

# LEARNING AND TRANSMISSION

## THE ADVANTAGES OF A COLLEGE INTERNSHIP

The internship that forms part of the Université de Montréal's postsecondary-education teacher-training microprogram, which constitutes the conclusion of a rewarding journey in college-level instruction, allows young educators to put their recently acquired knowledge into practice by testing it in a "real-life" situation. Over the past three academic years, 37 colleges have hosted some 340 such interns.<sup>1</sup> These internships, in addition to confronting participants' preconceptions with the realities of college-level instruction, also give young teachers the opportunity to "rub elbows" with their more qualified colleagues and explore the professional milieu we all hold in much regard, and gives them their first classroom encounter—an important step in the career of any teacher and a hard-to-obtain "hall pass".

We both took this microprogram at the end of our master's program in order, not only to obtain more in-depth training in our future career, but also to improve our chances of being hired upon graduating. Taking this path helped us obtain employment at the same institution that hosted our internship—the CÉGEP André-Laurendeau—where we are still teaching.

Although internships should be enjoyable and instructive, they can prove to be a nightmare for a number of reasons. In this article, we hope to report on our experience, which was positive and enriching, with a view to demonstrating how formative it was for novice teachers and their mentors alike. Our remarks are based on our observations, memories, and thoughts. We decided to discuss a number of different aspects of the internship experience, which involved teaching college-level French, for the benefit of teachers who may find themselves with interns such as ourselves in their classrooms.



**CATHERINE**  
ARVISAIS-CASTONGUAY  
Teacher  
CÉGEP André-Laurendeau



**JEANNE RIVIÈRE**  
Teacher  
CÉGEP André-Laurendeau

### Why study to be a teacher?

#### Jeanne

I'm from France, and I took all my schooling there. When I arrived in Quebec almost three years ago, I already wanted to teach, but I didn't know what CÉGEP was. The microprogram also helped me adjust my concept of teaching. In France, teachers are still seen as "giving the orders". By and large, teaching methods are unilateral; students do not take often have an active role in the process. The entire time I was in school, formative classroom activities took place only once a term, in the form of oral presentations.

When I started out in the microprogram, I was made aware of various basic concepts: the use of ICT, the emphasis on educational activities, and the need to establish continuity of learning (reminders, conclusions, etc.) and to emphasize the concept of "competency" rather than "knowledge to be digested". I also discovered that the college environment resembled that of a micro-society, and frequently noticed the number of diverse cultural activities and the policy for training open-minded, informed teachers. (I was astonished, for example, to see that students had to take a course that had nothing to do with their major!)

#### Catherine

Many factors motivated me to register for the program. First and foremost was the hope that it would make my C.V. look more impressive and give me experience that would help me find a job. However, I was very pleasantly surprised when I realized that, apart from my love of literature, I also loved the world of education as a whole. The course motivated me a lot, and confirmed day after day that I had made the right career choice. As I see it, the program represented a vital middle step between the theoretical background I was given in university and the real-life, professional environment in which I would actually end up working. Unlike Jeanne, I was familiar with the college community, but the microprogram still helped me understand the complex nature of post-secondary instruction: course outlines, learning sequences,

<sup>1</sup> Internal statistical data compiled over the past three years by Bruno Poellhuber, M. Ps., Ph. D., microprogram coordinator (college component).



government-established course goals, and so on. In short, the microprogram helped beef up my C.V. and gave me the additional experience I wanted, but I also have the impression that I gained much more than that.

### First crucial step: Meeting the mentor

#### Catherine

I remember being nervous before first meeting my mentor. Not only was I worried about whether she would allow me into her classroom, but I also hoped our initial contact would be successful and we could work closely together. That first meeting wound up going extremely well. We talked about education, literature, and culture for a good 90 minutes. I told her about my expectations, including my desire to teach at every opportunity so as to get the most feedback possible during the session. I quickly felt we had established a relationship of trust, and was extremely enthusiastic about starting out the term with her.

#### Jeanne

I met my mentor in the term before my internship, to observe one of her courses. That contact gave me an informal relationship with both the CÉGEP and the teacher, and helped me manage stress the first day of my internship. As I see it, that initial contact with the mentor is as important as the one between the novice teacher and her students. It just takes a few minutes to see if there's a "spark". After my first meeting, I already knew that the conditions for a good working relationship had been met. Our exchange lasted about an hour: I showed my mentor examples of lesson plans I'd done, and she briefly explained her teaching approach. We talked about our views on teaching and our tastes in literature. Then she showed me around the college, so I could familiarize myself with my new working environment and see where we'd both be teaching, where to find the French-language assistance centre (CAF), student-counselling offices, library, and so on. I also got a tour of other core facilities such as the cafeteria, café, and student lounge.

### Practical experience

#### Jeanne

I got to make a presentation on a literary work of my choice, as well as the related genre; in class, I also helped draft an out-

line for a paper on that work. This gave me a more complete overview of how to deal with a learning sequence. I taught the same content to two different groups, which generally provides a better basis for comparison. My mentor observed the second group, which considerably reduced my stress levels, as I had already practised on the first. Once the first few minutes of anxiety had passed, the experience was exhilarating; this was definitely one of the best moments of my internship. Moreover, it was extremely beneficial to be able to analyze my performance in the light of my mentor's feedback. Her comments bore on a few problems that had come up during the class, such as an overly detailed PowerPoint presentation. As for compliments, they're always great to hear!

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My mentor also enjoyed her new role. I felt she was a bit hesitant about telling me what to do, but she seemed satisfied with the exercise. She also said she'd noticed the effectiveness of some of her own methods, just by observing me. Teachers have to question the efficacy of their methods, and, in this case, my mentor saw our exchange of roles as a good way to gain perspective on her practices. Since being hired, I've adjusted my methods in accordance with comments I received during my internship. I no longer give the same course, but I've been using some of my mentor's practices, such as students' term-work files, which contain all the projects carried out in class and are evaluated twice during the term.

#### Catherine

I had several opportunities to teach. My mentor and I had decided it would be best if I started out teaching short periods at a time, which I did. For the first few weeks, I would teach for intervals of ten to 15 minutes. From the beginning of the term, my mentor gave me feedback. As the session wore on, my instruction time got longer. I really liked the approach, because I felt increasingly confident and more in control of the situation. I also felt that the students trusted me, thanks especially to the support shown by my mentor. As I see it, mentors shouldn't hesitate to delegate responsibilities to interns, even if some of those might seem tedious: this arrangement helps you get to know all aspects of the profession. For example, an intern might be asked to send documents to Photocopying, and this would teach her to manage printing times, which is the "fate" of every teacher; at the same time, she would be doing her mentor a favour.



## Working with the mentor

### Jeanne

I had an excellent relationship with my mentor. Our discussions were very informative. We usually discussed the course and talked about our students over lunch. It happened very naturally, and we mixed our observations with more informal and relaxed conversations. Our discussions were very free, like those between two equals.

We were also able to debate issues we disagreed on, such as the use of ICT. I'm no expert, but I'd discovered their advantages in the theoretical part of the microprogram and enjoyed defending them to my mentor, who was used to more traditional classroom techniques.

### Catherine

My memories of my numerous discussions with my mentor are very fond ones. We actually talked all the time! We chatted about teaching, of course, but also our general impressions. Our discussions were both instructive and entertaining, and helped me verbalize my own approaches and techniques. At the end of my internship, my mentor told me she'd found the process valuable for herself, as well, as she'd had to review the reasons behind her choices. She really appreciated these insights into her practices.

## Contact with students

### Jeanne

First, as an observer, I noticed the differences between some of my concerns and a "real" group of young adults. In particular, I noticed that the same course could produce a wide variety of reactions, from motivation to apathy. I realized that class schedules could be a challenge for teachers, and I understand that even more today, as my classes are either at lunchtime or 8:00 a.m! By and large, the students reacted very well to my instruction, frequently answering questions and taking their projects very seriously. I also paid considerable attention to the relationship between my mentor and her students throughout the session. I also adopted some of her strategies—especially the addition of rules on late arrivals to the course outline—in an effort to clearly express my expectations to all my students, right from the very first class.

### Catherine

As an intern, I think that what helped me control the class easily and quickly was my mentor's confidence in me. I had the impression that the students immediately viewed me as my mentor's colleague, not "just" an intern. I did not have any major classroom-management problems during my internship. Another thing my observations and teaching experiences taught me is that it's good to vary learning activities in order to stimulate the students. When they're actively involved in the process, they're less likely to cause disruptions.

## Involvement in departmental life

### Catherine

Overall, the department was pretty welcoming; I really liked the environment. My mentor's colleagues were extremely nice, and talked to me often. Over the term, I met other teachers I also discussed things with. I found all these exchanges interesting, because I was exposed to different standpoints on teaching. I noticed that, despite certain similarities, people from the same department could have completely opposite opinions on education. This helped me re-examine my own views and establish my own priorities. I must also say that, during my internship, I had the opportunity to work at the CAF, which gave me further insights into the CÉGEP and gain experience another way. In the end, I'd say it's important for interns to "get into" the life of their department, because this experience can have a deciding impact on whether they pursue a career in education. In my own case, I appreciated meeting everyone, and so had no doubts about my choice. By the time I was finally hired, I already knew half my colleagues, and that was very pleasant and reassuring!

### Jeanne

I really appreciated the department's atmosphere, too. I had a few concerns when I first arrived at the CÉGEP, and the immersion process gave me a clearer idea about departmental relationships. As regards departmental meetings, in particular, I was expecting some heated discussions about education, but found that exchanges focused more on more practical matters, such as the need to renew instructional materials. Today I can laugh at my naivety, as a CÉGEP is, above all, an institution where you have to know the ropes. There were two interns that session, and our relations with the mentors were excellent. I enjoyed comparing my own methods with those of other teachers and finding out about their own university



and professional backgrounds. Everyone was very nice, and treated me like an equal. Some even included me when asking for advice on methods or discussing specific students. I never felt inferior, and was able to fit in very quickly. Needless to say, internships also require an investment in the cultural life of the CÉGEP. Students may also see us as being more accessible if we leave our comfort zone, as I did when acting as a member of the jury for a writing marathon organized by the college. This experience was extremely enjoyable, and gave me the chance to familiarize myself with another dimension of the life of a teacher.

## Developing instructional materials

### Jeanne

I created almost all the materials I used in my courses. I put together PowerPoint presentations, designed projects, and updated the subject of the final exam. I had a lot of time to do all that, because the winter 2012 student boycott divided my internship into two periods that were relatively far apart. That let me work on the best way to present my course. However, it also meant the schedule had to be reworked, since the session was shortened when it started back up. In September, I had to adjust the material in accordance with the new time frame. Although this was stressful, it did help me measure my ability to be flexible, and I was pleased with the result.

### Catherine

Like Jeanne, I also had an opportunity to create and test materials. I developed exercises on stylistic devices and literary trends, a PowerPoint presentation, and even a few exam-preparation review exercises. I'm very happy, because once I was employed, I could actually use the same materials, even if occasionally they had to be modified. When I started teaching, I already had all the material I needed, which is reassuring for a beginner. Of course, I also was able to improve it thanks to feedback from my mentor.

## The correction process

### Catherine

I was very lucky, because my mentor gave me several opportunities to correct student work, in addition to introducing me to her own method. My mentor corrects student papers

out loud, and records what she says. This means students get twice the normal amount of feedback. I found that interesting, and promised myself to follow her lead... once I had a bit more experience. She was able to correct everything at once, both content and language (not an easy task!). An addition to recording corrections, I got to mark a few papers and the knowledge exam. Naturally, my mentor took a look at whatever I corrected. And, when the students made their oral presentations, we each had a correction grid; after the class, we would compare notes and give students the average of our two grades. I appreciated these experiences because of the feedback given. I learned a lot. When I began correcting my own students' work, I felt confident very early on. I think it's extremely important for interns to gain this type of experience, as it gives them an opportunity to practise and get feedback, which is nothing to sneeze at.

*...what helped me control the class easily and quickly was my mentor's confidence in me.*

### Jeanne

Unfortunately, in my case, this aspect was sacrificed somewhat to the events of the 2012 winter term. However, I did manage to correct some papers at the beginning of the session, and I also corrected exercises I'd designed. At the outset, I really had a bad case of "impostor syndrome"; I was afraid of being too strict or not managing to see the true value of an assignment. At last, by comparing my notes to those of my mentor, I noticed that my judgment was often correct. I also learned to master a grid I wasn't familiar with, and to classify language errors in keeping with the department's marking scheme. The first few corrections took a long time and were difficult, but beneficial. When the CÉGEP hired me, I had no problem using the scheme, as I was already familiar with it.

## CONCLUSION

We both learned a lot from our internship; the experience allowed us, not only to teach, but to familiarize ourselves with the various duties involved. We learned that being a good teacher involves a broad spectrum of obligations, from employing effective instructional methods to dealing with day-to-day problems. As regards collaboration with the mentor, we realized it was important that the latter identify her expectations of us, as well as the kind of relationship that would be established, so as to establish clear guidelines from the outset.



We also realized that it was preferable to “jump in” as soon as possible by conducting short teaching sessions. This gives interns a chance to familiarize themselves more quickly with the class (and vice versa), and they can make progress more quickly if they receive systematic feedback.

To conclude, we would like to stress that an internship is an extremely productive experience, for both student and mentor. It is, above all, a collaborative effort that facilitates discussions on pedagogy. ●

Catherine ARVISAIS-CASTONGUAY teaches French as a second language at Dawson College and French at the CÉGEP André-Laurendeau. She holds a joint undergraduate degree in film studies and comparative literature, a master's in comparative literature, and also a diploma from the Université de Montréal's post-secondary teacher-training microprogram.

[catherine.arvisais-castonguay@clairendeau.qc.ca](mailto:catherine.arvisais-castonguay@clairendeau.qc.ca)

Jeanne RIVIÈRE teaches French at the CÉGEP de Rosemont and the CÉGEP André-Laurendeau. She holds two undergraduate degrees, in French literature and in English, a master's in comparative literature, and finally a diploma from the Université de Montréal's post-secondary teacher-training microprogram.

[jeanne.riviere@clairendeau.qc.ca](mailto:jeanne.riviere@clairendeau.qc.ca)

Both the English- and French-language versions of this article have been published on the AQPC website with the financial support of the Quebec-Canada Entente for Minority Language Education.