



PRACTICING

what you teach

Coast-to-coast trips inspire MAT grads and visiting faculty

Jennifer Nelson MAT '11 can always tell the moment one of her Language Arts students “gets it.” The seventh grader’s hands go up in a “silent cheer,” as per the protocol in her classroom at Future Leaders Institute Charter School in New York City. But sometimes the punch in the air is accompanied by a not-so-silent “yesssss.”

This scenario had just played out at the end of an exercise arranging jumbled paragraphs from a memoir by young adult novelist Gary Paulsen. The students had paired up to decipher the author’s intentions by moving around cut-outs of small passages as if they were game board pieces.

“Authors don’t necessarily rely on transitional phrases,” Nelson tells her students, “but they use subtle hints and clues in the sequencing of their ideas to create a logical order.”

Nelson is four years removed from earning her Master of Arts in Teaching from USC Rossier’s online program, one of the more than 2,200 teachers around the world to get this degree since 2010.

Jennifer Nelson MAT '11 with one of her seventh graders at Future Leaders Institute Charter School in New York City.

Photo by Amber Mahoney

by matthew c STEVENS

ONLINE

students from USC Rossier have now logged more than 12,000 student-teaching placements and nearly 1.7 million hours of fieldwork in nearly 650 school districts and charter school networks in 48 states and more than 3 dozen countries around the world, dispelling any myths that online learning takes place in a vacuum.

USC Rossier Professor of Clinical Education Margo Pensavalle flew to New York to pay a visit to Nelson's classroom in November on the day of the Paulsen lesson. She was on the road to observe grads and interview school administrators and guiding teachers who have hosted and mentored USC student teachers over the years.

"I was there to observe the kinds of strategies our graduates are using in their classrooms," she explained after her return. She interviewed Nelson and other online MAT grads about how USC courses have helped them while also identifying gaps in their training that might lead to improvements in the MAT curriculum.

She liked what what she saw in Nelson's classroom.

"Jennifer was using many of the strategies that she learned in our program," Pensavalle said, "and in a way that just really engaged the kids. She was being accountable to the kids while also being accountable to good practices."

Nelson and her co-teacher, Daniel Née, were using Paulsen's nonfiction book *Winterdance: The Fine Madness of Running the Iditarod* as part of a writing lesson that focused on organization. Before tackling their own writing, the seventh graders would study how a pro did it.

Students took turns reading paragraphs out loud, raising their voices at the word "whoa!" and laughing at Paulsen's humorous account of his attempt to race across Alaska with a pack of huskies.

Each student made his or her case for sequencing the story, pointing out the evidence along the way.

"I call them investigators," says Nelson of her students. "They're detectives. When they see they have used the evidence accurately, they get so excited."



USC Rossier Professor Margo Pensavalle says of Nelson (above): "Jennifer was using many of the strategies that she learned in our program."

PRACTICE MAKES PRACTICE

Pensavalle and her fellow faculty members in the MAT program go to great lengths to cultivate a similar sense of excitement in Rossier's student teachers, whether they are from the online or on-campus program. While you might not see these new teachers let loose with silent cheers in the classroom, they feel the exhilaration when something clicks, when the hours and months and years of preparation pay off with a productive lesson or a burst in a child's confidence.

"Practice *makes* practice," says John Pascarella, assistant professor of clinical education and director of fieldwork for academic programs at Rossier, "which means that we want our teacher candidates to generate knowledge of practice *from* practice during student teaching so they may learn how to use that knowledge to describe evidence of learning, analyze their teaching and propose alternatives to their practice."

Pascarella worked with Pensavalle to devise a set of key competencies that former students should have mastered. With uniform sets of questions, Rossier faculty set off to conduct observations and interviews in four metropolitan regions where there are concentrations of online MAT grads: New York, Washington, D.C., Seattle and Honolulu.

How well do Rossier grads believe they were prepared to take on instructional responsibilities from day one? Work with students from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds? Work with English language learners, students with disabilities, struggling readers?

Do they know basic things about monitoring understanding by listening to responses that require reasoning, problem solving and critical thinking? Are they assessing student learning? How well are they integrating instructional technology? Are they using a wide range of classroom management techniques and discipline strategies?

Answers to these and other questions from a diverse sampling of grads help Pensavalle and Pascarella suggest modifications to the MAT curriculum.

"We're trying to get this information by encouraging the former students to open up," says Pascarella. "Our use of program surveys has given us some descriptive feedback from graduates and school partners and has helped formulate our interview questions used in our school visits. The interviews allow us to dig deeper into specific experiences and perspectives of the graduates and the school partners who have

hosted our student teachers."

The in-depth conversations allow faculty to pinpoint areas for improvement. For example, some former students and guiding teachers thought it might be helpful to add a new case study to the curriculum when covering strategies for working with students with disabilities. Another former student suggested adapting pedagogy classes so that students felt better prepared to deal with struggling readers, especially high school students that might read at a fifth grade level. Pascarella and Pensavalle log all of the feedback and compile their findings to take back for review by their faculty colleagues.

This rigor is a natural extension of the intensive training Pascarella oversees during student teacher placements. Beginning in the very first semester, an MAT student like Jennifer Nelson logs about six hours of onsite school observation. That picks up in the second term with teaching lessons.

During Guided Practice (student teaching), teacher candidates complete "Teaching and Learning Events" involving the use of planning videos, lesson plans, full-length lesson videos and a narrative reflection forum. "We call these rehearsals," Pascarella explains, "but essentially they're teaching lessons based on models of instruction learned during their methods courses."

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—John Pascarella, assistant professor of clinical education and director of fieldwork for academic programs

Then by term three they engage in full-fledged student teaching, when they're at the school site four days a week, 10 weeks at a time.

In many ways, USC Rossier is ahead of the curve in preparing teachers but is always working to refine what is already working well. Take Rossier's use of video, for example. By watching lessons shot over a 20-week period, student teachers can chart their developmental growth and hear feedback from their guiding teachers as well as from their fellow students in the MAT program.

"When we started five years ago," says Pascarella, "we were one of the very few online programs that required the use of video during student teaching as a form of performance assessment."

Now five years later, other schools have been adopting this model. So much so that video has become common practice in teacher preparation programs and is now a requirement in the new edTPA, formerly the Teacher Performance Assessment (TPA), which was developed out of the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity.



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—Margo Pensavalle, professor of clinical education

Recent modifications to Rossier's program include setting up students with guiding teachers for three consecutive 10-week sessions. Prior to this year, the student teachers switched schools—and guiding teachers—but Rossier has moved to a one-school placement this year.

"We wanted them to be able to establish rapport and learn the culture and community of that school across the time span of their enrollment in our program, rather than switching classrooms, schools and students during a key period of their development," he says.

It is this spirit of constant self-evaluation, adaptation and improvement that has driven Rossier to ask former students to help the school improve. Before the advent of the online program, this meant faculty were driving down to Garden Grove or Santa Ana for the day to visit classrooms of former students.

But now grads are scattered across 48 states and 3 dozen countries, prompting faculty to plan strategic visits to hub cities. And yet the spirit of the process hasn't changed.

"We don't just give our students degrees and wish them luck," says Pensavalle. "We're invested in them and connected to them from the time they begin their coursework until they retire. And we owe it to subsequent students to adapt and improve the program with the times."

TEACHING BY DESIGN

Five thousand miles from Nelson's middle school classroom in Harlem, Jenny Young MAT '14 teaches English language learners at Roosevelt High School in Honolulu, Hawaii. In her first year as a full-time teacher, the online grad has faced a steep learning curve.

"I've had to create my own curriculum from scratch," she explained to visiting Rossier Professors Monique Datta and Ronni Ephraim, "but because USC organized its English language arts pedagogy classes with the 'Understanding by Design' framework, I was able to approach that challenge with a sigh of relief."

Datta and Ephraim were pleased to hear that one of Rossier's key educational theories had bolstered a teacher that didn't have resources available to her on day one.

"Through 'Understanding by Design,' we're looking at the end in mind and determining what kinds of skills or processes or content we want our students to understand by the end of the unit," says Young, explaining the premise behind Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins' formative text *Understanding by Design* (1998).

When Datta and Ephraim paid a visit to her classroom in October, Young was only two months into her career and yet she was providing her ELL students with a level of rigor found in the English Language Arts classrooms of seasoned teachers, said Datta.

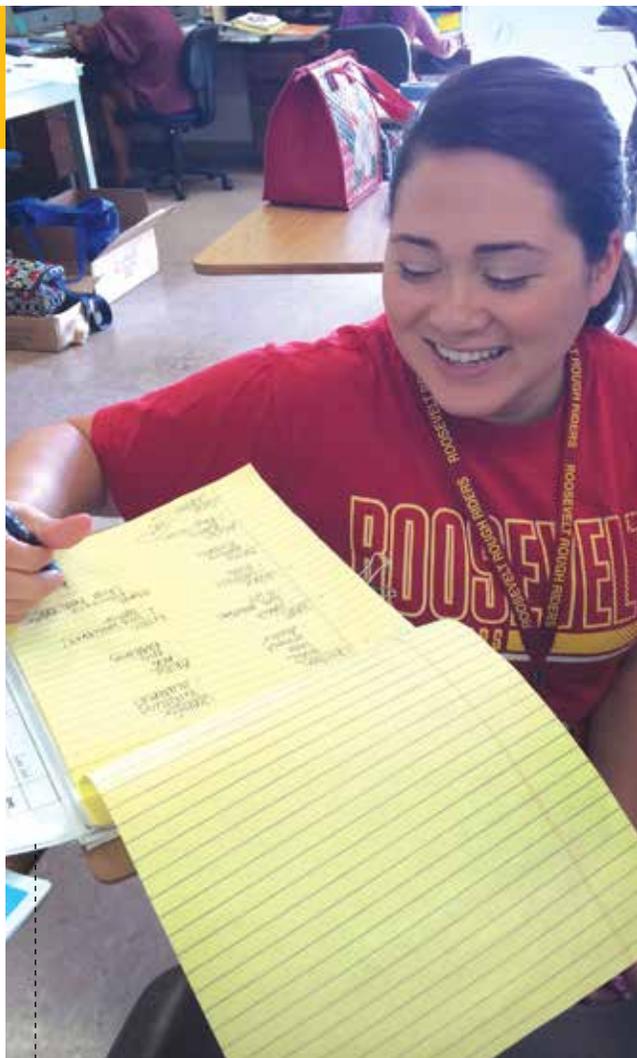
"We were very impressed with how she facilitated the class discussion," said Datta, "and with how she created this culture of safety and openness in her classroom."

Young was beginning her unit on argumentative writing by showing a video of a commercial and asking the students to pull pieces of evidence from what they saw.

"It's a visual thinking strategy where students have to look at a picture or video and find evidence before talking about it and then tackling it in writing," says Young.

"I focus on a lot of comprehensible input, which I know is huge in 501," says Young, still referring to the Rossier course number for Instruction for Teaching English as a New Language. "Breaking things down and scaffolding them correctly with the right pacing is so important for English language learners."

"We're really pushing our teacher candidates to bring their students to a conceptual level of understanding of the content area," says Datta. "Students are not just



Jenny Young MAT '14 teaches English language learners at Roosevelt High School in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Photo by Michelle Luu

regurgitating factual knowledge. It's the difference between knowing and understanding."

One of the principals from Young's student teaching placement agrees that USC Rossier student teachers are strong in content: "I think that team from NASA that went to the moon was less prepared," said the recent host of Young and two other student teachers from USC.

Datta admits to envying the foundation Young has received as a recent grad.

"When I was a student teacher," she says, "I was literally thrown to the wolves. It was sink or swim." Rossier teaching candidates do observations before teaching classes, then review their work with guided teachers, video assessment and self-reflection.

“

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—Host principal for Jenny Young and two other student teachers from USC

Young is a big advocate of the reflective process she learned at Rossier, the four-phase cycle of presence, description, analysis and experimentation. "It's a part of my regular thinking process now," she says.

Young got in the habit of journaling about her experiences on a regular basis, sometimes grabbing Post-its to record her thoughts on the fly.

"It was absolutely crucial when I was student teaching to make notes in the moment or immediately after a lesson," she says.

That fourth step, called active experimentation or intelligent action, is crucial to Young.

"In your first year, you're really learning what is working for you," she says. "Whereas in student teaching, you were doing things that worked for your guiding teachers, since you weren't in charge. Sometimes I am experimenting with different strategies, and I rely on all those notes I take in order to make those decisions."

FRUSTRATION AND TRIUMPH

Young's frank self-assessment and willingness to identify possible gaps in the Rossier curriculum proved Pascarella's point about why it was so worthwhile to send Rossier faculty on planes to the far corners of the country—from Hawaii to the New York island—on a quest to see how the MAT program could be improved.

While Young's conversation with Datta and Ephraim was sprinkled with academic terms like constructivist theory and the popular Problem Solving Matrix, it also included tales of triumph and frustration that wouldn't have been captured in a typical survey.

Back in New York, Jennifer Nelson shared similar feedback with Margo Pensavalle, sitting down with her to explore the four-year backstory to that silent cheer of one of her students



Photo by Amber Mahoney

who had successfully sorted those paragraphs from the Gary Paulsen memoir.

“My students wouldn’t have been successful at this lesson if they didn’t already have a buy-in to reading,” says Nelson.

Like Young, Nelson tried to bring it all back to readings and content from her pedagogy classes. She recalled one book in particular, *Literacy with Attitude*, which taught her how important it was for kids to learn to see themselves as readers.

“It starts by finding just the perfect book for them, having them be empowered to make those choices for themselves,” she said.

Nelson admits she didn’t come out of the gate fully formed. She was idealistic in her first year, checking out dozens of books from the public library and handing them out to kids who seemed indifferent to cracking them open. She

admits to having coddled her students, wanting to be “Mama Bear,” before coming around to the philosophy of “warm strict”—the idea of letting her students know that she loved them while also holding them accountable by keeping expectations high.

“I carry that with me,” she says. “I think I even wrote a paper about ‘warm strict’ in grad school.”

“All new teachers struggle with classroom management,” says Pensavalle, noting the common refrain captured in data collected from Honolulu to Washington, D.C. “We can give students the strategies and tell them when they are likely to work, but every classroom is different. And I think that many times our graduates want the magic recipe. But it really has to be their construction of what works for *their* classrooms.”

And yet Rossier still dabbles with a real-world recipe. Pensavalle and other faculty members have been exploring ways to intentionally incorporate classroom management strategies into the program, including a new assignment that will run through all four semesters. Associate Professor of Clinical Education Fred Freking explains how first-term students will now be required to construct an initial classroom management plan based on theory from their courses and observations from their fieldwork. This plan will evolve with each subsequent semester as students incorporate strategies gleaned from content-specific pedagogy classes, student teaching placements and their own reflection.

Throughout this process, candidates can exchange feedback with their peers through an online forum; faculty will also weigh in.

“Assignments like these will better prepare our graduates for their first year of teaching,” says Freking.

Datta and Pensavalle were gratified by their visits to Jenny Young in Hawaii, Jennifer Nelson in New York and other grads who had transitioned from students to peers to collaborators in Rossier’s perpetual assessment.

“I think our former students really felt a sense of empowerment,” said Datta, “like wow, my experiences and opinion matter and they may impact future candidates.”

“What was clear to me,” says Nelson, “was Dr. Pensavalle’s authentic interest in how USC Rossier made a difference for my teaching practice. And it seemed to me that she really wanted to know everything so that she could look at ways to always be improving the program.”

Practice makes a better MAT. ■