior high school. I hovered over Pru Susa. I trained her in my ingenious attendance system. I showed her how to write study questions on a novel, just the same way I did. I tried to coach her in how to manage a discussion, exactly as I managed it. Sitting in the back of the room, I saw that students weren't as engaged in the discussion as they were when I led it, and so I criticized her.

Then, one day, a couple weeks later during the *Great Expectations* unit, I was in the hallway and found myself listening in. The kids were discussing the book in small groups, a technique I didn't use very often, and the room was buzzing. A week later the walls were covered with colorful posters the students had made of characters and settings in the novel, something else I hadn't tried before. Even Ward Lewis, Mr. Blank Wall himself, complimented me in the hallway about how much better decorated my room was. I had to tell him it was the student teacher, not I, who was generating that work. (Maybe he knew that and was just getting in a subtle dig. That would be like him.)

Though she thanked me politely and told me I had been "a great mentor," I don't think it was Pru Susa who really learned something that semester. I was the one. Only five years into the profession, I discovered I had started to become rigid. I found out that an intern teacher could open up new possibilities, make richer and more complex my own teaching, and break me into a new role as a mentor teacher.

Through this and many other experiences, I have learned that becoming involved in the education of new teachers is a valuable part of my own continued

professional growth. Now, as a professor of English education, I work closely with many middle and high school English teachers, teachers who are themselves becoming mentors and emerging into professional leadership. My graduate students mentor my undergraduate preservice students, supervise interns, and some move on to earn PhDs, becoming English education professors themselves.

Wherever you are in your professional journey, in the rest of this article I'd like to you to consider a role as an educator of other teachers, to think about how to move further along the mentorship scale.

Mentoring Pre-interns

One way to get started with mentorship is to serve as a supervisor teacher for a "pre-internship" or some other teacher assisting experience. Most universities require students to spend significant time in a classroom before undertaking the more full responsibility of student teaching. "Pre-interns" are supposed to be immersing themselves in the secondary school experience and thinking of themselves as an aspiring professional teacher. That immersion may take many forms, from simple observation, helping with preparation tasks or reading papers, to working with individual students, groups, or leading specific lessons with the whole class. The degree of responsibility that a pre-intern teacher should be allowed to take in the classroom depends on the nature and expectations of the university course or program, the pre-intern's maturity, and the best thinking of the mentor teacher.

Depending on the teacher preparation program there are a variety of pre-internship experiences that may be expected of students. Sometimes, perhaps as part of a guided course experience, pre-interns spend significant time in one classroom for the full course of a semester or year. Other times there are shorter experiences that may involve focused activities such as providing tutorial assistance, working in a writing center, teaching a specific lesson. Future teachers are better off when teacher preparation programs closely collaborate with schools and are richly infused with practicum and in-school experiences. Universities are often looking for teachers and schools open to supporting the field experiences of their students, and placement offices and individual faculty members are likely to welcome expressions of interest.

At our university the pre-internship takes place

when students are juniors taking their first course in curriculum design and instruction. These students are often just starting the core courses of their academic major and have not yet taken methods courses in their content area. While these future teachers may not have the advanced coursework they need to be ready for full responsibility for secondary teaching, they still have strengths that mentors can build on. Of course they are individuals, and mentors can best begin by setting up a time to carefully interview the pre-interns, and learn about their perceived interests, strengths, and weaknesses.

Still early in their formation as teachers, these students need to spend time observing secondary students and teachers. That observation will be most valuable if it is directed, if the mentor teacher points out specific things to look for. Before teaching particular lessons that pre-interns will observe, it is valuable if mentor teachers share goals, methods and intended outcomes with pre-interns. When possible, discussions of lessons are more valuable when mentors can talk not just about what to do, but also about why and how, exploring with the pre-intern the relation between theory and practice.

Mentors can also invite the pre-intern into "teacher research." Mentors might think about areas where they are trying to improve their own teaching and help pre-interns gather specific information from their observations, for example on questioning strategies, student involvement in discussion, or student response to writing prompts or assignments. Conversations with pre-interns after this kind of observation are likely to be valuable for both pre-intern and mentor. The mentor should provide a role model of a positive teacher carefully and critically examining her or his own practice with a view towards continued growth and improvement.

Pre-interns need to get to know secondary students, their interests and abilities. Interviewing students, tutoring, reading and responding to written work, leading focused small group discussions—all are good ways for pre-interns to become familiar with the students. Of course, universities tell pre-interns to maintain professional relationships with students and to dress appropriately. Nonetheless, it is sometimes hard for new teachers, themselves not many years out of high school, to know what to say or how to

act so as maintain professional distance rather than acting as the students' "friend." Mentors can suggest appropriate behavior and help pre-interns develop a professional stance and language.

Most pre-interns would love to have the opportunity to lead specific lessons. Such opportunities depend on university expectations, the maturity and readiness of the pre-intern, and the nature of the classes they are visiting. Any lesson plans that pre-interns develop for the classroom should be carefully reviewed by the mentor. Experienced teachers can easily forget how much they themselves have learned during the different phases of entering the profession. Pre-interns need teachers who are enthusiastic and optimistic about teaching, and who are also kind and helpful when pre-interns make mistakes or show a lack of understanding of methods or content, even at a basic level.

Mentoring Student Teachers

The most important pre-service experience is student, or "intern," teaching. Being a mentor or cooperating teacher for a student intern requires time, commitment, flexibility, and extensive collaboration. The student teacher and her or his mentor are entering into a rich and important relationship for the full semester, a relationship that may last years into the future and influence both teaching careers. The new teacher seeks guidance and acceptance as a developing professional. The most basic component of a successful mentoring is solid communication. In an ideal world mentor teachers would have an additional preparation hour to meet with interns; in the real world mentors must take the lead in blocking out regular time in the (already too busy) day for interns and mentors to talk to each other. Mentor teachers need to be able to listen, and offer constructive feedback without judgment. As I learned, there is a delicate balance between closely monitoring an intern and providing independence.

Student teaching typically passes through a series of phases, from orientation and observation, to planning for teaching, participating as a team member, and finally assuming full responsibility for classes and teaching without observation. Mentor teachers need to sequentially help intern teachers develop an understanding of the range of teacher responsibilities, and interns need to be involved in planning and decision-making, creating and executing

lessons, grading papers and making student evaluations. Mentors also need to maintain relationships with university supervisors and write evaluations and letters of recommendations. Mentoring even the best intern teachers is not an easy task. There are good books about how to be a mentor teacher. In *Mentoring Novice Teachers: Fostering A Dialogue Process*, Debra Pitton has solid suggestions for understanding mentees, developing communication, gathering data, and making classroom observations. Diane Yendol-Hoppey and Nancy Fichtman Dana in *The Reflective Educator's Guide to Mentoring: Strengthening Practice Through Knowledge, Story, and Metaphor* provide an engaging collection of mentoring case studies.

Intern teachers are often unaware of the specific abilities of secondary students. They need to discover the diverse skill levels middle school and high school students bring to the classroom and how to design lessons to meet and advance those skills. A good mentor knows his or her students well, and will be able to help new teachers break down complex assignments into the component parts that make success possible. I think it also typical that universities don't do enough to help new teachers understand the wide range of secondary students' special needs. The more mentors can help new teachers see not only the big questions of how to organize lessons, but also the fine points of how to individualize instruction, the better. While recognizing that these are complex skills requiring years to learn, they are vital parts of a successful student teaching experience.

Although interns should not simply be viewed as cheap labor for hall monitoring or cafeteria duty, it is important to involve them in the whole range of teacher experiences, department meetings, inservices, and extra-curricular activities. Student teachers benefit from sitting in on a range of classrooms, seeing teachers with different styles in their own discipline and visiting classrooms in areas of second majors or minors.

The internship is an emotional as well as an intellectual experience. It is valuable for interns to keep logs or journals and learn to observe systematically. Mentors might suggest topics or questions for such a journal. Of course, mentors should invite questions, and make it easy for interns to ask for help. Sometimes a mentor will create the most learning simply by listening.

The pre-internship and the internship are important parts of a school/university partnership for preparing the teachers of the future. Sometimes mentors receive token stipends or privileges, but the real compensation is in the mentorship itself. In these partnerships there may be special roles and opportunities for coordinating teachers. Many districts have initiated new teacher induction programs where senior teachers play an important role mentoring their new colleagues. Research on mentoring indicates that mentoring can increase retention rate of teachers (Odell and Ferraro).

Becoming a good mentor teacher is a skill that requires thoughtfulness and practice. A good mentor needs to model continued openness to new learning, including from new teachers, attend and presenting at workshops and conference, taking graduate courses, experiment with new ideas, and reading professional journals.

There is an extensive literature about mentoring and professional organizations specifically to support mentoring in education. The Writing Project is based in a philosophy of teachers teaching teachers. NCTE and its state affiliates provide conferencing and publishing opportunities for mentors. The Conference on English Leadership (CEL) is a good place to meet teacher leaders, department chairs, and mentors. The Conference on English Education (CEE) serves NCTE members engaged in the preparation, support, and continuing education of teachers of English language arts/literacy. The Mentoring Leadership and Resource Network in the ASCD is another professional resource.

Becoming a Teacher Educator

Outstanding classroom teachers do not have to leave their classroom to play an important role in the preparation of new teachers and the future of the profession. As I have discussed here, middle schools and high schools need master teachers who model reflective practice, foster new teachers and junior colleagues, and provide much needed leadership in their buildings, districts, and state and national organizations. At the same time there is a need for some outstanding teachers to earn PhDs, take positions at colleges or universities in education or English departments and become professors and English teacher educators. For many years there has been a shortage of professors of English education, a study of the 2001-02 academic year showed that 51% of the open English education

positions in university English departments in the United States went unfilled because of a lack of candidates. That shortage continues into the present; a study of the 2006-07 job market showed that thirty-seven percent of such positions went unfilled. Professors of English education play a critical role educating the next generation of English teachers, engaging in research in the teaching of English, and supporting professional organizations such as NCTE and its state affiliates.

Some teachers may be interested in learning about what a doctoral degree in English education would entail. My new book *The Doctoral Degree in English Education* offers testimony from many different doctoral students and their mentors. A must read for any language arts teacher considering earning a PhD and teaching at the college level, the book has chapters on making the decision to go to graduate school, identity shifts for teachers becoming doctoral students, participating in graduate student activities, engaging in research, writing a dissertation, teaching future teachers, and starting out as an English education professor. Contributors to the book indicate that a doctoral degree, while demanding, can be a consummately enjoyable and meaningful opportunity for continued professional growth. One of the contributors, a new PhD student, Shannon Mortimore writes:

After earning my MA in English education, while teaching high school, I felt invigorated to continue my coursework. The Master's helped me to refine my teaching, and the more I learned, the more excited I became about applying these new strategies to my high school classroom. It seemed the perfect situation. I was able to engage intellectually with a group of my peers, interested in the same ideas and theories, and then see how these theories applied in my own classroom practice. I think, as a result, my last year of teaching, my sixth, was extremely successful. I made major strides in teaching writing, for example, something that I had struggled with previously. The following year, I applied to a doctoral program in English education with all of the enthusiasm I had garnished from my MA, and when I was accepted, the choice became clear. A doctoral program was an opportunity to focus on bettering myself as a teacher, though I didn't really think of myself

as anything but a high school English teacher. A year later, though, I am a doctoral student and the classes I teach have changed dramatically, I still find my wisdom, focus, and energy drawn to that beautifully chaotic place that was my high school English classroom. It was a “room of my own” -- an environment that was completely shaped by my own enthusiasm, progress, sacrifice, and creativity. The relationships I built with the kids were extremely enriching; I keep in contact with many of them today. What I have gained in the exchange is the ability to learn more about myself as a teacher—the strategies that would have helped me engage my students in more meaningful practice... There is energy, possibility, and vigor in both scenarios.

Another contributor and a new English education professor Robert Rozema says,

Now I teach pre-service teachers, which I enjoy tremendously. I sometimes miss the immersion in the literature and the interaction with high school kids, but I absolutely love working with college age students. The stress here is different, coming more in big waves than the constant water torture of high school teaching (“What did I miss yesterday? Was it important? Can I go to the bathroom? Why are we reading this stupid book?”). But for me, this feels like the right fit.

For teachers considering a doctoral degree, it is a good idea to talk to professors of English education or attend meetings of the CEE at NCTE conventions. Doctoral programs usually look for teachers with a Master’s degree and at least three or more years of experience. Some programs allow teachers to work on their degree while they are still in the classroom. Typically doctoral programs offer teaching assistantships or fellowships where doctoral students attend full time and teach a university course each semester, or collaborate closely with a professor on a course or grant research. These assistantships usually pay all tuition costs and offer a minor stipend to address living expenses. While there are programs in English and in education departments called “English Education,” there are also programs preparing English teacher

educators and fostering research in the teaching of English under many names including “Literacy Studies,” “Literature,” “Curriculum and Instruction,” “Rhetoric and Composition,” “Adolescent Literacy,” “Reading,” and so on.

My principal Dick Sagor was right that taking on an intern teacher would be a learning experience. Secondary English teachers have a critical role to play in supporting, mentoring, and preparing the next generation. Consider this essay an invitation to become involved in mentorship in your district and to become engaged with teacher education universities and programs at all levels. Perhaps accepting this invitation will mark the next step in your own professional growth.

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A former high school English teacher, **Allen Webb** (allen.webb@wmich.edu) is now Professor of English at Western Michigan University. His work focuses on teaching literature, especially multi-cultural and contemporary world literature. He is author of several books including *Literature and Lives: A Response-based, Cultural Studies Approach to Teaching English* and, with Robert Rozema, *Literature and the Web: Reading and Responding with New Technologies*.