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The Very Model of a Modern Teacher-training Program

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SCHOLAR-PRACTITIONER

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Summary: Gonzaga University's MA/TESOL program developed organically from within the university's ESL program, guided by a philosophical model comprising three modes of authority: compassion, scholarship, and invention (Jeannot, 1997). This article assesses the success of the model from the faculty and student perspectives.

Keywords: MA/TESOL program, ESL program, authority: compassion, scholarship, invention

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Our field, with its alphabet soup of acronyms that I will reductively call "TESOL", is nothing if not heterogeneous. It encompasses P-12 ELL education, Academic English, Adult Basic Education, EFL, and ESP, to name but a few of our teaching contexts, and our students are, quite literally, the world. How should we prepare teachers for that bewildering diversity, when one size clearly and unequivocally does not fit all? This article looks at the teacher-training model invented by my friend and colleague, Mary Jeannot, in 1998 at Gonzaga University, highlighting some of the things we got right and sharing some of the lessons and innovations we feel have contributed most to our students' success. If that sounds self-congratulatory, then take comfort in the knowledge that – spoiler alert – it doesn't end well.

In contrast to more typical MA/TESOL programs, Gonzaga University's grew out of, or better, within the English Language Center (ELC), our Academic ESL Program. It was not created by hiring faculty with PhDs in Applied Linguistics or TESOL or by borrowing them from other departments (Figure 1); instead, we ESL faculty gravitated

or were gently pushed by Mary towards MA courses that fell within our interests and expertise while continuing to teach ESL courses. More often than not, we would co-teach a course one or more times before flying solo, a luxury that I now realize is quite rare, and even today we still offer one course that is always co-taught. As a result, a strongly collaborative and reflective core emerged in our teaching that permeated in all directions: as a faculty, we shared everything from syllabi to materials to CMS courses; we reflected together on what was effective and discarded or adapted what wasn't; we learned so much from each other and from our students, both ESL and MA/TESOL, because from the outset we had to (or were able to) acknowledge the authority and experience of all participants. This was partly because we had to draw heavily on current and past teaching experience since most of us did not initially have theoretical backgrounds from doctoral studies. But more than that, it was because we were able to move seamlessly, but not always comfortably (Embrace the ambiguity!) between the roles of TESOL faculty and ESL teacher (Figure 2). In practice this meant that the ESL and MA/TESOL faculty were one and
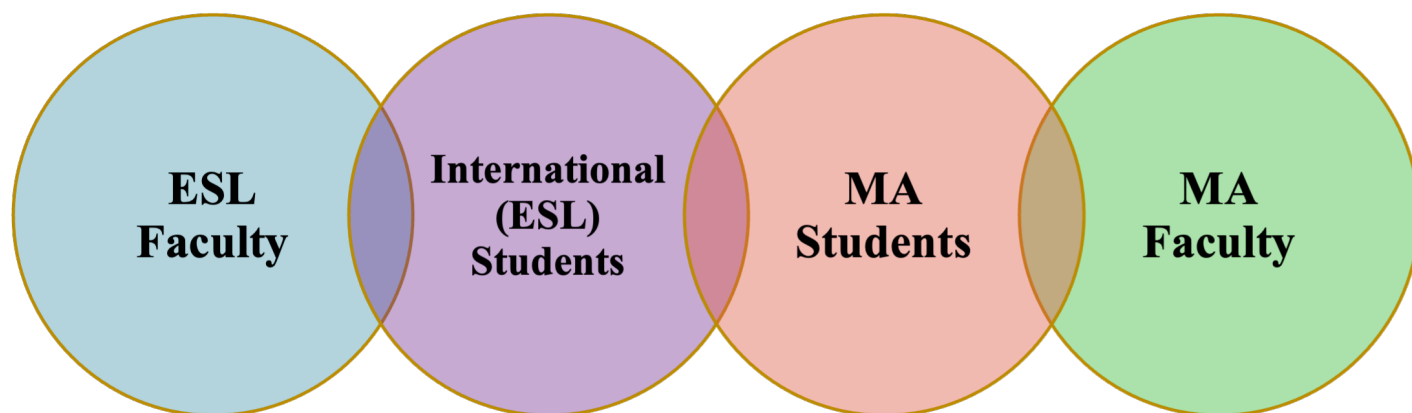

Figure 1: Interaction/overlap in the traditional program

the same, with expertise and commitment equally shared between the learners in both programs, physically located in the same space; in turn, that meant that students from both programs interacted daily, allowing relationships to form and grow organically. In fact, those roles tended to blur and occasionally vanish as the responsibility and authority for learning shifted according to activity and focus.

To borrow heavily from Mary's work (Jeannot, 1997), the model comprised three modes of authority: compassion,
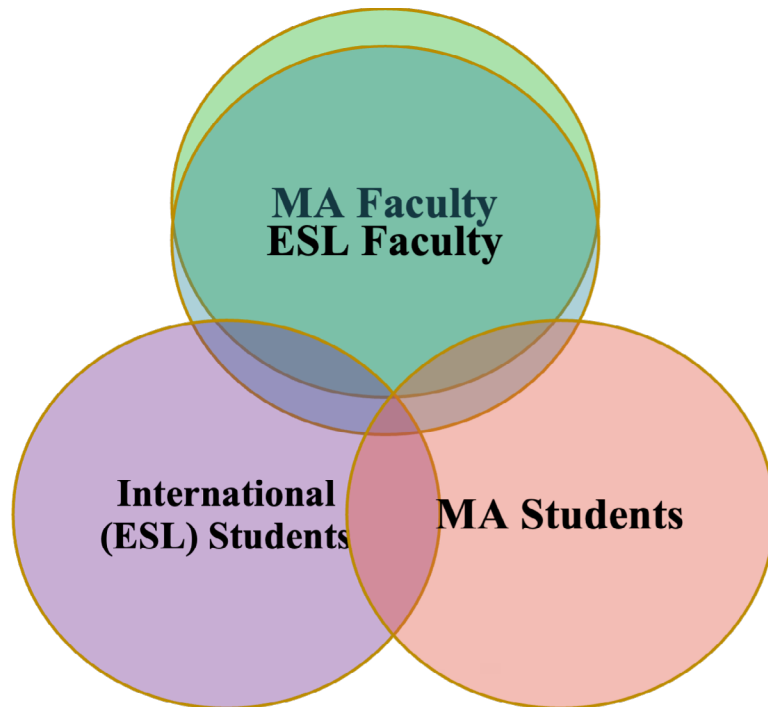

Figure 2: Interaction/overlap in Gonzaga's model

scholarship, and invention. Jones (1987, p. 146, in Jeannot, 1997, p. 61-2) defines the first as the "imaginative taking up of the position of the other" that comes from "having access to knowledge of concrete, not abstracted, others, to knowledge of the agents involved in these situations, of their particular histories, attitudes, characters and desires." Scholarship in this context "weave[s] together the personal, the theoretical, and the political" (Jeannot, 1997, p. 11) in classrooms "where personal experience and scholarship are social constructions that are not fundamentally opposed, as they have been historically" (p. 22). And invention is characterized as "a dialectical phenomenon of making and finding, combining old and new and convention and creativity" (p. 159), somewhere between creation and discovery. In the context of perennial calls by many in the field for greater involvement by teachers in the research of theoretical and especially instructional issues (e.g. Burns, 2010; Edge, 2001, 2011; Edge & Richards, 1993; Freeman, 1998), this view of classroom authority held great promise. So how did the promise deliver?

The principal advantage for our MA students was immediate application of concepts and theories from their MA courses, played out in real life by the same instructors, in their ESL classes. We can discuss differentiated instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006) or postmethod pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2003) or interlanguage (Selinker, 1972) all day long and still have no concrete idea what these concepts mean until we see them in action, and for our MA students, this was a constant: we were a "teaching hospital" where almost every ESL classroom was always open for observation, and most often observers were thrown in the deep end to participate, to monitor, supervise, lead, and teach. They could observe spontaneous, real-life modeling of wait time, for example, which many initially perceive as painful silence, and come to see for themselves the benefits of allowing learners to take the time they need to decode and gather the language to respond – as well as how communication can shut down when you don't. One former MA student summarized the experience thus:

> I was able to observe ESL classes that were taught by my professors, as well as collaborate with ESL instructors who did not teach in the MA/TESOL program… As an MA/TESOL student, I saw my classes as starting points for my experiences observing and interacting with ESL classes, where I could test and deepen my understanding of language learning theory. (H, 2014. The anonymous quotes here are all from former students.)

They got to know the ESL students both as fellow students and as their students, together with their "particular histories, attitudes, characters and desires" and their ways of using English to make meaning. MA class assignments thus became about specific language learners as much as about language learning in general, which tends to be accompanied by a strong desire to do well for the students, with less focus on doing assignments for the grade.

> Even before I completed my practicum, from the very beginning my language teaching instruction was fully integrated into the other areas of the ELC. I was able to observe and help out in my own professors' outstanding ESL classes; this gave me the opportunity to see them practice what they preach, so to speak. It gave them credibility and currency as teachers since they were fully immersed in the topic that they were teaching. (J, 2012)

While this arrangement was not always comfortable for faculty, who were essentially always under the microscope, we did acknowledge that the transparency changed our teaching. There was simply nowhere to hide, no way to "fake it", which could be very humbling at times. We had to acknowledge, for example, if we gave confusing instructions for an activity and wasted time as a result, and authentically demonstrated the need for repair – if

something wasn't working well – in a fluid, flexible context; or if we couldn't remember the difference between restrictive and non-restrictive adjective clauses, we could collaboratively address the issue and move on together. As one of my colleagues put it, the "thin borders" between our MA and ESL teaching made us better, more professional teachers. We also appreciated having authentic, shared experiences through which to process more abstract theoretical issues in MA classes. And of course, as ESL teachers we loved the authentic interaction with linguistically more proficient peers, about half of whom are L2 speakers of English, that came with the arrangement.

> *I wanted a program where the professors teaching me to teach were simultaneously teaching Multilingual Learners…I was able to go beyond "language acquisition in the content areas," a focus of K-12 ESL endorsement programs, to truly understand how language is structured, learned, and developed for students with a variety of L1 literacy and oracy experiences… I was able to watch action research in progress in the classrooms of my own professors, and I was able to consistently watch the "theory in action" of MA/TESOL professors. (N, 2013)*

About ten years ago, we set up a Tutoring Center in the ELC using Graduate Assistant funds to hire MA students as ESL tutors, which most of them do early in the program. This meant that they stepped into a more instructional role, often with shared classroom experience to draw on as they made meaning with the ESL students. Walking through the ELC, I'd often hear snippets of conversations like: "Remember what Heidi said? If you know when it happened, use simple past." The role of the tutoring center in supporting international students was extended in 2015 when the MA program, in collaboration with the English department, created a Multilingual Writing Tutor position in the university's Writing Center.

Being in and out of the ESL classrooms and teacher role all the time meant that MA students were seen by ESL students as a sort of hybrid: somewhere between a peer, a mentor, a tutor, and a (student) teacher:

> *Both student groups saw each other as resources for learning. This relationship benefited both groups of students in countless ways and created a truly special learning community that I have not seen in any other program within the United States. (R, 2014)*

By the time the MA students came to do their practicum teaching, they had already established deep, authentic relationships with ESL students and knew how to relate to them, and so were less likely to take on an authoritarian, performative "teacher voice", and perhaps less likely to teach as they were taught, drawing only on their apprenticeship of observing teaching from the traditional perspective of students who

> *[…] do not receive invitations to watch the teacher's performance from the wings; they are not privy to the teacher's private intentions and personal reflections on classroom events. Students rarely participate in selecting goals, making preparations, or post-mortem analyses. Thus they are not pressed to place the teacher's actions in a pedagogically oriented framework (Lortie, 1975, p. 62).*

They also discovered at a very basic level that language learning is hard and takes time, having watched the ESL students struggle both in and out of class. They came to recognize that not all students learn in the same way; that no one learns anything to the schedule set out in the syllabus, least of all language; that different cultural attitudes towards education can manifest in very different ways, none of which are "wrong"; that allowing students to steer their learning according to their needs makes sense. Perhaps the biggest takeaway of all, especially for English language teachers, is that English is not the only way to make meaning.

> *I was exposed to various cultural modes of thought, beliefs, and traditions. The most rewarding part of this was that I could interact with those thoughts, beliefs, and traditions with the people that brought them to our campus; not simply learn or hear about them from a textbook or lecture. (B, 2015)*

The collegial relationship between faculty and MA students led to other inventions. In 2012, at the request of MA students, we started the Gonzaga ESL Community Outreach program, a free weekly program, which has flourished and has become a central component of the program. All MA students teach in GECO and are mentored by second-year students, one of whom also administers the program every year. This model of "cascading mentorship" (Golde et al., 2006) developed organically over the years and GECO has provided a site not only for teaching practice and leadership but also for research and scholarship (e.g. Scott, 2022). We all – faculty and students – began to present more at conferences, join university committees where our voices were not silent nor silenced, seek higher degrees, and publish. As our colleague Martha Savage describes it,

> *Faculty flourished. I flourished. It allowed MA graduates to see into the world of life-long learning… It was a world where I could try out things, get feedback and was accepted. It allowed me to find my voice and dig deeply into what I love.*

Higher education can be a challenging environment for nascent organisms, especially ones that don't quickly turn a profit, but for fifteen years or so the institution largely left us to our own devices because a healthy profit was indeed being turned. The problem with administocracies, though, is that one bad administrator can wreak havoc. That's what happened to us: an upwardly charming and utterly incompetent administrator turned up and within

three years had pulled the plug on ESL recruiting and carved the program, like the European colonial powers dividing up Africa, into "ESL" and "MA/TESOL" along the predictable lines of academic qualifications: those with MAs to one side and those with PhDs to the other, with different academic homes and, crucially, different budget lines for each. Two valued colleagues lost their jobs as a result, and the psychological trauma still reverberates today. Separate departments with separate budget lines also meant that teaching in the "other" program became increasingly difficult – although, to be fair, several of our new colleagues, both academic and administrative, tried their best to facilitate the ongoing "exchange" of faculty between the programs.

Today, with a new international student-recruiting partnership in place, the institution looks poised to become host to a significantly increased international student population, but much of the expertise and practice that went into supporting this population has been dissipated. Like most ESL/TESOL faculty, we are adaptable and ready for anything, but we still live in the hope that our institution will recognize – and allow us the academic freedom to (re)invent – the particular genius of the model we have lost. Failing that, we hope others will adopt, adapt, and invent the model within their own contexts. It is a model of teacher training that our students deserve.

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