

# **First Person Twice Over: A Narrative on Peer-led Mentoring Between Two Assistant Professors of Language and Literacy**

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## **Abstract**

A narrative account of how two budding instructors of language and literacy — one in French language and culture studies, the other in reading and literacy education — entwined the development of their friendship and professional development during their time as graduate students and since. The narrative emphasizes the serendipitous potential of peer-led professional mentoring, a construct which challenges presumptions of doctoral-level professional development as an entirely institutional process. Also noted, the need to address the absence of formalized literacy instruction practice in college-level foreign language instruction, and the potential of ostensibly whole language practices in collegiate literacy development.

## **Introduction**

In this brief stereo-vocal portrayal, we report on a literacy development success story from a perhaps unlikely quarter. We two — white, male, deliberately iconoclastic tenure-track assistant professors, one in French language and culture study, the other in reading and literacy education, respectively — here celebrate the improvement of our teaching and conceptual understanding of literacy through a relationship built first upon friendship rather than professional circumstance, student response rather than ideological conviction, and a shared dissonant cultural atypicality vis. academe's preferred stances. Our personal and intuitive "findings" are, not surprisingly, equally unlikely. At a time in American education when direct, didactic and scripted pedagogy and curriculums seem to be, where not long a matter of tradition, ascendant by dint of governmental fiat, we have come through our comparative experience to

prefer the greater efficacy for adolescent learners of developmental, transactional, and holistic conceptions of literacy education.

Ours is a story of cooperative thinking leading to cooperative learning, and thus to cooperative personal and professional development. We share it here narratively in two voices in a process of *writing-over* (Alvermann & Hruby, 2000). Peer-led mentoring is the retrospective term we use to describe this aspect of our career development. Needless to say, there was more to our mutual professional development than the serendipitous emergence of our collaborative reflections. The generous and unflagging support of our respective mentors, committee members, professors, graduate colleagues and students all played an important role in our growth as academics, certainly. Even the curious and often unfathomable institutional structures of higher education itself were no doubt a crucial contextual circumstance. Still, the back-story to our professional growth, which we here recount, contradicts the assumption that academic professional development is an entirely in-house and authorized affair.

Given the compressed narrative format we have chosen for this manuscript, it is not possible to review the literature on peer-led instruction (about which there is much), nor on the mentoring of doctoral students as professional educators (about which there is considerably less). And this is probably as well, because such a review could never fully justify a leap to the construct of peer-led professional co-development we here describe. This is a first-person narrative doubled, not a formal research report, so we abbreviate our experience epigrammatically in a tone we believe appropriate for this column.

*L:* Like many new teachers in the humanities or sciences, I came to my first teaching assignments without any professional training as a teacher. As a graduate student instructor of French, I assumed I would teach as I had been taught—straight from the text—even though I had hated that approach as a student myself. At the time I supposed that was how teaching was done (how else?), and followed the tried and true methods of my professors and the department at large. It did not occur to me to interrogate how effective I would likely be in advance of my first teaching assignment. After all, I had taken a one-hour "teaching tips" workshop provided by the university. What else?

Soon into my first semester, I realized that slogging through the unnatural and uninspired exercises of our course materials was unlikely to make my students quickly conversant in French, let alone excited about their linguistic developments, an excitement I deemed crucial to foster their further self-directed collegiate study. To tell the truth, teaching French out of a canned text had not worked for my English-speaking classmates in high school and college, either. Had I not already been a native speaker of French back then, I, too, would not likely have "learned" much French in those classes.

I have always been one who yearned, as my ex-wives have complained, to please others, and I wanted badly to please my students. I wanted to orchestrate successful student learning that in turn would motivate them to further a provocative classroom experience. I was initially at a loss, however, as to how I should strike the right balance between student pleasure and teacher professionalism. And basically I lacked a well-focused alternative model for teaching language. So I struggled along, teaching my classes as best I could, and wrestling with my doctoral research.

My dissertation (Lemarchand, 2001), which I recount here briefly because it came to play a role in my subsequent teaching success, is an analysis of a cache of letters from French soldiers in the trenches during the First World War, collected by the French Army in 1917 and completely censored until their release in the 1980s. These letters provide a poignant testament to the ways trench and industrial warfare dispirited many soldiers by the war's end. And the caustic tone of these missives presages the post-war malaise that descended on Europe and that has had such a profound effect on our culture and history ever since. This work was intriguing enough to divert me from my discontents as an instructor. Periodically, though, I would brood on the limitations imposed by the institutional environment my students and I shared. Was this my own disaffection with life in the collegiate trenches?

If I had given the notion any thought at the time, George would have been the last person I would have expected as a source of inspiration in this matter. We initially crossed paths, George and I, at a popular local drinkery where he was in the habit of grading his high school students' quizzes during happy hour, quizzes in only the loosest sense and of his own design, as funny as they

were, apparently, instructive. A theatre-brat from New York City, he had a dead-aimed wit and a devious bar-side brogue that could appreciate with the hour. Yet, he was middle-aged, unmarried, past his social prime, and without any career trajectory that I could see (which only underscores my lack of appreciation for teaching as a profession at the time). Moreover, he was *only* finishing up an M.Ed. in secondary language arts, and besides his teaching and some newspaper work had, from the sound of it, spent most of his life running taverns and merrily tangling the sheets. In other words, to my then too quick propensity to dismiss life's outliers, George was an amusing loser.

As a Frenchman—a privileged son of a French Army Colonel, adrift in what I deemed a cultural Sargasso—I was uninspired by the ornery fatalism of our rural college town's inhabitants, and desperately bored with the suburban pretensions of the university's faculty. I thus had a ready receptivity, in other words, for the odd and the illegitimate, and, in Wal-mart's America, as it turns out, this can mean the self-enlightened and the cosmopolitan as often as the exploited and the dispossessed. George was the former, which helped with the tab. So we soon found ourselves gravitating regularly toward wide-ranging discussions into the wee-hours, as easily enough around a bookshelf or computer console (my wife asleep in the next room), as around the back of an after-hours bar (a would-be rock star asleep in the next booth).

Our conversations would encompass philosophy, history, psychology, literature, popular fashion, and the emotional dynamics of human sociality. And always we would circle back to language and its inter-relation with thought and being. We shared an eager awareness of the underappreciated distinction between continental and Anglophone philosophy, especially for the former's emphasis on how cultural and historical contexts comprise intellectual idioms, itself a culturally situated idiom not as easily amenable to the clip-and-paste mentality of American scholarship as America's intelligentsia might wish (Hruby, 2001). (In spite of cautions by the very continentally inspired sources they cite, English-language American scholars have pasted the importance of sociocultural context into legions of their scholarly articles, as if its cultural incorporation could be accomplished by mere requisite assertion — a reiteration, perhaps, of the American tendency toward fiat).

Our nascent stereo-vocal view of discourse (stereo here implying more than just a dichotomy, and certainly not a dialectical antagonism, but a doubling that can blend to lend sonic or conceptual depth), and the philosophical slipstreams that informed it, became the inaugural move in our growing collaborative discontent. We would appropriate it as our favored weapon in our multiple critiques of life as we knew it, as only the precociousness of graduate students could allow, and the nuances it lent our friendship were gratifying in their own right. We would also use it against each other, arguing the true worth of the philosophy of Richard Rorty or Linda Alcoff, Hegel's influence or Descartes'. We shared books, ideas, and good times by way of it. It became an alternative register of personal discourse.

But then one day George announced he was following my lead and starting his doctoral studies. As I wondered aloud, half in jest, just what it was someone in Reading Education could actually study at the doctoral level, our intellectual collaborations took a pragmatic turn. It was a wonder we hadn't thought of it sooner, perhaps, but maintaining the necessary distance between our professional and personal lives had been intuitively obvious even then, and would ultimately become manifestly obvious soon enough.

G: In a long life-time I have known personally only a handful of people like Lionel (and none of them in academe, tellingly enough), people who have the courage or foolishness, the intellect and the creativity to disengage from society's obligatory formalisms and act and think freely. People like that, to my mind, and the world they continually refashion, are what make life worth living. Expansive, subversive, celebratory, and all in the best sense, they live life more voraciously than most of us would dare, and provide the rest of us a little vicarious respite, a little light. A subversively liberating *provocateur*, that is how I might describe Lionel. So what if, like the Coneheads who amused us on reruns of *Saturday Night Live*, he excused his social improprieties as the result of his being from France? At least, by demonstrating that the intellectually unchained could thrive in the academy, he provoked and inspired me to get my Ph.D.

In a sense, he repaid me the favor of my advice. When Lionel was confronting the Herculean task (Herculean when not being Sisyphusian) of orchestrating an effective French literacy classroom, I offered him some pointers based in my then rudimentary knowledge of the literature and my own

classroom experiences. He did not originally phrase his instructional challenge in terms of literacy, but given my academic interests that was how I read them, and on that basis gave my advice. I realized with genuine surprise, then, that he really did not know what a teacher educator did, or what a teacher of literacy—even French literacy— needed to know. In this Lionel was not unlike most people, which is one of the misfortunes of both our profession and higher education. But in the course of a single discussion it became obvious to us both that taking a literacy perspective on a French language and culture study classroom not only could address the simpler issues of suitable teaching strategies and learning activities, but could also open up an intellectually fruitful examination of which practices were coherent given his larger pedagogical intentions. But that came later; the methods came first.

*L:* We discussed some of the basic aspects of literacy instruction design: the differing goals and rationales embedded within pre-reading, concurrent reading, and post-reading learning activities; altering activities between different strategic scales: individual, dyads or triads, small groups, whole class; the reading-writing connection; project-based inquiry—those sorts of exemplars of effective and theoretically coherent *practice*, as George would persuade me to refer to it. This is Teaching 101 material, I suppose, but keep in mind that I had never been prepared to be an effective teacher; I was a college professor, after all!

We started off with what you might call the easy stuff: anticipation guides, discussion webs, text questioning, and classroom discussion techniques (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002). I tried these activities out in my classes and they worked surprisingly well—surprising, at least, to me. And, I think, also to George who seemed incredulous at how effective these methods could prove in the hands of someone who, like myself, had only a minimal amount of theoretical background. As for my own reactions, which on George's suggestions I began recording in a teaching log I maintain to this day, I was generally gratified by both the student response and my own increased interest in teaching the class. So the next time we got together I asked: "Got rubrics?"

George dismissed the idea of rubrics. Assessment needed to be done in real-time and in situ for the purpose of informing instruction, he suggested. We were a long way from that, yet. Instead, he lent me a couple of content area reading texts (Alvermann & Phelps, 2002; Brozo & Simpson,

2003), and a strategies and practices *Compendium* (Tierney & Readence 2000), older stuff on collaborative learning (Johnson, Johnson, Holubec & Roy, 1984) and using writing strategies and portfolios in class (Olson, 2003; Tierney, Carter & Desai, 1991), flagging about a half dozen specific activities with sticky notes. He explained the specifics and the theoretical rationale, most of it embedded in either psychology or sociology. I already had an intuitive understanding about most of these fundamentals; but our discussions and the explicit presentation of the methods texts helped me articulate them more precisely for classroom application. As George noted, it isn't rocket science. But it isn't fast food service, either. Additionally, I could tell that as I took to the material and the discourse, I was offering back insights George found equally useful.

*G:* The more I listened to Lionel's dissatisfactions with his teaching, the more I began to have with my own. Unfortunately, my doctoral assistantship assignments initially kept me from any university teaching, so I taught vicariously through Lionel. By the time he landed his first full-time tenure track position—at which point I *was* teaching literacy and learning methods classes to future secondary teachers—we had begun discussions on the interrelation of genres and modalities of literacy, textbook selection and the nature of authentic texts. I felt we were on to something, but there was the nagging question of just how authentic a distinction there is between pre-designed course texts and texts selected for a pre-designed course.

*L:* I was in the department office organizing the paperwork for a conference proposal, discussing my research on the War Office letters with a colleague, when one of my students standing near expressed her interest. It had never occurred to me that my undergraduate students would care anything about such a distant topic from their lives, or perhaps even know when or where WWI had been. But what George had mysteriously called "a teachable moment" was clearly staring me in the face. We were only a few weeks into the semester, so the requisite introduction to the protocols, strategies, and activities were largely behind us. Was this an opportunity to break from the trenches and attempt linguistic authenticity?

At the next meeting of my advanced class I gave my students a slimmed-down version of the conference presentation I had recently delivered. Happily, they, too, were interested in my research. I provided them copies of the letters, an authentic way to introduce them to personal

French epistolary form, I thought, and with early 20<sup>th</sup>-century European handwriting. We discussed the letters in small groups and as a whole class, asking ourselves what we would imagine to find in them. The answers did not necessarily have to be in French, of course. As a pre-reading activity the idea was to stoke the students interest, imagination, visualization, and prior knowledge about early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. After reading the letters, I asked them to consider and discuss what they felt about the soldier's plight and emotions, and asked them to write back to them (in as much French as they could muster), expressing their own concerns (as a fellow soldier, a citizen, a wife, and in one case a Parisian bordello owner unhappy with business). With this enacted literacy as prologue, we incorporated the course's culture and history strand as I asked them to analyze the letters for clues to explain recent traditions, behaviors and social structures in present day France. From there the discussion, in English and French by turns, spun out to the varied interests and understandings of the students. Their knowledge became truly their own and of themselves.

This worked so well, my enthusiasm spilled over into my intermediate classes where I attempted pretty much the same thing. Their vocabulary was more of a challenge, so we took up vocabulary study as a research necessity. In addition to tracking the themes in the various letters (requiring both close and higher-order comprehension skills), I had them track, as a concurrent or repeated reading practice, the vocabulary and idioms with which they were unfamiliar. They coded their findings as either vocabulary pertaining to civilian life, or vocabulary applying to the military. Subsequent writing and small group sharing gave students a chance to incorporate this now quite viscerally comprehended vocabulary. Their demonstrated preference for incorporating the new civilian vocabulary was understandable. Still, I felt assured that my students' understanding of WWI was now something much more adrenal than a dim Hollywood faux-memory.

I, too, wrote to these assignments, and on my observations of my students as a classroom community. And I would share these writings with my students. It seemed, against my entrenched skepticism, that a collective sense of identity as members of a learning community emerged, as evidenced in the comments in the students' own learning logs, as well as my own. But for me there was the added enjoyment of seeing theoretically coherent ideas come together in practice. The reading-writing connection, the effective organization and variation of group sizes,

the sequential integration of pre-, concurrent, and post literacy acts... taken together, a rather different classroom approach to teaching drills and trumped up dialogs from a textbook. Apparently, in spite of my initial jesting, I was discovering there was something to literacy education, after all.

*G:* As Lionel repeated these approaches in his subsequent classrooms, he started to interpolate and integrate videos, French Internet sites, French language newspapers and magazines, radio and television news and feature broadcasts. His newly assembled pedagogic tool kit supported the coherent incorporation of sidebar mini-lectures on mid-century French literature, the lead-up to WWII, the political and economic aftermaths of the post-war world, and the social and cultural transformations that entwined these motifs. He was intensely animated about his success, and would happily share with me his students' comments and interest.

The success of his rapprochement to teaching French inspired me, too. Although it would be beyond the range of this abbreviated essay to describe it in any depth, my own practices were much influenced by Lionel's success with authentic texts. Even though I taught teaching methods courses, I found it necessary to ground the typical review of teaching strategies with matching presentations on theory and research. Following Lionel's experiments in authenticity, I employed graduate level textbook chapters, research journal articles, and examples of short meta-fiction from the 1980s to challenged the literacy skills of my pre-service language arts students, thereby confronting them with the kinds of frustrations their own future students would face. In effect, I was backing them into a literacy processing corner requiring the very strategies, activities, and collaboration designs we were studying to navigate the textual twilight zone of their own proximal professional development. As had Lionel, I had students engage in various forms and scales of written reflection and discussion to negotiate this. The results were generally gratifying, particularly for the students, and as I shared this back with Lionel it became clear that our growing sophistication as instructors owed a lot to our fortuitous friendship.

Eventually, we were to discover that successful teaching and professional development advanced beyond the authoritarian imprimatur of the department community was an exercise in bating vocational animosity. Over the past few years, socially-mediated conformism, media-mongered

fearfulness, America's jingoistic anti-intellectualism, and the cage-like end game of the tenure process all seem to have conspired to render rancid the pretensions of academic professionalism. As a requisite totem, "professionalism" is ubiquitously revered in the American academy, but its meaning, even at face value, is obscure. Its use no doubt underscores the cherished overturning of the university-as-gentleman's-club (in both the class and gendered senses), although the superiority of giving America's intellectual life over to the mind of the suburban book club member rather than the spirited country club dilettante is possibly dubious.

"Professionalism" also underscores the slavish Anglophone chasing after of "the business model" of institutional management, although the meaning of this is equally unclear. What does "business model" imply for those who have never spent a day of their lives running a private-sector business (unlike Lionel and myself)? In its simplest institutionalized form what "professionalism" means is a default value of *no*. More thoroughly, it requires the self-abnegation of the heroic vision. It means deferral to all occlusion of transparency, acquiescence to all mock-liberational hypocrisy, and the recanting of any challenge to the academic and cultural status quo. All of which is to say, academic professionalism means first and foremost adhering to the proprieties and presumptions of America's suburban bourgeoisie — membership in which, songs of equity and justice aside, is the ultimate goal of all that vita building. Happily, in the end, we found a way to divert our visceral contempt for this standard of institutional decorum, doubly informing our friendship and our teaching.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, our collaborative co-development continued on and continues still. We soon supplanted our strategy sessions with more edifying and informed discussions about everything from transactional strategy instruction (Pressley, 2003) to sociopsycholinguistic transactional theory (Goodman, 1994), from New Literacy Semiotics (Kress, 2000) to the phrenology of dyslexia (Shaywitz, 2003), from the recent evo-ethological turn in educational cultural psychology to our informal assessments of street literacies in Montréal or Lyon as opposed to those of London or Atlanta. We incorporated metatheoretical analyses in our efforts from Reese and Overton (1970) to Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000). Even now, although we work up

to 4500 miles apart, we still share our instructional adventures and critiques. As unlikely as we would have deemed it ten or even six years ago, we two idiosyncratic, privileged, ready-canvases-for-psycho-projection-by-abstracted-academic-othernesses, have demonstrated in our own professional development the importance of what complexity theorists might call serendipitous convergence.

G: But I'll let Lionel explain that another time.

## About the Authors

Lionel J. Lemarchand (Ph.D. French Literature and History, University of Georgia) has been an Assistant Professor of French in the School of Modern Languages since 1998.

His current research is on French socio-cultural studies and WWI. Since joining Georgia Tech, Dr. Lemarchand has presented various facets of his research at several conferences: some of his historical findings at Harvard University's Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, some of his literary research at the Purdue University Conference on Romance Languages, Literatures and Film, and some of his work in social studies at the Humanities Conference at the University of the Aegean in Rhodes, Greece.

Along with published articles and translations, he is the author of: *Lettres censurées des tranchées – 1917 Une place dans la littérature et l'histoire*. Paris: L'Harmattan. June 2001 (242 pages) and is currently working on another WWI book project with the French artist Philippe Xavier.

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George, G. Hruby (Ph.D.) is Assistant Professor of literacy and reading at Utah State University's Department of Secondary Education. Although he is currently near-buried by the demands of

bourgeois propriety, he is proud to announce that his daughter's first two multi-syllabic words were "outside" and "turpitude."

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