Panel Title: Tailoring Instruction, De-Taylorizing First-Year Composition: An Analysis of the UH Writing Mentors Program

Body of the Abstract:

Moderator and Presenter 1: Holly Bruland
Casting the Role of the Mentor-Researcher

Leaders in the field of Composition and Rhetoric are calling for writing programs to become more responsive to local cultures and more rigorous in their research. Our panel takes up these challenges by examining the UH Writing Mentors Program, a local writing initiative that places graduate students in first-year composition classrooms as writing mentors and auto-ethnographic researchers. Although university writing centers increasingly assign tutors to work “on-location” in college classrooms, we know of no other program that conceives of its support for student writers in as extensive and complex terms as we do.

Our panel brings together seven participant-researchers from the UH Writing Mentors Program in an attempt to examine and problematize the intellectual and cultural exchange that constitutes mentoring. We adopt a theoretical framework located at the intersection of composition studies and cultural studies, drawing on strands of place-based pedagogy, performance theory, and post-colonial theory. Presenters will discuss the impacts of adding a new institutional actor in the form of a mentor to the scene of the first-year composition course, all the while exploring how the mentoring relationship locates (and re-locates) both student writers and writing mentors within the institutional culture of UH M_noa. Although each presenter will probe a different facet of the mentoring model, the panel as a whole will argue that mentors’ careful tailoring of instruction to individualized student learning outcomes ultimately works to de-Taylorize the traditional factory model of first-year composition in productive and provocative ways.

Presenter 2: Chelsey Kojima
Individualized Learning Outcomes in Higher Education

Because higher education is designed to develop a “whole” student who will make beneficial contributions to society, learning must be treated as a multi-faceted process. Learning outcomes are benchmarks educational institutions use to measure student success. But are universities and colleges accurately measuring student growth? Do learning assessments provide culture-fair education and account for diversity among learners? How can student success at educational institutions be enhanced, if not ensured? With the upcoming WASC-mandated assessment this spring, UHM’s ability to meet both academic benchmarks and more holistic standards is crucial.

Writing is one of the most essential skills students must learn in their academic journeys at UHM. While learning outcomes are pedagogically designed to maintain standardized curriculum and instruction across class sections, they cannot address the diverse learning needs of all
students. The writing mentor program individualizes student outcomes, seeks to develop the “whole” student, and enables UHM to meet the diverse needs of its students. As an example, within a single conference, a student and I discussed all of the following issues: homesickness, what it means to give constructive feedback on classmates’ writing, peer-to-peer mentoring, the definitions of different types of essays, writing organization and structure, and how to re-work a conclusion. Conference sessions like this illustrate how the mentor program can serve as an invaluable extension of learning that goes beyond the purely academic. In essence, the writing mentor program individualizes learning outcomes and propels students towards more successful personal, professional, and academic lives within and beyond UHM.

Presenter 3: Phillip Drake
*Working Towards a Better (Essay about the) Environment*

In response to increasing concern over issues of ecological sustainability, the English Department at UH will implement sustainability-focused courses in its 100-level composition courses beginning in fall of 2008. Beyond developing writing skills, these courses will strive to increase ecological awareness in the classroom and help students think critically about a range of issues in contemporary environmental discourses. With the help of Professor Laura Lyons, the English department was able to offer a sustainability-focused composition course this semester, in which I participated as classroom mentor. In this project I use student interviews and logged data to examine student engagement with issues of sustainability in their class work. My analysis of student engagement will focus on receptivity to sustainability, application of critical thinking to work and class discussions, and development of a sustainable awareness outside of the classroom. Interestingly, student engagement has been mixed. Some students are already active environmentalists, while others struggle with their own ambivalence towards ecological questions: “I hate sustainability,” sighed one student in a mentoring conference. In speaking with students, I have worked to reframe sustainability to more closely engage their interests – be it technology, science, or politics – and also to help them recognize the complexity and expansive potential of discourses in sustainability. While it is certainly important to cover traditional sites of ecological concern such as animals, environments, and consumption habits, in this project I find that by widening the discursive field, there emerge new opportunities for enhanced student engagement.

Presenter 4: Annette Priesman
*Pertaining to a Pedagogy of Punctuation*

My preliminary auto-ethnographic data, in the form of field notes taken during class sessions and after individual conferences, indicate that many English 100 students struggle with punctuation, specifically with the comma and the apostrophe. Punctuation is complex: its mastery requires time, patience, and practice. Yet, proficiency in punctuation is vital to students’ success in college and careers. Students who graduate with high GPA’s do so because, in part, they understand the rules of punctuation. College professors and future bosses will notice– and remember– which writers demonstrate knowledge and sophistication in their uses of punctuation.

However, traditional one-size-fits-all approaches to teaching punctuation have been shown to be largely ineffective, and thus the teaching of punctuation often becomes relegated to the bottom of the pedagogical heap. Drawing on the work of Lynne Truss, I explore the history and evolution
of punctuation and the effects of a waning interest in this complex discipline. I also probe my own data from teaching punctuation to first-year students, exploring how the mentoring model has allowed me to discuss with my students the differences between American punctuation practices and the British punctuation conventions in which I was schooled, even as it provided the context for one of my students to teach me about the `okina. My preliminary findings indicate that conferences addressing punctuation can be dynamic and attentive to cultural dimensions. Thus, I would argue that mentoring can help students to learn punctuation at a pace they are comfortable with, in a meaning-orientated space.

**Presenter 5: Tracey Williams**  
*Transitional Ally*

Transitioning to college poses a real challenge to many students. It is in this space of the “transition” that the English 100 writing mentor can be particularly effective, acting as a unique “ally” for the English 100 student, particularly the entering first-year student. Whether assisting in students’ navigations of time-management, organizational skills, university policies or helping students to become familiar with the institution’s research and outreach facilities, the mentor acts as a navigator and facilitator within students’ new learning environment. While there are students who navigate this new environment and its various rites of passage with relative ease, it is the students who need (and seek) this additional assistance that I am most interested in. My experiences in mentoring first-year, first semester students allowed me to learn first-hand about the varying degrees of students’ preparation for academic culture and university life. For example, whereas most of us may take for granted such seemingly-simple acts as checking out a library book, one of my mentees asked me to assist him in understanding the procedures for checking out his first book from the library. The role of mentor, because it is a sub-professorial, pre-professorial, but not anti-professorial role, allows for a unique relationship with the student that often culminates in a trust and comfort. Therefore, the mentor is uniquely positioned to help students transitioning into their new roles as successful (and retainable) college students.

**Presenter 6: Alicia Maedo**  
*The Mentor as Mobile Writing Centers for Collaboration*

In 1991, Andrea Lunsford calls for a collaborative writing center where collaboration both in theory and practice reflects a broad-based epistemological shift, a shift in the way we view knowledge. The shift involves a move from viewing knowledge and reality as things exterior to or outside of us, as immediately accessible, individually knowable, measurable, and shareable—to viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized, as, in short, the product of collaboration[…].

Lunsford cautions against marginalizing modes of collaboration as strictly “hierarchical” and/or “dialogic,” and, therefore, a problematic reconstitution of the status quo in institutional settings.

However, mentors assigned to first-year composition courses already function as mobile writing centers, or “contact zones,” in- and outside of the classroom. Mentors serve as intermediaries between instructors and mentees while assuming roles as students (e.g. actively participating in class discussions), authority figures (e.g. recording attendance), and advisors (e.g. assessing
student conduct/performance outside the classroom). Interactions among mentees, instructors, and mentors’ discursive selves establish a dialogic for self-reflexivity and adjustment according to the individual student. In implementing strategies to address individual mentees’ pretextual, textual, and postextual issues, all parties form an interdependent, collaborative consciousness and an awareness of his/her writing process. Thus, mentors, as integrally place-based writing centers, operate within the socio-political construct of the institution—a place where Taylorization is no longer conducive to the cultural construct of academic.

Presenter 7: Tanya Torres

*Enabling Multiple Means of Expression and Engagement: The Role of the Mentor in Approaching Universal Design Pedagogy*

Student diversity dramatically increases the need to expand our traditional conceptions of the First Year Writing classroom. In our goals for enabling the learning of all students, we must acknowledge the necessity of the intellectual work accomplished by UH Manoa’s Mentoring Initiative. Disability studies provide theoretical frameworks for interrogating and defining the institutional and pedagogical roles of the First Year Writing Mentor. I will use personal experience as an English 100 mentor to illustrate ways in which our pedagogical practices in the FYW classroom may benefit from conceiving of the mentor’s role in terms of UDL (Universal Design for Learning). This framework UDL promotes universality in terms of accessibility, an emphasis on individualization, recognition of difference in student learning styles, an avoidance of practices that limit opportunities for students to engage course material and an institutional valuation of empathetic and reflexive cooperation in the learning process.

Primarily, I illustrate student differences in learning styles accommodated within mentoring interactions as classroom extensions. I organize these experiences theoretically from UDL frameworks in disability studies to achieve reflexive and empathetic matrices of mentoring action. These matrices include navigating student disclosure/evaluating student ability, provision of alternative media, equal representations of course material and academic standards, and modification of materials and techniques in instruction, rather than modifying expectations of student learning and/or ability. I provide instances where student differences in learning styles were not accommodated due to central issues in UDL pedagogy (ex. student disclosure of understanding). I provide frameworks of pedagogical and institutional action approaching UDL enabled by the mentoring initiative.

Presenter 8: Jennifer Sano

*Student Evaluations of Mentor and Program Performance*

End-of-semester student evaluations are a common means by which post-secondary institutions assess the performance of instructors and courses. The UH Writing Mentors Program used a similar instrument “to evaluate each individual classroom mentor specifically,” and “to assess the English Department’s mentoring program as a whole.” I will present an overall analysis of the “English 100 Mentoring Program Fall 2007 End-of-Semester Surveys,” taking note of common threads and trends that appear in the quantitative and qualitative data collected in these forms from across the program. For example, much of the terminology students used in response to the open questions of the evaluations highlighted the performative nature of the role of the mentor: several students across the board made comments stating that their mentors were “like another teacher,” and others suggested that the program could be improved with mentors who were “more personable.” Such data will allow me to consider the ways mentor ethos is decoded
by students. I will secondarily use these evaluations to investigate how successfully the program accomplished the following two hypotheses: 1) “At least partially as result of mentoring, student writers will exhibit an enhanced self-reported understanding and appreciation for writing,” and 2) “At least partially as a result of mentoring, students will exhibit enhanced meta-cognitive abilities when given a writing task.” Finally, I will discuss the limits of the evaluation forms and the protocol by which forms were disseminated, and offer possible strategies for improvement of the forms, and the program as a whole.