



Fedukovich, C. (2013). Standing Against Future Contingency: Activist Mentoring in Composition Studies. *Workplace*, 22, 40-52.

CASIE FEDUKOVICH

STANDING AGAINST FUTURE CONTINGENCY: ACTIVIST MENTORING IN COMPOSITION STUDIES

In 2009, Thomas Benton¹ published his two-part article, “Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go,” detailing dismal job placement rates for doctoral students. Benton (2009a, 2009b) indicted the culture of doctoral education in the humanities as complicit in contributing to the crisis of contingency. He argues that this culture “socializes idealistic, naïve, and psychologically vulnerable people into a profession with a very clear set of values” (2009a, para. 15) and that it promotes the idea that job placement outside academe is a failure greater than working as a non-tenured faculty member, precariously employed, time-poor, and without institutional support.

Though his argument is intentionally divisive, Benton’s premise is sound: The number of doctoral graduates vastly outpaces available job placements. Further, tenure-tracked lines have decreased while public funding for higher education continues to diminish, leading to an overreliance on contingent faculty. Upper-administrators lean heavily on contract labor because, in the spirit of the neoliberal university, they value flexibility in hiring over ethics. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) found that in 2009, 75% of all faculty in the United States worked off the tenure track (AAUP Joint Subcommittee, p. 1). Specific to doctoral students in English and Foreign Languages, the Modern Language Association’s (MLA) 2006-7 *Survey of PhD Placement* reported that around half of graduates (49-55%) were placed in tenure-tracked appointments (2011, p. 4). Approximately 30% of these graduates accepted jobs off the tenure track but chose to stay in academe.

Composition programs are disproportionately responsible for staffing contingent positions. As a required course at many institutions, First-Year Composition (variously titled First-Year Writing or Introduction to Academic Writing) often offers more sections than any other course on campus, so the demand for labor is high. Anne Ruggles Gere (2009) reported that in 2009 about 84% of undergraduate writing courses were taught by faculty off the tenure line, split between graduate students (24.6%) and non-tenured faculty (58.3%) (p. 4). Partially in response to Hammer’s (2009) call for research in contingency studies, composition has begun to build a storehouse of disciplinary scholarship detailing the underlife of contingent faculty (Bartolomae, 2010; Doe et al., 2011; Schell, 1997).

Many graduate students in English, if they finish their degrees and stay in academia, will join this New Faculty Majority, the vast and growing population of non-tenure-eligible faculty. Facing such dismal odds, why do doctoral students choose to forfeit four to five years of wage earning at the slim promise of a tenure line? There is an absence of research conducted by or with doctoral candidates to explore their

¹ Thomas Benton is the pseudonym of William Pannacker, an English Literature professor and academic administrator at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

reasons for staying in academia, particularly in the two years after the Great Recession of 2008, when advertised positions in English dropped 39.8% (MLA Office of Research, p. 1, 2012).

This study presents data from interviews with six doctoral students in English who have chosen to stay in their courses of study. They each identified labor histories, specifically legacies of blue-collar work, as grounding their decisions to continue. These doctoral students had in common resistant professional identities and teaching methods as they described similar recognitions of the relative lack of on-the-job injuries and feelings of obligations in giving back to their communities. They each recognized that a doctorate in English does not guarantee job market success if that success is measured only by a tenure-eligible appointment. Instead, each described goals that included a focus on teaching and desires to work at smaller institutions, even if contract employment were their only option. The participants' narratives suggest that the decision to stay in graduate school may be influenced by a number of historically situated factors, such as labor ideologies and political, personal, and professional commitments.

The process of graduate study—from admissions to advising, preparation and graduation—points to graduate mentoring an opportunity to radically influence doctoral students' entrée to the job market. Moving from the six participants' experiences, this article concludes with a recommendation to incorporate activist mentoring as a way to quietly and incrementally stand against contingency.

Methods

In the spring of 2010, I interviewed six doctoral candidates who self-identified as working class or blue collar.² Subjects self-selected via email and were my peers at a large, state-funded, land-grant university in the Southeastern United States. We all taught first-year composition in the English Department. At the time, I was appointed Assistant Director of Composition, a position the department awarded to a fourth-year doctoral candidate interested in writing program administration. Interviews were held in the office of the Director of Composition. I understood that my presumed status in the program and the venue for interviews might influence participants' openness, and I therefore chose methods I felt might ameliorate their discomfort.

In three, one-hour, semi-structured individual interviews and one focus group, we discussed a range of topics related to their past and present work lives, how they envisioned their future work lives, and their pedagogical philosophies. Interview protocols were created based on phenomenological questioning (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990) and interactive interview techniques, defined by Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillman-Healey (1997) as a "collaborative communication process, occurring between researchers and respondents" (p. 121). For Ellis, et al., interview situations "involve the sharing of personal and social experiences of *both* respondents and researchers, who tell (and sometimes write) their stories into the context of a developing relationship" (p. 121). Given the potentially sensitive nature of the project, a collaborative model addressed concerns that participants might feel co-opted by the research. I began the first of each six interviews with an explanation of my purpose for the project—to explore in-depth the experiences of working-class graduate students in English—and my own self-identification as working class. I shared with each participant my family's labor history as miners and mechanics in the coal fields of West Virginia and how this labor history has influenced my graduate study and teaching. We often carried discussions outside the interview space, where we shared ideas for teaching and engaged in peer mentoring.

Our relationship as peers directly informed my choice of a postcritical methodological framework (Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Gunzenhauser, 2004) and analytic induction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Keeping in mind Gunzenhauser's (2004) promise to refuse participant exploitation and the postcritical mandates of

² There are important and productive differences between describing oneself as either blue collar or working class. However, the participants themselves conflated the terms, and for the purposes of this article, I will also conflate them.

reflexivity and equality, this study followed an inductive analytic approach. Transcripts were coded using methods outlined by Saldana's (2009) first- and second-cycle coding processes (p. 77), methods similar to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) constant comparison. Member checking occurred at three points: at the completion of raw interview transcripts, after initial drafting of the study, and after subsequent revisions (see Lather, 1986, on face validity).

Most (5 of 6) participants identified as first-generation college students, but they came to academia from a variety of backgrounds. Two identified as Mid-western, one as Western, one as Appalachian, and two as Northeastern. Even within these regional connections, participants identified with sub-regions based on labor access. The Mid-western participant described a history of farming, the Westerner, ranching and oil-field work; the participant from Appalachia narrated a family history rooted in mines and steel mills, and the Northeastern participants described factory and service labor in their family backgrounds.

The project began as an inquiry into influences of labor histories on teaching methods and philosophies; however, in 2010, two years into the Great Recession, anxieties about dwindling job placements permeated our interviews. Most tenure-track hiring in English takes place at the Modern Language Association (MLA) Conference in early January. Our March and April interviews were thus fraught with discussions about our peers who had submitted multiple applications without response or who had accepted contingent labor positions.

Although the six participants narrated radically different labor ideologies, all six agreed on three ideas: 1) working in academia, even with the uncertainty of job prospects, is both safer and more stable than working in most blue-collar industries; 2) teaching comprised the "real work" of the academy; and 3) overreliance on unprotected labor was neither surprising nor particular to academia. Specific to first-year composition, the six participants identified the purpose of the course in two ways: as instrumental, a space where students could practice skills directly connected to job success (with a focus on economic access); and as emancipatory, where students could explore critical approaches to larger cultural issues (with a focus on ideologies and civic engagement).

Tangential to this project, none of the participants chose to self-identify as "academic," citing the presuppositions of privilege as too far removed from their own experiences. Resistance to the title, informed in part by their class backgrounds, uniquely situated these novice teachers to first recognize and then question the class-bound power structures which drive the neoliberal academy.

Participants: Historically Influenced Teaching

Daniel: Working-Class Bona Fides

Daniel³ grew up in rural Pennsylvania, just outside the rust belt. His family mined coal, and his grandfather led a number of union strikes, a legacy which frames Daniel's commitment to economic equality through education. Low-wage and hourly work implicates micro-management, one of the factors supporting his persistence in academia. Coupled with his preference to opt out of free-market capitalism through subsistence living, Daniel noted,

I'm not necessarily anti-capitalist... [but] I want to be in academia to remove myself as much as possible from hyper-capitalism. After the first 20 or 25 years of life constantly at the bottom, I asked myself, why do I want to be part of it? That was part of why I started studying English in the first place.

He neither makes nor sells products, he argued. Instead, he connected classroom teaching with advocacy and "horizon broadening." He explains his pedagogy as "pessimistic... I want to show students that the bootstraps myth is a myth. I'll never teach the Horatio Alger lie."

³ All names are pseudonyms.

Like two other participants—Rick and Anne-Marie—Daniel envisions himself teaching in a state-funded school, ideally in his home state, so he can serve a population of students “open to the idea of refusing consumerism, open to critically thinking about American corporate culture.” He identified these populations as similar to his own background: first-generation college-student, blue-collar, and hungry for economic change.

While it makes him angry to see mainstream culture ignore the loss of industry and out-migration in places like rural Pennsylvania, Daniel works against stridency in the first-year composition classroom. He said, “I’m not here to start any sort of revolution. I’m here to introduce kids who would otherwise never encounter interesting ideas like the ones in Freud or Nietzsche.” Daniel connected his teaching philosophy with the gradual cultural and economic shift from an emphasis on sole-proprietorship—through opportunities like vocational training and apprenticing—toward a corporate model of labor, a shift that he has identified as parallel to the labor structure of the university. Students are no longer encouraged to think individually, as inventors or leaders, but instead are encouraged to collect skills as docile technicians. Likewise, the corporate university has bypassed individual concerns, of students and teachers alike, to serve behind-the-scenes capitalist demands.

Daniel narrated a labor past that includes stints in home health care and patent writing, jobs which left him feeling complicit in contributing to systemic inequity. He tries to work against these inequities through his teaching, saying, “Academia is the last hope for my conscience, the last humanist gasp.” Content memorization and testing has displaced “languid discussions of art and culture and the human condition,” and corporate influences have simplified learning to the point where students are no longer responsible for critically interrogating the world. Loss of this critical interrogation, Daniel said, only supports vast inequality, and he firmly resists current trends to evacuate the humanities from higher education.

Daniel also recognized that holding an advanced degree in literature means that he will be competing for only a few tenure-eligible jobs nationwide. However, the uncertainty of contingent employment is a “fair trade,” he said, for the affordances a teaching position holds. Teaching at the college level “really is an ethical obligation” and is far more important to him than research and publishing. He described freedom in allowing students to “fail if they want to,” a philosophy he directly connected to ideologies of working-class self-reliance.

Anne-Marie: Far from the Oil Field

Anne-Marie is more hesitant than Daniel in outlining a firm stance against the corporate university. She described her childhood in Wyoming as “based on the core of rugged individualism, motiveless wandering, and ‘taking care of your own.’” Her small home town was close to the Canadian border where ranching constitutes the primary industry and poverty was the status quo. The most lavish house in town sat next door to the trailer park, where her sister still lives. Higher education wasn’t a concern, as the diesel technicians, “Tekkers” and “Greasemonkeys,” made wages far above most other residents.

Anne-Marie noted ambivalence in titling herself an “academic,” as she says it is an identity directly at odds with her upbringing as “oil field trash.” Her family, she related, always thought of career scholars as necessarily disconnected from the world and, worse, trained in deception: “Academics are the people who pull the wool over your eyes. They’re always trying to get one over on you.” As a Medievalist, she described professionalization as “lonely,” since “so many scholars in my field feel that it’s important to discuss things like 14th century fish ponds. They never mention students or teaching, so where’s the relevance?” The most important work of the academy is not its contribution to research, even at research-intensive schools. Instead, she identified teaching as the “real work” of the academy, as colleges and universities can decide to either “support this country’s dramatic inequalities—as they’re doing—or work against them” by teaching critical inquiry.

Anne-Marie admitted that her training—in learning multiple languages and studying cognate fields like paleontology and theology—ideally positions her for a tenure-tracked appointment at a Research 1

university. Yet this is not a placement she is invested in achieving. In part, it is Anne-Marie's professor-centered critique of academia that causes her to reflect on her possible future as a professor: "Academics have constructed what the university is, what it's supposed to do, how it's supposed to interact as a part of the world, in a lot of ways are fundamentally false." She noted a distinct and troubling schism between the "ivory fishbowl" and the "wider world," a dichotomy that she cited as reason enough for her to "throw this career under the bus and start over." Yet if an academic appointment allows her to creatively address social issues and advocate—at the time of interviews, she was spearheading a campus initiative for LGBTQI inclusion—Anne-Marie sees its utility, even as she identifies herself as both/and: "one foot in academia and one foot at the base of the mountains in the West. One foot in a world-class library and one foot in an oil field." She sees her role in the academy *not* as grounded in the texts she produces, but more interpersonal, as a representation to working-class students that "not all professors are checked out and self-involved."

In contrast with Daniel's pedagogies, Anne-Marie's approach to teaching writing detailed a more instrumental focus, as she guided students through practices that she hoped would "make them competitive" for both jobs and other opportunities, like scholarships. But this skills-based approach is limited as she recognized that vocational training opportunities have dwindled and that much of what she teaches in first-year composition can be considered skills sets for middle-management and could convey to students that "[she] doesn't care much about what they think, only what they can produce."

Paul: "You Do Your Work"

Paul was the only participant to orient to an urban upbringing. Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, his family worked in factories, and Paul loaded packages into the bellies of airplanes for years before entering community college as a nontraditional student. Because of his own labor history, Paul described working in academics as a "pseudo-job," saying, "It's hard to think of this as like a full-time job in the conventional sense, because sure, we do other stuff, we work longer than just those hours, but... [w]hat is work? Can I leave and do the rest of it at home? At a real job, you can't." He described an approach to work that draws heavily from his experiences with physical injury and the expectation in blue-collar work to "do your job" regardless of the circumstances. This attention to mind-work over body-work and the acknowledgement of physical limitations is one point which Paul recalled to support his persistence in the academy. He described one instance when, despite the flu and a fever, he showed up for his writing center tutoring shift. The director immediately sent him home.

In contrast, Paul recounted the story of a co-worker he met in airline logistics. They were tasked to load freight airplanes, and this man came to work despite a broken hand and strep throat "because you don't get sick days. You don't need to talk to load boxes. You don't need both hands to work." This recognition of the affordances of an academic appointment, even a contract one, keeps Paul in his course of study. Compared to much of the work Paul had done or witnessed, "[Teaching is] nice. It's indoors. It doesn't require a lot of heavy lifting, but at the end of the day, it's a job. And this sort of takes away some of that romantic notion" of a full time, tenure-eligible academic appointment as a position with universal relevance or prestige.

For Paul, career success involves teaching full time at an institution that serves first-generation and working-class students, like a community college or a small regional institution. He cited trust as the most important factor in his teaching philosophy: "It's like in air freight. You have to trust the person next to you so much because they could make a decision that kills you. In teaching, the students have to trust that the instructor has their best interests at heart." Paul communicates this trust to his students through his dress, which he described as "obviously formal, a suit and tie usually" and through "acting the part of professor," including a thoughtful refusal of decentering the classroom. "I want them to know that someone is there to guide things," he said, "and I want to be the obvious person of authority at the front of the room." This trust is difficult to build, but Paul narrated a philosophy that identifies an ethical

obligation to teach students from backgrounds similar to his, a position he noted would most likely be one of a contingent faculty member.

Paul firmly rejected, like the other participants, the identity of “academic,” stating, “I think of the people I used to work with who, if the company closes down at the airport, they’re screwed. Obviously there are problems if the university reduces its funding. I might lose my job. But there are other schools. There’s greater flexibility.” Working at multiple schools, as he acknowledged many contract faculty must do, is an unfortunate result of the corporate university’s focus on profit, yet he did not despair to think of himself as a non-tenure-track faculty member. While the hours are long and the work difficult, it is sustainable, at least in the short term: “If I hurt myself, if I fall down the stairs leaving here and I break my arm, it’s not the worst inconvenience in the world for me to teach with a broken arm. My relationship with my job isn’t such that if this were to go away and I had to find another job, my life would be shattered.” The opportunity to work with students in their first year and the relatively low incidence of job injuries all support Paul’s desire to complete his doctorate, even if contingent work is all that is available to him.

Rick: Success Beyond the Self

Rick’s experiences growing up in Missouri sharply contrasted with other participants, as Rick noted the tangible grace of manual labor, which he considered “physical as well as mental as well as aesthetic.” In our interviews, these ideological aspects—from the importance of family and community to the purity and satisfaction of manual labor—were tightly wound through narratives of the ways Rick has done labor or witnessed labor being done. His father owned a fence-building company where Rick and his brother worked during summers: “You’d start building and there’d be a string line, and this is where we must be by the end of the day, and when you got there, there’s a definite feeling of accomplishment... this beautiful white fence going up the hill.” The products of an academic life are mostly intangible, he argued, and can take weeks or years to materialize to be appreciated by, in many cases, a small audience. Teaching gives Rick the same kind of satisfaction as laying fence, where he can make daily improvements and gather immediate responses from students.

Rick’s family’s labor background influences his decision to structure his classroom as a community, with a focus on “making bonds and building trust.” Rick’s parents now own and operate a convenience store in his small hometown, an establishment Rick calls the “cultural and social center.” However, before their entrepreneurial careers, both parents worked in die-casting factories, a job Rick took one summer during college. His experience in factory work has become the single greatest influence on Rick’s teaching: “I grew up with parents who wore tee shirts and jeans to work. I wore a tee shirt and jeans to [the factory]. When I teach, that’s what I wear. It’s my work clothes.” Rick aligns himself as a teacher with the “floor boss,” as a facilitator working “alongside, not above students,” and not as a “factory suit” who might only occasionally tour the space in order to evaluate the workers. This choice points to Rick’s focus on decentered pedagogies, in which he works to make students responsible for the direction of the course with democratically designed assignments and rubrics.

While Rick’s preliminary research into peer-review strategies might make him a strong candidate for a research-focused job, he does not consider a Research 1 placement success. For Rick, job market success must be effective beyond his personal career advancement. Both Rick’s teaching philosophy and future plans in the academy are framed in terms of the desire to return to a small, teaching-focused school like the one he attended as an undergraduate student. The benefits of such an environment were multiple for him: “It was such a small campus that there were teachers that everybody wanted to take because they knew they would get something very important out of [the class].” A teaching job, even one with a contingent contract, would keep Rick in the classroom where he feels most comfortable, most able to “be himself,” even if he had to negotiate the difficult process of job security. “It seems that contingent faculty are valued much higher at smaller schools,” he said, “maybe because their budget cuts aren’t as dramatic. But either way, I would feel safer teaching as a lecturer at a small school, more protected.” Because his time and energy could be focused on teaching, especially as a contingent faculty member without

publication expectations, he felt that his personal and professional goals and strengths as a classroom teacher best matched the missions of small liberal arts institutions. He described a desire to “work with the community around the school, to help build houses and fences for the families, to get to know students,” and he suggested that a tenure-eligible position focused on publishing might upset this work/life balance.

Research, Rick argued, is isolating, as a “Research 1 institution is more focused on what you do. I just don’t think I’d enjoy that as much as being there with the students in the classroom, where I immediately know if I’m doing something good for someone else.” He continued to describe many tenure-tracked appointments as “disconnected,” as relying on peer-vetted texts like books and articles to stand in for interpersonal relationships with students.

Will: Building Castles

Will described a background that started in the cornfields and factories of rural Iowa. Like Daniel and Rick, Will strongly identified with an agricultural background and noted that this background—in addition to his class identification—colored the way he sees himself and his place in the world. Iowa, he said, has “this aura of simplicity because you know the pigs aren’t going anywhere, the cornfield’s not going anywhere. It’s just not going to make you rich either.” Like Daniel, Will is influenced by the sociocultural and economic shift away from sole-proprietorship as a viable career path. Instead, “it seems, for a lot of people, school is the way to get an engineering job or educate yourself in a lot of different ways to get jobs.” Will’s father was a roofer, carpenter, and mechanic. He detailed his father’s work history as a move to establish himself independently, avoiding the need to be employed by a company: “My dad was a self-employed guy. He learned his skills from his friend’s dad and went out in the world and worked for awhile and came back and started his life at home.” Will’s insistence that education isn’t the only path to success is a point that works to inform the rest of his narrative.

Throughout our interviews, Will gestured toward this a benchmark of self-reliance as one of his framing experiences. Formal schooling is thus cast as an alternative for people who lack these specialized skills and, as he noted, as an option for people who feel that “school’s the only way you” can be successful. That is, people with no access to vocational apprenticeships must then look to institutions of learning to gain the credentials needed to become employable.

While Will learned to lay shingles alongside his father, he described a resistance to working for someone, instead of operating his own business. After training in construction, Will took up digital technology as a potential future career: “Before I [came back to school for my master’s degree], I was always into computers and programming. I’ve got a little mechanical knowledge from working with my dad. I could go that way, but I’ve chosen to stick with the castles in the air.” Will’s “castles in the air” influence his choice to stay in academia, as they represent a move away from the dangerous, physically-demanding work he watched his father do.

Will described his goals to work in academia as a thoughtful effort to make life more financially comfortable while also engaging in satisfying labor. He related, “I think part of the reason I always wanted to [go in to academics] was to maybe try to move up the ladder a little bit, to get up to semi-respectable middle-class position.” He stated that he “loves working in the realm of the mind” and “remembers pretty vividly thinking that I decided to do this when I was 13 or 14. I don’t want to work on a hot roof. I don’t want to work someplace where someone could drop a bundle of shingles on me by accident.” Will did not move to describe construction in the same nostalgic terms Rick used for laying fence. Instead, Will recalled his father’s death of a heart attack—an event which happened while he was roofing a house, the day before Will left for college—as further support for his decision to pursue a life of the mind.

Will also recognized that a job in academia, even a contingent position, may hold more social cache than the jobs held by his family, yet he was quick to correct the notion that he is looking to surpass a given working-class baseline: “I’ve not tried to shape my persona to try to be somewhat of a higher-class position. Maybe I just want some of the comforts and the opportunities you get from not being broke-ass

poor and working on a farm.” Instead of making an argument for the prestige of a position in academia, he cites the “comforts and opportunities” granted by a job like a professorship as his reason for persisting. Even as a contingent faculty member, he told me, the threat of traumatic injury is much reduced and opportunities for meaningful labor much improved.

Tabitha: Being of Use

Tabitha’s narrative began with her hesitation to identify as working class, as she argued that she identifies with an “immigrant class” more fully than “straight blue collar.” Complicating her family’s access to education—a move that Tabitha made to cue attainment as a marker for class status—is her own educational background. She attended a prestigious boarding school in Connecticut, an experience that conveys images of wealth and comfort. However, she noted, she attended this college-prep school on scholarship and worked summers as a housekeeper at the school to offset some of the costs.

This tension between elite schooling and working-class identification ran throughout our interviews. “I self-selected,” she explained, “because my parents had the ideology that [much of] a working-class [life] was connected to lack of education.” Tabitha detailed an educational past focused on employability, stability, and sustainability. The intrinsic goal of schooling was, for her family, directly connected to her ability to earn a comfortable wage after it was completed. This instrumental focus implicates working-class ideologies, as studying the humanities is a “privilege you get when you come from an upper/middle-class life, so kids can become art majors or history majors, and then kind of float around Europe for awhile.” Tabitha holds an undergraduate degree in engineering and worked for a major manufacturer for a few years before beginning her graduate work in Medieval comedy.

Tabitha’s teaching philosophy and career goals center on the idea of material usefulness, a concept she argued disappears as one moves closer to middle-class lifestyles. The working class must “know how to fix things and build things, because we can’t afford to pay people to do it.” Tabitha describes her teaching methods as similarly “practical.” Influenced by her background in engineering, she grounds her methods in portability and application, a skills focus she defended as “useful in giving students the frameworks they need to achieve their own ideas of success.” However, she also considered the college writing classroom as a space of critical engagement, particularly important when first-year students—who are 18 and just coming into their own intellectual spaces—are considered: “I think that what we do is phenomenal, especially... becoming aware of the tactics people use, [helping students] separate information from authority.”

Tabitha argued that the skills she teaches in first-year composition are directly related to the kind of critical consciousness students lack in terms of challenging their own socioeconomic situations: “It’s just one of the most important things in life you can give a student, those tools... to recognize when they’re getting the shaft, how to argue persuasively in their own best interests.” Though she identified teaching as her primary interest in graduate study, she was hesitant to outline a plan for her future in academia, saying that she wasn’t convinced of the viability of higher education in its current form. “Especially with online instruction,” she said, “much of what we’re doing now will be obsolete. There’s cost savings in moving college online, so classroom teachers like us will be dinosaurs.” She did not demonize this trend toward moving education online, instead considering it a neutral effect of technology. Because of her background in engineering, a choice itself framed by her legacy of labor, she is open to the idea of technology’s use in education and could see herself working part-time for online institutions where, she said, she could “be of use in working with demographics of students who may be unprepared or underprepared or who feel out of place in a brick-and-mortar classroom.”

Discussion: Quiet Advocates

The narratives of these six doctoral candidates suggest that novice academics draw from decades of influences—ideological, cultural, and physical—when making career decisions and framing their

professional identities. These six students represent six potential contingent faculty members, a status which is becoming more common and less protected as the gradual defunding of public education continues. They each understood that they were trading valuable years of wage earning for a credential that might not secure permanent employment in academia. However, as they variously noted, these decisions were not made from naiveté about the job market or lack of knowledge about life as a contingent faculty member. Drawing from decades of labor ideologies and work histories, the six participants framed academia as, drawing from Daniel's narrative, just another exploitative industry: "I think if you're working class, you've grown up... learning to like the taste of shit because they have to eat a lot of it. Academia's no different." Because the participants in this study had first-hand knowledge of blue-collar labor—factory work, machine repair, mining, farming, and carpentry—they worked from a dialectic of labor that considered physical trauma, mass mistreatment, and other kinds of contingency as, in the case of Will's farming background, reliance on the weather. Because labor was central to their understanding of self, they considered the implications of graduate study in their work futures.

However, broadly speaking, many doctoral candidates across disciplines are unaware of the state of the job market, overreliance on unethical hiring practices, and the realities of contingency. This project suggests that doctoral candidates' decisions to pursue graduate study are influenced by many factors that may remain unapparent to mentors. What I propose is an application of activist strategies to graduate student mentoring, in light of these narratives, to contribute to the growing field of contingency studies and to open our departments and programs to discussions about the realities of academic hiring. While individual departments cannot hope to turn the tide of contingency, doctoral mentors can work locally to learn students' reasons for graduate study and to provide them informed advice which takes contingency into consideration.

Activist Mentoring

Mentors can work against future contingency by engaging in mentoring that goes beyond entrée to the field. In considering mentoring an ethos, a "living habit of being" (Sini, 2009), we can apply grassroots activist strategies to work against our complicity in the labor contingency crisis. While it is important to work for equality for contract faculty—living wages, adequate resources, and secure employment—graduate mentors can, as a part of their departmental expectations, better prepare doctoral candidates to advocate for themselves when they enter the job market or to consider employment possibilities outside academe.

Kezar, Gallant, and Lester (2011) reframe activism in academia as *Tempered Radicalism*, or advocacy which "honor[s] the norms, values, and missions of the academy while simultaneously challenging its enacted practices" (p. 131). This "quiet and persistent" action (p. 131), including student mentoring, "re[li]es on the cumulative effect of incremental and often subtle action to foster change" (p. 134). Because most faculty members are largely stripped of power, even in their own programs, tactical and tempered radicalism through student mentoring may be a way to bring about slow change against unethical hiring. I propose four specific "subtle actions" activist mentors may take up: providing culturally influenced mentoring, offering opportunities to unsettle students' assumptions through radical reflexivity, arranging for informal mentoring with non-tenure-track faculty, and building in formal course work that explores inequalities in higher education.

Gail Okawa (2002), writing from the position of college composition, describes mentoring as a cultural and "activist practice among academics of color" (p. 507). Her narrative-based study tracked mentoring practices with two foundational composition scholars—Geneva Smitherman and Victor Villanueva—by first collecting their experiences as protégés and then querying the students Smitherman and Villanueva mentored. Specific to Okawa's (2002) study is the framework of ethnic identification as a membership category, though it should be noted that not every protégé of Smitherman and Villanueva identified as a scholar of color. Smitherman described her mentor, Dr. Bob Shafer, as responsible for her pursuit of English studies, saying that he "practiced a mentoring based on action—belief in the student, intervention

against injustice, entrée into the profession, and support” (p. 512). Okawa’s study found that culturally situated mentoring supported community, refused isolationism, and worked to connect students traditionally invisible or unwelcome in the academy to larger power structures. As described by Anne-Marie, the process of professionalization can be “lonely,” isolating, and can feel disconnected from day-to-day realities. Mentoring along lines of membership categories, as Okawa describes, can support more open relationships between professors and doctoral students. The present study implemented membership-based, culturally informed peer mentoring, which Rick described as “comforting” as he had “no idea there were other working-class graduate students” in our department.

Second, mentors may structure these relationships textually through the use of radical reflexivity, which honors students’ prior knowledges (Minichello & Kottler, 2009; Pollner, 1991). Pollner describes this process as “an unsettling, an insecurity regarding basic assumptions, discourse, and practices used in describing reality” (p. 370). By building in opportunities for these advanced students to reflect on their choices—as the six participants in this study did—graduate mentors may be able to better guide and support the students’ definitions of career success. Also, by unsettling assumptions about graduate study—not only in job market terms, but also its role in fostering public intellectualism—mentors can move their relationships from managerial to advocacy-based, a move that implicates a wider range of embodied concerns. As Rick noted, academia values texts as proxies for faculty; recasting mentoring as a “living habit of being” (Sini, 2009), at once embodied and enacted, allows mentors and their students to write up and then discuss issues like differences between tenure-eligible and non-tenured positions, desirable job expectations, and work/life balance.

Mentors may support this reflexivity by calling on John Dirkx’s (2008) framework of “self-formation” (p. 65) to guide students through the dramatic identity negotiations of graduate study. In comparison to mind-work, Dirkx’s “soul work” offers a counter to the primarily practice-oriented, and primarily disembodied, training offered to novice academics. He advocates supplementing content-based courses with opportunities to allow novice teachers to “re-story [the] self” (p. 70) and to recognize the “emotional landscape of faculty life” (p. 70; as cited in Kraft, 2002, p. 204). As the present study suggests, scholars-in-training already practice reflexivity at deep levels. Offering them opportunities to discuss these negotiations in safe spaces can help them make more thoughtful decisions about their career paths and enter the job market, if they choose, knowing more about the kind of scholar-teacher they wish to become.

Third, encouraging doctoral students to get acquainted with faculty beyond the advisor, particularly non-tenure-track (NTT) faculty, may provide a valuable analog to a student’s professional development and may work against the isolation described by the six participants. NTT faculty offer much in the way of context-specific support and situated practice. Here, I am careful not to suggest that contingent faculty need more service work. With reduced budgets, many are already experiencing task creep, where they are charged with duties outside of teaching. I do wish to recognize, however, that contingent faculty often hold the institutional memory and practical expertise in their programs. Since 86% of writing instruction is led by contingent faculty (Gere, p. 4, 2009), these faculty possess on-the-ground insight into trends in teaching and learning in composition. This insight proves invaluable to novice scholars who are likely—or who intend to—work as non-tenure-track faculty, yet many departments overlook NTT faculty as a resource for informal mentoring.

By working alongside contingent faculty as potential colleagues, doctoral students not only gain access to the challenges and rewards of teaching off the tenure line; they also make professional connections beyond their committee members. In addition to one-on-one relationships between doctoral students and NTT faculty, which may be undesirable in terms of time commitments, mentors may encourage their students to be present at program- or department-sponsored professional development activities. At a time when many of our doctoral students will be competing for teaching-heavy positions, mentors must address teaching-specific professionalization alongside disciplinary expertise.

Further, non-tenure-track positions vary widely by institution, and it is methodologically slipshod to name all contract positions undesirable. Daniel, Rick, and Will all described job market success in terms of working as contingent faculty, since they would have access to large student populations and, though

disempowered in many ways, can effect large-scale influence through their teaching. As the participants in this study cited teaching as the “real work” of the academy, it is reasonable that they might desire positions where their time is spent teaching, instead of in research. Developing relationships with non-tenure-track faculty can help them consider their career goals in real terms and develop vocabulary for discussing their future.

Finally, graduate mentors can work departmentally to offer courses in academic labor theories and practices, to present students with frameworks and vocabulary for interrogating their choices and working for change. In my department, for example, a course on writing program administration brought to the fore the many complex negotiations facing program administrators. Students not only learned the intricacies of academic hierarchies but became more aware of the implications of their degrees. To work in writing program administration (WPA) is to be identified as “middle managers” responsible for negotiating resources: people, spaces, and budgets. The role of the WPA is often reduced to a binary, where the administrator is charged with either complicity in unethical hiring practices or with rejecting the system wholesale. In practice, the experiences of most WPAs are much more complex. The students in this WPA seminar had considered many of the logistical demands of the job—like scheduling and communicating with contacts across campus—but they had not yet considered the program administrator’s role as “middle management,” given the responsibility to operate the program but no authority to make decisions about issues like contract security or budget allocations.

Because composition staffs so many contingent positions, it has become an area for focused research in the implications of contract labor, with cornerstone texts like Donna Strickland’s *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies* (2011), Marc Bousquet’s “Composition as Management Science: Toward a University Without a WPA” (2009), and Sidney Dobrin’s *Postcomposition* (2011). Giving graduate students the opportunity to explore these texts, to connect their professional goals with market demands, and to enter the job market aware of the state of hiring—both as potential contingent faculty and as academic middle managers—can help mentors work within departmental expectations while also advocating for their students.

Insofar as the personal is the political and the professional, graduate mentors can work against future contingency by introducing graduate students to the academic hierarchy of labor early. Further, by promoting radical reflection and informal mentoring with non-tenure-track faculty, mentors can encourage graduate students to connect their backgrounds, ideologies, and commitments to their work. Christians (2005) argues that “major institutions fail to account for the identities of their members” (p. 152). As an institution shaped by status quo and staffed by a diverse cadre of instructors, the university presents a case of identity negotiation among faculty and students—and those who dwell between. Mentoring processes, in addition to offering pre-professionalization, can be refined in light of the present data connecting class status to pedagogy and reflective embodiment.

All of the doctoral candidates in our departments come to us with labor histories—decades and centuries old—that manifest in their conceptions of themselves as teachers and their professional goals. Present practices in graduate mentoring do not go far enough in considering the prior knowledges—felt, sensed, or known—of these students. By working in methods for students to actively reflect on their professional development and offering opportunities for them to make connections beyond their isolated circles, graduate mentors can quietly but gradually begin to effect change.

References

- American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Joint Subcommittee, Contingency and the Profession and College and University Governance. (2009). The inclusion in governance of faculty members holding contingent appointments. Retrieved from the AAUP website: <http://www.aaup.org/NR/rdonlyres/F780FD9B-92A4-4D41-B373-18BBEBEE64D3/0/ContingentFacultyAndGovernance.pdf>.
- Bartholomae, D. (2010). Teaching on and off the tenure track: Highlights from the ADE survey of staffing patterns in English. *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture*, 11(1), 7-32.
- Benton, T. (2009a, January 30). Graduate school in the humanities: Just don't go. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://chronicle.com>.
- Benton, T. (2009b, March 19). Just don't go: Part 2. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://chronicle.com>.
- Bousquet, M. (2009). Composition as management science: Toward a university without a WPA. *Journal of Advanced Composition*, 22(3), 493-526.
- Christians, C. (2005). Ethics and politics in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 139-164). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dirkx, J. (2008). Care of the self: Mythopoetic dimensions of professional preparation and development. In T. Leonard & P. Willis (Eds.), *Pedagogies of the imagination: Mythopoetic curriculum in educational practice* (pp. 35-82). New York: Springer.
- Dobrin, S. (2011). *Postcomposition*. Carbondale: SIUP.
- Doe, S., Barnes, N., Bown, D., Gilkey, D., Guardiola Smoak, G., Ryan, S., Sarell, K., Thomas, L. H., Troup, L. J., & Palmquist, M. (2011). Discourse of the firetenders: Considering contingent faculty through the lens of activity theory. *College English*, 73(4), 428-449.
- Ellis, C., Keisinger, C., & Tillman-Healy, L. (1997). Interactive interviewing: Talking about emotional experience. In R. Hertz (Ed.), *Reflexivity and voice* (pp. 119-149). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Gere, A. R. (2009). *Initial Report on Survey of CCCC Members*. Squire Office of Policy Research, National Council of Teachers of English. Retrieved from <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Groups/CCCC/InitialReportSurveyCCCCMembers.pdf>.
- Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
- Gunzenhauser, M. G. (2004). Promising rhetoric for postcritical ethnography. In G. Noblit, S. Flores, & E. Murillo, Jr. (Eds.), *Postcritical ethnography: Reinscribing critique* (pp. 77-94). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Hammer, B. (2009). From the editor: Defining the material and disciplinary limits of contingency. *Forum: Newsletter for Issues about Part-Time and Contingent Faculty*, 13(1), A1-A4.
- Kezar, A., Gallant, T., & Lester, J. (2011). Everyday people making a difference on college campuses: The tempered grassroots leadership tactics of faculty and staff. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(2), 129-151.
- Kraft, R. G. (2002). Teaching excellence and the inner life of a faculty. In S. M. Intrator (Ed.), *Stories of the courage to teach: Honoring the teacher's heart* (pp. 203-17). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lather, Patti. (1986). Issues of validity in openly ideological research: Between a rock and a soft place. *Interchange*, 17(4), 63-84.

- Minicheillo, V., & Kottler, J. (2009). *Qualitative journeys: Student and mentor experiences with research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Modern Language Association. (2011). *MLA survey of placement in 2006-7 graduates from doctoral programs in the United States and Canada*. Retrieved from http://www.mla.org/pdf/survey_phdplacement_0607.pdf.
- Modern Language Association (MLA) Office of Research. (2012, September). *Report on the MLA Job Information List, 2011-12*. Retrieved from http://www.mla.org/pdf/report_jil_1112.pdf.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Noblit, G., Flores, S., & Murillo, Jr., E. (Eds.). (2004). *Postcritical ethnography: Reinscribing critique*. Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Okawa, G. (2002). Diving for pearls: Mentoring as cultural and activist practice among academics of color. *College Composition and Communication*, 53(3), 507-532.
- Pollner, M. (1991). Left of ethnomethodology: The rise and decline of radical reflexivity. *American Sociological Review*, 56(3), 370-380.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Schell, E. (1997). *Gypsy academics and mother-teachers: Gender, contingent labor, and writing instruction*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook.
- Sini, C. (2009). *The ethics of writing*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Strickland, D. (2011). *The managerial unconscious in the history of composition studies*. Carbondale: SIUP.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.