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W. Douglas Baker
Eastern Michigan University

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Mentoring New Teachers Towards Leadership

W. Douglas Baker
Eastern Michigan University

Lisa stands at the front of the room tapping her finger on a word on the board, "What word is this?" She pauses. "Conscious," we pronounce aloud. "What word is this," she double taps the board again. Someone did not say the word. "Conscious," we all say louder. "Good," she smiles. She reminds us during the demonstration that "everyone has to pronounce the tapped word in unison," or the teacher will prompt the students until all participate. Lisa's school district had adopted a scripted reading program for the lowest "quintile" of high school students (based on the state test), and the principal had recently selected her and one of her peers, Denise, as program leaders (both were entering their second year of teaching). Through a sample lesson, Lisa began to make visible the practices, values, and expectations of the scripted approach; we experienced the lesson and examined and discussed the curriculum and its assumptions.

Lisa, Denise and Sheri, another second year teacher also picked to lead a scripted reading program at a middle school, chose to present and initiate conversations about the classroom practices demanded by these reading programs at a conference in California I organized for beginning teachers. A few weeks before the conference, I had discussed with them over the telephone the possibility of demonstrating a lesson and offering insights into their students' responses and raising questions about teaching reading to secondary school students. Lisa and Denise believed that the program at their school was working, but Sheri had doubts about the one at hers.

Two years before this inaugural conference, Lisa, Denise and Sheri completed a post-graduate, "fifth year" certification program. Each school day they observed or taught secondary school students and then drove to the university for evening classes. Two university instructors supervised each student teacher and led on-site seminars. The seminar format used in many of their courses provided opportunities for student teachers to examine pedagogy and classroom practices, to observe and interact with secondary school students, and discuss their experiences with peers and instructors; therefore, the certification students were mentored through the coursework, onsite seminars and supervision, and discussion among peers and faculty. However, when these teachers earned their certification and accepted jobs as "real" teachers, they soon depended on the discretion of their new school districts for support. For example, in California a district might choose to provide matching funds for a mentoring, or induction program, e.g., Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA), or a school might assign an experienced teacher as a mentor.

Yet, new teachers may feel intimidated by an experienced colleague and not expose problems or ask revealing questions, especially if they have a challenging schedule, e.g., class assignments that include a disproportionate number of "remedial or disadvantaged students" (AFT 2). Often, the biggest challenge for new teachers is to move into the school culture and learn how to find support. Emily, a conference participant, said in a survey reflecting on her first year, "My biggest challenge...was figuring out the politics of the school and working within them to get the support I needed." She explained that the certification program did not prepare her to deal with the politics of entering into the professional community of the school as a beginning teacher.

New teachers need to be invited and encouraged to pursue active membership in professional communities; lack of support of perceived professional opportunities may cause beginning teachers to reconsider their career choices. For years we have heard statistics about teachers leaving the profession. For example, in California in 1998, 30-50% of new teachers left their jobs within five years (EdSource); although some of the teacher shortages can be attributed to what Ingersoll (514)

calls a "revolving door," teachers who "migrate" to other teaching positions. Regardless of how we interpret teacher retention statistics, beginning teachers need institutional support from their administrators as well as academic and disciplinary support from experienced teachers. Mentoring programs such as BTSA are designed to support beginning teachers, although these may not be discipline specific; other programs intended to guide new teachers into professional discussions and networks, e.g., MCTE/NCTE's "Teachers for the Dream" are geared for particular populations of teachers; and graduate schools usually prefer teachers with at least two to three years of experience. The National Writing Project (NWP) offers a professional growth community, providing a summer institute for groups of teachers who become fellows of the project and teacher consultants of writing. Yet, directors of regional writing projects that I have asked say that they usually prefer teachers with at least 3-5 years of experience. (According to an article in NWP's *The Voice*, 37% of the summer institute fellows of 2000 had at least ten years of experience.)

Participation in a professional community is an important aspect of developing as teachers (CELA 2), and encouraging new teachers to join and participate in these communities was the impetus for organizing a beginning teachers conference. Mentoring beginning teachers towards leadership is crucial. The conference provided a forum for new teachers to present or demonstrate pedagogical practices and initiate professional conversations with their peers, other new teachers.

For three years I have organized a "Beginning Teachers' Conference" and have observed benefits for the teachers and certification students who attend. Nearly all of the attendees taught English as a subject to secondary school students and the presenters shared and demonstrated classroom ideas and initiated discussions on a range of literacy topics. For example, last year's conference at Eastern Michigan University included the following session titles: "Teaching Reading to Middle School Students," "Peer Review of Writing," "Teaching Poetry," and "Processing Student Teaching." By discussing and demonstrating self-chosen topics, the teachers often explore dilemmas of evolving beliefs and classroom practices, and they develop confidence as conference presenters.

For some participants, the conference resembles the seminars of their certification program, which many of them valued; yet, they arrive at the conference with new experiences and perspectives. Some of them are disillusioned and seek to reinvigorate their enthusiasm for teaching. For example, Sheri explained that after she implemented the district-mandated, scripted reading program she soon realized that the program appeared to fail the students—"some of them were crying because they could not keep up," but she felt little administrative or peer support: "There was no one I could talk with about [the demands of the program and effects on the students]," "I needed that time of renewal [at the conference] and a chance to meet with colleagues who can still act professionally and are driven by their desire to see our kids succeed."

At the inaugural conference, the teachers filled lunchtime with stories of their first years. Kim described an experienced teacher from an adjacent room who "would hide outside the hallway and listen to me talking to my class," and then he would report to other teachers about Kim's progress or perceived idiosyncrasies. "I felt alone during that first year, and I didn't know whom to trust," she said. The conference provided an opportunity for the new teachers to reunite with peers, compare stories and regain some of enthusiasm for teaching. Furthermore, the presenters received coaching from at least two mentors (a site supervisor—and co-director of the local writing project—and me) for their presentations or demonstration lessons. Therefore, the conference experience allowed me to suggest to the teachers other professional opportunities available to teachers and encourage them to view themselves as teacher leaders, prepared to initiate and contribute to public discussions about educating secondary school students.

As the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation settles in we are realizing the urgency of

teacher participation in political conversations and actions. Beginning teachers must prepare to enter teaching in contentious environments (*cf.* McCracken for a description and implications of NCLB), and learn how to make visible their pedagogical beliefs and practices. Cathy Fleischer urges teachers to learn how to articulate their pedagogy "and speak comfortably and convincingly about why they teach in the ways they do" (192). Conferences such as the one I have described provide a step towards guiding new teachers towards these goals and becoming leaders.

Last year, one participant wrote on the conference evaluation sheet, "I enjoyed sharing my voice with other beginning teachers. The more I talk about my beliefs, experiences and knowledge with my peers, the more competent I feel talking to parents and the community." The more opportunities beginning teachers have to analyze and discuss underlying assumptions of proposed or practiced curriculum, the better chance that these teachers will be able to articulate their pedagogy and to make informed decisions that will best serve their students.

At the inaugural conference, participants responded to Lisa's demonstration by raising questions about the validity of the scripted reading programs. Reflecting on the weaknesses pointed out, Lisa and Denise described how some students had asked them to close the door to the classroom so peers would not observe the chorus pronunciation, and other students had cried because of a presumed lack of ability to maintain a "one size fits all" pace. By the end of the session, Denise announced, "I thought this approach was working, but now I don't know."

As a beginning teacher asked to help lead a program that cost thousands of dollars each year, Denise diligently followed directions. In their certification program, Lisa, Denise and Sheri proved to be conscientious, inquisitive and organized. When their principals recommended that they administer scripted reading programs, they dutifully did so and sought to guide students who had struggled as readers. They were determined to make it work, yet through their experiences and the opportunities provided by the new teacher's conference to demonstrate and express reservations. They began to view and articulate the approach to reading from a different perspective.

This type of beginning teachers' conference offers one more important function: it provides an opportunity for teacher educators to gather information, data, and stories about first years. We can learn more about how beginning teachers view and implement pedagogical assumptions, theories and practices encouraged by our certification programs. I have come to value the demonstrations and stories of beginning teachers not only because they offer fresh perspectives on the culture of schools, mentoring programs, and certification programs, but also because I am participating in professional conversations with some of our future leaders in education.

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About the Author:
W. Douglas Baker is an assistant professor at Eastern Michigan University and a co-director of the Eastern Michigan Writing Project. He taught English for eleven years at a central California high school, and one of his interests is mentoring new teachers towards leadership.