

## Peer Advising System: Collaborative-Reflection-in-Action Model of Professional Development

Young-Kyung Min

The University of  
Washington, Bothell, US  
ykmin@uwb.edu

### ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from a writing program at a large mid-western university in the US, this article examines the influence of a peer support group on new teaching assistants' development and socialization as writing instructors during their first year of graduate school. It illustrates how new instructors' guided participation in the collaborative reflective practices—the process of sharing the stories of their teaching while developing their own pedagogies and revisiting their experiences with their peer advisors and group members—becomes a focal element of their development as writing instructors in their first year of teaching in the program. Elaborating on the effects of collaborative reflection training on new graduate students, the article also illustrates how a peer advising system can build a collaborative teacher culture, which can ultimately build a collaborative school culture.

**Keywords:** Peer Advising, Reflection-in-Action, Critical Friends

### Introduction

It has been widely recognized by teachers and teacher educators that the key factor to teacher change and long-term development is reflection (Farrell, 2007; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Pennington 1995; Williams, et al., 2001). The notion of reflection has been studied by many scholars since Dewey's original concept of reflection as "a purposeful inquiry" that requires "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it" (1933, p. 9). As a guide to my inquiry, this article uses Donald Schön's (1987) notion of reflection-in-action. The concept of "reflection-in-action", as opposed to reflection-on-action, underscores the importance of the practitioner's understanding of his own practice *while* engaged in the action rather than contemplating his action after the practice. It suggests that the practitioner's routine interactions and everyday activities have a great influence on his professional development. Schön's framework of reflection-in-action shares the basic insights with the theories of learning-in-practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) develop a social-practice view of learning through the notion of a community of practice, which they define as "a set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). This view of learning highlights that learning takes place in a social co-participation framework, not in the individual's mind or brain. Schön's notion of reflection-in-action and the theories of learning-in-practice suggest the importance of paying attention to the process by which the novice member is initiated into the group's practices and the crucial influence of colleagues on the new member's socialization process into the practices.

Although research points out the crucial role of a peer support group for first-year teachers' development and socialization (Day, 1999; Francis, 1995; Fullan, 1993; Gootesman, 2000; Hargreaves, 1994; Oliphant, 2003; Senior, 2006; Tsui, 2003; Williams, et al, 2001), most discussions tend to focus on pre-service and in-service teachers. Just as the needs and interests of beginning teachers are different from those of experienced teachers (Farrell, 2003), the needs and interests of new graduate students who learn to teach as part of their TAs can be quite different from those of pre-service and in-service teachers. The purpose of this article is to examine the influence of a peer support group on new teaching assistants' development and socialization both as students and instructors during their first year of graduate school—an anxious time as they are beginning graduate school as new students, yet also as new teachers. Elaborating on the effects of collaborative reflection training on new graduate students, the article illustrates how a peer advising system can build a collaborative teacher culture, which can ultimately build a collaborative school culture.

### Background & Methods

This article is based on the findings of an ethnographic study that examined the literacy practices of a writing program based on my participant observation in the program as a teaching assistant during my graduate study at a large mid-western university. The writing program is housed in the English Department, which offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in Literature, Creative Writing, and Writing Studies. The program offers approximately 200 sections of freshman writing courses each year, and the writing courses are the main source of teaching assistantships for their graduate students in the department. Most of the students, except for first-year students and international students, teach two courses per semester. Every new instructor must participate in the peer advising system for one year.

The main data used in the study are two kinds: (a) observations, institutional and instructional documents, and interviews; (b) the field notes taken during my participant observation in the department that offered the writing program both as a student and as an instructor. The data for the original research were collected from fall 2007 to fall 2009; however, the observation data used in this article are based on my participation in the peer advising system, the TA orientation, and rhetoric instructor workshops as one of the new instructors in the program from fall 2008 to spring 2009. The semi-structured interviews conducted with the Program Director and new instructors in the peer advising group in which I participated are the basis for the interview data. The institutional documents include the TA Handbook, professional development seminar materials, TA Orientation and instructor workshop handouts, Common Syllabus, and sample assignments. The miscellaneous notes I took based on my participant observation in the program during the period are also a crucial part of the data for this study. The article begins with a short description of how graduate students in the program are trained to become writing instructors based on the peer advising group in which I participated. After the brief overview of the program's induction practice, the article addresses the implications of such a training system for graduate students' professional development.

#### **Literacy Socialization of Graduate Students as Writing Instructors**

A peer advising group usually consists of one advisor and 3-5 new instructors. In my first semester of teaching in the writing program, I was assigned to a peer support group advised by Erin, a doctoral student in Writing Studies with two other instructors: Sharon, a first-year MA student in Writing Studies, and Andrew, a first-year MA student in Creative Writing. Our group's peer advisor during the second semester was Robyn, a doctoral student in Literature. Both advisors taught various sections of writing courses not only at the university but also at other institutions where they received their MA degrees. We were introduced to Erin during our TA orientation. She attended every session of the orientation and met with us for one hour each day to recapitulate the main points and to provide further explanations on other aspects of teaching that were not covered during the orientation.

Our group met once a week in the first semester and every two weeks in the second semester. We discussed a variety of pedagogical and administrative issues such as syllabus design, course assignments, class activities, lesson planning, grading and commenting, classroom management, trouble shooting, teaching demonstration, class observation, and teaching evaluations. We also discussed the instructor training workshops and the professional development seminar that we were required to take in the first semester of teaching in the program. As we were provided with a variety of materials during the professional development seminar and the rhetoric instructor workshops throughout the year, the peer group meetings were a great opportunity to revisit the materials and to reinforce our understandings of certain pedagogical approaches to teaching writing that were promoted in the program (e.g. writing process pedagogy, ethnographic approach, genre pedagogy, multi-modal composition, etc).

Our peer advisors constantly encouraged us to reflect on our approaches to teaching the writing courses and to document our reflective thoughts—both in class and out of class—in our teaching journals. They asked us to use the journal notes for our self reflection letters which we were required to submit at the end of each semester. They observed our classes and led us to identify the strengths and weaknesses of our teaching practices. Erin observed each of our classes twice in the first semester, and Robyn observed once in the second semester. They met with us individually when we received our student evaluations at the end of each semester and discussed positive aspects of our teaching and the areas to be improved. They also led us to reflect on our commenting practices and provided feedback both in writing and in our individual meetings. Erin looked over our comments on two sets of student papers in the first semester, and Robyn looked over one set of student papers in the second semester. Toward the end of each semester, they encouraged us to reflect on the connections between our teaching persona and the teaching philosophy statements that we wrote in the professional development seminar and to include our thoughts in our self reflection letters. We were also asked to reflect on our experiences using the Common Syllabus and its accompanying materials as well as the default textbooks that new instructors were required to use in the first year and to include our evaluations in our self reflections letters. The Common Syllabus had a great impact on new instructors' approaches to teaching writing because many sample assignments, class activities, and other supported materials were developed around the Common Syllabus. New instructors' opinions have a great influence on designing the new Common Syllabus and selecting default textbooks to be used by another group of new instructors in the following year.

At the end of each semester, our peer advisors met with us before we submitted our self-reflection letters to the program office. The goal of the self-reflection letter was to encourage new instructors to reflect on their teaching over the course of the semester and to plan ahead if there were certain aspects of their teaching they want to change for the next semester. The letter was also intended to help the peer advisor write a more accurate evaluation letter of each advisee's instructional practices. Our peer advisors wrote evaluation letters for each of us based on our self-reflection letters, their class observations, our commenting practices on students' work, our participation in the group meetings and instructor training workshops, and the progress we had made throughout the year. During the time of this research, it was often found that instructors on the job market included the evaluation letters from their peer advisors in their teaching portfolios.

In short, the group meetings allowed for a more *informal* space to explore our approaches to teaching writing and to reflect on our growth as writing teachers in collaboration with group members in our first year of teaching in the program. It also needs to be noted that, in our group meetings over the year, we shared not only the stories of our teaching (the winning and losing moments in our classrooms) but also stories of our graduate school life (the resonating and frustrating moments as new graduate students). We often talked about how we should *balance* being both full-time graduate students and teachers and how we should support each other as we were experiencing the same challenges. We recognized that having a fellow graduate student assigned to us as a peer advisor was crucial for our first year of teaching during graduate school.

### Collaborating on Reflection with Critical Friends

The program's induction practice for new instructors shows how it guided the instructors to engage in multiple levels of reflection—*immediate* reflection required for their weekly group meetings and *delayed* reflection required at the end of each semester—to foster more *systematic* reflection training on their teaching, which can ultimately help the instructors develop critical reflection on their practices. The cycle of revisiting their teaching experiences and making sense of it with the help of peer advisors and other group members illustrates the collaborative "reflection-in-action" (Schön, 1987). It highlights the crucial role of "critical friends" who support each other and collaborate "in a way that encourages discussion and reflection in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning" (Farrell, 2001, p. 369).

During the interview (September 7, 2009), Sharon, an MA student in Writing Studies, articulated the influence of the peer support group on her first year of teaching during graduate school:

We had a very short time to prepare our semester-long courses, so any guidance or advice from the peer advisor or others in the group was absolutely necessary for me. While program directors were also available to help me, I saw my peer advisers and group members as my "*go-to*" support system to make it through the first year as a rhetoric teacher and first-year graduate student. I know I could have completed my first year without a peer advising system, but I would have felt much less connected to other teachers, much more ignored by the program in general, and likely would have floundered much more my first semester of teaching. (italics added to indicate her emphasis)

As illustrated above, the peer advising meetings were a venue for the graduate students to develop their pedagogies, share their teaching materials, learn strategies to troubleshoot problems, identify their strengths and weaknesses as writing teachers, connect theory with practice, and evaluate not only their teaching practices but also certain pedagogies promoted in the program. They also revisited the materials that they received during the TA orientation, the professional development seminar, and instructor workshops throughout the year. The new instructors' guided participation into the program's literacy practices points out how they become more competent not only as instructors but also as graduate students with the help of their group members in "the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978).

During the interview (October 18, 2009), Andrew, an MFA student in Creative Writing, elaborated on the influence the peer group meetings on his development as a reflective teacher in the first year:

We were constantly asked to reflect on our experiences of teaching the courses throughout the years. Looking back, I think the peer group meetings helped me become a more reflective teacher. I'd never taught a writing course before, so I was not familiar with the process pedagogy, ethnographic methods, or genre pedagogy. I often felt overwhelmed by the amount of new information we received as new instructors in the first year, so, the peer group meetings helped me reinforce the departmental norms about how we should teach the freshman courses in terms of designing assignment, grading, commenting, lesson planning, etc. It was great that we went through all the information again with the group members ... So much reflection throughout the year, but it was great that we did the reflection together.

His statement suggests that the new instructors' participation in the peer advising system can help them develop a lens to correlate the concepts of theory, practice, and reflection, which is the crucial for their growth as

graduate students as well as classroom teachers. He articulated the difficulties he had balancing the two important tasks as a student teacher in the first year of graduate school and stressed that the peer advising meetings helped him balance being both a full-time graduate student and a writing instructor in the first year of graduate school.

Sharon elaborated on the influence of the group meetings on balancing her graduate school life as both a student and an instructor as well as on her understanding of the disciplinary socialization of graduate students as writing instructors during her interview:

The peer group meetings helped me to contextualize my work as a graduate student within and around my teaching such as how to balance being a good, thoughtful teacher alongside being a good, thoughtful graduate student in my own courses. The group meetings helped me to feel a bit less anxious about balancing my graduate student identity with my teacher identity and to know that I was not alone in the process of it all. Also, the peer group helped to see how my teaching philosophy might be similar or different to others' developing philosophies. I remember thinking it was interesting how graduate students' various backgrounds—such as a Literature background as compared to a Creative Writing background—influenced how one approached one's teaching and the structure of a class.

As most new instructors were learning to teach four-credit courses for undergraduate students with little to no training, during the time of this research, it was clear that many new instructors had difficulty *balancing* their student identity with teacher identity in the first semester—an anxious time as they began their graduate studies while learning to become a teacher. The group meetings provided them with a venue in which they could learn how to balance their student identity with their teacher identity as they shared not only the stories of their teaching but also stories of their graduate school life. The peer advising system is also an important window through which to explore how the instructors develop an awareness of the dialectical relationship between what they read in their fields of study and how they actually teach in the classroom. As illustrated in the article, through peer advising meetings, a graduate student in Literature socializes on a regular basis with other graduate students in Writing Studies and in Creative Writing. Sharing their experiences of teaching writing, they become more aware of how each instructor's diverse scholarly interests and disciplinary backgrounds influence their approaches to teaching writing. This process can ultimately help instructors develop "social languages" (Gee, 1999), which is "an identity kit" used to get recognized by others and themselves as they become full participants in "the community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

During the interview (August 6, 2009), the Program Director stressed that the instructors' socialization process was essential for their development as writing teachers:

If you closely look at it, it is really socialization. Students get together and share syllabi and assignments. So somebody from Writing Studies picks up somebody's film assignment, or the assignment of somebody from Women's Studies, or Literature or from Cultural Studies, etc. There is a lot of cross-fertilization as faculty and students work together in the program. It's an amazingly diverse, hybrid setting ... and the peer advising system plays an important role for the literacy socialization of the instructors in our program.

The wording "cross-fertilization" conveys the complex literacy socialization process of the instructors who are learning to become writing teachers while graduate students. The peer advising system is basically the infrastructure that cultivates such a cross-fertilization process for new instructors in the writing program. The program's induction practice shows how the program provided a system of collective scaffolding for new instructors by structuring forms of social interaction that promoted the literacy socialization process between experienced and new instructors in "the zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea of scaffolding, which is closely related to the concept of "zone of proximal development", refers to a process through which a student learns by working with a more competent individual on the skills and knowledge that are needed to perform specific tasks through a kind of apprenticeship. Also, the program's induction practice for new instructors shows that the freshman writing courses ultimately become a key training ground and research site for the graduate students in the department as they learn to lay the groundwork for their future lives as instructors.

## Results

The article illustrates that the new instructors' guided participation in collective reflective practices can play an important role for their development both as writing teachers and as graduate students. It points out the importance of providing both *formal* and *informal* spaces for novice instructors to explore their approaches to teaching during their first year in the program—the crucial time as they begin their graduate studies as a student while learning to become a teacher. It also shows how the program's culture is shaped and sustained by their instructors' literacy socialization. Through peer advising meetings, instructors see the materials that other instructors have developed and start to use those materials in their classes. When they become peer advisors later on, they are likely to share the materials with their group members and provide their advisees with similar guidance. Thus, the cycle of collective

scaffolding is *repeated*. During the period of this research, although it was not the case with every peer advising group, most peer advising group members appeared to continue to support one another in various ways when their members went on the job market—especially when they prepared for their teaching portfolios and teaching demonstrations—even after their first year of teaching. Thus, the peer support system can help build a collaborative teacher culture, which can help build a collaborative school culture.

### Conclusions

Many teacher training programs aim for sustained, autonomous professional development. This article suggests that a peer advising system can help new instructors develop reflective practices and promote the literacy socialization between new and experienced teachers, which can ultimately lead to more sustained professional development for graduate students. A successful operation of a peer advising system depends on many factors such as group chemistry, each member's psychological states, their disciplinary backgrounds, their research and teaching interests, the program's leadership, and the program's pedagogical foundation. Group members' psychological states are especially crucial to foster collaborative reflective practices because not all teachers are ready to reflect and reflection is not for everyone (Golby & Appleby, 1995; Moon and Boullon, 1997).

Nowadays, graduate students are often hired to teach various courses both at undergraduate and graduate levels. Graduate students can bring multiple benefits for both parties when they are provided with effective training. First, the courses provide graduate students with a teaching laboratory for their professional growth and development (during the period of this research, some peer advisors in the program reported that their experiences training new instructors enhanced their opportunities for getting a job). The growing files of teaching materials and resources—which have been developed through the collaborative reflection between new and experienced instructors over the years—can become a foundation of the program's instructor training system and pedagogical development. It will also financially benefit universities; it would cost too much if regular faculty members teach such courses. Thus, it is crucial to find effective ways to train graduate students during the first year of their apprenticeship in the profession. This article suggests that a peer advising system can help new teaching assistants' development and socialization both as students and instructors during their first year of graduate school, and such a system can help build a collaborative teacher culture, which can eventually help build a collaborative school culture.

Longitudinal studies are needed to trace the influence of a peer support system on instructor development to further examine how such a training system can be translated into high quality practice after they leave the program. The connections between the effectiveness and the long-term benefits of such programs for novice instructor training should be further explored and assessed.

### References

- Day, C. (1999). *Developing teachers: The challenge of lifelong learning*. London: Falmer Press.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston: Heath & Co.
- Farrell, T.S.C. (2001). Critical friendships: colleagues helping each other develop. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 55, 368-374.
- Farrell, T.S.C. (2003). Learning to teach English language during the first year: Personal influences and challenges. *Teaching and teacher education*, 19, 95-111.
- Farrell, T.S.C. (2007). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. London: Continuum Press.
- Francis, D. (1995). The reflective journal: A window to preservice teachers' knowledge. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11, 229-241.
- Fullan, M. (1993). *Change forces, probing the depths of educational reform*. London: Flamer Press.
- Gee, J. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Golby, M. & Appleby, R. (1995). Reflective practice through critical friendship: Some possibilities. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 25, 149-160.
- Gootesman, B. (2000). *Peer coaching for educators*. London: The Scarecrow Press.
- Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times, teachers' work and culture in the postmodern age*. London: Cassell.
- Jay, J. & Johnson, K. (2002). Capturing complexity: A typology of reflective practice for teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 18, 73-85.

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Moon, J. and R. L. Boullon. (1997). 'Reluctance to reflect: issues in professional development' in D. Hayes (ed.). *In-service teacher development: International perspectives*. London: Prentice Hall.

Oliphant, K. (2003). Teacher development groups: Growth through cooperation. In G. Crookes (Ed.), *A practicum in TESOL* (pp. 203-214). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Pennington, M. (1995). The teacher change cycle. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29 (4), 705-731

Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.  
Senior, R. (2006). *The experience of language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Tsui, A. (2003). *Understanding expertise in teaching: Case studies of ESL teachers*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, and E. Souberiman (Eds.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Williams, A., Prestage, S., & Bedward, J. (2001). Individualism to collaboration: The significance of teacher culture to the induction of newly qualified teachers. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 27(3), 253-267.