Learning to lean on each other: peer mentoring for teacher development

Alexis E. Ramsey, *Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA*
Kristen Seas, *Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA*

ABSTRACT. This article describes the research and development of the Collaborative Online Instructors Network (COIN) to help composition instructors exchange ideas and materials on the teaching of writing. Research was conducted at a large, land-grant University in the Midwest region of the United States and focused on the pedagogical needs of graduate student instructors of composition in the University's English department. The findings, gathered through surveys and focus groups, suggested that instructors are looking for additional resources to help them prepare for class and develop their teaching methods, and that they are receptive to online venues in particular. From the data collected, the authors designed and implemented a Web-based resource consisting of a community forum for facilitating discussions about pedagogical issues and a digital library of materials to allow instructors to share what works well in their classrooms. Such an online resource thus provides an additional site for the professional development of new and veteran instructors, and the curricular development of the program overall.

KEYWORDS: *Digital library, Forum, Pedagogy, Professional development, Teacher preparation*

Introduction: pedagogical crises

We begin with a confession: two years ago, we both suffered what we called "pedagogical crises". We found ourselves feeling isolated, in our teaching, and dissatisfied with what we were doing, in our composition courses. Although seasoned veterans of the trenches of freshman composition, we just didn't feel like we were effectively reaching our students or making sense of that nebulous beast: "writing". Such insecurities were particularly pressing, given the curricular demands of Purdue's composition program, since Fall 2003, when a technology component and student conferencing became mandatory for the introductory course. This meant even the most experienced TAs suddenly found themselves in unfamiliar

teaching territory. Thus, as helpful as our year-long mentoring program had been, we each realized that there was still much to learn about teaching writing.

After admitting our insecurities to each other, we felt relieved. How nice to know that we were not alone in our struggles to learn the art of teaching. Yet were we the only two struggling? Many of our colleagues did not appear to have such difficulties; in fact, they came back with stories of creative and successful lessons, that got students talking in class, and understanding composition. The question then became: what can we learn from these innovative colleagues about becoming better teachers, and how can we make that peer education possible beyond the existing mentoring program?

Research: instructors' needs

As a response, we decided to pursue a forum for pedagogical peer-mentoring among instructors. However, we were dismayed to find little relevant research, concerning alternatives to conventional teacher preparation, beyond traditional forms of hierarchical mentoring (Boyle, Boice, 1998; Shannon et al., 1998; Swenson, 2003). Moreover, studies addressing non-traditional forms of mentoring, such as co-mentoring, have focused on academic rather than pedagogical arenas (Wyant, 1996; Brown-Wright et al., 1997; Fugate, 2001; McGuire, Reger, 2003). Thus, we decided to conduct our own research into the needs of our specific peer community of instructors, to gain a better sense of the kind of support they required, and how best to meet their needs. During the 2005-2006 school year, we first surveyed all (190 total) of the instructors in the Purdue composition program, with a 29% response rate, and then conducted focus groups, with 14 compensated volunteers of both graduate instructors (TAs) and adjunct lecturers, divided into three sessions. However, the numbers discussed below are only those of the TAs, the primary population of interest in our study. Among the 44 graduate instructors surveyed (roughly 27% of the entire TA population in the program), 50% claimed they felt very prepared, when they walked into the classroom, with another 39% claiming to feel somewhat prepared. Yet, when asked to rank their sense of preparation in creating specific components of the introductory composition course, their answers were less confident (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sense of preparation in creating material
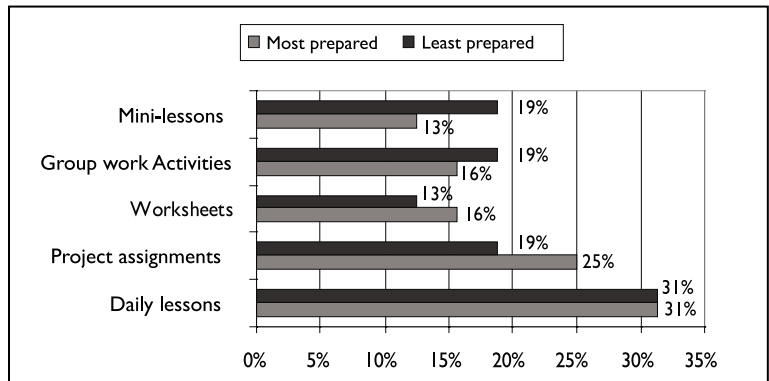
The survey responses also indicated that the department's graduate instructors are already turning to one another to prepare for teaching, with 84% of those surveyed seeking help from fellow instructors, and 90% relying on conversations with friends and peers (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Resources used to prepare for class
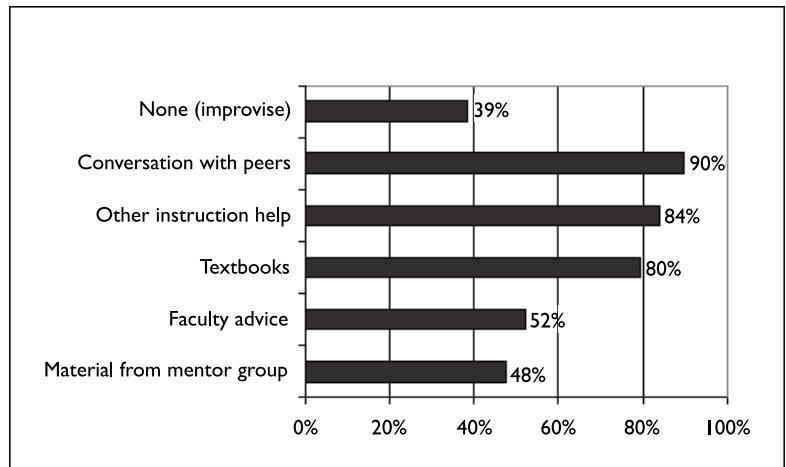
Most importantly, for the prospect of a community resource, an almost unanimous 93% (excluding only those who did not answer the question) claimed that they would be willing to share their own ideas and materials with other instructors. Indeed, when asked about the creation of an informal, voluntary forum for

instructional support, 81% indicated they were receptive to the idea. So what do all of these numbers mean? As we discovered in the focus groups, they mean that graduate instructors are thinking about their teaching practices, are willing to work with others on pedagogical issues, and perceive a need for more resources to help them. Aside from resources sought beyond the program, as in textbooks or Web sites, nearly all participants noted that they turned to colleagues, office mates, and other peers for suggestions, and to answer questions about issues in their own classes. Moreover, all participants affirmed the need for additional teaching resources beyond first-year mentoring.

Response: collaborative online instructors' network

What has emerged from our research is the development of the COIN-Collaborative Online Instructors' Network (http://digitalparlor.org/coin). Since 51% of our survey respondents concluded that an online venue would be the best medium for sharing pedagogical resources, we created COIN to facilitate the sharing of teaching ideas, through a decentralized, voluntary, collaborative online forum. Established in November 2006 and still growing, COIN is available as a ready resource to anyone, regardless of experience, who is seeking new pedagogical techniques. COIN is also entirely peer-driven, sustained and directed by the instructors' themselves; however, to encourage participation in the network, the composition program at Purdue offers both an endorsed service line for a participant's vita as well as a certificate of recognition.

Ideally, participation in COIN facilitates professional development, by providing an opportunity for instructors to share insightful strategies for teaching writing, as well as reflect on their own teaching practices, as they are asked to contextualize their submissions to the network. As instructors, we are constantly learning from our experiences - our mistakes and successes - and COIN allows us to learn from one another's experiences and knowledge, to help us grow as teachers. For instance, in our survey, 31% admitted that they felt least prepared to create daily lesson plans, while the same number indicated that they felt most prepared to create them. This interesting coincidence suggested both a disparity in the respondents' preparation as teachers, and a promising opportunity for co-mentoring between

instructors of different strengths and weaknesses. Finally, by providing a medium of contact that foregrounds the ideas, rather than the social relationships within the department, COIN also fosters a sense of community around the shared imperative to improve as instructors, regardless of position in the department. Indeed, because COIN is voluntary and draws out those who already passionately pursue the art of teaching, we hope this sense of community will translate beyond the Web site itself.

Discussion questions

1. We chose to take advantage of the emphasis on technology, in our composition program, to develop an online forum for mentoring. How feasible is this use of technology for other writing programs?

2. What are your thoughts on the use of an online forum itself to facilitate peer mentoring, compared to more traditional face-to-face methods?

3. What other media or means of facilitating peer contact might writing programs use to cultivate peer mentoring networks among their instructors?

4. What type of teacher preparation is offered at your institution, and do you find it adequate in meeting the needs of instructors, particularly graduate TAs, in their professional and pedagogical development?

5. What measures is your department taking, if any, to extend instructional support, for pedagogical development, beyond official mentoring programs?

6. What sorts of financial and/or programmatic constraints are inhibiting the creation of more extensive teacher development programs? And what can be done to overcome them, particularly given the potential role of technology in pedagogical mentoring?

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Sintesi

I corsi di scrittura e composizione della Purdue Univeristy, specialmente a partire dall'anno accademico 2003-2004, quando la componente tecnologica e il cosiddetto student conferencing sono diventati obbligatori per il corso introduttivo, hanno fatto emergere una serie di problematiche, riguardanti soprattutto il modo in cui insegnare efficacemente la materia, coinvolgendo gli studenti in prima persona. Le difficoltà di sempre, sommate alle recenti innovazioni, hanno finito col disorientare parecchi insegnanti, alcuni dei quali hanno deciso di ricorrere alla peer education, sfruttando così le capacità e le conoscenze dei colleghi più esperti.
Con l'obiettivo di creare un forum per un peer mentoring pedagogico tra docenti, durante l'anno accademico 2005-2006, è stato condotto un sondaggio, rivolto a tutti gli insegnanti del corso di scrittura e composizione (190 in totale), che ha registrato una percentuale di risposta pari al 29%. In generale, il sondaggio ha

rivelato chiaramente che i docenti riflettono attivamente sulle proprie modalità di insegnamento, sono favorevoli alla collaborazione su questioni pedagogiche, e sentono il bisogno di ulteriori ausili e risorse specifiche per perfezionare il proprio livello di preparazione.

Dei 44 insegnanti di ruolo interrogati, il 50% ha dichiarato di sentirsi molto preparato nello svolgimento delle singole lezioni giornaliere, mentre il 39% ha affermato di sentirsi abbastanza preparato. Tuttavia, quando è stata chiesta loro un'auto-valutazione, circa la creazione di materiali specifici per il corso introduttivo, le risposte hanno fatto emergere una minore fiducia nelle proprie capacità. Le risposte al sondaggio hanno indicato anche che i docenti di ruolo del dipartimento ricorrevano già ai consigli dei propri colleghi per migliorare la propria preparazione: l'84% chiedeva un supporto in generale ai propri colleghi insegnanti; il 90% ricorreva invece all'ausilio di amici e altri pari.

Un'interessante coincidenza è risultata proprio nelle risposte, diametralmente opposte, alla domanda sul livello di preparazione relativo alla pianificazione complessiva delle lezioni: un 31% si è dichiarato molto preparato, e un altro 31% ha ammesso, invece, di nutrire una minore fiducia nelle proprie capacità organizzative in proposito. Questa identità di percentuali evidenzia la necessità di un peer mentoring istituzionalizzato, volto ad uniformare il livello di conoscenze degli insegnanti e a garantirne, allo stesso tempo, l'esito positivo, con l'esatta metà del corpo docente più esperto che può mettere la propria competenza al servizio dei meno esperti, insegnando in qualità di peer teachers, e l'altra metà, dichiaratamente meno competente, disposta ad apprendere come peer learners.

Il dato più importante emerso per la prospettiva di una risorsa comune all'intera istituzione è stato, difatti, che il 93% degli intervistati si è dichiarato favorevole a condividere le proprie idee e i propri materiali con gli altri insegnanti. Alla proposta di creare un vero e proprio forum, per quanto informale e volontario, per un supporto reciproco tra docenti, l'81% ha affermato infatti di essere favorevole all'idea.

A fronte di queste indicazioni, i risultati della ricerca sono alla base della fondazione del COIN-Collaborative Online Instructors' Network, una rete telematica che permette la cooperazione tra docenti. Il COIN è stato creato allo scopo di condividere pratiche didattiche e idee legate all'insegnamento, visto che il 51% ha individuato proprio nell'ambiente online il mezzo migliore per la condivisione di risorse pedagogiche.

Il COIN è stato fondato nel novembre del 2006 ed è in continua espansione. Oltre che collaborativo, decentralizzato e volontario, il network è totalmente gestito, supportato e diretto dai docenti stessi. La partecipazione è comunque incoraggiata dal corso di scrittura e composizione della Purdue University, che offre un attestato di riconoscimento e diversi servizi paralleli di sostegno.