

When the Family Tree Metaphor Breaks Down, What Grows?

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When I think about generations, I often think about more-or-less discrete cohorts: siblings and cousins lining up neatly across a family tree, never minding small differences in age, with their parents' generation doing the same a little further up, and their children spreading out across their own horizontal row a little further down. As a metaphor for understanding disciplinary history, the traditional family tree suggests a similar kind of coherence: we might speak of the generation that founded composition studies; the generation that founded composition graduate programs; the generation of undergraduate writing studies. Or choose a less institutional and more intellectual way of marking time: the leaders of the process movement; the drivers of the ethical turn; the social constructivists. There are many resting places or dividing lines to choose. Regardless, the language of *generations*, and the family tree it invokes, suggests a movement from one group to another – the passing of seasons, of wisdom, of a torch.

That sense of intergenerational exchange was certainly on my mind when I and my colleagues at CUNY started the Writing Studies Tree as graduate students nearly a decade ago.¹ As we framed it in an early grant proposal, the primary audiences for the “genealogies of mentor/student relations” that the WST would store were “newcomers to a field” and “well-established members,” imagined as more or less cleanly separable groups; several of our proposed benefits were framed in family-tree terms, such as a “lineage” newcomers could take pride in, or “successors” as a measure of success:

Genealogies of mentor/student relations have a long history in academia, stretching back at least as far as the links tying Alexander to Aristotle and back through Plato to Socrates. For newcomers to a field, such genealogies offer many benefits: tracing lines of influence and resistance can aid in reconstructing the logic behind the field's commonplaces; locating sub-communities of scholars can suggest new authors to read or programs to apply to; and locating oneself or one's colleagues within such a lineage or network can engender a sense of prestige or belonging that enhances professional development. For well-established members of academic fields, a genealogy offers a way to pay public tribute to early influences, and another way to measure one's own success, in terms of successors and collaborations. Finally, for those studying the dynamics of networks or

disciplines, an academic genealogy offers a record of the formation and evolution of communities-by-choice – a record which, because it is rarely captured by publications alone, runs the risk of remaining local knowledge, disaggregated from other comparable histories and patterns, or becoming lost entirely.

We envisioned the WST as a kind of hyperlinked family scrapbook, a place for stories to be made more discoverable by tying them to structured data, and for data to be made more accessible by tying them to human stories and personal connections. Or maybe a digital community quilt, built from patchwork by many hands, showing the threads that bind each of us, through others close by, to those a little further away. An intergenerational repository.

At the same time, we made some choices early on that would begin to unravel some of the assumptions in the metaphor of genealogy and clear generational alignment. Traditional academic genealogies, such as the Mathematics Genealogy Project or NeuroTree, tend to assume that the essential relationship to track is dissertation advisement: each person has one, or maybe two, direct advisors; in STEM fields, students tend to work in one lab at a time, with a primary investigator directing the research. In such cases, it's clear where you draw the lines. But as we thought about our own influences, it became ever clearer that that wouldn't be enough. Non-chair members of the dissertation committee, at a minimum, felt important to accommodate within the database, to acknowledge and thank; Writing Program Administrators played an important role in my own introduction to the field, and into the database design they went. And what about the professors whose framings and lessons stuck with us, even when they weren't directly advising us beyond their courses? Or what about the people down the hall or across the desk in the shared office? Weren't they, too, part of our mentoring network? In fact, what about each other? As we worked alongside each other on this and other projects, as we drafted conference presentations and, eventually, articles, we learned from and taught each other laterally, and lifted each other up. Rather than keep the traditional data fields, then, we invited contributors to the WST to document more multifaceted lines of descent and affiliation, prepopulating the data entry forms with a wide range of both mentoring relationships and collaborative relationships, such as co-authorship, that we see as a form of co-mentoring.

Because the database has been almost entirely crowdsourced, we've been able to see how these invitations are taken up: the choices people make in what they contribute, and thus on some level the relationships that contributors find especially compelling, worth recording and sharing. One thing that strikes me is just how often the mentoring relationships entered do go beyond the dissertation. As of this writing, there are 1,962 distinct people named in the WST

database and 551 institutions, with 5,589 relations recorded among them. Of those relationships, 1,968 (a little over a third) are directed, *mentored/mentored by* relationships, but only 622 are dissertation chairing, the old marker of a generational baton-pass for academic genealogies; nearly the same number of graduate professors outside the dissertation committee (616) have also been posted as mentors. Another 643 people are linked by virtue of having *worked alongside* each other.

These connections sometimes do, but often do not, bear out expectations of generational cohorts. People don't have unique locations in the tree: for one thing, dissertation advisors can, and do, coauthor with their students or former students, such that the same person can appear both as mentor/mentee and as collaborator. For another, within a couple of years of graduating as a PhD student, you can become a PhD advisor, or committee member, or certainly professor; you can, in a sense, become part of the prior generation, even relative to those in school at the same time as you.

So when we try to use the family tree layout to map the mentoring relationships in the WST, some strange things happen. Even within the same basic relation type, more than one path can lead to the same person. In my own local network, Sondra Perl appears both one "generation" up (because she advised my dissertation) and two (because she advised the dissertation of Mark McBeth, another member of my committee); as a result, they are simultaneously of the same and of adjacent "generations." Amanda Licastro appears in my co-mentoring branches no fewer than six times, reflecting that she and I have worked together not only on several projects (including the WST itself), but also in combination with various other groups of people, making the collaborative relationships not easily reducible.

At first, we felt a little concern about these quirks in rendering the network, but over time I've come to accept and even embrace them. It makes sense that there is no single line that explains our relationships; the multiplicity, reciprocity, and sometimes, yes, the surprise of where we encounter a mentor's influence are all part of what makes them influential, part of our fabric.

Or maybe it's time I stopped being surprised. *Generation* has the same root as *generate*, after all: it's not just groups, and it's not just genres, it's what we make of (and by) what we share. As we remix across age groups and stages of career, we re-imagine what it means to be "of a generation" with someone. Recent initiatives like DBLAC and NextGen have given us new lenses on the received hierarchies of composition studies, new ways of drawing networks together and of seeing the roles we play within them. Revisiting our early WST proposal now, I cringe a little at the mention of "prestige," which I see is more a problem than a positive – but I also want to reaffirm the value of "communities-by-choice," of finding and celebrating those communities and

making them visible. I do still want the database to help new scholars locate themselves and their potential allies and mentors.

In closing, I want to acknowledge something that has maybe been obvious all along: the Writing Studies Tree affords only a glimpse of only some of writing studies. When I said above that I interpret what it shows as a reflection of “the relationships that contributors find especially compelling, worth recording and sharing,” it’s only the *contributed* relationships we’re able to see there – and that’s not even all of those the contributors value, as some add only names, and not their networks. But I still believe there’s something here, as tangled or paradoxical and un-tree-like as it may be, that is worth cultivating and growing. And so I’ll end with an invitation: that if you also see that potential, you’ll help us make it not only a fuller database, but a newer one; a *re*-generation that your insights will make possible. And we can iterate forward, together, from there.

Notes:

1. Amanda Licastro and Jill Belli have been my closest co-designers and co-maintainers of the project; see <http://writingstudies.org/live/about#support> for other essential team members.