Chapter 5

Faculty Interviews

Because of the negative tone of many of the interviews with graduate instructors, a decision was made to interview tenure-track faculty both at Texas Tech University and at other institutions. The reasons behind this decision were two-fold: first, all the faculty interviewed had much experience teaching writing intensive courses and were, of course, conversant with the problems inherent in training new instructors; second, because of their expertise, these faculty members might serve to triangulate the responses of the graduate instructors; and, finally, they might be able to offer guidance regarding why the graduate instructors spent more of their interview time discussing barriers to knowledge transmission. In other words, was the negative tone of the graduate instructors a function of their own lack of expertise in teaching and in professional development (and, thus, understandable and perhaps necessary)? Or, did the complaints signal more systemic problems in the training of graduate instructors?

Three faculty members at Texas Tech were interviewed. All were tenure-track and all had experience in teaching writing intensive courses. The first of these interviews was a member of the Composition faculty. He had most recently taught the graduate-level course that prepares new instructors to teach FYC. For him, the hybrid nature of FYC at Texas Tech offered great potential." There is much more that we can do with TOPIC / ICON," he said. "For example, we can stream video and offer instructor-student chats." He expressed great excitement about using TOPIC / ICON to support teaching FYC and other writing courses at a distance. When asked about why he believed that the subjects in the present study did not share his enthusiasm, he very candidly suggested that, "they don't feel a part of anything that goes on." He decried the lack of emphasis that FYC places on actual face-to-face classroom teaching. "We put them in a classroom and then we don't see them again until the semester is over." When asked about possible explanations for the negative attitudes expressed toward grading, this faculty member suggested that "TOPIC / ICON is a top-down

system. There is very little room for instructor input and development." He opined that, because graduate instructors had so little input in using and developing what he believed was an innovation, they would almost necessarily have little use for it. When asked if he believed that instructor complaints might reflect the fact that these instructors were essentially novices and had little to compare their teaching and grading experiences to, he said, "somewhat."

An interesting aspect of this interview concerned this faculty member's ideas regarding the incorrigibility of the FYC curriculum. "We use the textbook way too much," he said. "Unfortunately, when problems arise in the interpretation of the assignments or, when we want to change an assignment, we can't change the textbook. We have to rely on word of mouth to the instructors. Not always effective." His suggestion was to dispense with the textbook and put the entire curriculum online. If assignments needed to be modified, they could be modified according to course needs and instructor consensus during weekly or bi-monthly curriculum meetings. He suggested that this was a way to "practice" the social construction of knowledge and to understand the provisional nature of knowledge in very practical terms.

Another instructor interviewed was a tenured associate professor in British literature whose undergraduate and graduate courses were all writing-intensive. While she admitted that she had very little understanding of the particular features of FYC at Texas Tech, she knew that there was some dissatisfaction expressed by the graduate students she mentored. "I understand some of the pedagogy and it makes sense, "she said, "But, I think that there is too little emphasis on classroom teaching in this new system. It would make better sense if students were allowed to gain expertise in a more-or-less traditional model—teaching and grading your own students—and then, perhaps moving into the new system. It seems as if all they (the FYC administrators) care about are grading quotas. We don't equip students to teach." She did, however,

suggest that "graduate students are always going to complain anyway" but added that the saw very little mentoring occurring in the present system and that it was such mentoring that needed to occur before a graduate instructor could be successful (or, at least, feel successful) in any innovative system.

The topic of mentoring was one that occupied much of our interview. For this faculty member, mentoring is viewed in the very traditional sense of the word; a novice works with a more experienced teacher. She felt that such a relationship was perhaps the only way to train new instructors as a more thorough treatment of all sorts of instructional matters could be taught in greater detail (syllabus design, lesson plans, etc.). When asked how much of this really occurs in a typical mentoring relationship, she laughed and replied, "Well, that's the ideal, anyway." She admitted that FYC was a "different animal" but voiced her concern that the psychological needs of novice graduate instructors were ignored under the way FYC trains new instructors. Mentoring, for her, was as much about providing emotional support for novices as it was about transmitting information and skills.

This view of mentoring was echoed by a tenured faculty member who specialized in creative writing. "We teach writing by 'workshopping' what people have written," he said. Admittedly, he knew that creative writing and FYC serve two rather different populations and have far different purposes but stated, "However, writing is writing. There are common elements in every writing class." He expressed being troubled by some of the complaints he has heard from his graduate students in creative writing who teach in FYC. In terms of what he had heard about grading, he wondered about instructors having to grade so quickly and in an online environment. He liked the idea that FYC assignments at Texas Tech were criterion-based as "that makes them easier to grade." Still, he believed that student writing was only being graded in a most superficial manner. He saw instructor training in FYC as "inadequate" and

complained that, "when we get them—when they teach literature or creative writing later in graduate study—they have so many bad habits to unlearn or they are just lost. In any case, we need to show them how to teach and what to look for when they're grading." He saw the grading of student work as something that had an aesthetic component that could not be addressed via grading on the TOPIC / ICON system. When asked how an instructor might transmit this "aesthetic sense" via commentary to an undergraduate, he admitted that such an endeavor probably fell within the realm of tacit knowledge. "You have to work with new instructors, encourage them, answer their questions." When asked how one might do that in the context of large FYC classes, he admitted, "I have no answers. I just think it's a waste of talent to put some of our promising graduate students in FYC." Pressing him on this answer, I asked who would teach FYC if "promising" graduate students in English do not, he replied that that was not his concern.

An interview was conducted with a tenured professor at the University of Texas at San Antonio. A full professor, former department chair, and a former director of their FYC program, she was willing to discuss the challenges UT-San Antonio faces in teaching FYC and in training graduate instructors to teach in their program. The program serves a university with over 27,000 students. Fully 57% of their students come from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education. Because of the military installations in San Antonio, the university has a large number of "nontraditional" students (undergraduates over the age of 25). As part of a growing institution, the English Department at UTSA faces the same challenges as other similar departments. Namely, they seek to provide FYC services to a growing and increasingly linguistically diverse undergraduate population. Not surprisingly, they provide these services with an instructional staff of 15 adjunct and non-tenure track instructors and approximately 15-20 graduate student instructors. They offer instruction in a more-or-less

traditional manner with each instructor responsible for grading the work of his or her classroom. Class sizes average about 25 students per class although, lately, some instructors have been combining their efforts and offering portfolio assessments with two instructors reading and responding to student work. In 2004, however, the two required freshman composition courses migrated away from English to a "freshman success department" that includes other "core" courses such as freshman algebra. Instructors from the English Department still staff these courses.

Because UTSA admits a number of transfer students (from community colleges and other institutions) who matriculate already having taken the required FYC courses, this faculty member suggested that the need there may not be as pressing as what is experienced at Texas Tech. Nevertheless, she was concerned that, if present trends continue (and they are likely to), creative approaches to teaching FYC would take on a much greater urgency at UTSA. The trends she saw emerging included a number of incoming freshmen from households in which English was not the primary language, college students who represented the first members of their households to attend college, and older students returning to college after a protracted absence. These groups create challenges for instructors whose expectations and pedagogical practices are more appropriate for more "traditional" incoming freshmen. Additionally, she worried that, as enrollments increased, more would need to be done to provide adequate FYC instruction.

She commented on some of the findings from the present graduate instructor subjects by admitting that she was not surprised. "We see the same things here. There is a real reluctance on their part to let go of what worked for them in the past when they themselves were students," she said. She suggested that there is a rigidity of thought evinced by new graduate students that seems understandable. "These are successful students and they want to transmit the

techniques that made them successful to their students," she explained. "But, they don't realize that they are exceptional in their love for language and that their students probably don't share that same passion." Additionally, she admitted that these graduate instructors tend to fear new information and the acquisition of new skills. "I see it in the courses I teach. You mention theory and they resist. They tell you, 'But we just want to read these great books.' It is not until they get to the PhD level that many are willing to explore the many diverse approaches that make up the field of English studies," she suggested.

Another barrier to implementation of innovative approaches in FYC that she saw at UTSA came from the non-tenure track instructors who teach the courses. She suggested that, because their positions seem tenuous in that they are tied to enrollments, they are unwilling in many cases to suggest anything that might involve "doing more with less." According to her, this is disheartening for a number of reasons. First, their reluctance means that it will become more and more difficult to serve burgeoning enrollments. Second, these instructors represent the "institutional memory" of FYC at the university and would ideally be those who could guide necessary changes. Finally, all the full-time non-tenure track instructors had taught at UTSA for an average of 7 years and, if enrollments either plateaued or continued to increase, they would be likely to continue their employment. Yet, she suggested that, because they perceived themselves as "working at the pleasure of the department" (even though they no longer actually answer to the English department), they were invested in maintaining the status quo. Additionally, because FYC is no longer under the aegis of the English Department there, directions from tenure-track English faculty are viewed as little more than suggestions.

This faculty member, then, felt that the prospect of any innovation in teaching FYC at her university was likely to be "too little too late" as neither graduate students nor non-tenure track instructors were committed to any innovation. For

the graduate students, this lack of commitment seemed to stem from an inherent conservatism and rigidity in their thinking and, for the non-tenure track instructors, it seemed to be the result of fear ("if they find a way to do more with less, maybe I'll be out of a job. At least that's what I think they're thinking"). Additionally, she believes that, even when FYC was the direct responsibility of the English Department, tenure track faculty had little interest in these courses. Her concern is not that the university will be unable to serve those students needing FYC ("If push comes to shove, of course we'll do something.") but, instead that, because the university will react to these needs, they will lose the opportunity to create a better solution.

Emergent Themes

Because the interviews with the four faculty members only lasted one hour each, there was far less data to code and, indeed, the coding that occurred here did not require the same rigor as did the data from the graduate instructors. Nevertheless, a few themes did emerge. First, four of the five faculty members interviewed expressed concern that, due to the challenges of offering FYC at large universities, graduate instructors were not mentored in ways that they needed to be. All these faculty subjects believed that mentoring of some sort was essential for graduate instructors to develop expertise, to develop as professionals in higher education, and, not least important, for the "mental health" of these novice graduate instructors. All, however, identified barriers to providing adequate and appropriate mentoring including workload constraints, lack of interest on the part of tenure track faculty, and graduate instructors themselves being unaware of the need for and unwilling to participate in a structured mentoring relationship.

Another emergent theme related to the need for mentoring involved faculty perceptions of graduate instructors as novices in terms of their professional development. Indeed, the theme of mentoring appeared to go hand-in-hand with

the status of graduate instructors as "apprentices." All five faculty members tended to agree that graduate instructors have extremely limited perspectives about working in a university setting and "rather unreal" (in the words of one faculty member) expectations about workload and (in the words of another) "just what it is that English departments do."

Finally, all faculty members interviewed expressed some uncertainty about whether or not FYC was best situated in English Studies. One of the interviewees had actually overseen such a move (i.e., an FYC program moving out of an English Department) and was guardedly optimistic about such a move. The other faculty interviewees simply wondered whether FYC in an English Department was the "best fit." All, however, agreed that graduate students in English would probably be best-equipped to teach FYC in any setting.