

Doctoral Mentoring Philosophy Essay | Jim Warren

My doctoral mentoring philosophy grows out of scholarship in my field of Rhetoric and Composition and reflects my commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in doctoral education. Below I describe three areas of scholarship from which I draw insights, explain why these insights are especially generative for English PhD students at UTA, and share stories of students who have flourished under my mentorship. I conclude this essay with some examples of how I have provided students with professional development tailored to their specific career goals, which in many cases are different from those of traditional PhD students.

English as a Diffuse, “Rural” Field

One of my responsibilities as a doctoral mentor is to help students negotiate the special characteristics of knowledge-making in English Studies. Scholars who have studied the epistemic practices of different disciplines point out that some fields, such as the hard sciences, are characterized by discrete problems on which many people are working, whereas other fields, such as the liberal arts, comprise a broad array of topics with relatively few people working on any one problem. The philosopher Stephen Toulmin describes these differences in terms of “compact” vs. “diffuse” fields, and educational theorist Tony Becher makes a similar distinction when describing “urban” vs. “rural” fields. As someone who works in a diffuse, rural field, I often confront a dilemma when asked to direct dissertations: do I encourage students to pursue their scholarly interests wherever they lead, even if they lead away from my area of specialization, or do I insist that students hew to areas of scholarship I know well? This dilemma is particularly acute in the English Department at UTA, as we attract a diverse group of PhD students with a wide array of interests, yet our number of graduate faculty is relatively small.

I resolve this dilemma by allowing mentees considerable freedom in their choice of topic so long as some part of the project contributes to an area of scholarship I know well. Then, for the areas I do not know well, I work closely with students to ensure that we both know the relevant scholarship. We study closely the bibliographies of key sources, paying particular attention to references that recur. We conduct cited reference searches in Google Scholar and Web of Science. Once we have an exhaustive list of relevant scholarship, I make sure students account for this work in their projects and that I am familiar enough with it to comment on its use.

One student who benefited from this approach was Lisa*, a post-traditional learner (i.e., older than 30, a military veteran, working full time and caring for dependents) who was returning to her graduate studies after a few years away. Lisa wanted to write a dissertation that examined the effectiveness of noncredit-bearing, developmental writing courses. She was invested in this topic because she herself had benefited from such a course many years ago, but she also appreciated that such “remedial” courses are more likely to be required of Black and Hispanic students and that they correlate with lower graduation rates. I wanted to honor Lisa’s interest in such an important topic, but I had never taught developmental writing and had only a passing familiarity with the scholarship surrounding it. I do know the scholarship on credit-bearing first-year composition, however, so we constructed a project that analyzed the continuities and disconnects between developmental writing and first-year composition learning outcomes. We conducted a meticulous

* All names are pseudonyms.

review of scholarship on developmental writing to ensure that we were being intellectually responsible, and Lisa positioned her project primarily as a contribution to first-year composition, which allowed me to better assess its originality and rigor. Lisa wound up conducting a study of community college students in North Texas as they progressed from developmental writing through first-year composition—the result was a project that honored her lived experience and scholarly interests while making a genuine contribution to the field.

Writing as Knowledge-Making

A key tenet of my mentoring philosophy is that writing *constructs* academic knowledge, rather than simply translating already-formed knowledge into written form. One of my areas of scholarly expertise, *Writing in the Disciplines*, examines text-making conventions across disciplines and considers how these conventions reflect specific knowledge-making activities. I draw on this knowledge to help students better understand how professional scholarship in English Studies works, how the field's discursive norms facilitate discipline-specific knowledge claims. I have found that this sort of metacognition is particularly valuable for PhD students who struggle to internalize academic modes of thought that are often automatic for traditional students.

My first doctoral student, Sandra, had been in the English PhD program for many years before my arrival at UTA, and she had nearly given up. She started doctoral work late in life and was nearing retirement age; her dissertation had been languishing for several semesters; her chair had left UTA. I got to know Sandra while developing an on-line composition class, and it was clear to me that she was extremely bright and highly knowledgeable about scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition. I asked to read the latest draft of her dissertation, and what I found was an extremely thorough and eloquent review of scholarship on service-learning pedagogy and on-line writing instruction. What I did not see was an inquiry that might result in the production of discipline-specific knowledge. Sandra was stuck in a “banking” mode of learning, digesting the scholarship of others and regurgitating it on demand, but never attempting to make an original contribution. In my initial meetings with Sandra, I shared some of my own scholarship and modeled for her how to generate answerable research questions from the work she had already completed. A lightbulb went off for her, and in just over a year she had completed a fascinating dissertation that explored ways to adapt service-learning composition pedagogy to on-line environments.

Responding to Student Writing

Research in Rhetoric and Composition has found that instructor feedback on student writing often fails to achieve its intended effects. For one thing, students at all levels, especially those from historically marginalized groups, tend to see critical feedback as a sign of failure. Furthermore, students often misunderstand their mentors' written feedback or struggle to translate it into effective revisions. In such cases, students who seem closed to suggestions might in fact be simply discouraged or confused. One way to enhance the effectiveness of written feedback is to supplement it with in-person conferences, so I always meet with students immediately after responding to their work. This helps me soften any critical comments and ensure that the student and I are on the same page, that we agree on necessary changes and how to make them. No less important, face-to-face meetings allow me to reiterate my belief in students.

My student Julie believed she had to eliminate all traces of African American English from her writing in order to sound like an academic. The result was turgid prose that failed to communicate her ideas clearly, and the first time I responded to her work, I found myself editing nearly every sentence of her draft. In my first conference with Julie, I had to convince her that my extensive marking was not a sign of her failure but rather a sign of my interest in her ideas, which were being obscured by her attempt to produce stuffy academic prose. I showed her recent scholarship in English Studies that draws on everyday language and nonstandard dialects to engage readers, and I introduced her to translanguaging scholarship, which helped her conceive of her own idiolect as a resource rather than as a deficit. For about two years, we continued this process by which Julie would submit work, I would mark it up extensively, and we would meet to discuss style. By the time Julie finished her degree, she had not only produced a beautifully written dissertation but also had developed a lucid style that nicely balanced her unique ways of expressing herself with traditional academic prose.

Another finding of research on response to student writing is that mentors have a tendency to appropriate student work, to suggest that students produce work that mentors themselves might produce. I try to avoid pressuring students to conform to my own ideas for a project; instead, I serve as a sounding board that might help students better realize their own intentions. I respond as an interested reader—asking for clarification, pushing back on claims, suggesting alternatives—but never forget that the work is not mine.

Perhaps my most challenging mentoring experience involved David, a brilliant, original thinker who was determined to write an unconventional dissertation. In his personal life, David was transitioning genders throughout the dissertation process, and he made clear to me that what he needed from me on both a professional and personal level was affirmation, not direction. David's project was a postmodern critique of conventional discourse structures, and his manuscript enacted this critique by actively defying the discursive norms of the dissertation genre itself. I gave David fair warning that the committee would not approve the manuscript that was emerging, but I also did not stand in his way. As it happened, my colleagues on the committee did resist—strongly—and thus began a series of complex negotiations and extensive revisions that eventually resulted in the committee's (reluctant) approval. I do not claim that I found the perfect balance between respect for this student's intellectual freedom and insistence on professional standards. I will say, though, that at the end of the process David felt he had written the dissertation he needed to write.

Professional Development

Students who pursue an English PhD at UTA do so for a remarkably wide variety of reasons. I am sensitive to this variety and work hard to provide professional development opportunities suited to students' specific career goals. To be sure, many follow a conventional path toward tenure-track positions at research universities, and for these students, I provide the type of support I myself received. For example, I help these students find conferences to attend, work with them on conference proposals and talks, and introduce them to colleagues in my professional network. These students need to publish early and often, so I help them develop publishable work early in their studies and place that work in appropriate journals. As students near graduation, I guide them through the complexities of the job market, make sure they produce highly polished job materials, and require them to participate in mock interviews. All four of my former students who followed this route were offered tenure-track positions.

For students seeking non-traditional academic careers, I facilitate experiences that will help qualify them for the sorts of jobs they seek. For example, my first doctoral student was interested in on-line education, so I made sure she taught a writing course I developed for the Center for Distance Education and served as a supervisor for academic coaches in a course I developed for the Accelerated Online program. She was then hired as Assistant Director of Digital Teaching and Learning in UTA's English Department. Another student wanted experience administering high school/university partnerships, so I set up a semester-long program in which our UTA classes collaborated with English classes at Arlington Lamar. This student wound up accepting a tenure-track position in which her responsibilities include academic outreach to local high schools. One of my recent students was a full-time instructor at a local community college who had no desire to leave her position but was concerned about job security. Thus, we worked on teaching-centered promotional materials, and her institution moved her to the tenure track even before she finished her degree. A student graduating this May is a long-time high school teacher who has no desire to change careers but does want to enhance her scholarly profile. To that end, she and I have presented at the Texas Council of Teachers of English Language Arts conference three times and have published three co-authored articles for *English in Texas*. Another student who is graduating this May is a devout Seventh-day Adventist committed to working in a university affiliated with the church, so I have helped her situate her secular scholarship in the context of a faith-based institution. She recently accepted a tenure-track position at Southwestern Adventist University. As these examples show, a PhD in English opens the door to many professional opportunities, even as tenure-track positions in English dwindle. I embrace the opportunity to prepare doctoral students for a dynamic profession that is changing rapidly but that remains deeply satisfying for those who find their place.