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Moments in the Stream: Reflections on Fifteen Years as an Adjunct

My Contingent Status

A DREARY FATE THAT LEADS ONE TO BE UNCHALLENGED, DISRESPECTED, and unrewarded; a job that is equivalent to being a permanent slave; a position that is historically marginalized: those are all terms that Laura Micciche found in her study of affective rhetoric discussing freshman Composition courses and those who teach them (166-167). My fifteen years teaching freshman Comp as contingent faculty both confirm and complicate Micciche's findings.

I will not attempt to chronicle in detail my first fascination with words on the page: my father reads us girls a story, as we sit in his lap in a farmhouse that can only be reached by fording a creek at the end of a Tennessee dirt road. Now it's 7 a.m. on a January morning, and I am walking Atlanta's downtown sidewalks, shouldering a heavy backpack. My intention in this narrative is not to detail every moment, just the ones that stand out like islands—moments that still inform my teaching, which in turn inform my theory.

I stand before my first freshman Composition class with the grammar exercise book that I have been handed. It has to be better than student teaching in high school; surely the students are more mature than those ninth graders—besides, they have been admitted to a Christian college and presumably been taught respect. They are, and they have. I have planned to use several writing invention activities from my student teaching. The grammar takes over; we don't get to most of them. The activities that I do try fall flat. The grammar is boring; I yawn as much as they do. We spice up the process when I intentionally (and unintentionally) make mistakes in explaining the grammar and challenge them to find my mistakes.

I zip on campus, teach my course, and leave. I joke with the academic vice president's secretary that no one would know if I didn't show. She assures me that she would know. She usually has chocolate on her desk for overstressed academics. We begin a friendship that lasts until I leave nine years later.

Based on my master's work in English education, I choose a book of essays to use in the second semester along with a handbook that teaches MLA, APA, and Chicago style of doc-

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umentation. We do one paper using each style, and then students choose their favorite style for the last paper. The essays challenge us to think beyond the five-paragraph essay format.

I begin to think about formulating a new five-year plan for my professional life. Having finished the master's, I begin to consider a doctorate and a summer gig teaching English in China. A positive pregnancy test puts all that on hold. I walk more and more slowly as the academic year winds down towards May, using all the handicapped ramps and door openers. Instead of a final exam, the students turn in a final paper on the last day of class. I grade furiously over the weekend and mail my grades on the way to the hospital to deliver my younger son.

I would swear—if I were a swearing person—that the administration lets in anyone who can sign their name to an application. I have a student who cannot write a coherent sentence; I suspect a learning disability, but I don't have the training to help him. Although the college admitted him, this small institution does not have the resources to help him access academia either.

I also have students who say they have not written any papers in high school and prove it. Most affirm that they have not had grammar since ninth grade. One lets me know that she never uses commas because her high school teacher counted two points off for a wrongly used comma, but only one point off for a missed comma. "I can do the math," she says. I tell her that I count off equally for both errors. And I count 21 comma errors on another student's three-page paper. I experiment by only counting the number of errors but not marking them on the paper, challenging the students to find them.

A new chair of the humanities department comes—a woman with a Rhet/Comp doctorate but little experience in administrating a department. We change to a literature-based approach with MLA documentation and change themes each semester to prevent students' reusing papers. Mostly, the students find the themes more interesting. One student can't handle our readings on death (ironically the theme is named "Dealing with Life") because a friend from high school committed suicide. I approve his dropping the course.

In spite of the literature emphasis, we continue to have high standards for grammar and other conventions. My chair wants to give a "D" to a student who does not have a perfect Works Cited in her final revised paper. I gave her a "B" looking at it holistically, and that grade is confirmed when I do a mathematical analysis. I joke that we should have hats that say "MLA Enforcer." She is not amused.

The chair is serious about professional development and sends in proposals for the two adjuncts to present at several conferences (led by her, of course).We present at two. I offer to get my doctorate and concentrate on the areas where the college needs courses, especially since the faculty handbook mentions paying for these courses. We discover that I can

never be hired full-time because I am not a member of the sponsoring denomination. I was not told that when I was hired as a contingent instructor.

Because of the number of students who are struggling with writing, including formatting a paper using the computer, I suggest a writing lab. For one hour each, I have two classes that meet in the computer lab, where I have set up tasks that will help them complete their freshman comp papers. Some appreciate my reading over their shoulders, and others hate it. Most at least finish the papers. We experiment with having these basic students both mainstreamed and taught in separate but equivalent classes.

I find that I am drawn to nontraditional students who are returning to school, since that mirrors my own journey. Mary[1] confesses that she passed high school English because she babysat her teacher's children. Even then she knew that she didn't learn to write, but figured that she would be a professional dancer and wouldn't need to know. Now she does, and I spend extra time after class talking about her writing. A businesswoman who can afford to do so, she gives me a rolling suitcase at the end of the year. "It's for all the books and folders you have to drag around," she says.

It's a small campus; the professors and students can eat lunch together at the cafeteria. I often sit with the other professors and join in their conversations. I was originally hired by the Vice President of Academics, and we often talk at lunch, exchanging irreverent words in sign language. I've become accustomed to thinking of myself as a professor and get a small charge out of getting junk mail and review books addressed to "Professor Bost." My new chair informs me that I am not a professor: I am merely an adjunct instructor; therefore, I am never to use that word to refer to myself.

From those lunchtime conversations, I learn that the education department has had difficulty finding a satisfactory instructor for Introduction to Linguistics, which is part of the state endorsement requirements to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). In fact, the last teacher refused to do part of the course. I've had that course on the master's level and taught ESL, so I ask the dean to let me try it. The first year is a challenge, especially since one of the students is the wife of the professor of philosophy. I'm sure that everything I do and say is talked about. The textbook is extremely difficult because it is intended for master's level students. Most lectures end up concentrating on the "Bost Version" of the textbook. Also, we have no idea of how to do the required in-school experience, which was set up as an interview. Some of my students cannot get their English learners at a public school to answer a single question. By the next year, I have a new textbook that concentrates on aspects of linguistics that teachers need to know, new activities that allow the students to express linguis-

1. All the names are fictional.

tic concepts in posters and reflective pieces, and a new concept to allow interaction with ESL students: games designed by my college students. We have English learner students volunteering to "play" with us.

By now, I've asked for an office and been allowed to use the one vacated after the death of a long-tenured and beloved history professor. It's on the floor with the education faculty. When the education department has its certification review, I am pressed into service proofreading the submitted documents, as well as analyzing my linguistics class materials for evidence that we have met all the standards. I'm even grilled by the assessment committee about whether I would mind my children being taught by a former student who made a "C." "Yes," I answer; "those who make 'C's' generally do so because they can't handle the responsibility of getting papers in on time or other similar issues. Those who don't get the concepts make 'D's' or 'F's.'"

A couple of male students think making me their "buddy" is the way to pass my class. One puts his arm around my shoulder in front of the class while he tries to explain away his missing assignment. I am furious but manage not to yell. I step away and explain that I do not appreciate this activity. The student flunks the course and drops out. Another one slaps me on the back—hard—while I am sitting down with another student discussing her writing. When I talk to the vice-president about the incident, he is serious for once. He requires that the student apologize. The student transfers to a state university.

My teaching load is three courses and two labs, for a total of 11 hours—one short of being full-time. At the end of spring semester, I have 68 student portfolios with eight papers each, plus at least one draft for each assignment. I hole up in the basement with bags of Hershey's kisses and stacks of folders. True to our new process philosophy, I have not graded any of the drafts, only responded to them. I can hear my five-year-old rampaging through the house with his father and older brother and sister. It could be worse: I had 76 students at the beginning of the semester.

Usually, I attend convocation that begins our academic year. There's frequently an overflow crowd outside in the vestibule; we can see through the glass and hear somewhat through the sound system speakers. This year, I'm the only one standing there. This scene becomes a metaphor for my last year at this institution.

On my own, I send off an abstract to the state council of teachers of English and am accepted to present on my favorite objects—quilts and books. My chair is not amused. I take the Graduate Record Exam and visit a couple of campuses, but I put off beginning my doctorate again because by now my older son is going to college.

Even though I'm from a different denomination, I volunteer to lead a discipleship group of four women and am approved. We meet weekly in my office to discuss the Bible

and our lives. On a particular Wednesday, only one person shows up. She tells me that she has heard from another student that my chair has said my contract will not be renewed. I am minutes away from being observed in class by my chair. My student and I pray for my composure. I've planned small group discussions on our reading in preparation for a writing assignment. It goes perfectly: the students are engaged, responding to the questions and each other. My chair can only complain that I have not lectured.

After class, I drop in on the vice president and discuss the rumor I've heard. I tell him that I understand my contract has only been from semester to semester, but that plan A has always been to come back the next semester. I ask, "Do I need a plan B?" "Yes," he responds.

I leave my red check curtains (which originally hung in the kitchen of our first house) with the education professor who has the office next to mine. She's often listened to me vent. I leave on good terms with everyone except my chair. I go back occasionally to have lunch with the education professor.

Plan B turns out to be another Christian college, which called me the year I had 76 students. I had declined then because I didn't think I could do a good job with another class. Now I call the undergraduate dean back, and soon I'm hired to teach the campus classes of EN 101 and 102, again as a contingent instructor. This is a smaller campus; there's no lunchroom. I'm the only English teacher in the humanities department. Most professors are theologians and ordained ministers. I joke that I am the token layperson.

By the second year, I am teaching both the campus and the online classes. The students who typically attend this college and seminary are enmeshed in their careers as pastors, ministry leaders, and soldiers, and therefore many of them take online classes. Most have been out of high school for ten to twenty years. They may have been laid off from a career in one field and are following a calling into another. They are non-traditional in age, but traditional in beliefs.

The online class turns out to be another adventure in learning. The pattern of assignments and due dates is different. I can require that an online student read a chapter and write the assignment in the same week. In fact, it makes more sense to do it that way. The first year, I am receiving everything by email over a dial-up connection. Gradually, the students and I learn to use the course software in more efficient ways.

Online teaching is problematic in another way. If I am listening to a student in person, I can usually guess why he or she is having problems. A lot of that contextual information is missing in an email. Jack emailed me that he was having trouble understanding EN 101, but doesn't say why. I misunderstand this as whining and respond accordingly. I soon realize from his writing that he is from Africa. I ask if English is his second language. Actually, it is his third, and he is quite fluent in French and has served as an international banking

consultant. I try to assure him that his ideas are good, but that his lack of fluency in English is hurting his grade. But the damage is done, and he complains about only getting a "D" after all his hard work. I recommend more time learning English. He comes to campus, but I am able to spend only 15 minutes with him because I am in the middle of the campus class. He enrolls in the EN 102 but drops out. The graduate dean shares with me his angry comments about my warning that EN 102 is harder than EN 101. The dean supports my warning. Two years later, Jack is back in the EN 102 course and in my World Literature course because he needs those to graduate. I am careful in how I communicate (I've rewritten the warning he found problematic). He is careful to show that he wants to learn how to write academic papers. In spite of a dangerous trip back to his home country midsemester, he is able to pass both classes with B's. He emails that he hopes I will be at his graduation so he can thank me in person. I have to be at my daughter's graduation in another state.

Initially to update my high school teaching certificate, I've gone back to college as a student. When getting a graduate research assistantship requires that I enroll in a master's degree program, I do. My professor sets me to writing all the documents necessary for putting her ESL classes online and passing a Quality Matters review. She also encourages me to get a doctorate, as do other professors in my writing program. Even one of my older students, in his pastoral counseling mode, encourages me to get that degree. By the time I am accepted into a doctorate program, I am four courses short of another masters; I finish and start the doctorate at the same time and still teach my freshman courses. I joke that I am thoroughly institutionalized.

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My family rolls their eyes collectively and individually. My youngest asks if I am a professional student. "Pretty much," I reply. I don't explain that teachers are always already learners first. He loudly and vehemently announces that he does not want to be a teacher like his older siblings, like me, like his great aunt, like his great grandmother. I wonder if he is protesting too much. I didn't set out to be a teacher, either.

However, I will keep on teaching. Two students remind me of why. Fred comes to EN 101 on campus a week late and in shock. A nontraditional student, he has missed the first class because his father died; he has never wanted to come to school anyway because he figured college couldn't teach him anything. In the middle of a grammar quiz, he suddenly looks up and exclaims out loud, "I get it now!" I see him on campus occasionally, at the library or drifting through my room talking to other students. I tease him about the day the lights went on. He calls me his professor and insists that I will be at his graduation next

spring. I will be there.

Ellen shares in her writing that she has had a difficult life, including overcoming a drug addiction. After class, she says that she is using what she has learned in her speech and Bible classes. "Mrs. Bost, whenever I write, I hear your voice in my head," she says. My first reaction is apologize for doing that to her. "No, no," she insists, "it helps to hear you telling me how to write a paper."

While I am hiking to that 8 a.m. graduate seminar, I don't think of my low contingent faculty status, my marginalization, my "nagging legitimacy problem" (to use Micciche's term). I think of Mary, Jack, Fred, and Ellen.

My Pedagogy

Also, when forming my pedagogy, I am seldom thinking of any of those discouraging terms for contingent faculty; teaching my students is foremost on my mind. Like Mary, Jack, Fred, and Ellen, most of my current students have been shut out of higher education for decades due to their own life choices, family and work obligations, or previous educational failures. A few come from relatively sheltered situations like home schooling. With an institutional ethos that includes invitations to belief[2] issued to "whosoever will," access is open. I've had students from all the continents except Antarctica and Australia. In a recent campus class, I had students who were natives of three African nations and two Caribbean islands, as well as the United States.

In structuring my courses, I consider Erika Lindemann's question: "what is the purpose of a writing course?" (referenced in Julier 140). The purpose of the freshman writing course that I teach, as described by the dean when I was hired and confirmed by feedback that I have received, was to prepare the students to write scholarly papers for their theology professors (and to a lesser extent for their sociology and counseling professors). Most of my students did not make the conventions of grammar and formatting a part of their writing in high school. Sooner or later, a majority will concede that they dreaded confronting writing/grammar/research/English and find they are pleasantly surprised to be learning. Thus, the first order of business is the one generally maligned in Composition and Rhetoric: reviewing/ teaching grammar. In contradiction to those in the field who say that grammar cannot and should not be taught (see for example Constance Weaver's description of the controversy and Hillocks' meta-analysis), I do.

In fact, the description of the current-traditional method fits my first semester EN 101 course like spandex. Although I am a writer by experience (eight years as a reporter) and

2. The evangelical world view emphasizes the need to invite everyone, regardless of race, gender, or other diversities, to believe in Christ Jesus.

by training (Don Murray's text *A Writer Teaches Writing*), I find that Murray's non-directive approach does not provide the guidance my students need. If I play too much of a passive role, I will "fail to provide enough structure, guidance, and direct instruction about particular conventions and strategies" (Tobin 11). Although I do provide that structure, I try not to teach grammar with the attitude of "drill and kill." I frame the grammar exercises with illustrations of how correct grammar helps the students accurately convey the story that they have to tell. (And I assure them repeatedly that they have a marvelous story to tell.) I also require reflection on the writing process with journal topics that ask the students to identify their greatest grammar difficulties, their greatest success, and their strategies for solving problems, among others. My acknowledgement of process writing is to require students to revise their paragraphs. Through this revision, I also help the students put grammar in the context in which it belongs—their own writing (Kolln 148)—by making detailed comments on their paragraphs as we work through narration, description, classification, illustration, and persuasion. Yes, I confess: not only do I teach grammar, but also I teach the modes. There are some students whom I have had for EN 102 who have obviously still not "gotten it." There have been others who have demonstrated they are learning. EN 101 is definitely a course in which I teach writing as a skill, in contradiction to Rose (403). However, students need those skills and techniques to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. I believe, like Jeff Smith, that "we are ethically bound by students' own aims" (qtd. in Ann George 101). My students aim to pass their courses for a ministry degree, but most importantly to live out the validity of their beliefs to the glory of God.

The EN 102 class that I teach more closely follows the process writing paradigm. In this class, I spend time on invention, research, arrangement, and revision. The requirement is for one larger paper, on a topic of their choosing, that is persuasive. Weekly assignments include evaluating an internet source, writing and then updating a storyboard, preparing an annotated bibliography and writing a rough draft, on the way to the finished product. Even students in the online course do two projects that require group work: evaluating student writing for plagiarism and peer reviewing each other's rough drafts.

In all my classes, I try to be specific about what I expect. As Bartholomae points out, student writers try to determine what the professor wants and what the professor knows (386). As a student myself, I know that analysis of the assignment (the rhetorical situation) is the first task of beginning to write. I try to be as transparent as I can to help them figure out not only how to pass my course and the courses of other professors, but also how to keep learning and expanding their writing abilities. In this manner I hope to demonstrate "that writing is a very unique skill, not really a tool but an ability fundamental to academic inquiry, an ability whose development is not fixed but ongoing" (Rose 413). I share my own writing

conundrums, gaffs, and revisions.

For Mary, Jack, Fred, and Ellen and students like them, I'm the gatekeeper to higher education, and I want to fling that barrier wide open and drag, direct, and/or push them through. I position myself as the coach: "Yes, team, you have to run those wind sprints up and down the stadium stairs!" Not only am I a gatekeeper, but I also see myself as having a broader function: that of an academic literacy sponsor. Deborah Brandt writes, "They [literacy sponsors] help to organize and administer stratified systems of opportunity and access, and they raise the literacy stakes in struggles for competitive advantage. Sponsors enable and hinder literacy activity, often forcing the formation of new literacy requirements, while decertifying older ones" (16). Students, especially those in freshman Composition are often faced with "inventing the university," as Bartholomae points out. He states that it is especially difficult for a student to imagine the audience for his or her paper (386). I want to be that audience, that mentor, the literacy sponsor who opens the door to the academic discourse community.

My department chair emails me: "Will you be available to teach EN 102 in the spring?" I immediately reply, "Yes, of course!" My students and I are only half way through the marathon that is First Year Composition. My job is contingent, but so is life. Both are sometimes blessed.

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