

# Reflecting on my Reflection

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\*Recent graduates of Humber Polytechnic's **Teaching Excellence Program (TEP)** were invited to select and submit work from their time in the program to JIPE. This sample of reflective essays offers an engaging glimpse into faculty perspectives, their approaches to teaching and learning, and their experiences as Humber educators.

## Abstract

Through professional reflection and contextualisation, this essay recounts the relational circumstances and rationale for my final reflection piece for the Teaching Excellence Program (TEP): the inauguration of The Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences Onboarding & Mentorship Programme at Humber. The piece recalls the silent tumult I encountered when my professional distinction shifted from contractual to full-time college faculty member. The initial news of the promotion produced joy and relief. However, once I began TEP, those initial sentiments were eclipsed by a private, unexpected ambivalence. Ultimately, my experience as contract faculty provides the basis for the reflection piece, this unconventional reflection on the reflection piece, increased insight and unexpected awareness of TEP's relevance to my role at Humber.

In 2017, I was invited to teach as a contract faculty member at (then) Humber College. Implicit in that invitation was an understanding that the task of enculturation and onboarding into the college, fell to each new contract faculty member. Like countless other contractual faculty, I triaged my teaching practice to competence. In 2022, I was offered a full-time teaching role. Interestingly, (unlike contractual employment) implicit in this invitation of staffing permanence was an understanding that the task of enculturation and onboarding into the college, fell to the college. Humber discharges this obligation by providing faculty development training to its newest full-time faculty. At the time, TEP provided teaching strategies and tools under the assumption that new faculty are primarily sourced from industry and/or are new to teaching. However, in recent years the prevalence of contract faculty has exploded into over 70% of the Ontario college teaching sector (*OPSEU Local 350, 2025*). Meaning, the pool from which full-time hires are drawn has decidedly shifted. As a result, more and more of the projects that TEP faculty complete in their second year of the program are informed (in topic and execution) by the contract faculty experience, just as it has informed my reflection here.

In the summer of 2022, I accepted a full-time position with the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences (FLAS) at Humber Polytechnic. I was subsequently enrolled in Humber's Full-Time Teaching Excellence Program. My final reflection project featured the FLAS' Full-Time Mentorship & Onboarding Programme.

I joined the full-time cohort with excitement, but was decidedly ambivalent about participating in TEP. I had already completed the optional contract faculty version of TEP four years prior. This full-time version, offering "community conversations, experiential learning activities and reflective practice" (Humber Polytechnic – Innovative Learning, 2023, p. 45), seemed anachronistically positioned within my Humber teaching journey because I was new only to full-time status, not to teaching, nor to Humber.

Now, five years after being genuinely new to everything, a figurative reset button had been activated somewhere and I was once again, mysteriously defined as a new faculty member. I was not at all sure how to situate that pivot, nor how to conceptualise any potential benefit to it. I had long since (clumsily) onboarded myself into teaching. Through a reliance on the kindness of colleagues and several professional bumps and bruises, I had shoved myself into pedagogical competence and cobbled together sufficient pedagogical proficiency to now decidedly define my output as an asset to the classroom.

Suddenly, structured onboarding was before me, unintentionally offending the make shift, DIY onboarding behind me. I was uncertain how to reconcile this 'offence'. I was leary of what might be behaviourally expected of me, privately worrying about any expectations of performativity within the TEP space (I mean, was I expected to behave as though I was new? Seriously?). Regardless, I was willing to explore and participate. I decided that exploration would be my focus during the next two years.

Retrospectively, I recognise that, beyond widening my professional community, TEP provided me with a special opportunity that my solitary onboarding could not: a dedicated moment of pause and reflection. I did not know it at the time, but I needed that reflection to fully embrace my impending permanence.

I am the programme facilitator of the FLAS Full-Time Mentorship & Onboarding Programme. The initiative was/is of deep significance to me. I perceive it to be a soothing

balm on educators, capable of subduing prevailing trends of indifference towards comprehensive faculty enculturation which defines many a new prof's onboarding experience. Long before becoming full-time, erecting and maintaining this resource in FLAS, mentorship, had been the preoccupation of my professional life, outside of the classroom.

Whilst still a contractual faculty member, structured mentorship in FLAS was given the green light to create an "organization socialization" (Bauer, 2009, p.1) to welcome and measurably prepare faculty to enter a Humber classroom. A conference, Fostering Diverse Communities of Mentorship at The Mentoring Institute in New Mexico, provided proximity to educators who had/would incorporate onboarding into their management practice. Shannon Jackson, a friend and twenty-year people's and culture veteran, (ironically) provided me with mentoring to conceptualise a viable, college faculty onboarding reformation. Shannon's guidance strengthened focus on remaining solution oriented. Prioritising prescriptive faculty support, whilst encouraging me to actively resist any ineffectual impulses to esteem mere description of *the need* as any meaningful contribution. By year one of TEP, I was completing the design of a peer-to-peer model that "engaged the stakeholders in the planning" (Bauer, 2009). Mentors and mentees were to be consulted throughout the mentoring process to ensure the continuity of compatibility, ease and progression. "Mentorship smooths the transition of faculty into new roles" inviting participants to "develop and grow" (Lumpkin, 2011, p.357), thereby optimising faculty contribution to the classroom.

By my TEP year-two, mentorship had been successfully inaugurated into our polytechnic while the first equity deserving cohort was inaugurated into the sector. By the time my TEP reflection was due, we were training the next cohort of mentors. I received special permission to have this perpetual initiative function as my reflection piece. There was plenty to write about. Not that I could remember most of it at the time. I was up to my birthmark in worry and focus (for context, my birthmark is on the side of my face, so the worry was high). There was little time to do anything but anticipate issues and stockpile potential solutions.

I opted to write about the *desired outcomes* of the mentorship programme instead of my connection to it. I carefully penned an aspirational account of mentorship's function, the rationale for the peer-to-peer model and the experiential value it was

poised to provide. My personal connection...reflected nowhere on the page.

In the period since my reflection, FLAS mentorship has become four structured onboarding programmes:

- The Full-time Faculty Onboarding & Mentorship Programme (facilitated by Alyson Renaldo)
- The Contract Faculty Onboarding Initiative (facilitated by Dr. Maria-Lucia Di Placito & Alyson Renaldo)
- The PC Onboarding Initiative (facilitated by Dr. Maria-Lucia Di Placito)
- The Welcome Mat(t) (facilitated by the English department's Recruitment and Retention Committee: Neesha Meminger, Chandra Hodgson, Matthew Harris, Leanne Milech & Alyson Renaldo)

The first three initiatives are tailored to our specific departments, but *The Welcome Mat(t)* provides connection and ad hoc support to our combined FLAS faculty. The name is a combination of a welcome mat and the name of one of our English professors, Matthew Harris. Irrespective of time constraints, Matthew prioritises collegiality; making himself available to any faculty member that may need support, including this author. We decided to build a support mechanism (the mat(t)), based upon that model of professional generosity. For more information on the mentorship origin story, watch the video, *Beyond Talk: The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences Mentorship Origin Story* (<https://youtu.be/kKbBTdSzDEg?si=owUII6rMOLEnAczK>).

I am as surprised as any that one initiative would expand to four. My (hopeful) TEP reflection did not envision seeing all versions in measurable service of the department.

In mentorship's most idyllic form, it provides proactive care to the polytechnic's most essential resource: its teaching staff.

Over the years, I have observed that many teaching professionals initially enter Humber's classrooms with some element of their countenance smiling. It manifests as a subtle twinkle in the eyes, eyebrows slightly raised in anticipation, or a tiny smile. It's a faint expression, visible only to those who recognise its source. It is sourced from the invigorating notion that one is about to contribute to something as societally consequential as the proliferation of awareness and knowledge.

Beginning the polytechnic tenure with an inspired smile is a prof's decision. However, maintaining said smile, must be a perpetual, collaborative effort between professors and the departments they serve. It is my hope that, to whatever degree it is possible, the provision of onboarding and peer-to-peer mentorship serves to safeguard and protract the life cycle of every new professor's professional smile. I am very fortunate to facilitate a programme that centralises faculty support and vibrancy.

In writing my reflection for TEP, focus was placed on the logistics of mentorship and onboarding stewardship. I was so fixated on moving the programme safely through initialisation that I gave little consideration to penning anything of its burgeoning value, nor its value to me. It's now clear that my reflection was accidentally incomplete. In being afforded this moment to *reflect upon my reflection*, I think I will right that minor wrong, right now.

My advocacy of mentorship is primarily situated in previous professional experiences as a contract faculty member. When I began at Humber in 2017, my smile-laden countenance would have been evident to those not even calibrated to recognise it. I embraced my new role as a professor with 'bear hug' enthusiasm. I was not only a giant bear of enthusiasm, but a giant *green* bear. I understood that my ascent to competency would be steep...and it was. To that point in time, my entire academic knowledge base was from the perspective of being a student. There was so much to learn and (then) no formal channels in my department by which to acquire it. I roamed our office area, ever fearful that someone would realise that they made a mistake in inviting me to teach. I tried making subtle suggestions that I needed help. My (fake) cavalier demeanour yielded equally cavalier assurances that *I would be fine* and I should lean into the freedom I had to *do whatever I want* in the classroom. Those well-intentioned colleagues didn't realise that there was no desire for pedagogical exploration, but to locate clear steps to stewardship of a classroom. I didn't want freedom. I wanted to be securely tethered to competency!

During one of my earliest semesters, I was handed a last-minute teaching assignment. I was to begin teaching this new course the following day and could not, for the life of me, figure a way to shift the learning outcomes into teaching modules. I was so consumed with impending doom that I could barely speak. Viktoria (Dr. Viktoria Jovanovic-Krstic), a fellow contractual prof saw me catatonically staring at my computer

screen. She put her hand on my shoulder, then emailed me over her materials for that course. She spent the next little while walking me through an effective way to initialise this new course. In that moment, I could hear her truthful message that it was going to be all right. Thankfully, eventually, my nervous system heard it too.

Please understand that contract faculty are not compensated for the work they do outside of the classroom, including course preparation. Meaning, any materials that Vik shared, were the result of painstaking, time-consuming, dedicated, unpaid labour. It was a colossal act of generosity for her to share her materials with me. Even now, I cannot allow myself to consider where I would be, if during my initial days, Viktoria and many other *Viktorias* had adopted a (justifiable) protectionist posture over a kind one towards me.

I was lucky, very, very lucky. But not all can be. Therefore, the procurement of essential professional support ought not be left to chance, hence FLAS' mentorship and onboarding programmes.

Were I to pen my TEP reflection now, I would better speak to what I now understand to be the true revelation of my final reflective project: understanding my full-time status to be a unit of service to students and contract/full-time colleagues alike. The mentorship and onboarding initiatives are but structured mechanisms to *action* those intentions, cultivate collaborative collegiality and protect professional smiles from the (justified) cynicism born of a lack of support and (in the case of contractual professors) a lack of compensatory consideration.

I would also write that I am (and was then) grateful to be a part of Humber's full-time cohort. I would give a nod to reflection as needed punctuation to the beginning or ending of any meaningful journey. My TEP reflection signalled the end (a period) to my contractual teaching days and an invigorating commencement (exclamation mark) to my (then impending) full-time teaching days.

Reflection connects us to just how far we have come. Nine years after my initial hiring at Humber, my countenance still smiles as I walk through the halls.

There is no definitive way to quantify the satisfaction derived from occupying a space wherein students, faculty, support

staff and administration alike are all afforded the benefit of daily increased awareness and learning.

I doubt that I will ever grow tired of reflecting on that.

## Note on Contributor

**Alyson Renaldo**, MA is a professor of critical thinking and professional writing in Humber Polytechnic's department of English. Alyson designed and now facilitates the Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences Full-Time Mentorship and Onboarding Programme. She also co-facilitates the Contract Faculty Onboarding Initiative with Dr Maria-Lucia Di Placito. These initiatives are the first of their kind at the polytechnic.

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