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Forming University and Teacher Partnerships in an Effort to Reframe and Rethink Mentoring Programs

While celebrating the graduation of teacher candidates from the university’s teacher certification program, I felt the perennial distress at the possibility of losing contact and influence with these promising beginners. With my colleagues, I looked for ideas for bridging the two communities—current English credential students and alumni from the program—to encourage collaboration, professional development, and a continued sense of belonging and support. Furthermore, I wanted this mentoring and collaboration between these two communities to simultaneously allow me to continue to facilitate student learning, advise former students, and develop myself as a teacher educator. I realized, however, that technology would be the key to these mentoring opportunities to collaborate with those across the state and teaching abroad as well as providing convenience, a requirement to be sensitive to the busy lives of post-baccalaureate students and beginning teachers.

Background on Typical Approaches and Conceptualizations of Mentoring

Since the early 1980s, mentoring has played an integral role in improving teaching and thus hopefully improving student learning (Feiman-Nemser). Although research is continuing to be conducted on what makes for an effective mentoring program, educators and policymakers point to effective mentoring programs as potentially being one way to reduce the high rate of attrition that occurs within three years of teaching (Darling-Hammond). Linda Darling-Hammond in her article “Keeping Good Teachers: Why It Matters, What Leaders Can Do” argues that “well-designed mentoring programs raise retention rates for new teachers by improving their attitudes, feelings of efficacy, and instructional skills” (11).

Mentoring is currently conceived as “an ongoing relationship between mentor and mentee in a particular context” (Orland 75), typically the context of the school in which the beginning teacher and the mentor are employed. A mentor is usually an experienced/veteran teacher “who supports, encourages, counsels and befriends a less-experienced person in order to promote the latter’s professional and personal development” (Anderson and Shannon, qtd. in Orland 75).

Although there is some agreement in the field of education as to what constitutes a mentor and the roles and responsibilities of a mentor, mentoring programs vary drastically across states and across schools with respect to the amount of structure and the resources available to implement these programs. Too often, mentoring programs take on a “sink or swim” mentality with teachers not feeling the support that they need during the first several years of teaching due to a poorly implemented mentoring program. In other mentoring programs, beginning teachers feel very supported; however, these beginning teachers are left to fend for themselves when the mentoring program concludes after the first two or three years (Barnes-Ryan; Feiman-Nemser).

The mentoring that school districts provide is plagued by many challenges. First, with what seem
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To be never-ending budget cuts, school districts are finding it challenging to provide clearly delineated mentoring programs due to limited funds. Furthermore, sometimes the mentoring relationships that are formed may not be the most ideal for the beginning teacher because the beginning teacher may see the mentor more as an evaluator rather than as someone to approach for feedback, collaboration, and support. Judy Fiene and her colleagues in “Mentoring New Teachers: What Teacher Education Programs Can Do to Help” describe this concern and state, “it is not easy to find professional communities that provide nonthreatening, nonevaluative discussions about the art of teaching” (92).

A New Conceptualization of Mentoring

Several teacher educators have argued for the need to rethink the current conceptualization of mentoring and to think of ways that those outside of the local context of the school in which the teacher is employed—specifically universities—can play an integral role in mentoring beginning teachers (Barnes-Ryan; Coffey). Designing a mentoring program that promotes partnerships between universities and school districts would require a framework for teacher learning that builds connections from credential and induction programs to future professional development opportunities (Feiman-Nemser).

Taking into consideration the recommendation for universities to play an integral role in the development of its teacher candidates after graduation, I believe it is also advantageous to have current credential students collaborate and participate in mentorship opportunities with alumni of the same credential program. Although current credential students and recent alumni of a credential program do not meet the qualification of being a veteran teacher (as mentoring is typically defined), I would argue that with the proper scaffolding and educational training, beginning teachers could offer the other important assets of effective mentors—collaboration and support. I am not suggesting that school site mentors and mentorship programs should cease to exist; rather, I am arguing that the university setting should have a continuing role in the development of its teacher graduates.

By the time preservice teachers graduate, a credential program should have provided students with “a compelling vision for good teaching and a beginning repertoire of approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment consistent with that vision” (Feiman-Nemser 1029). Rather than parting ways after graduation, a university advisor’s continued role in the lives of recent alumni can help these teachers to make connections to their teaching contexts and their previous learning as well as enact the approaches that they learned in their credential program. I would also argue that this additional mentoring from the university level and collaboration with current and graduated credential students from the same program allow for a comfortable learning environment and a receptiveness to feedback and suggestions, an important component of being willing and able to change teaching practices (Fiene).
An Attempt to Foster Mentoring Facilitated at the University Level

Recently, I have become particularly interested in thinking of ways to mentor preservice teachers while they are in a credential program. I also am sensitive to the needs of beginning teachers once they leave my program and how I can better support their development. To bridge these two communities, I decided to coordinate and implement collaboration and mentoring opportunities for current English credential students and recent alumni. As I began to embark on planning these mentoring events, I realized two things: (a) many of the graduates were teaching in many parts of the state of California with a few in other states or teaching abroad; and (b) with the current budget cuts to public schools and universities, I had limited funds for these mentoring events. Given these limitations, I realized that the use of technology to collaborate virtually would be an efficient and cost-effective way to bring together the current credential students and alumni.

I outline below recent virtual mentoring opportunities offered to current students and alumni of an English credential program, commenting on the successes and challenges of these collaborative efforts. I then describe additional mentoring opportunities that I hope to implement and research that I hope to conduct to evaluate the effectiveness of this mentoring program.

A Virtual “Make and Take” Workshop

Inspired by the English Companion Ning (an online community for the collaboration of English teachers) and an event offered at an NCTE Annual Convention, my first attempt at bridging the two communities of current English credential students and alumni was to compile a resource of teaching artifacts. I emailed more than 60 current and former English credential students who I had worked with over the past three years and asked that each teacher submit a teaching artifact with which they had found success or that they imagined would be successful in their future classroom. With the artifact, I asked that each contributor include a description of the following: (a) background on the teaching artifact, (b) description of how the teaching artifact was used, and (c) an explanation as to how (or why) the teaching artifact was effective.

After receiving all of the descriptions and artifacts, I sorted the artifacts by type (e.g., teaching writing, teaching grammar, alternatives to teacher-led discussions) and created a table of contents, letter to contributors, and section dividers. I then compiled all of the artifacts into one Word document. Although only about a quarter of the teachers invited participated in our first compilation of teaching artifacts, I was amazed at the contributions and the effective instruction that was showcased in each artifact. The descriptions of the artifacts provided further insight into the “best practices” and theoretical influences that informed each teacher’s practice.

I emailed the final document, which was more than 60 pages in length, to all contributors and received a positive response from contributing teachers. The contributors were eager to peruse the document and determine what teaching artifacts they could modify for use in their classroom. Contributors’ names and email addresses were provided to encourage further collaboration and conversations.

One of the benefits to this virtual collaboration was that this was a cost- and time-effective activity. There was no cost involved (since the document was emailed). It also was time-effective in that it took each contributor approximately an hour (or less) to select an artifact that he or she had already used in the classroom and to type up a description. As the person who compiled the artifacts, it took me about half of a day to organize everything in a way that made sense. The potential impact of these artifacts on the individual contributors and students, however, was worth the time and effort.

One of the challenges I encountered when facilitating this mentoring event was that the original intention of this event was to include a face-to-face meeting, whether that meant using Skype with participants or having local participants meet on campus; but this event never took place. With parent conference nights, sporting events, and other personal and professional obligations, contributors found that they were unable to attend an hour face-to-face meeting to discuss the artifacts and collaborate further. Another challenge was encouraging a larger number of contributors. Although I was pleased with the work that was submitted, I was somewhat disappointed when only a quarter of invited participants contributed artifacts. I plan on investigating why invited participants...
chose not to participate, and I wonder if there is anything that I can do in the future to encourage a greater number of participants.

Based on the positive feedback I received at our first attempt at compiling a document of resources, I am eager to do this again. I will be inviting current and former English credential students to participate in developing “Volume 2” of our teaching resource. This time, I will have a theme for our compilation (Preparing for the First Days of School) and will compile artifacts related to getting to know students and building a positive classroom community. This resource will be compiled over the summer in the hope that if time is an issue, teachers might have more time to contribute an item over the summer than during the busy school year. Plus, receiving this resource before school begins will be helpful in transforming the first days of school in the fall.

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**Group Discussions on the English Companion Ning**

Another amazing online resource that has encouraged mentoring among teachers, specifically English credential students and recent alumni, is the English Companion Ning. When I teach the English methods course, I introduce students to the English Companion Ning and invite all of the students to join. These students then create their profiles and use this resource (mainly by exploring some of the discussion threads that have already occurred) when planning instruction.

Most recently, I created a group for students and alumni of the English credential program at my institution. The nice feature of the group is that my students are more willing to post questions and share materials within this group because they are familiar with whom they are talking and have similar teaching philosophies and foundational knowledge because they have participated in the same credential program. Within the first day of creating and inviting participants to this group forum on the English Companion Ning, one alumnus of the program posted a discussion thread titled “What to Do After the AP Exam.” This initial conversation received several responses and served as a good example of the collaboration possibilities.

As I become more familiar with this social networking site for the purposes of discussing teaching, I envision many possibilities including co-planning of units, sharing of teaching resources, book club discussions of educational and literary texts, and mentoring/guidance from practicing teachers when credential students are looking for employment. I also plan on revising the credential courses that I teach to design assignments that require current credential students to collaborate with other credential students through the English Companion Ning. By requiring this type of online collaboration as part of a course assignment for English credential students, I hope these students will become comfortable with collaboration and that their participation will serve as a good model for alumni of the program regarding the collaboration possibilities through the English Companion Ning.

**Summer Professional Learning Community**

Summer provides another opportunity for current English credential students and alumni to interact about initiatives and education issues. For example, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are currently influencing curricula and assessments and are prompting new professional development opportunities for practicing teachers. To better prepare my students and alumni to see the value in CCSS as well as critically analyze this initiative in a productive way and negotiate this new space, I have invited students and teachers to participate in a summer forum in which we will read *Supporting Students in a Time of Core Standards: English Language Arts, Grades 9–12* (Wessling) and discuss this text at a local coffee shop.

My hope is that the book group instills in the participants the means to think about organizing their own community of collaborators. One of the most insightful things that a cooperating teacher mentioned to me when I was supervising a student teacher in his classroom was the following: “If there is not collaboration happening at your school, make it happen!” This resonated with me because I think
it is important for teachers to realize that they can make a difference in their professional growth. Not all schools have professional learning communities or time carved out of the daily schedule for co-planning or the discussion of seminal educational texts. However, teachers can take it upon themselves to create informal professional learning communities. Whether my summer participants continue to participate in future summer forums is still to be determined, but I hope that by forming this community, participants will see how they could do something similar with teachers at their school if they so chose.

To encourage future participants to join the summer forum and to share the discussions that take place during our meetings, I will start a discussion thread on the English Companion Ning under our group page for community participants to provide their review of the text. This will allow those who did not read the text to be informed about its main ideas as well as how these ideas might influence their instruction.

**Future Collaboration and Mentoring Events**

My small start to providing mentoring for current English credential students and recent alumni is just the beginning of how I hope that I can serve as a resource to beginning teachers. Capitalizing on technology resources, I could envision implementing some of the following ideas, which include blogging and Twitter.

In the future, I would like to partner current credential students with alumni and have the pairs communicate throughout the school year via blogs. In the methods class that I teach, I could build in assignments for the credential students that require them to make the initial contact, share teaching materials, and perhaps even collaborate on planning a unit together. I would imagine that the credential student would be more responsible for maintaining and contributing to this relationship, but my hope would be that the practicing teacher would also see the benefit in the relationship. This collaboration would be a good experience for the practicing teacher to develop the skills and dispositions needed to serve as a future cooperating teacher to a student teacher and even transition into a leadership position such as a department chair or building administrator. The nice feature of a blog is that the bloggers can include pictures of their classroom, videos of them teaching, and teaching documents to share with their blog partner. Through the use of a blog, the teachers would simultaneously be developing and refining their technology skills, which might prompt them to use similar resources with their secondary students.

As I plan for extending the mentoring experiences in the future, I can think of other possibilities. Twitter could also be a useful forum for me to maintain as a means of mentoring current and former English credential students. Daily or weekly I could post useful links to websites, quotes on teaching, and books to read that could influence the growth of current and practicing teachers. I could also provide recommendations on scholars and educators in the field of English education that my students and alumni could follow for ideas on teaching. I could also see actively involving current credential students and recent graduates on Twitter by creating a hashtag for our collaboration group. I could introduce this hashtag to the current credential students in my credential classes and ask that during their practicum and student teaching experiences they reflect weekly by posting a tweet with the designated hashtag (in addition to writing their daily blogs). These tweets could consist of things that went well, observations they made about teaching, or a text that was recommended by their cooperating teacher. Then, I could see extending this same idea to practicing credential students and recent graduates on Twitter by creating a hashtag for our collaboration group. I could introduce this hashtag to the current credential students in my credential classes and ask that during their practicum and student teaching experiences they reflect weekly by posting a tweet with the designated hashtag (in addition to writing their daily blogs). These tweets could consist of things that went well, observations they made about teaching, or a text that was recommended by their cooperating teacher. Then, I could see extending this same idea to practicing teachers who graduated from the program to involve their voices in the conversation. With most credential students and recent graduates of my program using smartphones, Twitter is a great way to quickly provide helpful information that is time effective and immediately shows up in the users’ newsfeed on Twitter.

Another great online platform that I would like to more purposefully use with current and former credential students is Goodreads. Goodreads is a social cataloging website with a focus on sharing with friends texts that you want to read or that you are currently reading. Users of Goodreads create a profile and include in their profile what they are reading, what they plan on reading, and reviews of texts that they recently read. If I created a group on Goodreads for current and former English
credential students, it would be an opportunity to share what we are reading, and it could be a great resource for professional development, books to recommend at their home school sites, and also a list of possible choices to read in future iterations of the professional learning community.

What Mentoring Means

This is just the beginning of my efforts to provide virtual and face-to-face mentoring and collaboration opportunities for my current and recently graduated English credential students. I am eager to implement the additional ideas that I have listed above, to receive feedback from participants, and to eventually release more of the organization and facilitation responsibilities to my alumni.

Through my experience trying to create and implement mentoring opportunities joining these two groups of teachers together, it has reinforced the need for the field of education to reconsider what mentoring means. Although it is useful to see a mentor as a teacher who has had numerous years of teaching experience, I have found that current credential students have a lot of skills and ideas that they can offer to beginning teachers and vice versa. I think it is important that teacher educators equip beginning teachers with the confidence that they need to contribute to a larger community outside of their classroom and also to teach beginning teachers how to be humble and receptive to ideas from others in the field. I also realize how having a mentor from the start of the credential program throughout a teaching career is valuable because the history of the individual teacher’s strengths and areas for growth is known.

The work that I have done to foster a continued community of collaboration and support to my current and former credential students has provided me with professional development as well. I feel reconnected to what is currently occurring in secondary classrooms. I have been exposed to new instructional strategies and teaching ideas that will reshape the credential courses that I teach. I also feel more knowledgeable about technology and more willing to learn about the technological tools available for collaboration and teaching. Most importantly, I feel rejuvenated and motivated to continue my own growth as a teacher—something that I hope the participants in these mentoring events will experience as well.

Works Cited


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READWRIITETHINK CONNECTION

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The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “A Collaboration of Sites and Sounds: Using Wikis to Catalog Protest Songs” also asks students to work together on a digital set of resources. It asks students to research and analyze contemporary and historic protest songs and to catalogue them in a class wiki. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/collaboration-sites-sounds-using-979.html