

## **Perspective from the Developed**

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Professional development in my career as a writing instructor is a before-and-after story. Like most of my colleagues, I learned to be a teacher of college writing simply by doing it. I had no formal training in education pedagogy much less in theories of composition and rhetoric. I came into teaching as a graduate student pursuing a higher degree in literature. Teaching writing was how I earned my keep in the department that supported me while I perused the complexities of Eliot and Pound. For most of my career, the role of director of composition rotated among junior faculty members appointed to the helm with little grounding in the field of composition studies; often I observed their struggle to become quickly conversant in composition studies like an undergraduate cramming for a final exam. Within this atmosphere in which there was only cursory attention paid to a composition program situated within a department devoted to the pursuit of literature, professional development of the writing faculty was not a priority. Compositionists have long been the neglected stepchildren of the *literati* in most university English Departments.

As a graduate teaching assistant “back in the day,” as my students would say, I had a speedy, three-day introduction to teaching methodology the week prior to the beginning of the fall semester. I recall group instruction and practice in constructing a syllabus, using a required textbook, managing a classroom, providing student feedback on papers, and establishing grading policies. By Friday of that week, I was considered “certified” to be solely responsible for teaching a class of 24 undergraduates who were only a few years younger than I was at that time, with no teaching assistant, co-teacher, or even a mentor appointed to oversee my progress. I took on the mantle of “instructor” with only a vague idea of what that meant and what I was doing. In that case, I suppose what one does—and what I did do—is imitate or model my teaching practices after what I myself had experienced in my undergraduate classes. In the absence of theory, imitate. For me, and therefore for my students, this meant a lot of reading with a focus on literature and writing literary analysis. It was what I knew, what I had experienced, and what I thought I knew how to teach.

In that same year, as a master’s degree candidate who was also a teaching assistant, I was also required to take a second-semester, one-credit hour course called “Seminar in Teaching Composition.” Once a week, TA’s gathered to discuss our adventures in the classroom and review how we graded student papers. There was no textbook and our course material consisted mostly of classroom anecdotes, but it was a supportive environment and a place to bring questions and challenges we were facing as first-year teachers.

My next experience with faculty development came as a part-time instructor in the guise of a mentoring program, in which composition teachers were paired with tenured faculty who had more years of full-time teaching experience, although usually not in the field of composition. My first meeting with my designated mentor was brief—and also my last.

With his feet propped up on his desk, he said, “So, you know what you’re doing, don’t you?” I felt I did; at least, I was none the wiser if I didn’t, so I said “Yes, I think so.” He offered that I should contact him if I ran into “any trouble.” I didn’t, so I didn’t.

A second attempt at mentoring designated a tenured faculty member to help writing instructors prepare syllabi for composition courses to which they had been assigned but had not taught before. [Oddly enough, many of these tenured faculty members had never taught the course before either]. This was mentorship in theory; in practice, however, a novice instructor would go to the department secretary, pick up a sample syllabus that had been used previously for the class, and use it as a model for his or her own. Here, then, was a continuation of the methodology of learning by imitating.

Perhaps the best experience I had in those early years—and closest to the spirit of professional development—came when a well-meaning composition director invited writing instructors, all of whom at that time were part-time or graduate assistants, to meet informally to read and discuss selected articles found in CCC and other journals. A small group of us met twice a semester to read and discuss issues in contemporary composition studies. This was supplemented by an occasional afternoon get together to talk about problems we were struggling with regarding classroom management and troublesome students.

As I look back on what has passed for “professional development” throughout many of my years of teaching, I find that these early experiences were hit and miss attempts, some more sincere than others, to offer support to a group of instructors who were left to rely for the most part solely on instinct and trial and error in the classroom. For some lucky students, I suppose our instincts were occasionally good and our errors lessened with each semester.

Today, however, I write from the perspective of an instructor who has seen much improvement in professional development in recent years. At this point in my career, I am a member of a full-time writing faculty hired to teach composition to undergraduate students. While still not eligible for tenure, I no longer teach each writing class as if it could be my last, contingent each semester on the whims of enrollment and funding. The creation of full-time Lecturer positions several years ago was intended to maintain a consistent and reliable faculty group to staff all first-year courses, among them composition, which is frequently one of the largest undergraduate programs at any college or university. Intentionally or otherwise, the creation of full-time non-tenure faculty appointments had the effect of providing a modicum of status and a degree of professionalism to a writing program that had too long relied on temporary, part-time, contingent faculty to deliver freshman composition. The establishment of full-time writing instructors at many universities across the country also coincided with a rise in professional degree programs in Rhetoric and Composition devoted to theorizing written discourse. Fortuitously, both of these trends merged, I believe, and resulted in the fact that I now teach under the direction of a program director and associate director schooled in composition theory who brought professional expertise and intellectual rigor into a

program that had long suffered from a lack of identity, purpose and direction. Under their leadership, the writing faculty at my institution has benefited from initiatives to invigorate writing instruction. As a result, at present, I find myself beyond mid-career and just now discovering that the infusion of professional development into a neglected program and faculty has re-energized my thinking about the teaching of writing and my classroom practices.

Faculty development opportunities in recent years in the Composition Program at The University of Toledo have raised standards of collaboration and dialogue among full- and part-time instructors and generally fostered a supportive teaching culture. Evidence of our growth and engagement in the work we do as a faculty is evidenced in a number of initiatives undertaken within the framework of a faculty colloquium which each year tackles a number of different pedagogical and classroom practice challenges facing our program. Initiatives in recent years have included reviewing and rewriting our program's goals and objectives, developing new courses in the composition sequence, composing common syllabi and resource handbooks for instructors, deciding on common text book adoptions, and implementing changes in program assessment. In addition to providing these and other opportunities for collaboration, colloquium focus groups promote unique opportunities for program leadership among members of the composition faculty who develop a degree of expertise through research undertaken in the pursuit of the work of the colloquium.

Exposure to the presentations of a number of guest speakers of national merit in the field of composition and rhetoric has also been part of the colloquium activity. Lester Faigley, David Jolliffe, and Ellen Cushman, among many others, have come to share their research and expertise in many of the very concerns that face our faculty, such as reaching the remedial student in an open enrollment institution with a highly diversified undergraduate student body, incorporating visual literacy into our assignments, implementing portfolio grading, promoting writing across the disciplines, using a genre approach to writing instruction, teaching with technology—in short, rethinking our pedagogical approaches and practices in a number of significant ways.

Probably the single most influential impact on my professional development in recent years has been training in using technology, such as WebCT and Epsilon, in the composition classroom. Web-based classroom management systems and electronic portfolio programs, now both integral to our course curricula, offer faculty unique ways to deliver enhanced writing instruction to undergraduates that complement more traditional classroom pedagogy. No single initiative has helped me to evolve and reinvent my role as a classroom instructor as has technology training undertaken in the program development work we do in our faculty groups. Through these platforms, I feel I reach my students where they “live” now and will reside in the future by preparing them to participate in both the academic and professional literacies they will need to succeed.

Professional development in composition studies—in all the various ways I have experienced it in recent years—has influenced my teaching in some ways that I can see

and verify and in other ways more subtle than I may even recognize. It is obvious that I have benefitted from the activities and instructional resources provided by the work of the colloquium. Yet, even more significant to me is that our work has given us the opportunity to think about what we do and how we do it—which has changed the conversation about writing instruction for many of us who have been teaching for a number of years. Discussions among our faculty are no longer based solely on anecdotal evidence of “what works and what doesn’t” or “what I do versus what you do” but are rather more informed inquiries into the foundations and practices of classroom pedagogy. We still like to talk about what we “do,” but now our ongoing conversations about writing instruction inform and shape our practices in more meaningful ways.

On a personal level, I believe the work we have done in our program under the mantle of professional development has provided many unforeseeable benefits for me in the classroom: I am more cognizant of the ways in which students learn and the languages they use to establish their authorial voice, more informed about the needs of developmental or first-generation college students with inadequate literacy practices for academic work, and more tuned in to emerging literacy practices in alternate forms of media and technology. I have learned how genre works to shape students’ purpose and focus in writing and have incorporated that knowledge into my writing assignments. Likewise, I am savvier about designing a syllabus, scaffolding writing assignments, and using portfolio assessment to maximize student learning and achievement. None of these awarenesses, I think, would have transpired in the days when I figured it out by myself relying on my wits and instincts by just “doing.” Experience is a good teacher, but it cannot always provide the inspiration and motivation to do better and aim higher. I write now from the perspective of one whose career has become more enriched at a time when many with my years of experience are winding down or feeling stale.

Still, while the program and department in which I teach has made significant strides in the direction of providing effective professional development for composition faculty, there remain significant impediments to a commitment to writing faculty development at the institutional level. We are fortunate at UT to have a Center for Teaching and Learning that awards small grants to faculty projects devoted to improving classroom teaching. Several initiatives run through our colloquium and individual projects taken on by Lecturers have been at least partially funded through this important resource. However, the university at large still does not provide Lecturers the same kind of research and development support accorded to tenure and tenure-track faculty in terms of travel funds, reimbursement of fees for attendance and presentations at professional conferences, and stipends for research that would directly support classroom teaching. The costs associated with this next level of professional development are borne entirely by the individual instructor and many simply cannot do it on a teaching salary that is below the national average for a beginning high school teacher. Likewise, memberships and publications in professional organizations are frequently too expensive for part-time and adjunct faculty who continue to be a prime labor pool for the delivery of composition instruction at many colleges and universities. Lecturers are not eligible for course releases or even partial sabbaticals that might afford them the time and “mental space” to pursue research and

publication in composition studies that could bring significant benefits to their students and recognition to the program as a whole. In this regard, composition instructors remain a second-tier faculty at the institutional level, and the restrictions placed on their professional development result in lost opportunities for improving the education of their students and growing their programs, both of which would ultimately benefit the university itself. Fortunately for me, professional development is an “after” story, but the commitment to improving and developing writing faculty at many institutions remains ignored and is late in coming to others.

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