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Meeting the Challenge: Beginning English Teachers Reflect on Their First Year

Sharing their first-year experiences, new secondary teachers (and their college methods professor) describe the importance of reflective teaching practice for professional development.

The shift from university classroom to secondary English classroom can be a difficult transition for first-year teachers. Despite programmatic preparation, various classroom experiences, and an eagerness to enter the classroom, beginning English teachers face a number of challenges from the first day: managing difficult students, handling the paper load, preparing and presenting lessons, meeting a dizzying array of standards, even making friends with other teachers. The adjustment to the "real" classroom is complex and often difficult—as Kylene Beers reminds us, one that challenges new teachers socially, culturally, politically, and technologically.

These challenges are obviously influenced by the increasing complexity of the English classroom. Our understanding of literacy continues to expand. Students work with print, visual, and media literacies, with texts ranging from canonical short stories to graphic novels, from popular music to modern film (Albers and Harste; Carter; Golden). Students also work with new literacies supported by technology (Kajder; Richardson); as evidenced in the September 2007 issue of *English Journal,* online literature circles, podcasting, virtual worlds, and digital video creation now have a place in the English classroom.

Students themselves contribute to the complexity of the English classroom, representing a range of abilities, interests, and backgrounds. They challenge first-year teachers with difficult personal issues: "poverty, joblessness, low expectations, boredom, peer pressure, disaffection, lost opportunity, substance abuse, alienation, family disintegration, and, particularly for those who are poor or marginalized . . . the utter lack of prospects for the future" (Cochran-Smith 372). First-year teachers must also learn the context of their new classrooms as they move to new communities or relocate to unfamiliar areas of the country.

Reflection

One practice that can help with the shift from university classroom to English classroom is reflection—not a formal essay responding to an assigned prompt but conscious interrogation of an issue of personal relevance with the intent to understand the issue and move forward. Reflective practice is often pushed aside when teachers enter the classroom, a casualty of too little time and too many demands. Yet carving out a few extra minutes a day can make a positive difference to teachers' instruction and students' learning.

Reflection provides English teachers with a means to productively engage the many challenges they face in the first year. Through reflection, teachers question issues of pedagogy and practice and identify the complex problems associated with teaching (LaBoskey). Reflection supports different perspectives on teaching and learning as teachers begin to question personal beliefs and develop new understandings (Loughran). The connections and questions developed through reflection also have the potential to change teachers' views of social, cultural, historical, and political influences on education, supporting efforts for equity in teaching and learning (Liston and Zeichner). Lastly, reflection

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helps teachers question the attitudes and actions associated with the many ethical and emotional elements of teaching (Mills and Satterthwait).

Preparing English Teachers for the First Year

As a teacher educator and former secondary English teacher, I (Melanie) am well aware of the challenges awaiting preservice teachers when they step into their own classrooms. In the methods course, I attempt to prepare them for those challenges in multiple ways. They read about and discuss a range of issues relevant to the English classroom: pedagogy (e.g., Alsup and Bush), culturally relevant teaching (e.g., Gay), diverse students (e.g., Gonzales et al.), classroom management (e.g., Curran), and technology (e.g., Kim and Kamil). They engage in reflective practice through discussion and journal writing; they complete research projects on an issue of their choice; they take part in a 20-hour practicum in a local high school.

Like all teachers, however, new teachers often struggle in their first year, despite their preparation, because the complexity of the secondary English classroom challenges them in ways they could not anticipate. They have the ability to make sense of the issues they face, however, through reflective practice: they can use reflection to consider and to question their practice and their belief.

This article continues with the reflections of four beginning English teachers on their first year in the secondary English classroom. Each teacher concentrates on a specific challenge faced in the first year—social, cultural, political, or technological—and concludes with a consideration of reflection's role in teaching. In their own words, these teachers describe their entry into teaching, their surprise at specific aspects of the profession, and their ability to use reflection to navigate the challenges of the first year.

Bridget: The Societal Challenge

On my first day of student teaching in Indiana, my mentor teacher told me, "I have been teaching for 30 years and I will be very honest with you. If you can survive here, you can survive anywhere." I dealt with things in those few months that I never imagined I would see in a middle school classroom: pregnancy, suicidal students, students who were registered sex offenders. I found myself constantly thinking of my students and trying to "fix" their troubled situations. As much as I hated to admit it, even with my hours of work and good grades, I was not prepared for that classroom. When I finished student teaching, though, I felt much more confident about my ability to deal with students' issues.

When I moved to the Gulf Coast, I applied and interviewed for positions right away, all the while being honest with potential employers that I would only be in the area for a year. One principal said, "I appreciate your honesty, and ordinarily we wouldn't schedule a meeting, but let's see how it goes." I was thrilled when I was offered a position with that principal's school teaching English I and English II Honors. On my first day of orientation, I eagerly looked for my classroom number and found several numbers listed instead. Confused, I asked my department head and she confirmed my fear: I was floating. My heart sank a little at the thought of not having my own classroom: no room to decorate, no room near any of the other teachers in my department, no room to display my students' work from class, and no room to make me feel like an actual teacher. More than anything, I was disappointed that no one spoke to me about floating ahead of time. I had prided myself on being completely honest with my department but it seemed they had not afforded me the same respect.

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The language arts department at the school was one that any school would envy: smart teachers, plentiful supplies, and classrooms that doubled as computer labs. Unfortunately, I learned that, as a new teacher, I did not have much say in curriculum planning in such a strong department. I spent hours going through other teachers' materials to make sure that I was prepared to teach the curriculum. When possible, I added in projects that were successful during my student teaching and shared them with the other teachers, but I was always careful not to overstep my "boundaries"—invisible ones

that I set based on observations of the department's interactions with the other new teachers. Still, I became close with these teachers, often receiving positive feedback on my projects and entreaties to stay at the school.

After my student teaching, I was somewhat prepared for the challenges students brought to the classroom. I wasn't prepared, though, for the challenges of working with my fellow teachers. I learned to ask questions; I learned to look for answers on my own before I asked for help; and I learned to acknowledge the invisible boundaries of a hierarchical system in place long ago. Creating relationships with my fellow teachers wasn't easy but it was definitely a rewarding aspect of teaching.

Reflection

In my first year of teaching, reflection became an emotional outlet for me. First-year teachers are often overwhelmed and lack emotional support. Administration and fellow teachers promise to walk them through every process and swear to do it with a smile on their faces. In my experience, that wasn't the case. During the first months of teaching, reflection was the one thing I could do to center myself when I was feeling overwhelmed and frustrated with my situation. I was unhappy that no one had told me I was floating, but I was stuck with it. Writing my frustration out was a way to relieve the stress and work out my problems with the situation.

My fellow teachers thought they were being helpful by giving me the recipes for everything that I would need to succeed; however, they left out one important ingredient: me.

Reflection provided an outlet for me. I reflected mostly when things were not going well and I did not want to complain to my colleagues. One important thing that I learned is that if you write something down, walk away from it, and then reread your entry a few hours or days later, you are able to see things much more clearly. The process was not always pretty; often it was scribbled messily in red pen when I was frustrated or stressed. Still, I would try to take at least 20 minutes a week to reflect on how I felt during that week.

The first few weeks of teaching I was upset because I was teaching to such a set curriculum. My fellow teachers thought they were being helpful by giving me the recipes for everything that I would need to succeed; however, they left out one important ingredient: me. Instead of holding a grudge, one morning I used my planning period to reflect on why it bothered me. Later, I read my reflection and wrote a list of ways to improve the situation: incorporate projects and movies that I think students would enjoy, speak up at department meetings, and volunteer to help with departmental issues. I believe taking the time to reflect on the issue made me much more confident and comfortable in my teaching today.

Matt: The Cultural Challenge

When I graduated from college, I applied all over the country for teaching positions. I looked at schools in Colorado, Michigan, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Wisconsin, Minnesota, even Alaska. I wanted to move beyond the Midwest, to see other regions and meet other people. Ultimately, I wanted a new experience.

I took a position in South Carolina, living and working in communities different from my hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana. I grew up in a predominantly white, fairly affluent neighborhood; I attended a private Catholic high school and earned an English education degree at Purdue, both predominantly white institutions. I had visited South Carolina several times on family vacations but I never saw the state as that different from Indiana—aside from a very strong Southern accent.

My new school, however, was rural, impoverished, and largely African American. When I drove through the local downtown, I was one block away from some of the most depressed and depressing neighborhoods I had ever seen. It seemed every other house had a caved-in roof, boarded and barred windows, and paint peeling from the exteriors. There were overgrown yards behind ragged chain-linked fences, broken-down and rusted-out cars, graffiti slapped across sheds, garages, and even some of the houses themselves. And these were my students' homes.

I found myself teaching in an area known locally as the "Corridor of Shame," a stretch of schools along Interstate 95 with low success rates and high percentages of students scoring at or below basic on standardized tests of core subjects. In my first year,

I had nine female students—freshmen and sophomores—pregnant or with a child at home. I had students who were completely unfazed when they earned Fs or zeroes on assignments; when I asked why they didn't care, they replied with a simple shrug or looked at their friends and laughed. I had students who explained they didn't have money for books or school supplies while they sported new tattoos or designer clothes. It dawned on me that the students' perception of what was important was defined by what was and wasn't socially acceptable for their community.

I wasn't prepared for a culture of low expectations, students who lacked motivation or interest in anything academic, teachers who filled their unit plans with irrelevant videos, and administrators who simply rapped the knuckles of students who, in my eyes, were a danger to their peers. I hadn't counted on the stress of dealing with students who seemed to care little about learning in my classroom. It made me wonder, *Do I want to do this?* It was hard not to feel bitter and resentful toward the students; so many were unwilling to do the work and unresponsive to my efforts to reach them. I hadn't considered the difficulty of teaching in a school filled with students who weren't like me. There were days when I was conscious that I was the only white person in the room. My students would ask me if I was racist or say that I was picking on them because they were black. It made me sit back and think, *What have I done to make them think that?*

I was frightened and nervous going into my first classroom, but I was ready to make a change and I thought that I could. My university professors had high expectations of me; my colleagues expected me to reach students because I was young and energetic; society told me that I could make a difference in a student's life simply because I was a teacher. It only took a few writing assignments to realize that my ego was the only thing changing. I knew many things about teaching but I didn't know my students; I also didn't know the importance of my background, much less the culture of my community, when I started teaching. My students have opened my eyes, probably more than I have opened theirs. With every good intention, bad attitude, well-thought-out decision, ill-conceived notion, or little victory, I have gained an appreciation for a world unlike anything I had known.

Reflection

Reflection was an important part of my learning and understanding in my first year. Taking the time to reflect allowed me to consider my perspective and understanding of the world around me. I didn't write a reflection each day, focusing more on the days when things didn't go so well. I had days where I walked away from school thinking there was nothing that I wanted to do to keep that memory alive but, for me, those days were the best days for reflection. In my eyes, the best ideas come from the worst experiences; with a more critical state of mind, I can be more honest with myself and come to creative solutions and approaches to problems. For example, I constantly dealt with a group of students who refused to do any work in class. After some reflection on the situation, I decided to call each student out to the hallway for a conversation. I shared my views on cooperation and learning and extended the offer to take part in class rather than sitting there wasting time. Some students made an effort, some didn't, but I felt like I'd handled the situation in a more professional manner than simply being angry about their actions.

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Some of my reflections were short bursts of ink on computer paper; others were simply conversation with other people. I talked to my colleagues because they were the ones who could relate directly to what I was going through and had the experience to help guide me. I talked to my professors; they served as philosophical guides, gave suggestions of approaches to the classroom, helped me let my walls down in terms of how I viewed the students, and helped me move from being too critical to being more constructive. I talked to my former classmates, too. They helped me keep my bearings and let me know that what was happening in my classroom wasn't everyone's experience. Whatever method I used, reflecting on my teaching, in writing or simple conversations, kept me going. I still

take the time to reflect and know it can be just as powerful today as it was during that first year.

Martha: The Technology Challenge

Sitting in the darkened computer lab during my senior year of college, I was engrossed in designing an intriguing website for my future students to use. I eagerly designed marvelous vocabulary quizzes, areas for critical thinking responses, and even creative games. Nestled in my cocoon of the university world, I envisioned my future classroom as a place where technology would be easily employed, and students would immediately be engaged.

Imagine my surprise when I began my first year of teaching. I learned that technology was not always available at my fingertips, and students may not necessarily know how to use applications I considered basic. I learned that for my students to be successful, it was necessary for me to teach technology as well as grammar, essay structure, and literature terms. A simple assignment, such as typing the final draft of a paper, became a lesson on formatting and functions of Microsoft Word; I was amazed at the number of students who still needed instruction on how to double-space their papers. My ninth graders had only a vague idea of how to use the information available over the Internet. I had to teach them how to distinguish reputable sites from "bogus" sites, as well as how to navigate and search through all the information they found on the Web.

I was frustrated by the lack of availability and the fact that technology seemed to always fail at some point. Either an application wouldn't work properly or a computer would freeze before a student had saved everything. My school was making efforts to purchase more computers and support technology use in the classroom, but I still battled busy computer labs and too little technology in my classroom. I realized that technology was advancing faster than my teaching. I knew there were applications and activities I could be using with my students but I didn't know what they were or how to find them. I was struck by the lack of continuing education for teachers regarding technology in the classroom, especially with students so interested in technology.

I realized that my students paid attention and retained the information presented when I used technology. Technology allowed me to combine my educational objectives with engaging activities that also built their computer skills. One of my most successful projects was a music video my students created on a theme of their choice from *Lord of the Flies.* They used Windows Movie Maker, the Internet, and Microsoft Word to compose in-depth literary analyses in ways that appealed to them. This unit was successful because students took ownership of their work; they were engaged, and so they understood and retained the information.

Stepping out of college and into the reality of the English classroom was an adjustment for me, but it was a valuable experience. I learned that it was vital for me to continue integrating technology into my teaching. The value of student engagement and the ability to equip them with lifelong skills cannot be overlooked. Though there may be challenges and rough spots, the long-term results are worth the effort.

Reflection

Reflection was a large part of my first year. Despite the craziness of learning how to balance planning and grading, I managed to find time to reflect on various experiences and lessons taught. Typically my reflection consisted of writing a journal, and I usually wrote a couple of times a month. It became almost therapeutic to write about my week. Sometimes I simply vented about frustrations, but often I wrote about successes, the thrill of connecting with students or a lesson that went well. I also found myself reflecting by discussing the joys and challenges of teaching with other teachers.

I chose to reflect during my first year because I have seen the value of writing and processing events in my life. Thoughts and reactions are fleeting; it seems vital to give them permanence through ink. I think reflection is imperative now that I am in the classroom. I value the reflection process as a time to consider areas that need improvement, focus on successful traits, and discover new insights into my teaching.

For example, I was teaching a unit on *To Kill a Mockingbird* to my ninth-grade class, and we were discussing the theme of racism. I was using Nazi Germany as an example, assuming my students understood, when one of my international students raised her hand and asked, "Who is Hitler?" Later,

when I was reflecting on the lesson and making notes, I began to think how wrong it was for me to assume my students would have similar background knowledge. The United States' involvement in World War II was different from that of the countries where my students spent their childhoods; their history classes may have emphasized events much differently. By reflecting over my lesson, I changed my teaching and remembered to incorporate background information for even brief references or examples. I learned the importance of acknowledging that common knowledge in the United States does not mean common knowledge in other countries. I may have eventually learned this lesson, but I think I came to this understanding far quicker because I spent time actually processing the lesson and reflecting over comments and questions from my students.

Bryan: The Political Challenge

Ah, college: the days of idealism and blissful optimism. Sitting in the small brown classroom in our traditional circle, the professor lecturing about something called an IEP, while I stared out the dusty window at the beautiful fall day, thinking of my future classroom: a room of plants, posters, and soft music, students learning about analysis through the study and discussion of the Red Hot Chili Peppers; me, knocking my students' educational socks off with my interesting activities. I saw myself as the wizard behind the curtain, teaching my students without them even knowing it. But just like the famous movie, the curtain was pulled back on my classroom to reveal a world of crushed ideas, a world of strict regimen, a world of the status quo . . . a world of politics.

When I graduated college, I promised myself that I would not fall into the traditional pitfalls: the boring essays, book reports, and vocabulary exercises. In my first year, however, I found myself struggling with the promises I made and the politics I found. One of the biggest struggles was the loss of individual control within my classroom. I didn't feel like a teacher but the new implementer of old ideas, the status quo, the idea that learning was specifically this, not that.

I wanted to teach *A Midsummer Night's Dream* instead of the usually taught *Julius Caesar.* My fellow tenth-grade teachers weren't pleased:

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"We're not reading that!"

"Well, yeah, I know, but I like it better and I think the kids will, too."

"According to the principal, we all have to do the same thing, so we know we are all on the same page."

"Well, we are doing the same thing: we're reading a play and analyzing it. It doesn't matter if we're reading a different play."

After several discussions with my fellow teachers and the administration, I discovered that it did matter. I had graduated college with a degree in education, but my degree had training wheels. I could teach, but for my students' safety, I should stay on the well-beaten path. Why? If we all end at the same destination, what does it matter what paths we've traveled to get there? Why does it matter if we've taken a path through Shakespeare's enchanted forest on a summer's night or sauntered through Maycomb, Alabama, or traveled through Seth MacFarlane's Quahog, Rhode Island? Shouldn't the path be unique for the student and teacher alike? I had made a promise to myself to take the proverbial "road less traveled," yet, as a new teacher, I was expected to follow the same well-manicured path as those around me.

The worst part was that I was the one expected to change; I was supposed to leave my ideas behind and accept that reading a piece of literature, discussing it, and writing an essay were the acceptable approaches to teaching English. I knew those approaches didn't work for every student—they didn't work for me—but I had to use them.

As a college student, I always thought my classroom would be my classroom, but the truth is

quite different. So many people have a right to determine what is best for my students. The problem with this is they don't know my students; they don't know their personalities, their hobbies, their strengths and weaknesses. I would like to believe I know what can work for students and how I can help them but, in reality, people with titles are much more likely to determine what is "best" for my students than the average classroom teacher.

Reflection

The beginning of my first year of teaching left me lying awake at night, questions rolling around in my already overfilled head, voices shouting to hold on to my convictions, leaving me pondering if I was even cut out to be a teacher. These answers—and sleep—finally came in the simple form of reflection. Without reflection I'm just a cynical teacher walking down the traditional path to becoming a traditional teacher. In discussion with friends—some who are teachers—I was able to voice my frustration and displeasure, release the stress of being a teacher, and critique the direction of my educational path. Without reflection, the voices inside my head would not have made any sense, and I would have been spinning in circles; with reflection, I have discovered what ailed me and answered the questions that plagued me in my first year. Reflection allowed me to reinforce my educational philosophies and the path I wanted my students to follow. Reflection allowed me to mediate between the promises I made as a freshman in college and the politics of the classroom. Reflection allowed me to grow as a professional educator.

As a college student, I always thought my classroom would be my classroom, but the truth is quite different. So many people have a right to determine what is best for my students.

The largest conflict that I had as a first-year teacher was something that shook me to my core. Although reflection helped me solve numerous issues in my first year, none were bigger than the dissection of my educational philosophy. As a young teacher, I had a very idealistic view of education that, from the first moment, seemed to be in contrast with the real-life version of teaching. As the year progressed, many of my idealistic ideas drew remarks or looks of contempt and were pushed to the back and right out the door by colleagues who had been teachers even before I first contemplated entering the education field. As a beginning teacher, I was already nervous that my educational theories and philosophies were a stretch, even impossible, and as my best and brightest ideas continued to receive negative feedback from my colleagues, I thought it time to rethink my educational philosophy.

Was what I believed entirely wrong? Were my ideas totally absurd? As I sat in my classroom grading essays and cursing my decision to become a teacher, as I sat at a card table and discussed my ideas with my friends, I realized that it wasn't me: I wasn't absurd. Through reflection, I was able to see that my style and philosophies weren't entirely wrong. I was able to see that those students who had despised English no longer dreaded coming to class. I was able to see several of my colleagues revise their teaching plans and adopt some of my ideas. I was able to see that my philosophy was outside of the "normal" but, with a little tweaking, it led to a productive classroom.

Conclusion

The first year of teaching is a difficult shift for every new teacher to make, moving from the relative comfort of the university to the controlled chaos of the classroom. With so many practical matters to manage on a daily basis—planning, instructing, grading, attending meetings—teachers must also learn to negotiate the diverse social, cultural, technological, and political issues of teaching. Reflection is one element of that negotiation. Whether jotting notes in the margins of lesson plans, typing out thoughts at the end of the week, or discussing ideas with colleagues, taking the time to reflect can benefit beginning teachers.

These beginning teachers have shared their first-year shift into the secondary English classroom, the issues they faced there, and the place of reflection in their professional lives. Their experiences illustrate the importance of preparing English teachers for more than classroom pedagogy. We can certainly teach our preservice teachers how to use technology in their teaching—blogs, wikis, iMovies, podcasts—but we also need to teach them how to manage a lack of technology or students

who personify the digital divide. We can teach our preservice teachers about student diversity but we also need to teach them how to manage difference—of belief, of race, of gender, of culture, of religion.

Reflection provides teacher educators with a valuable tool to address these difficult areas with preservice teachers. Teaching our preservice teachers how to make sense of their experiences through reflective consideration provides them with a means to interrogate their teaching once they enter the classroom and deal with the challenges they face in the first years of teaching.

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