Chapter 11. "Who Decides My Grade?" Reflections on Team Teaching and Peer Mentoring in First-Year Composition

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This essay reflects on my experiences as a mentee and mentor instructor in a team-teaching writing program. Although a number of essays and research articles have been written about mentoring teachers at the college level, comparatively little has been written about team teaching in composition classes. The co-taught classroom enables different approaches to teaching first-year composition, challenges students to adjust to a collective pedagogy, and fosters a dynamic that teaches lessons applicable both in and out of the classroom. Along with cultivating a closer relationship with their individual *graders*, a co-taught class compels the students to develop relationships with the other instructors. Drawing on time in the University of Florida's University Writing Program—where I had the opportunity to be involved in multiple co-taught writing classes—and assorted interactions with students, fellow graduate instructors, and faculty involved with the design and implementation of co-taught courses during that time, this reflective essay seeks to consider the pedagogical successes, drawbacks, and unique opportunities that come out of the team teaching environment. In this first part of the essay, I will address some of the research (across a number of disciplines) that has gone into the efficacy of team teaching. In the second part of the essay, I will talk in more detail about my own experience as a co-teacher and mentor.

First, however, I thought it important to talk about how critical co-teaching has been to me as a writing teacher. During the eight years I have spent designing and teaching classes at the University of Florida and the University of Southern Mississippi, my approach to teaching has shifted from merely imparting the *right* knowledge to actively working with students in a collaborative environment that incorporates reading, writing, and critical thinking. This shift has been the most profound in my growth as a teacher, and it is directly related to what I learnt from being in the classroom with other teachers—some of whom had more experience teaching writing than I did, some of whom had less. The co-taught classroom requires adaptability as well as the ability to collaborate on syllabi, assignment sheets, rubrics, and the various other documents that help us shape our writing courses; in this environment, it's crucial to be able to compromise on pedagogical approaches and thinking about shifting classroom dynamics. In practical terms, due to the influence of co-teachers, I have gone from spending a significant amount of the class period lecturing about concepts and providing specific

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feedback for students to creating a classroom environment where students both analyze and create various texts. This does not mean that I have done away with the important work of leading discussion, introducing ideas that challenge the students, and giving suggestions and revisions regarding their work. Rather, I have come to see the class period as a time when students can do something that underpins the learning process, whether analyzing an online advertisement that requires a short oral presentation, assessing the logic of a feasibility report, or introducing a counterargument to a section of a proposal. It is not enough for a teacher to be passionate and invested in teaching; the students also must have a significant stake in shaping their own learning environment. With this objective in mind—especially when this objective is shared with co-teachers—a more collaborative learning space can be created.

Another part of my growth as a professor (and as a benefit of co-teaching) has been the importance of providing context—historical, political, and cultural—for the issues we are addressing in the classroom. Again, this was something that I was able to develop further when teaching writing with others. Teaching alongside people who bring their own specific interests to the practical and theoretical aspects of writing studies—say, for example, a research agenda on the writing of prison inmates or the rhetoric of the Mississippi Delta blues—further pushes on the notion of context. With the benefit of multiple instructors who have their own distinct knowledge bases, students can then build on that knowledge to critically engage with different texts, genres, and technical documents. In class conversations, we can then model the process of learning on not only *analysis* of the text but also on how writings and images are produced, circulated, and received by their respective audiences. (And the best of those discussions allow the students to make dynamic connections between their own writing, the texts that we are analyzing, and the one-on-one conversations they have had with each of the co-teachers.) We recently experienced success with this pedagogical approach in a class on the visual culture of death and dying. From images of the September 11, 2001, attacks to cross-cultural *memento mori* (for example, comparing the use of human skulls in contemporary Vodou in Haiti and the U.S. with the skull as motif in 17th-century Dutch painting), we considered the relationship between cultural, religious, and national contexts and the universal experience of death and dying. More generally, in working with a broad range of student writers, we emphasized the necessity of considering the audience and the information being communicated not only in their work but also when considering the construction of other forms of writing. Drawing on the particular knowledge I am committed to asking students to consider the networks to which texts belong and what this can reveal about the relationship between individuals, communities, and entire nations.

My own identity as a foreigner also informs my teaching philosophy and my experience as a co-teacher. I would argue that an instructor's foreign identity offers a valuable and compelling avenue for teaching and learning in the U.S. university classroom. The foreign instructor is a conduit to a world outside the

American educational experience, synthesizing his or her own background in classrooms abroad with a distinctive set of pedagogical approaches shaped by the U.S. tertiary system. Because I did not attend high school in the U.S., my students' prior experiences with writing and communication in an educational setting are often alien to me. But rather than being an uncomfortable impediment or even an insurmountable obstacle, this *disconnect* has enabled various productive teaching moments. Moreover, I was initially helped in this process by learning from my co-teachers about their experiences as high school students and undergraduates at colleges in the U.S. As my first experience with first-year composition was in a co-taught class, I was at first reluctant to *stand out* to the students. My accent was noticeable in comparison to my fellow American co-teachers: this made me self-conscious that I would be seen as someone with less understanding about the American college classroom. But I received encouragement from my co-teachers about *embracing* the difference. I was the first foreign teacher that many of the students had ever had, and I couldn't help but wonder how this affected my ethos when leading the classroom discussion. But by employing both micro-level (showing the use of different terminology from other *Englishes* to demonstrate context, for example) and macro-level (introducing a foreigner's viewpoint of the U.S. and this country's effect on the rest of the world) distinctions, the complexity of fronting the American classroom as an outsider facilitates many positive opportunities. Moreover, being foreign offers an opportunity to connect with the increasingly diverse students who make up U.S. college classrooms. However, I'm not sure I would've come to embrace my foreign identity in the classroom so quickly without the encouragement of my American co-teachers.

My first experience with co-teaching came in an unexpected manner. On starting graduate school, I was given two teaching assignments, one of which was for a first-year writing classroom. The director of the writing program put me in contact with a mentor for that class, and it wasn't until that point that I realized that I would be teaching with someone else. At the end of that first semester, I realized how lucky I was to be put in that situation. I wouldn't have developed confidence in leading classroom discussion and shaping in-class writing assignments. Moreover, it wasn't just the experience of learning from the mentor: I was teaching alongside two other new graduate students, both of whom had more teaching experience than I had. However, there is research on the efficacy of the co-taught classroom. "Teaching with a Peer: A Comparison of Two Models of Student Teaching" compares two models of student teaching: where one student teacher works with a mentor teacher and where two student teachers work with one mentor. The latter is closer to what I will be discussing in the second half of the essay, and the study concluded that while there were some drawbacks in the three-teacher model, overall there is the opportunity for dialogue between the co-teachers, more support due to the fact that the student teachers can draw on the mentor's toolkit, and collaboration that comes from beyond a one-on-one dynamic. "Co-teaching: An Overview of the Past, a Glimpse at the Present,

and Considerations for the Future," Marilyn Friend, Monica Reising, and Lynne Cook, framed by their experiences in special education, define co-teaching as "an instructional delivery approach in which a classroom teacher and a special education teacher (or other special services professional) share responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction for a group of students" (6). While writing out of the context of the special education classroom, Friend, Reising, and Cook also succinctly describe the objectives of the co-teaching classroom: in co-teaching, "the teachers strive to create a classroom community in which all students are valued members, and they develop innovative teaching strategies that would not be possible if only teacher was present" (6).

Building on parts of Friend, Reising, and Cook's seminal study, Nancy Bacharach and Teresa Heck's "Co-Teaching in Higher Education" focused on 16 university level co-taught classes and took into account the preparation of faculty for co-teaching. The study showed that the "co-teaching experience provided an energizing opportunity for faculty to renew their passion for their profession" (25). Moreover, faculty, after being part of a co-taught class, unanimously assert that they "had an enriching experience in which they learned new material and instructional strategies . . . [while becoming more] reflective about their teaching since decisions about how and what to teach had to be negotiated rather than prescribed by one individual" (25). Looking at another discipline, music education, Stephen J. Paul addressed how co-teaching relates to the motivation of an individual to become a teacher is related to a collective identity: "In simple terms, to become a teacher, a person must first want to become a member of the group 'teachers.' He or she must learn to do 'teacherly' things—planning and presenting lessons, evaluating students progress, diagnosing student problems and prescribing solutions . . . " (73). Where I learnt to do "teacherly things" came through the co-taught classroom, and it shaped how I would mentor fellow teachers in the future.

From my experience, here's how the co-teaching classroom plays out: After introducing myself, mentioning some of the primary goals of this first-year composition class, and assuring the students that my intent is to reward improvement over the course of the semester, I have one last task: To explain to the 19 students seated in front of me why there is not one but four instructors here today. Turning to my right, I ask my co-teachers to introduce themselves: Shoniqua, an M.A. student in Gender Studies who has just moved South after graduating from Penn State; Emily, another M.A. student from Miami, who is focused on Children's Literature and is just three years older than some of the students in this room; Vincent, a journalist turned creative writer from California who has moved to Florida to complete an MFA. I then tell the students that each of the instructors will be responsible for a particular *module* or *unit*, selling the fact that having four instructors in the classroom will give this class the kind of student/teacher ratio that is extremely rare at a public institution. Most of all I emphasize how as co-instructors we work together as a cohesive team teaching group.

I take comfort in the idea that the initially perplexed looks on their faces are a

reflection of not only this news but also of shellshock from the first couple of days at one of the country's largest universities. I reiterate that this is an opportunity for students to work closely with an instructor to improve their writing skills—not only for their college careers but also for other future endeavors: graduate school, the workplace. I don't tell them that none of my co-teachers have taught before. I don't tell them that this system is as imperfect as any other pedagogical approach. I do tell them that there are more of us (instructors) than they'll ever have in any other class, and I have seen it work very well, even brilliantly at times. I don't tell them that we might not always agree on teaching practices, but I do tell them that I have taught in a number of different environments, and this one I love the most. I then ask them if they have any questions, and I wait for one that inevitably arrives every semester: "Who decides my grade?"

Like all teaching, team teaching begins before we stand in front of our students on that first day of the semester. However, the *prep time* process is one of the primary differences between a single-instructor and the co-taught course. Whether or not incoming graduate teaching assistants (the mentees) to UF's University Writing Program have teaching experience, they are viewed as a vital proponent of the shape of the course: primarily in contributing to the syllabus. In this way, mentees take ownership of the course at this key moment in the course's development. Moreover, particularly for graduate students with limited or no prior teaching experience, working with a mentor who has taught numerous first-year composition classes helps to alleviate that very specific source of anxiety: the prospect of standing in front of a class filled with college students for the first time.

My co-teacher Emily's anxiety about this prospect was particularly acute because she had been an undergraduate at the same institution less than a year before. One of her main worries was whether the students would "take her seriously" due to her age. From our first meetings during those weeks leading up to the semester, Emily's nervousness about leading a class discussion was palpable. Although she would not be leading discussion of the first readings, she was concerned about her ability to do so later in the semester. And while it is not a magic bullet for alleviating a first-time teacher's stress, the team teaching environment provides ongoing support throughout the semester, and this atmosphere is integral at the outset. As many of my new co-teachers have attested, the prospect of that first day standing in front of a room of freshmen is scarier than the reality: After the first productive peer-review session or in-class writing session, the new co-teacher is visibly more confident. In the co-taught classroom, the teacher is not left alone to figure it all out. There is an instructor who has taught the course numerous times before and co-teachers who are, to use a cliché, in the same boat. Together, we ruminate on age-old questions about teaching writing: how does one encourage revision? How do we connect the readings to the concepts that we are attempting to teach? But, unlike the vast majority of first-writing classes, these questions are contemplated amongst teachers in a group setting, and the conversation continues throughout the semester. As a group, we return time and again to this meta-analysis of the course.

Prior to our first class session, Emily asked questions about how I had taught the class before, but she also looked to her co-teachers and fellow new graduate students for advice. One particularly fruitful conversation concerned destabilizing the teacher (authority figure)/freshman student (passive receptacle) relationship. Reflecting on their experiences as writers in both high school and college, Shoniqua, Vincent, and Emily talked about the type of writing class they would ideally create. All three expressed a desire to draw on some pedagogical approaches from high school and college; however, unlike when this discussion occurs among new instructors who are teaching a class *solo*, these teachers would be implementing a pedagogical synthesis of sorts. For her part, Emily stated that she wasn't invested in presenting herself as an *expert*, but rather as someone who possessed valuable experience as a writer, as someone who could facilitate the growth of students' writing confidence.

One of the most visible ways that the co-taught class impacts the student is via feedback on their work from more than one instructor. For example, when we held in-class peer-review sessions, I encouraged the co-teachers to seek out students who weren't in the instructor's grading group. The first time we did this, my initial thought was that students would complain about getting "mixed messages" about, say, the scope of their argument. One instructor might suggest a narrower focus, while another might encourage a widening of the essay's critical lens. Inevitably, differences in opinions about the direction of a student's essay arose, but this was rarely detrimental to the student. In fact, it encouraged the kind of dialectical thinking that enables a more thoughtful, dynamic, and nuanced argument to emerge on paper. The student must both respond to and consider incorporating information from more than one (non-peer) reviewer. In many cases, I saw students integrating this feedback through a variety of nuanced and often surprising methods. "Vincent suggested that I include a counterargument earlier in my essay," one student said to me, "and Emily said it would work better towards the end. (Their feedback) made me realize how important this particular argument is . . . . I am going to make the essay respond more directly to (this person's) article, and break it down point-by-point." The combination of one-on-one/small group interaction and the different instructors' critical perspectives provide a particularly fruitful writing environment for the first-year composition student.

Of course, there is the constant concern about grading papers—more precisely, how students perceive the grading process in the co-taught composition course. Students who are resistant to the co-taught class are often preoccupied with the subjectivity and power involved in grading. Rather than trying to persuade students that the grading would be as *fair* as in any other single-instructor classroom environment, at the beginning of the semester we describe the process behind grading in the co-taught class. This description is not as simple as telling the students that we discuss the work of each student and have an ongoing conversation about the aims of the course; it is also a process of presenting to the student-writers the practical implementations of the co-taught classroom.

During the first week, we divide the class into grading groups and assign each instructor a group. We have created these groups through two different ways: some semesters we randomly divide the class into three or four groups, depending on the number of co-teachers. In other semesters, we assign a diagnostic writing assignment—usually a personal narrative focused on the student's previous experiences with writing—and then divide the class after reading through these assignments. The purpose here (and this is something we reiterate to students) is not to identify those so-called *strong* and *weak* writers on the basis of some traditional form and content criteria but rather to give the other instructors a group of student-writers from dissimilar writing backgrounds. Student groups may range from those students who are paralyzed by word counts; students who believe writing *skill* is some inherent gift; those who are determined to write *just enough* to get through the class.

Particularly for those graduate instructors teaching freshman composition for the first time, this exposure to students with varying levels of confidence in their own ability as writers is a foundational experience. Meeting with the students in the smaller grading groups and discussing with them their own writing histories invariably begins a later conversation—usually and enthusiastically after the class period—among the co-teachers about pedagogy. Often this conversation focused on the necessity of not seeing first-year writing students as some monolithic group. Especially in the case of new graduate instructors, the use of conferencing to directly address the needs of each student writer helps emphasize the diversity of our student-writers, and allows the co-teacher to see what motivates the student writer. The smaller grading groups also allow the co-teacher to foster the notion of being part of a writing community: like our first-year students, we teachers also agonize over our own writing. Even without prompting the new co-teachers in this direction, in the co-taught classes I regularly see an instructor's reference to her own writing history as an extremely effective pedagogical tool. Vincent, for example, captured the students' attention talking about form and his own transition from full-time journalist to a poet in an MFA program (and the intimidating environment of the graduate school workshop!). By sharing with our students our own experiences with editors and peer feedback we demonstrate empathy about the constant challenge of writing. This *thing* is not easy, and we are struggling with the process of crafting sentences, paragraphs, and essays (not to mention the related research), too.

Once the co-teachers know the students they are responsible for grading the real strengths of the co-taught writing class become readily apparent to both student and instructor. First, the student is going to have more opportunities to interact with the person "who decides the grade," and the instructor has a greater number of times to use the one-on-one setting for particular pedagogical ends. Also, in emphasizing to students that while each instructor is responsible for a particular assignment, the structure, content, and objectives of the class were developed in a team environment. This coordinated construction of the reading list, syllabus, and

assignments gives each instructor a sense of ownership of the course as a whole. For example, even if Shoniqua wasn't the lead instructor on the rhetorical analysis, through her interactions with students during in-class activities related to the assignment, she has been an integral part of the teaching of the module.

In weekly meetings with Emily, Shoniqua, and Vincent, we discuss the development of the student-writers. Rather than solely focusing on the students' grades, we begin by talking about the class holistically: how different students have reacted to particular in-class assignments, what we might change (for example, how we could arrange a peer-review session and utilize all four teachers at once), and adjustments we could make to the readings in order to emphasize pertinent concepts. (Emily, in particular, helped her co-teachers select useful readings that drew together many of the course's core concepts.) This collaboration often leads into talk about the success of the most recent assignment, and, by extension, what grades have been given. Because during in-class activities we circulate—consciously attending to students who are not in our respective grading groups—our collective concern is not limited to just the individual grading group. For instance, because Vincent spent some time talking to Sean, a student in my grading group, about incorporating counter-arguments to his paper, Vincent asks me about Sean's essay. Or Emily, who led the module, asks about one of Shoniqua's students, Robert, who had missed the peer review session. Even though the final grade of each student is the responsibility of the individual grader, the progression of the student-writers comes about through a collective interaction amongst the co-teachers.

Team teaching is not a perfect science. Instructors are not always going to agree about the form and content of classes, and not every instructor is ready to engage in the type of compromise that is inherent in the co-teaching environment. However, the majority of discord and disagreement has had unexpectedly productive outcomes. I have seen a reluctant co-teacher come to see the value of drawing from another instructor's experience even if the instructors disagree about a variety of issues, and I have benefitted from new instructors challenging my default approaches to grading and teaching. Through the team teaching model, I have been lucky enough to witness anxious teachers fall in love with the first-year writing classroom, and this enthusiasm, in turn, has had a direct, positive effect on our student-writers.

Works Cited

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