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# Mentoring Matters

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A teacher might well imagine that it is difficult to confess shortcomings, to share anxieties, and to look for help from the person that one admires most and the one from whom the new teacher hopes to win respect. Opening up dialogue about concerns is likely to be easier when a new teacher has a sense that a mentor has been in the same place and continues to have doubts about efficacy and continues to experience anxious moments. In some instances, a mentor might consciously contribute to an impression of errorless mastery as a teacher. As Ryan Dippre reports, this impression does not invite an openness on the part of the new teacher, and it may inhibit the necessary exchanges to seek help and to consult about the daily problem solving that is part of teaching. In short, as this column reports, to foster openness, a mentor has to practice openness.

## Open Support and Open Space

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In the January 2011 *English Journal*, column editor Thomas M. McCann notes that the “empathic stance is at the core of a mentor’s role” (102). McCann goes on to explain in depth the importance

of taking an empathic stance with newly minted teachers, most of whom are filled with apprehensions and uncertainties as they set off on their careers. “We can well imagine,” he notes, “if we have any empathic power at all, that for the new teacher these doubts are exaggerated, or at least more keenly felt. These doubts erode confidence, turn attention to survival behaviors, and militate against professional growth” (103). Mentoring

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new teachers through an empathic stance is important, and a key step to developing that empathy is the idea of openness: open support and open space. Mentor teachers must balance providing much-needed support for novice teachers while allowing them to develop their own teaching style and persona, and an open approach to support and space will allow mentoring teachers to do this.

## Open Support

Open support for new teachers means a dialogue about insecurities, something that many men-

tor teachers do not undertake out of a sense of definite discomfort. In his article, McCann opens up and explains the insecurities he feels upon reentering the classroom: “I had three basic concerns: Will my students like me? Will my colleagues respect my work? Will my supervisor find me adequate for the job?” (103). These questions and others like them plague all teachers at all levels to some degree. Open support for a colleague new to the profession means sharing these insecurities and how to handle them.

When I entered the profession in August 2006, I lucked out by having an extremely competent and empathic mentor, Sue. She was not afraid to explore and explain her insecurities and how she handled them, and it helped me take my own insecurities more easily and take steps to resolve them as best I could. This example guided me in learning how to handle anxieties and insecurities that are unique to the field of teaching and could only be taught to me by an empathic mentor in the same field.

In addition to helping me through my initial uncertainties and anxieties, Sue taught me how to look at the long view of teaching. Specifically, she taught me how to prepare myself not only for working through the current

lesson, unit, or course but also how to keep myself organized as the year (and years) moved along. This long view of teaching is missing in novice teachers, many of whom are too caught up in time gauging today's lesson to worry about organizing the unit for next year's application. Sue's constant discussion centering on this topic significantly reduced my uncertainties the following year. With her help, I finished my first year with clearly organized units and a systematic method of adjustment for each unit in the following school year based on my observations of student reactions to each unit. Keeping the long view in mind showed me how to make small but important changes as needed to adapt my curriculum, which is likely to be significantly less psychologically wearing over the period of a career than tackling a curriculum all over again with each new school year. Keeping myself organized gave me the sense that I was in control of my classroom's educational direction, which allayed a great deal of my uncertainties.

Sharing insecurities and anxieties is difficult, particularly for experienced teachers who may have learned to handle, hide, and otherwise allay them throughout their careers. However, this sharing can provide novice teachers with a sense of comfort and mutual understanding that would keep their own insecurities from soaring unnecessarily. Sue's empathic stance allowed me to handle my insecurities and anxieties and understand that the situation I was in was far from unique or new to the profession,

and that other teachers fretted about the same thing from time to time. However, Sue did more than simply communicate likely moments of anxiety: she allowed me the space I needed to learn to cope with situations according to my own teaching philosophy and persona.

### Open Space

In my brief experience with teacher orientation in high schools, I have found a lack of concern with giving new teachers open space, or room to develop their teaching identities. This is probably due to the "sink or swim" mentality that pervaded—and, in some districts, still pervades—new teacher induction. However, there is a difference between leaving new teachers alone and allowing them to become themselves. As noted above, mentor teachers must provide their novice teachers with open support, but they must mix it with a proper degree of open space. A responsible mentor teacher is not out to create a clone of himself or herself, and interactions with new teachers should reflect that knowledge. A novice teacher may take a great deal from a mentor to begin with, but he or she must take time to adjust lessons and units to suit personal whims and classroom management strategies.

In *The Art of Teaching*, Jay Parini notes that "teachers . . . need to invent and cultivate a voice, one that serves their personal needs as well as the material at hand, one that feels authentic" (58). Finding this voice is a process, something that develops over time and grows as the teacher grows. New

teachers need open space in order to experiment with voice, and try to shape a viable public persona. "A beginning teacher," claims Parini, "will have to try on countless masks before finding one that fits, that seems appropriate, that works to organize and embody a teaching voice" (59). This is not to say that a mentoring teacher should leave a novice teacher completely alone. Rather, mentors should provide a model of how to handle lesson organization, classroom management, stress, and anxiety while giving novices room to experiment with the provided model and other ideas, theories, and approaches.

After five years in the classroom, I still cannot say that I have fully developed my teaching voice. However, any of the strides I have made are due to the open space provided to me by my mentor teacher. Sue's guidance helped me organize my lessons and reduced insecurities without taking away opportunities for me to interact meaningfully with my classes to find my teaching voice. I was able to alter curricular units to suit the needs of my developing teaching style and the myriad needs of my students, and—perhaps, in retrospect, this is the most important—I was allowed to fail. I remember many times walking into her room at the end of the day with a deep breath followed by "Well, that didn't work!" These failures helped me develop what I wanted my teaching persona to be, and experiencing failure early on and learning to adjust based on that failure was another way to cope with anxiety over the long term. Though I received a great deal of open support to get me

through the awkward, anxious moments at the start of my career, it was the open space provided to me by my mentor that allowed me to develop more quickly into a complete teacher.

### The Importance of Balance

Mentor teachers need to take an empathic stance when dealing with novice teachers, but they need to be empathic to two different needs: support and space. I owe my development as an educator to my mentor teacher's awareness and understanding of the

importance of these two elements, and I can safely say that a lack of either would have seriously inhibited the continued development

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of my teaching style and persona. New teachers need open communication about insecurities and anxieties with experienced teach-

ers, and they need those teachers to provide space for them to determine an authentic teaching voice. Teaching is a combination of professional collaboration and individual initiative, and providing open support and open space to new teachers allows them to experience both sides of the educator coin. 

### Works Cited

- McCann, Thomas M. "Mentoring Matters: Taking an Empathic Stance." *English Journal* 100.3 (2011): 102–04. Print.
- Parini, Jay. *The Art of Teaching*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

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## *EJ* 100 Years Ago

### Advice for New Teachers

Respect their youthful spirits, their fun, boiling over, as it may, to your personal inconvenience; their moodiness; their sensitiveness, so easily hurt by any witticism which they do not quite understand, and which, no matter how innocently meant, they will call "sarcasm." Go to their games—join in them, if you know how. Help them with their dramatics, their school paper; and never take the attitude of a censor who lets them do all the work and then blue-pencils it as much as possible—work with them as for a common project. (419–420)

The whole secret of dealing with young people is to remember that they are not finished product, but raw material. Your business is not to pass judgment, approving and rejecting; it is to discover latent possibilities, to invent new lines of development; to utilize even the waste product, as a modern manufacturing concern does. Try to see in every boy and girl an individual for whom the world has some fitting place; and to read his character, not at its present value, but for what it promises. (421)

Allan Abbott (Horace Mann School, Teachers College, NY). "To Beginners in English Teaching." *English Journal* 1.7 (1912): 419–24.