ADVICE FROM A RECENT HAS-BEEN TO A TA STARTING COLD

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So you gotta teach comp, and you don’t have any idea of how you’re gonna go about it? You’re starting off as cold as a gravedigger’s boots, and the only help you can find is a fat composition text whose fine print and great size intimidate even you (and you’re the teacher)?

Or maybe you’ve got practically the opposite problem. Someone helpfully pointed you in the direction of finding out what’s going on in the relatively new field of research in composition, and you’ve been reading the literature to learn what really works in the composition class. But very quickly you begin to feel overwhelmed by the sheer mass of all the material, and by the question of how to apply the research in your own classroom.

Both of the above problems boil down to one question that is often put this way: “(Expletive deleted) What am I gonna do when I walk into class Monday morning?” And as that first Monday morning draws near, fewer expletives are deleted, and the level of your anxiety begins to rise to circuit-breaking intensities. Am I getting close? Is that the way it is? Yes? Well, good! “Good? Why good?” you ask. “Are you some kind of sadistic creep?”

No, that’s not it, not what I am at all. What I am is an incurable do-gooder, as people who give advice are known to be, and my intention in writing this is to ease your fears about your first experience teaching composition. Thus, the more fear you have, the more I can ease, and the greater the job of doing good I can do. So, let us get on with it.

First, I want to give you a quick shot of perspective on composition as a discipline, one with a body of knowledge and a field with “members of the profession” like the disciplines of physics and biology. E. D. Hirsch, writing in a recent article, claims we’re living through a scientific revolution in composition, a revolution in the sense of those described in Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, during which Hirsch says, quoting Kuhn, “a number of schools compete for the domination of a given field.” The first stage of the revolution “is marked by controversies like our own, in which people ‘confronting the same phenomena describe and interpret them in different ways.’ With the gradual advance of knowledge, the conflicts subside, and a consensus builds up which forms the discipline into a genuine intellectual community.”

If you’re the person I described above with the second problem, you’re already familiar with the conflicts and controversies in the field of composition. You’re aware of the tentative nature of the conclusions in much of the research, the disputes that exist even over tested teaching methods, and the controversies that swirl around research designs used to test the disputed methods. And so, you’ve guessed by now that the revolution in composition is in its first stage, and you can give up any hope of finding absolute certainty in teaching it, at any rate for the near future.

So, here’s my first piece of advice: Don’t worry about your uncertainty. We’re all uncertain, and the most knowledgeable in the field seem often to be the most uncertain, while the least knowledgeable can be filled with passionate certainty — possibly, as Hirsch points out, due to “the intimate connection between partisan zeal and lack of knowledge” (p. 162).

And now, in preparation for my second piece of advice (and third, fourth, fifth, and so on), I offer the following summary from an article by Elizabeth P. Haynes, “Using Research in Preparing to Teach Writing.”

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH:

Of the eight means used to improve composition mentioned here — traditional grammar, structural linguistics, transformational grammar, sentence-combining practice, frequency of writing, intensive correction, increased reading and precomposition experiences — only traditional grammar has been shown by an overwhelming number of studies to be of little or no benefit. It can also be said that a number of studies have shown both frequency of writing and intensive correction to be ineffective in the improvement of writing. Because of the lack of studies concerning the newer grammar, research is inconclusive regarding whether structural linguistics or transformational grammar aids in writing. Judging from the studies to date, the benefit of either of the newer grammars as an aid to writing seems doubtful.

Studies to date indicate that sentence-combining practice, without instruction in formal grammar, is an aid to syntactic fluency. Several findings from studies (mostly those on frequency of writing and those on characteristics of good writers) suggest that increased reading results in improved writing. And several recent studies indicate that various methods of precomposition are beneficial to students.

All right. There’s our research base for Monday’s preparation, and as tentative as it sounds, it still points us in some general directions and away from others. What does Haynes tell us that might help the students write better? Pre-composition exercises, sentence-combining exercises, and increased reading. What probably won’t? Teaching the systems of traditional and transformational grammar, practicing intensive correction of papers, and (surprise) demanding a high frequency of writing.

Remember, we’re not expecting to receive the final word on the subject, since we know the subject is in a state of revolution. But since this revolution won’t be solved by Monday, we have to take the best available information and act on it.

Now at this point, I could wrap this up by telling you that I start each semester by giving the students practice in precomposition. Then, of course, they write essays and I read and evaluate them. At the same time, I assign weekly exercises in sentence-combining from William Strunk’s Sentence Combining, and I ask for a certain number of written responses to their reading. Just that, and insist that you get a copy of Paul Diederich’s Measuring Growth in English, read it before Monday, and take his
grading system seriously; I would insist, in fact, that you use his system.

That would probably be enough for you to get started and find whatever else you needed, from advice to textbooks. But I'm not going to stop there. No, from this point on, much of what I will tell you will degenerate into what most teachers of composition do when they are speaking about how to teach writing: I'm going to tell you how I do it. So, consider yourself forewarned, and always keep the distinction in mind when anyone tells you how to teach writing—they too are explaining their own practice, not the proven method for teaching it.

My second piece of advice is: Use the "Garrison Workshop-Tutorial" format for setting up your class. If you'd like to read a detailed description of what this is all about, see Roger Garrison's article, "One-to-One: Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition." But if you can't get it, here's a short description of the method.

First, the content of the course is up to you. The major changes from the traditional, lecture class will be in how you organize class time and respond to papers. Essentially, lectures are very short and the student paper becomes the subject matter of the course. Responses to the papers are oral and they are done in one-to-one, individual conferences.

Whenever students have a rough draft for you to read, they take a numbered card at the beginning of class (just like at the deli or any other place where important transactions occur), and then work on something else in class while they wait their turn for a conference. Garrison suggests you keep the conferences short and see the paper through several revisions instead of trying to point out every needed improvement in one sitting. This way, you get to see more students during a class period, and the students get to concentrate on solving one problem at a time.

With the Garrison system, you don't grade each paper. Instead, you give the students credit for the volume of work they complete and then, near the end of the course, grade them on one or two pieces of final work that they get to choose.

After using the system for almost four semesters, I've made some changes to fit my needs, but with the exception of assigning at a final, quality component of the student's grade, I follow most of Garrison's suggestions (more later about grading).

Garrison talks about the need for good beginnings, and in line with the directions suggested by research, he begins by focusing on pre-composition exercises, mostly in the form of the students listing ideas to write on and facts to substantiate their ideas. I too start by asking the students to write a list of subjects they'll write about during the semester. I don't hold them to the list—it's just a way of getting started. I combine this list-making with a couple of sessions on creative problem solving and idea generation so they can see how "deferred judgement" listing can be a helpful tool in starting to write.

Also, I make this a small-group process so they can get to know each other while learning brainstorming techniques. The group exercises serve two additional purposes: first, once the students have opened up to each other, they're not as reluctant to show each other their writing, so this breaks the ice for later peer responses to their papers. And second, these group exercises immunize the students against noise. McKeachie, in College Teaching Tips, warns against trying to exert too much control over students' conduct. His idea is that making rules can set up challenges that some students cannot pass up.

I had that experience the first semester I used Garrison. Ignoring McKeachie, I made the rule that no one could talk when we were writing. I wanted the class to be a quiet place for the students to write. I even dragged two desks out in the hall for conferences so my comments wouldn't disturb anyone. So, I set up a rule to be broken and an expectation in some students' minds for absolute silence. Of course, the rule was broken, and the students expected silence came to me with complaints about the noise. Then I had to make peace in the class.

Now, through the group exercises, I present the class as a workshop where people can talk, write, or read each others' work and comment on it, and no one has complained about noise. In fact, I give conferences inside the classroom now, and the hum of voices actually makes it easier to make my own remarks to a student and not worry about keeping them confidential.

Unlike Garrison, I don't require several revisions of the same paper. During most of the semester, I ask the students to do one revision on some specific problem in the rough draft (for example, a consistent need to supply concrete evidence or examples), and then they can go on to the next rough draft. This approach seems to give them a greater sense of movement and accomplishment than spending an equal amount of time on one paper and several revisions. I don't worry about the problems I may have left behind in one paper, because experience tells me they'll show up again in the next.

Later in the semester, I ask them to begin choosing what they'll revise on their own, either on the basis of their own feelings about what they've written, or with the help of a revision checklist I provide in a set of handouts.

So far, I have found a number of advantages in using Garrison's methods:

1. There's no delay between students presenting their work for comment and my commenting on it.
2. When I make comments, the students are there to ask any questions my comments raise, and I can make sure they have understood my answers. (One more piece of advice: make short written reminders of oral comments and suggestions for improvement on the students' papers.)
3. For every paper, the students have the chance to revise, knowing I'll see the revisions and comment on them as well.
4. With this method you're teaching individuals, not classes.

As far as curriculum goes, I'm reluctant to give you any definite advice other than suggesting you require that your students buy Sentence Combining and do as many of the exercises as you can feasibly read (I have them do sixty kernels a week in "Phase I" for six weeks, then eighty kernels a week in "Phase II" for four weeks). But when it comes down to what kind of papers to assign, how many, and how long they should be, there is no golden rule. Right now, I'm teaching four sections of freshman composition at two different universities with a total of one-hundred ten students (I also teach a one-hour section of usage...
and grammar, but no papers are required for that course). I have assigned six papers, six revisions, two typed final revisions, and the sentence combing. I ask for about four-hundred words per paper, and some write more, some less. My first semester teaching, I assigned twelve papers and revisions, but I only taught one section, so I managed to make time to read them. Now I couldn’t.

Also, I’ve done informal surveys of TAs, part-timers, and full professors, and I’ve never gotten the same answers to questions about how many papers they assign, how long the papers are, or how many revisions they require. So, since neither research nor practice tells us how to answer these questions with certainty, it’s up to the individual teachers’ capacities and the requirements their departments establish.

And now, for my next bit of advice, I’m going to return to the question of grading. Why do I recommend Diederich’s book so strongly, “insisting” that you read it and follow his system of grading? I’m glad you asked.

*Measuring Growth in English* is a report of research on essay grading done by Diederich and his associates at the Education Testing Service. Diederich began his research with the impression that students were being “graded on practically everything they do every time they turn around. Grades generate anxiety and hard feelings between students, between students and teachers, between students and their parents, and between parents and teachers;” so Diederich set out to find “the smallest possible number necessary to find out how students are getting along toward the four or five main objectives of the program” (p. 2).

And what was that number? Believe it or not, two. That’s right, they found that two essay exams (with a section of objective, sentence correction questions in each), given at the end of the semester would tell teachers as much as they needed to know about student progress as all the quizzes and graded papers that cost teachers so much time and anguish.

Diederich and his associates also found out some interesting facts about the subjectivity of essay grading. For instance, they found that simply stamping the words, “honors, on papers at random would result in those papers receiving significantly higher grades than other papers in the sample. Also, on the basis of his research, Diederich estimates that every time a group of English teachers sit down together to grade a set of papers, on the average, twenty percent of the papers will receive every grade from A to F.

So what’s my advice on grading? Don’t do it. That is, don’t grade the essays your students write during the semester. Then what do you do with those papers? The system Diederich recommends is just about the same as Garrison’s. You read the papers and make positive comments on what the students do well, and then add a suggestion for improvement (rarely more than one). Then at the end of the semester, give them two essay exams on different subjects and on different days (some students will do better than others on different subjects; some will write better on different days). The essays are then graded by two third-party graders using a general-impression grading system. (The graders read each paper quickly, and without marking it, give it a first-impression grade.) Then the two grades are averaged together for the essay grade. The student gets the higher of the two essay grades, and anyone who is still unhappy with the grade can come to a third session for a final try.

In the cases where the graders’ grades on an essay differ by more than a full letter grade, the essay is given to a third reader, who substitutes his or her grade for the grade nearer the mean.

Now I’m certain that very few of you who read this will teach in a school that has this system. I don’t myself, but I use it anyway. You too can set it up with the cooperation of any other TAs or Professors (or tutors who are qualified by the department to give grades). Here’s how to do it. Sometime in the last two weeks of the semester, set aside two class periods for the in-class essays and choose two general essay subjects the students could be expected to know something about. (My first subject was “Television is a Wasteland,” and I found that every student was well-qualified from experience to write about it.) Then, trade papers with other teachers who have agreed to use the method. They don’t have to endorse your whole system. They could simply want a third-party grade on a typed term paper. What’s essential to you is to get two third-party graders for your papers. In the cases where the graders’ grades differ by more than a full grade point, you can supply the third grade. In fact, I grade all my papers before I give them to the other graders, and then whenever the grades exceed the full grade point, I average the high two of the three grades just to give the student the benefit of the doubt.

One further suggestion: make sure all the papers are written on the same kind of paper, and ask the students to write their social security numbers instead of their names on the papers. These two precautions help rule out any chance of grader bias for or against format, sex, or ethnic background.

This grading system has several advantages. It transforms your role from that of a judge to one of a coach, eliminating much of the friction between you and your students. Also, it gives you a more “objective” final grade for your students’ writing. And finally, it frees you from the hours of work during the semester that the detailed marking and grading of papers requires.

Now, what do you do without grades to keep students motivated? How do you reward the hard worker who will never score as high as a better writer who can slide through the course without working? Institute some kind of point system for the volume of work a student completes. In my four semesters’ teaching, I’ve experimented with several methods and found that the volume of the grade shouldn’t exceed forty percent of the total grade. This way, the hard working students who complete all the work must still make a solid B on at least one of their final essays in order to receive an A — in the course.

You can see from the amount of time I’ve spent discussing grading, how important a part of the job I consider it to be. In fact, this is probably the single area with the greatest potential for causing you headaches, ulcers, and lost time. It is also an area of hot controversy, so don’t expect to find wide support if you use anything resembling Garrison’s or Diederich’s systems, especially if you’re discussing your system with someone who grades every essay and is happy with that system. Always remember the revolution we’re in, and don’t let “parisan zeal” discourage you.

What about advice for further reading? In order not to overwhelm you with another bibliography in composition (one recently published, “selected” bibliography in composition runs to over two-hundred titles), I’m going to recommend only one title, William E. Irmscher’s *Teaching Expository Writing*. It provides a broad view of the field as well as some made-for-Monday particulars, and the coda gives a starting point for further reading. As Irmscher himself puts it, “The important thing is to begin somewhere. One source will almost certainly lead to another” (p. 188).

And now for my final advice, which is simply: Expect success. There’s a lot to be said for the self-fulfilling prophecy, and even
experimental psychologists are starting to say it on the basis of laboratory research. So, when Monday finally rolls around, expect success from your students and yourself, and the chances are good that you'll get it.

Notes
4. Paul Diederich, Measuring Growth in English (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1974).
6. The best guide I have seen to the whole field of creativity is S. J. Barnes, R. E. Noller, and A. M. Biondi, Guide to Creative Action (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977). It contains articles on creativity, a course you can take on your own, and an extensive bibliography of books, articles, and films.

SURVIVAL AND PROSPERITY:
TA TRAINING COLLOQUIA

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Most traditional B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. programs in English, until fairly recently, have been largely unsuited to the realistic career needs of the students enrolled in them. As a result, many of our new TAs possess only a minimum of formal (theoretical) preparation which will help them as writing teachers, and so we have instituted training programs which usually consist of some combination of the following:

1. Some kind of supervisory system wherein new TAs work as apprentices (or at least as advisees) to more experienced instructors;
2. A series of meetings or training sessions or colloquia;
3. A group of readings introducing or surveying the fields of knowledge generally considered helpful, useful or mandatory for aspiring writing teachers;
4. Opportunity to observe other teachers in the writing classroom (often included as part of the supervisory system);
5. Work in a tutoring center or writing lab.

A survey of articles dealing with or applicable to the training of new writing teachers, and specifically new graduate assistants, shows that most of us agree new TAs need, above all else, to be made aware of the complex issues, problems and choices which they will face. But I believe our goals in TA training must fall under two major areas: helping them to "survive" and helping them to "prosper."

By survival I mean the immediate and pragmatic elements of the writing classroom that spell the difference between success and failure, between developing confidence and facing disaster, between enlightenment and discouragement. By prosperity I mean the extension and development of a teaching philosophy in general. Prosperity is a continuing proposition; continuing in terms of both the composition course itself and the teacher’s whole career. Survival is largely limited — but not totally restricted to — the first weeks of the first semester of teaching.

But there is a catch, a potential conflict of interests: what new TAs need to know to survive may differ from what they need to know to prosper, or may at least require different emphases. In the context of the survival/prosperity question, I would like to address specifically the technique of semi-formal training sessions for new TAs, whether they are called orientation consultations, staff meetings, or colloquia.

TA training colloquia usually occur in two phases: a series of relatively intensive meetings prior to the beginning of the first semester of teaching, and a series of further sessions spaced throughout the terms, or the academic year.

Early Colloquia

Naturally the pre-semester barrage of colloquia should largely address problems of survival. Inexperienced TAs anticipating their initiation as the person in front of the room in Freshman English need some answers (or at least a range of possible answers) to a number of very basic — and sometimes very scary — questions, of which the following may be typical:

How should I act?
What am I supposed to do with these textbooks?
How can I fill up 50 minutes?

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What do I do when I've collected the first set of papers?
How can I get the students to talk?
How do I begin to teach writing?

Beginning TAs are generally not concerned about the road to full-professorship or about publishing their first article in *CCC* or about becoming stars in the pedagogical heavens. They are worried about embarrassing themselves.

Perhaps the most effective method of designing early training sessions is to anticipate some of the ways new teachers may try to answer their own questions without guidance. For example, in "Preparing the New Composition Teacher," Joseph Compron lists "potentially alarming false assumptions that are held by prospective writing teachers." These assumptions are:

1. that freshman English is primarily a course about literature;
2. that good writing naturally follows good thinking;
3. that freshman English ought to introduce literature, writing and the arts to students as we, teachers of English trained as English majors, know it, rather than as a process.

Similarly, in "Teaching Expository Writing" William Irmscher offers a set of "myths" about writing and the teaching of writing:

1. anyone who can talk, can write;
2. writing can't be taught;
3. a writing course should begin with basics;
4. there is no connection between the teaching of grammar and improvement in student writing.

All of these false assumptions should be dealt with, and certainly new TAs could profit by reading Compron's article and especially Irmscher's book. But the Compron and Irmscher lists treat issues calling for more sustained development of a teaching philosophy—in other words they are matters of prosperity. I feel that initial TA training meetings must expose a series of false assumptions that are more immediate and that aim directly at treating the kinds of questions new TAs are most likely to have, and the mistakes they are most likely to make:

1. *Friendliness is the best approach.* This is not so much a false assumption as a simplistic one. We all want to be liked, and the temptation—particularly for new TAs who may be only slightly older than the students they teach—to try to be a pal group-therapy facilitator instead of a teacher, is heavy. New TAs, in other words, frequently have a tendency to confuse love and justice, and the advantages of setting up from the beginning some sort of professional distance are important for them to know. The hard line is that students are more likely to treat our judgments seriously if we are teachers than if we are buddies—and teaching writing certainly calls for making judgments.

A corollary to the false assumption above embodies a black-white fallacy: *If one does not come on like the quintessential flower-child, the only alternative is to be Attila the Hun.* As Irmscher says, "the single most important thing each of them [new teachers] has to learn is what concessions to make to freedom and what concessions to make to discipline" (p. 27). One's classroom persona, of course, develops with experience and is a careful blend of personality and pedagogy. New TAs, with little or no knowledge yet of either element, need to be given some guidelines.

2. *College students are adults, and therefore classroom rules, policies and expectations can be handled casually.* New TAs need to know the advantages of stating, in writing, such items as attendance policy, required texts, and minimal expectations for the semester's work. A sheet containing this information, handed out on the first day of class, gives the new teacher a document to fall back upon when and if questions or problems arise. Just as one example, most experienced composition teachers choose to operate under the premise that students can learn more about writing in our classes than out of them, and when confronted, as we are almost inevitably every term, by the student who has missed six of the first nine class meetings and the first two papers, experience gives us the wherewithal to handle the situation appropriately. The new TA, without such experience, should have something concrete to aid in making hard decisions fairly.

Another corollary needs to be mentioned here: *College students can be expected to do their assigned work.* Since Freshman English courses usually rely much less upon lecture than do many other college classes, few things are more frustrating for the new writing teacher than trying to discuss a chapter on generating thesis statements or trying to discuss "Politics and the English Language" when half the students haven't read it. Therefore the usefulness of pop quizzes over daily reading assignments, for example, can profitably be mentioned in initial colloquia.

3. *All college students possess a modicum of basic communication skills, or else they wouldn't be in college.* I like to tell the TAs I work with about the All-American running back, drafted by a professional team, who on his first carry in the first scrimmage was knocked nearly senseless before he could take two steps. It certainly hadn't been like that in college, even against the toughest competition. As a giant lineman helped the shaky rookie to his feet, he smiled and whispered, "Welcome to the National Football League, kid." So that they might better avoid the kind of rude awakening suffered by the lad in the anecdote, new TAs should be apprised of the necessity of giving, as early as possible in the term, some kind of diagnostic writing assignment. Our rookies need to have some idea of what they have to work with; they need to be able to spot, for example, the students who are going to need outside tutoring or help in the Writing Center, or who should be placed in remedial classes (if such are available). I think nothing is as potentially demoralizing to brand new writing teachers than to build carefully and conscientiously into the first full-dress writing assignment and have it fail because the general level of the student ability in the class is too low (or simply too skewed) to handle it successfully.

4. *Students will care genuinely about improving their writing.* In labelling this a false assumption to be dealt with as a survival issue for new TAs, I do not mean to project an attitude of malicious cynicism. A certain degree of pessimism may have its attraction for those of us who have taught composition for a number of years, but here I am referring to the bugaboo of grades. Students may indeed care about improving their writing, but experience has shown most of us that they do so largely in terms of the grades we assign, often at the cost of attention to the written comments we labor over, or the things we discuss in class. And every freshman comp section, by the law of averages, will contain a certain percentage of students who "have never made lower than B plus on any paper" and yet who write, by even the most generous interpretation, at a level considerably below B plus. So new writing teachers should be encouraged to establish, again as early as possible in the semester, some standards of judgment to serve as the basis for discussion and treatment of writing throughout the term. Even in classes where student writing is not letter-graded at first, the groundwork for standards of excellence and/or competence must somehow be laid, for the day of grades is surely coming.

5. *Most successful writing teachers do pretty much the same thing.* New TAs need to know that some experienced teachers start with personal (expressive) writing, then work into expository writing and finally to persuasive writing; that some start with
the "whole" and work down through the paragraph to sentences and words, while others do it just the other way around. New TAs need to know that professionally written pieces of prose can be used to illustrate rhetorical or structural points, to serve as models, to provide stimulating ideas for the students' own writing. They need to be aware of the differences between teaching by negative example and teaching by positive example (using dittoes of a D paper and a B paper in discussing a writing assignment), and the ways in which each may be appropriate. Such information shows new teachers some of the kinds of things they can actually do in the classroom, and supplies resource material for deciding how to deal with the complex task of teaching people how to write. And, to put the first last, it disabuses them of the notion that there is only one right way.

**Content of Early Colloquia:**

The survival questions mentioned and the false assumptions treated so far by no means represent a complete inventory of what new TAs want or need to know. An inclusive list is probably impossible because while common survival problems are easy enough to glean from discussion, experience and research, survival itself is finally an individual matter.

Therefore the specific content of early training sessions remains less critical than their overall effect. In other words the *what* is subordinate to the *how*. For example, a useful early colloquium might be entitled "Diagnostic Assignments." The greatest value of such a meeting would be the presentation of a rationale for diagnosis in the writing class, or the explanation of possible goals for diagnostic writings, rather than any specific suggestions regarding topics (although, of course, new TAs can profitably borrow from such suggestions until they develop the wherewithal to generate their own). The greatest value of a training session on "Teaching Essays" lies not in what specific selections are discussed or demonstrated by the colloquium leader but rather in the kinds of methods-questions that can/should be addressed: how to decide what to say, and what to demonstrate; how to involve students in discussion; how to tie the readings to the study of the writing process. The line-up of early colloquia is almost sure to include a grading session, and even here the value is perhaps evenly split between information on grading standards and the *how* of writing comments on papers.

Furthermore, the specific content of early training meetings is less important than overall effect because of a reinforcement factor. It does not matter if the experienced faculty conducting the sessions cover some of the same ground. Hearing several veteran writing teachers talk about maintaining some degree of distance in the classroom, or about the advantages of an early diagnostic assignment, or about certain teaching strategies, tends to properly emphasize key survival issues.

**Conduct of Early Colloquia:**

TA colloquia teach indirectly as much as they teach directly. In the very act of presenting their ideas, whether the official topic is "Generating Writing Assignments" or "Using the Rhetoric Text Successfully" or "How to Lead a Discussion," the training sessions offer a range of object-lessons about teaching techniques.

Professor A appears in a T-shirt and cowboy boots, is bombastic, witty, open, and replete with pedagogical energy as he conducts his session. Professor B is dressed formally, delivers her suggestions in a low-key manner, and is devastatingly effective in her logical, humane approach to teaching writing. Professor C is dignified, learned, and hard-nosed. He elicits enormous respect without wearing a three-piece suit and maintains a high level of interest without pacing all over the room and cracking jokes.

One colloquium speaker hands out reams of dittoes, another fills two blackboards to reinforce key ideas, a third asks effective questions and generates a ringing discussion. It may even be that one session-leader has excellent things to say but lulls the audience into stupefaction, while another, less organized, makes her points memorable by the sheer force of her personality.

The key to using both the direct and the indirect values of the colloquia is the director (be he/she the Director of Freshman English or simply the faculty member in charge of TA training, with or without official title). This person, who should be present at all sessions, can, first, reiterate the important suggestions made. But he/she can also point out the variety of approaches that have been illustrated, and can raise questions and encourage discussion about their relative degree of success, and about ways of choosing among them. The new TAs can therefore see and hear in the early training meetings ways of surviving in the writing classroom and can observe a broad sampling of actual teaching methods.

**Later Colloquia**

Pre- or early-semester colloquia, though they are heavily weighted toward immediate issues and therefore deal largely with survival, also contribute in some respects to prosperity — if only by beginning the process of making new teachers aware of the "confusing abundance of theories and approaches" to teaching writing.

But problems of survival do not, of course, stop after the first few class meetings. Class periods must still be filled profitably, students still ask discomforting questions, new pedagogical issues arise to replace the ones already dealt with: it is almost as easy to "lose" a class in the tenth week of the term as it is in the first week. Therefore the follow-up sessions in a TA training program, while they logically tend to treat less immediate problems (and thereby tend to be more oriented toward prosperity), will by nature and happenstance also serve in the continuing fight for survival.

**Content of Later Colloquia:**

Typically, later colloquia include another group theme-grading session or two. Developing evaluative skills in the new writing teacher is clearly a continuing process (for certainly that process will not cease even after the new teacher is no longer new). Yet the TAs will be facing sets of their own papers every week or ten days, and one survival-application of grading-session colloquia will be to aid in handling theme-grading difficulties that are likely to pop up with what can be threatening regularity. (I'm thinking particularly of problems such as the halo-effect, the student who overcomes certain kinds of errors but makes a series of new ones and thus still gets a D or F, or the student who feels content ought to count separately from style.) Later colloquia can also profitably treat more theoretical matters, such as using free writings (à la Macrorie or Elbow), group editing techniques, methods of generating topics for argumentation or persuasion papers, or ways to develop a unit of study on the rhetoric of advertising. Such sessions broaden perspectives and add to the new TA's growing fund of knowledge and choices. But, like the grading-sessions, these meetings can also aid in survival, especially by anticipating pitfalls. As just one example, free writings and the use of what Macrorie calls "the helping circle" can be a wonderfully productive part of a writing class, but without care and judgment on the part of the teacher
the technique can prove sadly ineffective or even downright destructive. Understanding the contribution made to the field of teaching writing by Ken Macrorie's work should without doubt be part of the continuing development (i.e. prosperity) of any new writing teacher. But what besides survival faces the beginning TA happily immersed in a helping circle who is suddenly confronted by a student who says, "Yeah, well, we sit here and say all of these good things, but you keep putting D's on the papers I turn in?"

Finally, there exists the group of follow-up colloquia, logically coming near the end of the first semester (assuming the usual two-semester sequence of Freshman English), which address concerns that will emerge in the second term's course. Topics might include alternatives for teaching the use of research materials and research-type writing, methods of using literature in the writing class, and discussion of the kinds of problems that occur when students at the freshman level undertake to write about literature. Here, of course, most survival-potential is deferred until the new teacher actually gets into the next semester's course.

Conduct of Later Colloquia:

As with the early colloquia, the specific content of the later colloquia is less crucial than the ways in which the sessions are used. And again we have the indirect as well as the direct benefits of training sessions. But by now, with some experience under their belts (and, we hope, some degree of confidence), the new TAs themselves will be able to largely take over the "synthesis" function performed by the faculty training-leader in the early meetings. Having begun to develop, even after just a few weeks in the classroom, some sense of what works for them (and what doesn't), new TAs can pick and choose successfully among the hints, techniques and theories offered in the colloquia. In other words, their own built-in survival mechanism starts to function and they can say to themselves, "Professor D's use of the student newspaper for generating argumentation topics is good, but I'll bet it would be better for me if I did it by breaking the class into groups—I just don't think I know enough yet to be able to carry it off in a lecture-format"; or, "Doing revisions as Professor E suggests is a good idea, but I'll have to be careful to work it into the grading system I'm using or there will be trouble when it comes time to figure final grades." This is not to say that colloquium speakers, or the faculty training-leader, should cease to offer cautions or to point out danger spots; but as the semester's training sessions progress the new TAs are quite naturally ready for more enrichment of their overall teaching philosophies, for more knowledge about the longer-range problems, issues, attitudes and choices which make up the profession of teaching writing.

Conclusion

I do not pretend to be offering here any startling new developments in the use of colloquia for TA training. But I do feel that in our natural anxiety to expose new writing teachers to the complexities which their jobs entail, we sometimes underemphasize the immediate problems of survival. We attempt in our training sessions to make a beginning toward filling the large holes in the backgrounds of the people who teach a significant share of our Freshman English courses. But as we do so, we should be aware that just as we have an obligation to introduce our charges to things they should know about the structure and history of the English Language, about rhetoric, about developing a theoretical framework for the teaching of writing, about choosing reliable, productive methods, we also have an obligation to remember the immediate, highly practical kinds of things they need to know to survive long enough to really learn.

Notes


2The most cogent outline of this professional knowledge I have discovered is Richard C. Gebhardt's "Balancing Theory With Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers," CCC, 28 (May, 1977), 134-40. He defines four kinds of necessary knowledge: structure and history of the English language; rhetoric; theoretical framework for teaching writing; and reliable, productive methods for teaching writing.

3CCC, 25 (February, 1974), 49-51.


5Gebhardt, p. 135.

Principal consultants for the 1982 Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English, to be held in Laramie June 28-July 2, are Linda Flower, Carnegie-Mellon University; J. Paul Hunter, University of Rochester; and W. Ross Winterowd, University of Southern California. People wishing to attend the Conference, or wishing to participate in panels, workshops, or address/discussion sessions should write to: Professor David Roberts, Conference Director, Department of English, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming 82071. (Deadline for submissions is May 1, 1982.)

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM: MORE THAN ONE OPPORTUNITY AT IOWA

Sue Seyfarth
University of Iowa

The freshman Rhetoric Program at the University of Iowa is staffed, in part, by approximately one hundred twenty graduate teaching assistants. Each first-year TA is required to enroll in the department's Professional Development Program, better known as PDP, a program which consists of a three day pre-registration workshop and weekly seminar meetings during the fall semester. The program planners structure the meetings in the following manner: small seminar groups are organized, usually made of thirteen new TAs, one experienced TA, and one faculty member. Most meetings are divided into two sessions, one involving the small seminar group and one involving the combined seminar groups. What is done, specifically, in these meetings varies from year to year as program goals and individual outlooks change, but there are some general principles that guide those planning the Professional Development Program.
Generally, in the pre-registration workshop, participants are given a chance to get acquainted with new and experienced TA's and with permanent faculty members, an experience especially helpful for those who are not only beginning their teaching careers, but who are also beginning a new graduate school in a new town at which many have arrived within a week of the workshop's opening session. People have the time in those three days to concentrate on and prepare for the early weeks of the semester, and, of course, they have an established support group in the faculty and returning TA's who are willing to answer questions and help solve problems regarding their teaching duties, their own studies, and their day to day lives in Iowa City.

Throughout the 1981 PDP pre-registration workshop the general goals regarding the teaching of rhetoric were most often implemented by simulating a freshman rhetoric class. Participants wrote, spoke, and read on topics that they might be asking their freshman students to work on in the coming weeks. The planners encouraged workshop participants to become actively involved in thinking about and articulating their own ideas for teaching the first four weeks of Rhetoric. The supportive atmosphere promoted a cohesion within the small seminar groups, particularly important when ideas were presented to the combined group. Through participating in group activities within the small seminar groups, participants experienced techniques they might use in their classes, such as brainstorming for paper topics or workshopking drafts for copyreading errors. Most significantly, the PDP planners hoped for and anticipated not the passive workshop that would have occurred had faculty members and returning TA's prescribed their plans for the first four weeks, but a lively workshop made up of vital, questioning, and contributing participants whose concerns and needs for the future weekly PDP sessions would become apparent. The weekly sessions that followed the workshop, then, looked beyond those first four weeks toward purposes and possibilities for the remainder of the term, but, of course, the group leaders were always open to discussing any immediate problems or issues that might arise. The emphasis on problem-solving and sharing of ideas and experiences—both successes and failures—continued in both the large group and the small seminar groups.

To me, though, what is an even more interesting and exciting aspect of PDP is the opportunity offered to returning TA's to become members of the planning committee. The role of the graduate student PDP planner is described rather generally as that of a helper who assists faculty planners in carrying out their plans for the workshop and weekly PDP meetings. However, I have found in my experience as a student assistant planner that there are some very specific philosophical and pragmatic implications of the role of the graduate student PDP planner. It is implicit in the mere existence of this committee of planners, made up of an equal number of faculty and graduate students, that in the Rhetoric Program at the University of Iowa we are all viewed as teachers. TA's are not asked to implement the plans of others; they are asked and expected to help in the creation of plans. There is an exchange of ideas between the faculty and TA's on this committee that occurs rarely, if ever, in one's academic degree department. The members share in the sense that we all can learn from one another, and, as the TA's share equally with the faculty in the responsibility for the direction of PDP, a sense of mutual respect develops that is unique from most other experiences I have had as a graduate student. I believe that the existence and actual function of this committee demonstrates that the faculty of the Iowa Rhetoric Program truly believes that graduate students have a great deal to contribute to the program's growth and development.

There are, too, practical reasons for the existence of the position of Student Assistant PDP Planner. At this time, Iowa's Rhetoric Program is staffed by eight faculty members and over one hundred twenty TA's. The faculty simply cannot assume the responsibilities that are assumed now by the student planners. In fact, those responsibilities are far more extensive than the general description of the job indicates. The graduate students participate equally with the faculty members in choosing weekly PDP activities, defining the specific nature of those activities, locating presenters and participants, and actually doing many of the presentations themselves. Each student planner is assigned along with a faculty member to a small group; the two share in the responsibility for the conduct of their group. Because the graduate student planners have been enrolled in PDP recently, they are able to perform an important function that no faculty member can: they keep the faculty in touch with the real needs of the new TA's. This unique ability that the student assistants bring to the planning committee certainly aids in fostering the respect they receive from the faculty members.

From the viewpoint of the student assistant PDP planner, the opportunities and benefits to be gained from such an experience are numerous. There is the professional advantage of gaining administrative experience that one simply cannot obtain from teaching alone. There are the already mentioned advantages of working closely with a group of permanent faculty members. Additionally, relationships develop between the graduate students and their respective small seminar group leaders which are gratifying both personally and professionally. For example, I cannot think of another professor who knows my work and my abilities more thoroughly than the PDP group leader whom I assisted. Then there is the unique opportunity to work with other graduate students: first, there is the creative and energizing experience of working, not competing, with the other student planners; second, one is in close contact with a group of new TA's whose needs and insights help to maintain one's awareness of their problems and also their fresh and instructive approaches to teaching. The role of the student planner, then, is quite creative and challenging. We try out our own ideas and hear responses from faculty and TA's. At times, we see those ideas implemented by others working in the program. For example, during one small seminar group meeting, we were paired off in order to share approaches to the teaching of reading with which we had been successful. I shared my method of using student-led reading discussions to increase comprehension and to integrate speech and reading. My group leader asked me to share this approach with our entire group. I received instant feedback on my idea; throughout the semester, I heard and read reports from the faculty members and the TA's in the group on their own applications, adaptations, successes, and problems with my approach. What this kind of experience means to the graduate student planners is that, beyond our function as teaching assistants, we contribute not only to the direction of PDP, but also to the direction in which the University of Iowa Rhetoric Program moves.

Just as the description of the position of Student Assistant PDP Planner has both philosophic and pragmatic elements, so do the benefits of the job. Confidence and morale increase with the recognition from the faculty that we, as experienced TA's, have a great deal to contribute to the growth and development of this Rhetoric Program. The general guidelines for the Professional Development Program's pre-registration workshop and
the weekly meetings throughout the semester plus the benefits of acting as a student assistant planner demonstrate the rare and valuable experience Iowa's Rhetoric Program offers to its teaching assistants through its challenging and supportive Professional Development Program.

AN APPRENTICESHIP FOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS
Constance J. Gefvert
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I began teaching freshman English fifteen years ago, in a medium-sized state university in the midwest. I had decided to try teaching for a couple of years after receiving my M.A., to see if I liked it well enough to commit myself to work on a Ph.D. I had worked as a teaching assistant at the University of Minnesota, but as a master's degree candidate, I graded papers in literature courses since only the doctoral students taught freshman composition. I was, then, a genuine neophyte when I was hired to teach twelve semester hours of freshman English. I had had no formal training in composition since my own freshman English course in 1959-60, and at that time, as my readers might imagine, freshman English was largely a literature course. I wanted, above all, to teach literature; but I knew I would have to serve my apprenticeship and pay my dues in the profession by teaching freshman English for awhile. Little did I know I would end up the administrator of a writing program.

When I arrived to take up my new position, I was handed a copy of James McRiform's Writing With a Purpose, 3rd ed., and an essay anthology. Although I was given no training, I enjoyed teaching right from the start, being a natural ham who loves a captive audience. But I sometimes felt as though my first-semester class was a sacrifice to my learning how to teach composition. The event that stands out most in my memory of that first semester was the one visit I received from the Director of Freshman English. That day I was teaching a selection from Plato's Symposium in our essay anthology. I did what I thought was a brilliant analysis of Plato's philosophy, and even got my students participating in class discussion. I felt like a great success until, after class, the Director called me in for a conference. Being a tactful and supportive person, he told me all the good things I had done: I was clear, I used the blackboard well, I was enthusiastic, I got my students involved. But then the blow fell. Did I remember this was a composition course, not a course in classical literature and philosophy? Yes, of course, I replied, feeling very hurt. But how can I teach students to write about Plato if I haven't first taught them to read Plato?

And there's the rub. That Director of Freshman English knew what he was doing, and he was himself an excellent teacher of writing. As it turned out, our conference that day led to numerous conversations, and I learned a lot from him. It was unfortunate, though, that he didn't have the administrative backing to structure a program in which neophyte teachers could benefit from his wisdom and experience before being tossed to the lions.

When I returned to Minnesota two years later, in 1968, to begin work on my Ph.D., I still didn't know a lot about teaching writing, and I was very much tied to a "product approach." But the Minnesota faculty, by that time, had begun to see the importance of some training in the teaching of writing. We had a two-day orientation, led by veteran TAs. We read and talked about Jerry Parber's "The Student as Nigger" (and later got in trouble for using the essay in our classes); and we read the recently published collection of essays edited by Gary Tate and Edward Corbett, Teaching Freshman Composition (New York: Oxford, 1967). The revolution had begun, and by the time I arrived at Wayne State University as a new assistant professor in 1971, I was pleased to discover that both TAs and new faculty were assigned to faculty mentors, and training people to teach writing was not considered quite so revolutionary.

I repeat these personal anecdotes because they are illustrative of the changes our profession has undergone in the last fifteen years. Few people would argue any longer that training in literature, at whatever level, prepares one to teach composition. Few universities now neglect to give TAs and new faculty some training in or orientation to the teaching of composition. But "some training" or "some orientation" is not enough. If we are to have teachers who teach composition because they really love it and find it intellectually stimulating and professionally rewarding, and not because they have to mark time until they graduate out of teaching composition, then we must make available to new teachers two things. First, we must share the knowledge we have recently gained from research into the writing process itself, particularly the ways in which writing and reading are related; second, we need to provide information about pedagogical techniques that have proven effective in teaching composition. But in order to have this kind of training, we must also have the resources and the administrative support to allow new teachers the time and space for learning some of these things. If we put a heavy teaching load on our TAs, we can expect most of them to learn just to survive while working on their graduate degrees in literature — that means most of them will not become committed to the teaching of composition for its own sake but will, like their professors before them, eagerly await the day when they can "graduate" to teaching literature courses.

The TA Apprenticeship Program at Virginia Tech

Given the new excitement in our profession generally about the teaching of writing, we need strong administrative support — and this means a financial commitment, as well — for giving our TAs a genuine apprenticeship in the teaching of writing, not merely using them as a cheap way to staff our courses. The program at Virginia Tech has succeeded because we have this kind of administrative support — from our department head, our college dean, and the university provost. I will first describe the program as it presently exists, and then I will explain briefly the administrative route we travelled in getting to our present training program.

The apprenticeship training program at Virginia Tech involves a cast of dozens. We have twenty-seven TA appointments each year. Most of these are M.A. candidates in English; a few are M.A., Ed.D., or Ph.D. candidates in other fields (we do not offer a Ph.D. in English). We choose some non-English department graduate students for several reasons: while we want to use our TA positions to support graduate students in English, we also want to have the best possible teachers in our freshman English classrooms. We will, therefore, choose a strong graduate student in another field over a weak graduate student in English if the appointment is mutually advantageous — that is, if it benefits our freshmen English students (non-English TAs must have some background in English); if it benefits the TA; and if it benefits the writing program of the wider university. Having graduate students from non-English fields helps to reinforce our support of writing-across-the-curriculum and helps send out
graduate students to be professors in other universities where they, in turn, can contribute to the increased emphasis in writing-across-the-curriculum. This year, typically, our TA group includes the following: twenty-two who are working on M.A.s in English — some in traditional literary fields and some in our Language/Teaching/Writing option; two M.Ed. candidates in English Curriculum and Instruction; one Ph.D. candidate in Public Administration and Policy; and two Ed.D. candidates in English Curriculum and Instruction, both specializing in composition and rhetoric. Of the twenty-seven, sixteen are new this year and eleven are serving a second year; of the first-year TAs, seven have had previous experience teaching in the public schools.

This group of twenty-seven needs to be seen in the wider context of teachers in our department. We have currently 80 full-time positions, some of which are filled with part-timers, giving us a faculty head count of 90. Virtually every one of these 90 teaches composition every quarter — either freshman English or one of the upper-division writing courses. The TAs, then, account for a relatively small percentage of the total composition staff in the department. Of roughly 160 sections of freshman English offered each term, only about forty sections are staffed by TAs.

A significant proportion of faculty resources is devoted to the TA training program. Half of my administrative load is devoted to the program. Six faculty members receive one course released-time each quarter in order to advise groups of four or five TAs; and roughly five regular faculty positions are used to staff classes that would otherwise be staffed by new TAs, allowing the new TAs, in their first two quarters, to be paid for teaching two sections of freshman English while they teach only one section and spend the other time in various apprenticeship activities, described below. Altogether, then, the equivalent of 6½ faculty positions, out of 80, is committed to giving the TAs a thorough apprenticeship.

Given such a large cast of characters, the apprenticeship program involves a lot of planning and has, over the last several years, undergone a number of variations and refinements. As the Director of Freshman English, I have the primary responsibility for planning and carrying out the apprenticeship, but I am assisted and supported by many people: the department head, who conceived the most recent refinements in the apprenticeship program; the associate head, who is also director of graduate studies and is responsible for appointing the TAs; the members of the Freshman English Committee; and the six faculty advisors who work with small groups of TAs. In addition, this summer I had assigned to me an experienced TA to help plan the orientation for new TAs and faculty; and this fall I am lucky enough to have an instructor in our department, who has been a TA and is finishing an Ed.D. in composition, serve an administrative internship. With this large support group, the apprenticeship is bound to be better conceived and executed than if it were the work of one person alone. Not only has the university committed generous staff resources to the apprenticeship program, but we have also been fortunate to have enthusiastic moral support from a wide and varied group of people — more to be mentioned later.

The TAs themselves are the leading characters in our program, assisted by the supporting cast just mentioned. The program in which we are all involved is an apprenticeship, usually of two years, which involves five components: a non-credit orientation before fall classes begin; a graduate course called Teaching College Composition, required of all new TAs and taught during the fall quarter; a series of "composition seminars" during the fall and winter quarters; TA advising groups; and a special internship during the second year. I will describe each of these briefly.

Fall Orientation

Two and a half weeks before classes begin in the fall, all new TAs, along with new faculty, regardless of their previous teaching experience, attend an intensive all-day two-week orientation to the teaching of freshman English at Virginia Tech. The orientation is conducted in a conference/workshop atmosphere and includes small group discussion as well as presentations by the TA advisors, other experienced faculty, and second-year TAs. Typically, our morning sessions are devoted to familiarizing the new TAs and faculty with the level of writing and typical grading standards in the various freshman English courses — developmental, honors, and regular. (The department does not enforce a common set of grading criteria, though we do give students and faculty descriptions of typical characteristics of A, B, C, D, and F essays, with a caveat that grades depend on many variables — for instance, which course in the sequence students are registered in, where they are in the quarter's progression, what the teacher is emphasizing in any given essay assignment, and the progress the student has made.) We spend a lot of time reading, evaluating, and discussing sample student essays in order to arrive at some common principles for assigning grades.

In the afternoons, we engage in a variety of activities: presentations by various faculty on such topics as invention, revision, and other matters that come early in the quarter on most people's syllabus; using peer editing groups in the classroom; integrating reading assignments with writing; writing good assignments; and holding student conferences. On several afternoons, we schedule tours and presentations by the staff of our three biggest support services on campus: the Counseling Center, the Learning Resources Center, and the library. Finally, we devote several afternoon sessions to planning the syllabus, the TAs working with their advisors while the new faculty meet with me and other experienced faculty members. (We do not have a common syllabus or set of required texts for our courses, except a handbook and dictionary. We do have course descriptions, which specify the objectives of each of the freshman English courses, the minimum writing requirements, and suggestions for texts and ways of meeting the course goals; therefore, new TAs and faculty need guidance in planning a syllabus that will achieve the stated objectives of the course.)

We always close the two-week ordeal with a party for all new faculty and TAs, along with all the faculty and experienced TAs who have participated in the orientation, usually about an equal number of each. At that point, everyone is exhausted, some even burned out, but there are some important advantages: everyone's syllabus is ready, including a calendar for the quarter; most people have their class plans for the first several weeks ready, including essay assignments; and we all have five days to collect ourselves before classes begin the following Wednesday.

Two features of this orientation should be underlined. First, one reason for the success of our program is that we treat our TAs as professionals and colleagues — apprentices, yes, but also as fully-privileged members of the department, listed among the faculty on the directory board in the entry way to the English building, entitled to secretarial help along with the faculty, eligible for department committees, invited to department meetings and parties. The integration of faculty and TAs in this opening orientation is the best way I have found to establish a sense of professionalism early in the TA's career.
Second, all new staff members are asked to read and be thoroughly familiar with several books before they come to the orientation, since there is little time during the two weeks to eat and sleep, much less to read. These include a handbook and dictionary, the only two books required in all freshman English classes, and several professional books — William Irmscher's *Teaching Expository Writing*, Ross Winterowd's *The Contemporary Writer*, and Koch and Brazil's *Strategys for Teaching the Composition Process*.

All of this sounds like a lot of work, especially because no one is paid to be on campus that early. The payoff, we have found, for TAs and faculty alike, is that the first quarter is easier than it otherwise would be. How unlike the struggles I had my first quarter with no one but the spectre of James McRimmon to assist me!

English 5060: Teaching College Composition

The second component of our TA training program is a course that all new TAs are required to take that counts toward the M.A. in English: Teaching College Composition. This course meets for three hours one afternoon a week during the fall quarter and offers an introduction to the theory and practice of teaching composition in college. The course focuses on three matters: competing theories of teaching composition; classroom techniques that work well; and practical problems of teaching freshmen to write at Virginia Tech.

The course follows a conference/discussion format; we use the first hour for presentations by various faculty members and experienced TAs, concentrating on topics relevant to the later weeks of most TAs' fall freshman English syllabi, and, near the end, suggesting ideas for planning the winter-quarter course. Other department members are invited to these presentations, known as "Composition Seminars" (see next section).

During the second and third hours of class, we do a variety of things: we talk informally about common issues and problems that come up in the classroom, leaving problems specific to an individual TA's syllabus to be discussed in their advising groups; we discuss the reading assigned for the day; and we work in peer editing groups, trying out a variety of approaches the TAs may then use in their freshman classes. The material for those editing groups is the writing the TAs produce along with their freshmen, since one requirement of the 5060 course is to write all the assignments the TA gives his or her students.

The texts we read in 5060 include *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*, ed. by Timothy Donovan and Ben McClelland; Roger Garrison's *How a Writer Works*; Maxine Hairston's *A Contemporary Rhetoric*; Louis Middleman's *In Short*; and, continued from the orientation, Ross Winterowd's *The Contemporary Writer*. In addition, each TA is required to write a review and give an oral report on either a recommended book or a series of related articles on composition or rhetoric, and each TA keeps a journal of his or her teaching experiences.

The 5060 course, I have found, not only teaches the TAs some things they can apply to their own freshman classes, but more importantly, perhaps, it provides a sense of professional and intellectual excitement about teaching composition, and it makes TAs aware of bibliography and research methods they can use to follow their own interests later.

The Composition Seminars

The composition seminars run throughout the fall and winter quarters and are required for new TAs; faculty and experienced TAs are encouraged to attend whichever seminars interest them. In the fall, the seminars meet concurrently with the first hour of the 5060 class and cover topics related to material taught in the first two quarters of freshman English. In the winter quarter, they meet with no attachment to a course but follow a similar conference format, emphasizing ways of teaching topics in the second quarter and suggesting ideas for the third-quarter course.

The presence of faculty members at these seminars, as at the fall orientation, creates a stronger sense of professionalism among the TAs than if the seminars were planned only for them. The reason we can require their attendance, of course, where we cannot require the faculty's attendance, is that new TAs are being "paid for teaching two sections of freshman English but are teaching only one, thus having one course "released time" to spend on their apprenticeship activities — including the composition seminars, the meetings with TA advisors, and the observing of their advisors' classes.

TA Advisors and Advising Groups

Each of the six TA advisors works with a group of four or five TAs, with a mixture of first- and second-year TAs in each group so that the TAs learn from each other as well as from their faculty advisors. TA advisors are chosen carefully, according to their interest, experience, and success in teaching composition, and their ability to work well with other people in a helping relationship. They must be flexible enough to recognize that different teaching styles and methods work for different people, since the advising program is designed to give TAs as much guidance as will be helpful to their development as teachers yet allow them as much freedom as possible to design their courses and to develop the teaching methods that work best for them. Each TA is given progressively more freedom as he or she matures as a teacher, and those who come to us with teaching experience are normally given more freedom from the beginning.

In the first two quarters of their apprenticeship, TAs meet regularly with their advisors — usually in groups, though some advisors prefer to work individually. They work together to select textbooks, plan syllabi and classes, and discuss assignments and quizzes, student conferences, classroom or student problems, and paper marking and grading. In addition, TAs visit their advisors' freshman English classes an average of once a week.

In the third quarter of their apprenticeships, TAs begin teaching the regular load of two sections of freshman English per quarter. Although they no longer participate in weekly seminars with the entire group, they do continue, throughout their tenure as TAs, to meet with their faculty advisors. As each TA becomes a more confident and independent teacher, some of the requirements are waived. Our goal is to help TAs become progressively less dependent on their advisors: for some, the process occurs within a couple of quarters; others maintain a close relationship with their advisors throughout their tenure here.

Special Internship

In their second year of teaching at Virginia Tech, TAs normally serve a one-quarter internship in some specialized area of teaching that will help them meet their personal career goals. Some work as tutors in the Writing Center; some work with the foreign student office in tutoring students in English as a Second Language; some work at one of the local community colleges. During the winter quarter of 1982, one TA will be writing scripts for videotapes to be used with foreign students. Each TA is encouraged to choose an area that will provide experience not normally available in our regular freshman English classes, and for the internships, each TA is given released time from one section of freshman English. Most of the internships are scheduled
History of the TA Apprenticeship Program at Virginia Tech

I was fortunate when I arrived at Virginia Tech, because several components of the apprenticeship program were already well established. The 5060 course began in 1970 at the same time as a program using "master teachers," the forerunners of our present TA advisors (see FEN, Fall 1972, p. 3). When I came to Virginia Tech in 1976, the program underwent minor modifications, but the most important change occurred in 1979, when the English department head convinced the college dean and university provost that we were depending too much on brand-new, inexperienced TAs to staff our freshman English classes while not giving them the time and breathing space to learn in a true apprenticeship atmosphere. We were granted five new full-time faculty positions. These faculty positions were and continue to be used to teach classes which our new TAs would otherwise have to teach, allowing them to spend more time learning how to grade papers efficiently, observing their advisor's classes, and in general getting comfortable with the teaching of composition before they are asked to carry a full TA load. With cooperation from the Graduate School, we have been able to pay our new TAs the standard salary even while they teach only one course during their first two quarters. Without this kind of administrative support, and the support from the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the University Provost, our program would not be possible.

In a tight economy, such generous support of a writing program is not always feasible; but if administrators in the university give a high priority to good writing and to good teaching of writing, they may be willing to sacrifice something less important to build a strong apprenticeship program. Virginia Tech is a typical land-grant university, both in enrollment and in financial resources. What may be unusual is the combination of administrators—department head, college dean, and university provost—who were willing to ante up dollars and positions to ensure not only good teaching for our freshmen, but a rigorous professional education for our TAs. It is not enough to design good writing programs for our freshmen. We must also commit resources to ensure that their teachers are well-trained, for ultimately it is the quality of teachers, not programs, that determines how well our students write.

FROM GRADUATE ASSISTANT TO ASSISTANT PROFESSOR: PROMOTION IN COMPOSITION TEACHING SKILLS?

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Faced with the question "Would you prefer a graduate assistant or an assistant professor to teach you composition?" most students choose the latter. Perhaps they naively believe that the rank alone carries infallibility and excellence; perhaps they assume that all assistant professors have been trained in composition; or perhaps they just think that professors should teach better. As a recent graduate of a six-year graduate assistant apprenticeship, I wonder if my teaching is more or less effective since I have become an assistant professor. I have been a member of a faculty for two weeks, so my assessment is immediate and incomplete. But as it now stands, I can make a good case for the graduate assistant as superior composition teacher to the assistant professor.

Although the graduate assistant studies as well as teaches, she generally teaches no more than two classes per semester or one per term. These days, however, the assistant professor is usually responsible for four courses per semester, two or three per term. As we all know, the assistant professor must also, somehow, find time for committee work and publications. If my experience is typical, then because of work load, the assistant professor has less time than the graduate assistant to plan individual classes, prepare them thoughtfully, experiment with teaching strategies, spend on office hours and conferences outside class, and grade thoroughly.

Despite my previous training as a teacher (I studied and taught before returning to graduate school), I took great care as a graduate assistant to fully outline each class. My notes often ran to several pages because I detailed each activity, wrote down my aims, and systematically varied activities. Looking back at a teaching notebook, I find this entry to introduce the second of two required composition courses:

1. Hand out course guidelines.
2. Hand out syllabus. Remind students to bring it to each class because I may modify it.
3. Distribute index cards and ask them to indicate name, major, age, term standing, hobbies and interests, work experience, and any special English problems. Explain that as I grade, I refer to these cards, so students should fill in the details carefully.
4. Give out handout on essay standards and explain each section. Encourage student queries. Get students to briefly draw guidelines for A, B, C, D and F papers. (Aim: to provide insight on grading complexity but to establish that firm criteria exist.)
5. Read out preliminary homework assignment, due next class, 1-2 pp. "Imagine you are attempting to define 'what I am.' Pick a dominant trait or characteristic that helps make you what you are, then detail an event that illustrates (or caused) that trait or characteristic." (Aims: to introduce general statements followed by support; to discover students' personal background; to see how they write.)

Now, hasty notes replace such a detailed analysis. Of course, this is partly because I know my aims and activities, but it is also because I no longer have time to write lesson plans like these. Sketchy outlines may lead to omissions or at least to less skillful synthesis and connections. (N.B. My classes are not always so highly structured and instructor-oriented, but my lesson plans certainly were.)

If I lack time for careful lesson plans, I also lose on class preparation: Previously, before I made a class outline, I spent hours dipping into different books for texts that precisely matched my needs. Once I remember triumphantly discovering some translated Anglo-Saxon riddles perfect for my unit on inductive description. (After analyzing these riddles, students later wrote their own, read them in class, and asked others to guess the answer. This exercise tested students' descriptive accuracy.)

Teaching a course on persuasion and logic, I meticulously filled out index cards to illustrate the four sources of argument: external, cause-effect, analogy, and definition. Each student received a card with a topic—e.g., socialized medicine—then an instruction to argue for or against by using one of the four
sources of argument. I spent four hours before class deciding on suitable subjects, testing them myself, and finally writing the cards. The strategy worked well and was fun. Overwhelmed by the strain of three different class preparations, I do not have the time or energy at the moment for other innovations.

As a graduate assistant, I prided myself that I never taught the same course twice: I changed assignments; I shifted assignment sequence; I placed more — or less — emphasis on writing process and revision; I experimented with workshops, diaries, and conferences; and I created radically different syllabi. Now I find preparing for four courses (three of them different) leaves me little time for genuine experimentation. I can see how “innovation” could come to mean using new books every few years, adapting a Monday/Wednesday/Friday syllabus to a Tuesday/Thursday one, and seeking variety in each class’ unique mingle of personalities rather than in new content.

When I was a teaching assistant, I could demonstrate my concern for each composition class by scheduling generous office hours, freely holding special appointments, and relaxing assignment due dates. I have discovered that juggling four courses strains such tolerance. Although I used to stay in my office an average six hours a week for one class, I have had to reduce the time to three hours for four classes. I still make individual appointments, of course, but only if necessary and if students conform to my schedule rather than I to theirs. As for late papers, I find that if more than one or two come in after the others, I get confused and irritated. I continue to accommodate genuine excuses, but whereas previously a student confession like “I’m pledging a frat and they made me work until 5 a.m., so can I give you the assignment tomorrow?” would rouse my sympathy, it no longer does so. Self-survival dictates that I can only be inconvenienced so much.

My self-preservation instincts may also affect my grading. I always try to return work as soon as possible with plentiful comments and a carefully determined grade. So far I have received and returned three assignments, but it was a struggle. As a useful check on class standards, I used to glance through papers once, grade them in detail, assign a provisional grade, then sort them into piles to ensure, say, that all the B+s were at the same level. Unfortunately, I cannot continue this procedure, at least for the moment. And I dread to think of the delay (or overtime) if I carelessly schedule written work in the same week for all four classes!

To conclude, I must restate that this is a personal and provocative account. Of course, not all graduate assistants are conscientious, concerned composition teachers; they have other demands and responsibilities too. It cannot be true either that all assistant professors who teach composition are as harried as this newcomer. However, what the assistant professor possesses in rank and experience, the teaching assistant can match in time and enthusiasm.

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The editor reserves the right to edit essays so that their usage conforms with the Guidelines for Non-sexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications.

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THIRD CLASS