

Dissertation Ruminations

Dr. Wendy Gavis-Lainjo

Introduction

The email read, "...as you all know, Leslie is planning to retire at the end of the academic year."

My eyes stopped at the end of that sentence. Retire? I didn't know she was planning to retire. I immediately began to worry. How could Leslie retire? What about conference presentations, data collection, Sociolinguistics class? Then I thought about it for another minute and started to smile. "Yeah," I sighed, "I guess I can imagine it." Leslie peering through binoculars at birds, hiking with Bruce in national parks, and delving into Native American arts. Good-bye staff meetings, deadlines, paperwork committees, and email. In my mind's eye, however, I see the door to Room 317 slam shut, and in the darkness, I start to reminisce about the many years I spent in that office as a student, assistant, and in the end, a friend.

Review of the Literature

I was twenty-two years old when I first met Leslie. A few months earlier, I had phoned the TESOL program to get information on the Master's degree and was referred to her. I had no idea yet where I was headed and told her that. One would have expected her to promote the Teachers College program, but she ended up giving me a lot more. In addition to telling me about the program, she told me about a dozen other TESOL programs all around the USA and what made each one unique. I was so impressed with her knowledge, honesty, and openness that I ended up choosing TC! If all the professors were like her, I reasoned, I wanted to be at that school.

I took three courses with Leslie. The Grammar course was rigorous and stimulating, but as someone new to the field, I struggled with the weekly problem-solving tasks, like figuring out the difference between "will" and "going to." Nevertheless, we eventually learned to think through grammatical conundrums and look for counter-evidence to ensure our reasoning was "airtight," as she used to say. She worked hard to make sure we learned well and demanded that we rose to meet a higher standard. It was a philosophy she stuck to in all of her courses.

In those days, Leslie was not yet a tenured professor, but she was clearly headed in that direction. She was always doing research, writing papers, and going to conferences. She had lots of energy. As my advisor, she had me taking the most difficult but also the most valuable courses, the ones she felt I needed to become a good ESL teacher. I always listened to her, but sometimes I ended up getting in a bit over my head, like the time she enthusiastically enrolled me—a new Master's student—in her doctoral seminar in SLA, assuring me that I could do the work. Ha! Thank goodness Tess Ferree, another Master's student, was in the class because when it came time for us to do our research paper, I had someone else to agonize with. At the eleventh hour, the two of us, terrified and on the verge of

a nervous breakdown, called Leslie at home—Tess in tears. We had no idea how to put our projects together into a coherent paper. We thought for sure we were going to fail, but Leslie cheerfully calmed us down (Tess stopped crying) and helped us resolve our respective dilemmas without losing too much face. We were grateful to have a professor who cared more about our learning than about how well we could compete with doctoral students.

Fast-forward about ten years. I was back at TC for my doctorate after teaching and doing administrative work in the U.S. and England. I remember a conversation that included the question from Leslie, “Would you like to work with me?” I nearly jumped for joy. After a few semesters, she was not only my doctoral sponsor, but I was also working in her office as her assistant. It was this opportunity, to be both a student of Leslie’s and a course/office assistant, that brought us closer together.

Method

Let’s skip this part. No one ever reads it anyway. (Note: If you are a doctoral student, DO NOT pay any attention to this remark.)

Findings

Academic Findings

It was during the 1990s that Leslie created her own doctoral seminar for students pursuing topics in sociolinguistics, pragmatics, and SLA. In my opinion, this was one of her most valuable contributions to the doctoral program, for the seminar was not only a place where we learned a lot, but it also functioned as a non-competitive, safe haven where we all made friends and listened to each other’s ideas in our long and often lonely journey towards the doctoral degree. It was the seminar above all that helped me stay focused and gave me encouragement when I wasn’t sure how to proceed or when I thought I was never going to finish.

Leslie did not plan topics for us. The seminar was created by her, but it was up to us to run it. We had a sign-up sheet, and all of us knew we had to present at least once during the semester. It worked so well that sometimes we used to fight just to give ourselves more than one session. That’s how helpful it was in terms of our progress.

In addition to the camaraderie, a number of useful documents grew out of the seminar experience, one of which is so simple an idea, you wouldn’t think it would matter very much: the dissertation outline. No one is born knowing how to organize a dissertation, and yet not many doctoral programs in the U.S. seem to provide students with this information. Leslie, however, realized the need and wrote the outline. My copy of the outline not only saved my life, it has since traveled to the Nursing Program at Columbia’s medical school and to a few other schools, because friends of mine doing dissertations had no idea how to begin writing up their work.

Above all, however, it was the consistently supportive environment of the doctoral seminar that allowed us over time to grow from students to scholar-researchers. To me, this was a great gift, and the odd thing is, it seemed to happen so slowly, without us being fully aware of it. All of a sudden, there we were, a new generation of researchers complete with our own peer group. If it hadn’t been for the doctoral seminar, we would probably not have emerged from the long doctoral “slog” as prepared to function in the real academic world as

we were.

Personal Findings

On a personal level, too, Leslie has played an important role in my life. Doctorates aren't just about the research you do. You also learn a number of things about yourself in the process. Depending upon your topic and how revolutionary it is, one of the things you might come face to face with when your start writing is your own self-confidence. My topic was stative verbs and how they are used in the (be + -ing) progressive aspect. In the 1990s, to make such a claim was a bit daring because so many grammar books denied it. As a result, when it came to writing my dissertation, I would sometimes experience bouts of shyness, especially when critiquing famous grammarians. I was afraid to contradict them too harshly, but Leslie would just say something like, "Go ahead! Slam them! You have real data here; they don't have anything." And so, the tone of the chapters began to change. The dissertation evolved into perhaps the best thing I have ever written and ever will write. I thank Leslie for giving me the confidence and the encouragement to keep going.

It wasn't just in academics, however, that Leslie gave her advice and support. I can't tell you the number of conversations we've had about personal relationship issues. If Leslie ever decides to work outside of academia, I think she should consider becoming a therapist. She's certainly had enough practice dealing with all of our ups and downs!

Conclusion

Summary

In brief, Leslie leaves behind a legacy not just in terms of her unparalleled work in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, but also in the doctoral students on whom she has had a profound influence. She has taught us by example to:

Set high standards and meet them.

Be generous with advice, but be fair, too.

Be down to earth, warm, and friendly.

Treat your students like the academic professionals they want to become.

Be critical; look for counterarguments; make sure your claims are sound.

Significance

All of us are fortunate to have any amount of time with Leslie, whether it is one semester or many years. Those of us who have completed our doctorates with her are proud to have her name inscribed in our books. It's a badge of excellence.

Directions for Future Research

To Leslie: I wish you all the best as your chart a new course for yourself. Enjoy the climb over the new hill. And don't forget to write!

Wendy Gavis-Lainjo, formerly Assistant Professor of English at CUNY (New York City College of Technology), met a wonderful man, got married, and moved out of New York City in 2004. She has since decided to pursue her passion for non-human animals and is enrolled in the Veterinary Technology Program (veterinary nursing) at SUNY Ulster County Community

College in Stone Ridge, NY. Her applied linguistics background, which emphasizes sensitivity to cross-cultural (mis)communication, has been particularly useful when reaching out to various shelter animals.