FIRST PERSON

When it's more than you, Jesus, and the pencil: Reflections on an academic writing mentorship

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When we think of struggling writers, images of children and young adults quickly come to mind. This article focuses on a group of struggling writers rarely considered: doctoral students in education programs. Although many people assume that adults pursuing advanced degrees have exceptional writing abilities, research (e.g., Noll & Fox, 2003) has found that most graduate students, even the highly capable writers, expressed negative attitudes toward academic writing, using words such as *scary, confining, frustrating, taming,* and *painful* to characterize their writing experiences. What makes academic writing so challenging, and what might be done to help struggling graduate-level writers? In this article, we explore answers to these critical questions by drawing upon our own graduate school experiences in the United States and highlighting academic writing mentorships as a possible strategy to support graduate students struggling with academic writing.

Pat's story

In the fall of 1976, I entered the doctoral program at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

My advisor, who was a tough taskmaster, required all of his graduate assistants to write two-page papers. He would often say, "If you can't summarize it in two pages, then you obviously don't know what you are talking about." I worked very hard to get my thoughts into those two pages. I felt vulnerable and uncomfortable and hoped and prayed that my advisor would like at least some of what I had written; he had never shown us a format for writing the two-page papers and he didn't provide examples of what he considered to be "good" writing. I would always hold my breath as my advisor critiqued what I had written.

As a graduate student, I felt very lonely. I would often say to myself or to my mother on the telephone,

> I feel like it is just me, Jesus, and my pencil. I don't have anyone to make visible the invisible. I don't have anyone to calm my feelings of insecurity. I don't have anyone who believes in me. I didn't have any problems in undergraduate school or in my master's program. What's wrong? Am I not good enough to make it in this environment?

I couldn't figure out what was wrong with me; I had been considered a good writer throughout my schooling, yet it was obvious to my advisor and to me that I was not "getting it." At that time, I didn't realize that academic writing was different than the summarizing I had done in other programs, and no one told me that I needed to be more analytical and reflective in order to be a good writer in graduate school. So I took my advisor's criticisms personally.

Thinking back to those difficult times, I realize that my advisor did not have much experience working with African American graduate students. He was from Appleton, Wisconsin, and I would venture to say that he had not encountered many people of color. As a graduate student, I spent a great deal of time analyzing my advisor's interactions with me. Initially, I thought that he did not like me because I was African American. But then I told myself that he knew I was African American before I was accepted into the doctoral program. So, I decided not to focus on race or gender issues but rather to focus on improving my research and writing skills.

I quickly recognized that my advisor had written more than 150 articles and 10 books. I came to understand that he was not going to allow his name to be associated with mediocrity. I tried to put myself in his place, and I thought about how I would feel if I were a well-known researcher and had a doctoral student whose research and writing skills needed improvement. In the end, I went to the writing lab, and it was there that I learned about academic writing and how I needed to be more analytical. When I came to my advisor with the next round of two-page papers, he said, "Oh, you finally got it!" I was relieved.

Although I eventually did well on my two-page papers, I never felt completely validated as a writer by my advisor. I was a graduate assistant who collected data and spent many long hours in the library researching a variety of topics. But despite all the time I spent working on projects, I was never invited to coauthor an article or book chapter. When I graduated, I wanted to find a position at a major research university, but I realized that I needed more time to "learn the ropes" of academic writing. I promised myself that when I worked with graduate students, I would explain to them that academic writing is not easy. It is a skill that takes time and patience to develop, and I would try to help them understand what it involves. I would provide examples, as well as resources, so that their writing experiences would not be so painful. I would work hard to mentor my graduate students in a different way; rather than making them feel doubtful and fearful, I would develop a caring and supportive relationship with them.

Jennifer's story

I came to Michigan State University, East Lansing, in 1997, excited to be embarking upon an incredible educational experience. As a new graduate student in the educational psychology program, I was confident and loved to write. Writing, in fact, had become my primary mode of self-expression because I was painfully shy and hated speaking in class. As I perused the syllabi for my fall courses, I was pleased to see that we would be doing a significant amount of writing, primarily in the form of weekly response journals and research papers. And I thought that writing would be an excellent outlet for some of the educational perspectives that I had developed from my experiences growing up as an African American child in a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia.

After several weeks, I noticed a perplexing phenomenon occurring in several of my educational psychology courses. When I cited the theories and concepts of well-respected scholars in my journal responses, my grades were excellent. But when I critiqued our readings on the basis of my personal experiences, my journal grades

were significantly lower. One assignment particularly stands out in my mind: We were asked to write a response paper discussing the progress that had been made within the field of educational psychology. In my paper I challenged that notion, arguing that educational psychology had not significantly affected the educational experiences and learning environments for African American and other students from culturally diverse backgrounds, particularly those living in urban areas. I received a low grade on the paper, with the words "WE have made progress" written in large, red letters. I was stunned and didn't know what to do. I wanted to talk to someone, but I didn't want to make an issue of the matter because this instructor was a prominent figure in the educational psychology program.

Ultimately, I decided to write papers that reflected the perspectives of my professors or other mainstream scholars, and it was no surprise that I received A's on them. But my voice was dying in the process. Writing became a lonely and isolating experience because I was so disconnected from my own thoughts, feelings, and opinions. I felt like such a sham. My writing devalued the truths that I knew through my experiences as an urban African American student and educator. Worse yet, I became extremely cautious, watching everything that I wrote—even during informal online discussions—for fear that I would write something that challenged my instructors or my peers. Even though I read research conducted by scholars of color that challenged mainstream ideas about schooling and literacy, I was afraid to incorporate these ideas into my course papers. I began to hate my writing, but I continued to write in this contrived voice because I thought it was the only way I would do well in the doctoral program. During that first year, it was so important for me to be a successful graduate student that it nearly cost me my life as a writer.

Our story: Transforming the experience of academic writing through mentorship

Our individual stories depict the experience of academic writing as a lonely, isolating, endeavor—one aptly characterized by Pat when she said, "I feel like it is just me, Jesus, and my pencil." Fortunately, we had the opportunity to "rewrite" our stories of academic writing when we began working together at Michigan State University in 1998. Jennifer, then a second-year doctoral student, was searching for a mentor who might help her to reclaim her voice as an African American writer and to forge a scholarly identity that would highlight her distinctive perspectives. Pat was interested in mentoring new graduate students of color and supporting their development as literacy researchers and writers. When Pat invited Jennifer to work as a graduate research assistant on her school literacy project, funded by the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA), this seemed to be the perfect time to "make a fresh start" (Graves, 1994, p. 1) as academic writers. Bravely, Pat took the initiative to encourage Jennifer to be an active researcher and collaborative writer in the study, and Jennifer accepted, uncertain about her writing abilities but eager to learn. The journey toward developing a productive academic writing mentorship had begun.

Building a mentoring relationship upon academic writing

Like all good teaching–learning endeavors, academic writing mentorships are built upon a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Developing this type of relationship requires strong commitment, because, as Hansen (2001) observed, "it takes time to write, to talk, and to listen" (p. 48). The time we spent talking and listening as we shared our own academic writing proved to be the most important factor in the building of our mentoring relationship. One of

the first pieces we shared with each other highlights educational issues that we personally care about: Pat brought in a grant that she was writing on at-risk and Head Start children, and Jennifer brought in a literature review on literacy motivation and African American students that she had written as a course assignment. After reading each other's work, we spent time discussing our responses, raising questions, and offering suggestions. Through this experience of sharing academic writing, we considered several questions that are extremely important for developing writing mentorships: Do we care about some of the same issues? Are our writing styles similar or at least complementary? Do I respect this person as a writer? How does this person react to constructive criticism? Will this person be honest enough to provide useful feedback for my writing? Is this the type of person with whom I can take risks as a writer? We believe that it is imperative to think about and respond to these questions before entering into an academic writing mentorship, and sharing academic writing is an excellent way to assess whether a writing mentorship has potential.

As we grew more comfortable sharing our individual work, we also began writing together. Initially, we worked on relatively short texts related to Pat's CIERA project. Then gradually we moved to larger writing projects. To facilitate this more intensive writing, we decided to work at Pat's house rather than in her office on campus. This change in physical location was beneficial for our writing mentorship in several important ways. First, the writing process seemed less formal at Pat's house. Being relaxed, we were able to brainstorm, think and write aloud, and revise and edit drafts more effectively. Second, because we believed in "working until the job is done," we often worked late into the night, and Pat's house provided a safe and secure place where we could complete our writing projects. Finally, writing at Pat's house facilitated the growth of our mentoring relationship through the sharing of good food and laughter. Whenever we worked, Pat was always willing to cook up Southern specialties

like fried catfish, greens, and cornbread; Jennifer would bring a salad to complete the meal, and we would spend time just eating, relaxing, and talking. Those times when we could unwind after a long writing session were invaluable; they enabled us to get to know each other on a more personal level, which in turn strengthened our writing mentorship.

Providing access to the conventions and discourses of academic writing

Street (2005) contended that "novice writers require the assistance of experienced guides as they enter the academic writing community" (p. 639). Mentorships provide invaluable contexts for experienced academic writers to "make visible" for novice writers the invisible discursive practices (e.g., conventions, rhetorical devices) valued within scholarly communities. We exemplify this point with a brief example from our work on an article for *The Reading Teacher* (Danridge, Edwards, & Pleasants, 2000). As first author, Jennifer was responsible for writing the introduction and literature review, so she gathered the relevant literature and wrote her sections. After reviewing Jennifer's text, Pat initiated a conversation about "audience" and its meaning for academic writing. We looked at several articles in *The Reading Teacher*, noting the tone and the style of the authors' writing. We talked about how the articles had a certain "feel" to them because they were written with practitioners in mind, and it quickly became obvious to Jennifer that the serious, formal tone that she had taken within her text would not be appropriate for *The Reading Teacher*. Conversations such as these were clearly important for Jennifer, because as a novice in the academic community she needed Pat to scaffold her learning of discursive knowledge and practices. These rich discussions also strengthened our collaborative writing because they provided multiple opportunities to examine the structure and style of published academic writing within various genres (e.g., conceptual papers, research reports, book chapters) and to

consider the organizational and rhetorical devices that academic writers use to construct arguments, report research, and position themselves within scholarly texts.

Honoring personal voices and interests within the writing mentorship

As African American literacy educators, we are both strongly committed to promoting effective and equitable literacy education for students of color, particularly those from African American backgrounds. This common interest is an important theme woven into the fabric of our collaborative academic writing mentorship. Yet we try not to view our collaborative work as a representation of a singular African American perspective because we recognize that we have had different life experiences that profoundly shape our voices as academic writers. Pat, for example, is interested in how schools, families, and communities can create productive partnerships in an effort to promote children's literacy development. Her ideas for partnerships are based upon educational experiences in a Southern, all-black elementary school in which her mother was active in the parent–teacher association and her teachers were visible and active members of her community. Jennifer's interest in elementary teachers who are effective with African American literacy learners emanates from powerful memories of teachers who viewed her as a capable reader rather than an "at-risk" urban student. When we come together to write, we honor these differences in order to remain true to who we are and to our life experiences. As a consequence, we consciously strive to craft our pieces in ways that enable us to write collaboratively on issues we care about while maintaining the authenticity and distinctiveness of our individual identities and work (see Edwards & Danridge, 2001).

An equally important aspect of honoring individual voices is explicitly addressing the "hidden" issues of power embedded within academic writing relationships. We believe it critical to deal with power issues "up front" because academic writing mentoring relationships are extremely fragile, and they can wither and die if one writer feels unfairly treated or slighted. When writers within the mentorship do not consciously attend to issues of power, mentors and mentees can feel taken advantage of, unappreciated, or devalued. Thus, we believe an ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure. Before we begin a writing project, we discuss authorship and explicitly define the duties and responsibilities that each authorial role entails. Of course there is some flexibility built into this discussion, but that initial conversation gives us a clear sense of direction and purpose when we write. In writing this article, for example, we negotiated authorship on the basis of our interest in the topic. Jennifer was very interested in writing about her mentoring experiences with Pat, so she took the lead in conceptualizing the piece, reading relevant literature, and drafting the introduction and conclusion as first author. As second author, Pat participated in brainstorming conversations, wrote her personal story, and edited several drafts of the piece. We have found these candid, open discussions about authorship to be extremely useful, and they are the reason our collaborative writing experiences have been rewarding and empowering for both of us.

Final thoughts

It's been seven years since we first began writing together, but we still consider our academic writing mentorship to be a "work in progress." Some of the structures and components of our mentoring relationship have changed now that Jennifer has graduated and works at a research university on the east coast of the United States. We have less time to write together due to increasing demands on our time, and we are more likely to engage in the collaborative writing process via e-mail than at Pat's dining room table. Nevertheless, the essence of our mentoring relationship—the trust, the respect, and the admiration that we have for each

other as writers and as African American literacy scholars—remains unchanged. In many ways, Jennifer still views Pat as an academic writing mentor, and Pat continues to support Jennifer by publishing with her, inviting her to participate in important writing opportunities, and conversing with her about literacy research and scholarly writing. We feel very fortunate because our mentoring relationship has transformed our perceptions of and experiences with academic writing; although writing for publication is still difficult and extremely frustrating at times, each of us finds reassurance in knowing that academic writing is more than "me, Jesus, and my pencil."

Our hope is that our story will inspire experienced academic writers (i.e., established literacy scholars) to (re)consider their own ways of working with graduate students. We sense that many literacy scholars want to reach out and support these novice academic writers, but they simply don't know how. Some experienced academic writers did not have positive mentoring relationships with their own advisors or with other faculty in graduate school, and thus they are not quite sure what to do or where to begin. Others may want to improve upon the mentoring they received as graduate students, but it may be difficult for them to envision new possibilities, especially because so little research has been conducted on mentoring experiences in literacy teacher education (Alvermann & Hruby, 2000). Despite these challenges, we believe that experienced literacy scholars can make a difference in the education of graduate students by being supportive and positive academic writing mentors.

We end this article by offering two suggestions for scholars interested in developing academic writing mentorships with graduate students. Because we do not believe that academic writing mentorships can develop from a one-size-fits-all approach, we discuss two ideas that honor the complexity of establishing academic writing mentorships rather than outline a series of specific steps. First, experienced academic writers should take time to learn about graduate students' perceptions of and experiences with academic writing. This awareness is critical for experienced academic writers, because "by listening closely to graduate students' perceptions of academic writing, we may be able to examine more fully our own assumptions and responsibilities as professors and mentors" (Noll & Fox, 2003, p. 342). When we listen to graduate students' writing stories, we gain invaluable insight on the kinds of help and support that novice writers need to become members of the academic community.

Second, experienced academic writers can build academic writing mentorships by taking small steps. Experienced literacy scholars are so busy that they often think they have "too much on their plates" to develop academic writing mentorships with graduate students. But we believe that less is more when it comes to developing these mentorships. Just as Pat hired Jennifer on her CIERA project, experienced literacy writers can offer doctoral students the opportunity to become collaborative researchers *and* writers on a current research project. Experienced academic writers should also remember that they can support graduate students in their graduate-level literacy courses by examining texts with students (e.g., working through an analysis of the rhetoric in a literature review) and explicitly discussing discursive conventions and practices valued by the academic writing community (Noll & Fox, 2003). We hope that other experienced academic writers will join us in taking these small, but extremely important steps toward transforming academic writing experiences for future generations of literacy scholars.

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