

Shifting roles and identities

Phyllis Wachob explores the effect of changing spaces 210

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Classrooms were locked; offices had no furniture; electronic 'keys' could not be programmed to open a particular office door because, "sorry, that room is a toilet!" These are only a few of the stories that emerged in the first weeks of moving into a new campus 'in the desert' for the American University in Cairo.

It was not only physical changes that welcomed the teachers, but also the challenge of facing new job definitions. A merit pay scheme, the creation of a Senior Instructor position and the intense self-appraisal that comes with accreditation were redefining roles. Preliminary work on the accreditation standards led the author and others to investigate the situation facing our Teaching Fellows - scholarship MA students who also teach an hour a day. There had been complaints from some of the Teaching Fellows, who felt they had been inadequately introduced to what and how to teach. Past 'buddy' and 'ask-me-if-you-need-help' systems did not seem adequate. A task force recommended a structured mentoring system that could meet Fellows' needs as well as blend into a professional development scheme for experienced teachers.

The questions that arose reflected the shifting identities and the changing roles of all in the program. The new Teaching Fellows were given an orientation by the second-year Fellows as well as being assisted by mentors. The mentors, some accepting the work reluctantly, have begun to understand that it is an important part of their job description and professional development.

If experienced Instructors are mentors, what are the Fellows: students or teachers?

Instructors saw the Fellows as "new colleagues", "student teachers", or "teachers". One noted that "the students need to see Fellows as teachers, so they shouldn't dress shabbily" or act unprofessionally. Instructors saw Fellows as responsible for students in their "high stakes" course. Many Instructors had been Fellows in the past and they had little sympathy. "We didn't get any help, we muddled through, why should we help them now?" One teacher was overheard to exclaim, "I'm teaching with two Fellows!" The implication was that, "If the students don't make it, we know why."

But Instructors also saw Fellows as "integral, and if they weren't here, we'd lose a lot" and that a proactive Fellow could be a dynamic team teacher. Others saw Fellows only as part-time, not important and not integrated.

The Fellows themselves began to understand as soon as they started teaching that, although they may have seen themselves primarily as students, their role as teachers was equally important. One said that, though she saw the roles as equal, "teaching is *emotional*." One second-year Fellow said she felt "more like a teacher now".

Some of the Fellows felt that some teachers saw them as "temporary", "novices" and as "cheap labor". One said that she felt the coordinator valued them too much, "He forgets we are

students too.” But other Fellows were happy to be treated as ‘real’ teachers, with the autonomy to try out new things. Another commented on the cooperative attitude of most Instructors, “I feel like I’m on the threshold of their world with a big welcome sign on the door.”

Can the Fellows teach the Instructors anything?

Both Instructors and Fellows acknowledged that, as MA students, Fellows were “halfway between theory and practice” and closer and more knowledgeable about the newest, most recent research. There was “no safe way” to offer advice in the minds of the younger, less experienced Fellows because of differences in age and status. “It’s face-threatening for Instructors to be offered to be taught something.”

The one field in which all agreed the Fellows could lead was new technology. Two Fellows shyly offered the information that their core teachers had asked if the Fellow would teach them the new technologies needed on the new campus. One said, “I feel so good about being asked! I told her we could start today!” Most agreed that seminars, conferences and non-threatening one-to-one sessions were possible and that shared experiences could strengthen the bonds between Instructors and Fellows.

How can mentors retain their core identities as teachers?

But how do we ensure that experienced instructors, maintain their identities as confident, competent teachers as we ask them to take on new roles as mentors and ‘students’ of new technologies and new methods? “Respect them” says one Fellow. They should not be offended if we say, “Here’s something new, check it out.”

One Instructor admitted that there were two kinds of teachers, divided between those who view every new experience as a “learning opportunity” and those who cling to an Egyptian cultural vision that says seniority is highly respected as epitomized in an Arabic proverb, “A day older, a year wiser.”

But the positive attitude of the majority held out. “Share experiences,” advised one Fellow, “do it gently, indirectly and be non-threatening”. One Fellow said that her co-teacher, who had been teaching for 30 years, realized that accreditation and the new changes meant that if she wanted to stay, she would “have to be a better teacher.” Being a mentor was new to her, but she had accepted the role shift.

By the end of the academic year, the spaces and the changes they brought about had become less fraught with anxiety. Fellows found their bearings as teachers; mentors, both from among the instructor staff as well as more experienced Fellows and MA colleagues, helped Fellows integrate; and technology, now available in every office and every classroom, also created new opportunities to connect with students, other teachers and the outside world.

The new spaces, however, were not without their own problems. “With everyone ‘locked up’ on their own, I feel that we fellows are missing the chance to exchange valuable information regarding our students and the whole teaching/learning process.” On the other hand, having a semi-private office helped some feel more like teachers. “I feel more integrated with the teaching faculty” and “There was more opportunity to meet face to face and discuss teaching practices.”

Mentoring became more formalized and was appreciated by some. Others commented on the availability, or lack thereof, of mentors due to timetabling. As one Fellow commented, "I think I took some of the initiative" which may have been the key to successful mentoring in this case.

The access to technology was welcomed. "Working in a 'Smart Classroom' has made a great impact on the way content is delivered to the students." One mentioned the access to a computer in an office space as very positive. "Subconsciously these changes have affected me, made me feel more a part of the teaching staff."

Change is not easy, but the opportunities that accompany it can be used positively. It's not money or status that will lead people to change, but shared experiences and positive support. We hope that our new campus in the desert will lead to new visions of a reinvigorated group of professionals that includes our Fellows in a reinvigorated *esprit de corps*.