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ENGL 511

20 November 2019

Dr. Gregory Skutches: A Man Devoted to His Craft

Dr. Gregory Skutches serves as the Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Much of his work focuses on the promotion of writing across the curriculum in first-year writing courses through the development of strong peer-to-peer writing communities. When asking Skutches if he would be willing to speak on his scholarship and investment in the field of Writing and Composition, he responded, “I would be happy to talk with you about the TRAC Writing Fellows program, but you should know that I am not much of a scholar.” His professional accolades suggest otherwise. Since assuming the Director position in 2006, he has built one of the largest WAC programs and the largest Teaching, Writing, and Communication (TRAC) Writing Fellow program in the country, employing “77 TRAC Writing Fellows” and serving “over 120 faculty and instructors, and approximately 9,000 students” (*Lehigh University*). And, despite having not published significant work in the filed of composition studies, Skutches has presented at number of conferences and even given a TED Talk on the subject of WAC and FYC. “I would say that I'm a devoted practitioner,” he said at the end of our first correspondence. The following interview with Skutches indicates that he is, indeed, that.

Unlike those who, at the turn of the century, served as the vanguard of 21st century composition studies, Skutches arrived on the scene “late.” “My path was meandering,” he says, growing up, he was raised to believe “important men do important things,” which for his parents meant “doctor, lawyer, [or] business executive,” while “literature and college professor of writing is not what serious dudes do.” It was not until after spending some time in the private business sector and, later, coaching college wrestling, that Skutches decided to quit his “relatively high-paying corporate job” and go back to school to earn his graduate degree in English at Lehigh University. At first, he had no such intentions of devoting his career to writing and composition studies, wanting to study literature. However, that all changed after receiving a teaching fellowship to teach FYC; “I loved the shit out of it,” he said proudly, signaling the end of his long, winding search for a vocation and the beginning of what has become a fruitful career.

Currently, in his role as Director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Skutches’ primary academic interest and professional focus is on the improvement of student writing. On the Lehigh University, Writing Across the Curriculum website, he lays out the program’s “guiding assumptions”: (1) “the value of writing-centered pedagogy” that emphasizes writing as a form of “exploration” and “discovery,” (2) “the power and effectiveness of peer learning” that fosters “a genuine exchange of ideas,” (3) “an expanded conception of writing that includes oral and multi-modal communication,” (4) “diversity,” which enhances students’ ability to “embrace difference,” and (5) a “cherished” relationship with faculty (*Lehigh University*). In order to successfully reinforce each of these assumptions in his WAC program, Skutches decided that he needed some help. For this reason, he had decided to pilot the TRAC Writing Fellows program, which has proven to be one of his most obvious successes. The TRAC Writing Fellows’ Missions Statement reads,

Based on the tried-and-true notion that collaboration among peers is one of our most effective methods of learning, the TRAC Writing Fellows Program at Lehigh University is committed to promoting a campus-wide culture in which writing and communication in its many forms are central to learning. In this culture, communication and inquiry are vitally linked, restraints on learning imposed by traditional disciplinary boundaries are eased, and students and faculty are all part of one vibrant intellectual community. (*Lehigh University*)

Skutches selects highly skilled undergraduate writers from a variety of disciplines and colleges to serve as peer-tutors who have the distinct advantage of being intermediaries between FYC faculty and their students. TRAC Writing Fellows attend classes, “respond with written feedback to drafts of student work-in-progress, hold individual and small-group draft conferences, and act as resources for students conducting research and using instructional technologies” (*Lehigh University*). This idea of inserting Writing Fellows into FYC classrooms is not a new one; however, there has never been a program as successful as what Skutches’ built at Lehigh.

Having worked as a Writing Fellow before at a different university, I was very interested to speak with Skutches’ about why he believes his TRAC Writing Fellows program has been so successful. What research exists on the subject of Writing Fellows in FYC, all seems to suggest a noticeable benefit of peer-tutoring as it builds trust between the tutor and the student as well as encourages students to invest more time in their writing and revision process (Hughes and Hall 1-2). Yet, for some reason, other universities have decided not to use Writing Fellows, or if they have used them, they could not continue the program. When asked to speak on the success of the TRAC Fellows program at Lehigh, Skutches explains that one of the greatest challenges of WAC is that people from different disciplines “think and feel differently” about writing, and that before anything else, he felt that he had to “change the culture” about writing at the university. TRAC Writing Fellows are a way in which to “change the culture” of writing because they make it “radically student-centered.” Thus, at the heart of his pedagogy is an emphasis on the student experience and self-efficacy.

Skutches describes the success of his TRAC Writing Fellows program using language that imitates that of WAC scholars Jane Emig in “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” promoting student-centered writing to learn pedagogy. According to Emig, writing is not a “first-order” process, but “talking and listening” are “first-order” processes, which comes more naturally to students (122-23). As a result, Emig, as well as Skutches, suggests that we use students’ strengths in learning through verbal, communal processes to advance their writing skills. Of course, neither Emig nor Skutches would deny the need to address “second-order” reading and writing skills, but their approach to doing so focuses more on the students’ ability to learn through process, rather than the need to create a final product. As the TRAC Writing Fellows are not evaluating student work, and instead providing constructive feedback without evaluation, their goal is to encourage their students to simply improve their writing. In doing so, TRAC Writing Fellows help students improve their writing outside of the constraints of the writing classroom, which in turn will reflect positively in all classrooms throughout their academic careers. The implementation of TRAC Writing Fellows, Skutches explains, helps shift away from the “rigor” model of old, which insisted that writing is a skill that improves through extraneous writing practice. “Sometimes students will leave unsatisfied or frustrated, even,” he says, “but that’s part of the growth process.” The regular collaboration between student and fellow encourages students to work through problems in order to learn and develop as writers, not to achieve superficial ends, such as receiving a high grade. The meetings are low-stakes and student-driven, allowing the student and fellow to create an agenda best suited for his or her growth as a writer.

As we were approaching the end of our allotted thirty-minutes, I wanted to ask him one more semi-selfish question. I asked Skutches, “Do you have any advice for someone such as myself, who is just entering the field of English or Rhetoric and Composition, specifically?” Almost apologetically, he responded, “Yeah, but do you mind if I say one more thing about the fellows?” His passion for his work is unmatched. It was just a privilege to hear him speak about something he loves so much, something very few people in any field rarely achieve. In those final minutes, Skutches wanted to make sure I left with this: “The biggest mistake of undergraduate education,” Skutches says, “is underestimating our students.” Of course, this implies that teachers must take risk on their students, but isn’t that what we do every day? Sure there is a curriculum, but we have to determine which aspects to focus most on and make decision, *take bets*, on what delivery method will present the material in the most accessible, albeit challenging, way. If nothing else, my discussion with Dr. Skutches taught me that if anyone is worth betting on, it’s our students because they have the most to gain from education, and believe it or not, given the opportunity they will rise to the challenge when presented.

Works Cited

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