

vidual drinks were composed, of course, but as units in a larger composition. He was composing the bar, the lounge, the atmosphere, the circumstance, the quality—I'm trying to avoid saying the ambience of the place. I daresay he had to compose the bar anew every evening. No doubt some constituents would remain the same, but just as surely there would always be new ones, too, unknowns to be composed. And always, I'd guess, people would keep dumping stuff, a lot of it useless, into his inventive, composing world, so that he would continuously have to be deciding which parts to use, which parts to ignore, which parts to throw out, forcibly if necessary, including the belligerent drunk down the bar.

His composition and his manner of composing interested me. He was working with a large and perpetually shifting number of ingredients and constituents, and he was producing quantity and some quality on call as he created the bar. I found myself wondering if there was something that a teacher of composition such as I could learn from his practice, or if there was something I knew that his work would call back to memory and some immediacy (I am trying to remember Dr. Johnson's remark that we humans require more often to be reminded than informed). I certainly wouldn't want to push the matter too far, for fear of being thought addled at the bar, but I did learn or remember some things, first of which is that it is nice to have a glass of wine after hearing some interesting papers. But I'll go a little further.

I was struck by John's memory. Tending bar reaches over a limited set, to be sure; it isn't the same as remembering chemistry or cognitive psychology or Alexander Pope. Still, his memory was interesting. He knew the recipes for all the drinks, with no appreciable pause to recollect. He knew where all the ingredients were and reached for them without hesitation. He remembered which waiters gave which orders from the tables in the lounge, and he remembered his own bar customers and their orders. He remembered and noticed regular customers and seemed to know which of them would always order the same drink. He made quick, deft transitions.

What is it that freshman composition students have to remember when they come to write for us? What is it that we expect them to remember? What is it that the writing calls them to remember. Do they know that they need to remember? I can only answer the last question: mostly not. Do they know recipes? Do they know where things are that can be used? Do they know—do we provide or show—ways of thought, available patterns, usable structures? Mostly not, I'd guess, unless all of that comes in the form of a five-paragraph essay. Do they know and then remember habituations of writing? Mostly not, despite all efforts and good intentions. Do they own information? Often not. Do they know who is ordering which drink? Something heavy weighs here that I cannot name. It has to do with the likelihood—again, despite all efforts and best intentions—that writing in composition classes is mostly done absent the need for remembered information, method, and insight.

Doctor John, the bartender John, was adroit at his work; he was fast, and he seemed to understand and to enact the principle of economy of motion. Maybe that's just a version of our sense of literacy, and maybe some will say that if students don't have the right genes, they can't do some things. They probably can't write *Paradise Lost*, but no one needs to. They probably can acquire some speed, adroitness, and economy of motion if there's need. The young bartender, of course, was working against need. Absent genuine need for genuine writing, there are close limits to what we can do in freshman composition courses, and the world—including our colleagues in other courses and divi-

sions of our universities—pretty regularly announces that it has no great need for writing.

Part of what made the young bartender's composition successful was his own personality, which I could not know and did not ask to know except in its visible manifestations: he was pleasant, he noticed people, he listened to people, he was capable, and he did not seem to doubt his own capacity to do the work that needed doing. I don't know that we have yet found efficacious ways to bring students into trust of themselves or willingness to risk themselves. If students don't know that writing is worth doing, and they mostly don't, and if they don't value themselves as writers, and they mostly don't, then our best work will come to little. I think one has to believe that it all counts.

The young bartender seemed to understand and to pursue the needs of what I'll call *saloon ecology*. He caught and balanced the interplays of customers, constituents, ingredients, and needs, always moving, always working that busy evening, making drinks, filling orders, chatting a moment, greeting someone, restocking constantly. I don't know that we have regularly managed to show writing students when they need to go get some more bottles, when they need to visit a moment with the customers.

In general, I thought John, the young bartender, composed a good room, a good bar. He had a good sense of diverse things, and he knew his audience. The attention we have paid in recent years to audiences for writing was overdue; it is appropriate and useful attention. There are also limits beyond which writers cannot pay early or principal attention to audiences. A particularly interesting thing about the young bartender was that, yes, the customers mattered hugely, but first, he was doing all he could do, and getting the work done, doing all he could do, seemed to be what mattered most. Perhaps what is owed in writing is to do all we can do, to do all it takes to get the work done. Perhaps self, subject, and audience fall away before the value of the work itself.

What else did I learn that evening? Nothing much, except to remember that once you take it in hand to think about writing and the way it gets done and taught and why, you can't much let go, even over the second glass of wine in the Sly Fox Lounge, lest you decompose.

## Preventing Burn-out in Teaching Assistants

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Those of us who have worked in some capacity with graduate teachers of college writing—whether that capacity be supervisor of their teaching or advisor in general—have probably been confronted at least once with the following scenario. It is a rainy, Thursday afternoon late in February, that most forgettable of months; twelve wan-looking graduate teachers of freshman writing, each of whom takes two graduate courses and teaches two sections of writing per semester, file into the fluorescent-lit, antiseptic classroom for his weekly seminar in the teaching of writing. Someone coughs and receives a glare partly malevolent, partly sympathetic (for the glarer coughs, too). This is the group that in late August of the prior year was tanned from summers spent in Italy, in the Rockies, in Southern California. This is the group that each week in the seminar eagerly sought to understand the psychological needs and expectations of late-adolescent

writing students, needs and expectations expertly presented by a resident educational psychologist; this is the group that sought to grasp Kinneavy's theory of discourse, looping, cubing, tagmemics, the issue tree of Flower and Hayes; this is the group that responded politely and enthusiastically to the Director's presentation of the phases in teaching a problem-solution essay, as well as to his account of Toulmin's logic. This is the group that kept careful notes and added material to their wide three-ring binders, their initial resource books for a lifetime of teaching writing and literature. This is the group that, pale, in late February has forgotten to bring the resource book of August. This is the group made up of twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four-year olds who have, in the past twenty-two weeks of instruction, on the average graded a total of from 550 to 600 freshman essays. This is the group that is physically tired.

And yet physical fatigue does not, in large part, explain the listless behavior of February's graduate teachers. These TAs suffer from a common ailment that strikes all of us from time to time: burn-out. Burn-out often occurs when a worker no longer believes that a demanding task achieves meaningful results or "makes a difference" for an individual or for a community. A worker once compensated for physical exhaustion and psychic depletion by an idea of self-worth or self-importance. As that idea erodes through the gradual opinion that one's work is not as important as one supposed, personal satisfaction declines or becomes minimal and burn-out appears. Compulsive and gifted workers, such as Thomas Alva Edison, demonstrate a fact that most of us intuitively know: if you like what you're doing, you can work like the blazes and feed off the emotional and intellectual highs of your labors. Workaholism is a disease, to be sure; but those vibrant heart-surgeons who sleep only five hours a night teach us that physical fatigue, by itself, does not completely explain the graduate teaching assistant's ennui. His or her problem is deeper because it involves emotional exhaustion deriving from the giving way of an idealistic striving to the half-conscious conviction that his or her teaching is not making a bit of difference to students. TA burn-out is reflected in the graduate student's February belief that he or she could assign tens, dozens, even hundreds of essays; that he or she could dutifully note all the comma splices, the misplaced modifiers, the misspelled words, the illogical transitions, the ununified paragraphs, the mixed constructions, only to see college freshmen make the same errors on the next groping effort, and the one after that, and the one after that. In other words, August's bronzed TA has come to the winter prejudice that little he or she does in the classroom or writes on a student essay will make a difference to freshmen who seem resistant to education, who seem so slightly to resemble the freshman that the TA remembers being. The listlessness and apathy resulting from the frustrations described above often express themselves as a vague complaining on the TA's part concerning a variety of rapidly shifting subjects. In February, teaching assistants may become openly skeptical of the value of the required weekly seminar; more specifically, they may suddenly question the worth of learning the aspects of composition theory. At the same time, TAs may become "gimmicky," or games-oriented, in their lesson plans in a disguised effort to cheer up both themselves and their students. Direct accusations and confrontations with students may also occur during scheduled conferences, which the TA may now on occasion forget or neglect. Finally, the burned-out TA is likely to be more skeptical than ever of the possibility of objectively determining an "A," "B," or "C" letter grade. In fact, a certain relativism may creep into most phases of his or her teaching. As a result of a new

relativism in essay evaluation, the grading of sets of papers may be postponed or avoided altogether.

If these are major effects of burn-out in teaching assistants, what are some specific causes of the malaise? A few are fairly obvious. We all remember how it felt when we first realized that some students actually didn't want us to be so intensely "meaningful" to them and to their lives. TAs often realize for the first time that the students whom they will spend a lifetime teaching often don't care as much about the literature or ideas that led the TA to get good grades as an undergraduate and graduate student. That hurts. Then again, August's TAs could never have suspected how painful it is to confront a failing student with his or her ineptitude, a confused, inadequate student who loads guilt on the TA, who weeps before the TA, who makes the TA feel personally responsible for the impending loss of the student's scholarship, or life-long dream of becoming a surgeon. Never could the new teacher of writing have imagined that the emotional distress and feeling of failure felt by the student could be felt so directly and so often by his or her teacher.

Other causes come from the TA's new conviction that he or she, in a semester or even in a year, cannot make the positive changes in a student's writing style or level of skills that the TA imagined would quickly occur. Often a new teaching assistant has a romantic view of the writing process; good writing results easily from the inspiration of great literature or the teacher's presentation of an exciting idea. Rarely is the TA mentally prepared for the unromantic experience of teaching the intricacies of pre-writing, drafting, revising, and editing. Chilled, the TA discovers in January during a student conference that freshmen are no longer even reading the teacher's marginal comments, mainly because they don't understand them or can't read the handwriting or the abbreviations. Too often the freshman writer has told the TA that his or her high school English teacher liked his or her writing, that the student wistfully looks back on all those liberally written papers about literature, on all those ungraded or loosely graded journals, on all those extra-credit "projects." The TA is tired of hearing that he or she is scrooge—an inhumanely demanding person, the polar opposite from the humane teacher of high school. The teaching assistant now mistakenly imagines that most of his freshmen have not been adequately prepared by former writing teachers, that no one seems to have ever taught them grammar or correct writing; he or she perceives that he is expected to shoulder a burden that others have not assumed in the student's twelve prior years of schooling—that he or she must "make up" in a final semester of year-long writing course what did not happen in four years of high school. To accomplish this desperate, this Herculean pedagogical task, the teaching assistant is sometimes told that he or she must not teach imaginative literature in the writing course because so much remedial instruction must responsibly be delivered instead.

In this context of explicit or implicit assumptions, the TA naturally may feel angry and frustrated, especially if his or her own knowledge of grammar and ability to teach it is at all shaky. In the midst of all these negative feelings, the teaching assistant most likely is experiencing the grinding pressure of what it means to be a graduate student at a university. Having a seminar paper due in a course on the same day as one receives fifty freshmen essays can be demoralizing and nerve-wracking at the same time. In those departments with a prescribed syllabus for freshman English, or even in those with numerous required course units that must be integrated into everyone's course plan, burn-out in teaching assistants may proceed from the graduate student's dawning conviction that her class is not really her course,

but the Director's or that of whoever made up the required syllabus or course units. Thus, burn-out may derive from the TA's feeling that he or she is simply an inexpensive robot, an automaton, a "cog" in the departmental machinery for processing thousands of freshman writers. With little "say" in the classes he or she is teaching, the teaching assistant may realize that he or she was more of a person as an undergraduate praised and given special attention by faculty. Finally, burn-out may proceed from the teaching assistant's conviction that he or she receives little guidance in the teaching of writing, in how to deal with those demanding freshmen. The TA may feel that not only does no one in the department know what he or she is doing in the composition classroom, but also that no one would really care about the TA's instruction if he did know what was going on.

These causes of burn-out can be present in part or in total, and of course they can combine in the most devilish of ways. What can be done to prevent burn-out in teaching assistants? Helping the TA to perceive improvement in students' writing obviously will defuse the graduate teacher's feelings of ineffectiveness. First, freshmen writing often improves when essay assignments are intellectually challenging. Problem-solving agendas, based upon the Flower and Hayes model, and thesis-anthesis-synthesis assignments (wherein the student considers two sides of a question before fashioning a compromise) often lead to better writing. Secondly, TAs can often perceive change when they try to do more with less; targeting specific areas for improvement allows the student to focus. Initially, the TA identifies, with the student's assistance, those three or four areas for improvement; then the TA and the student make a "pact," the TA agreeing to only grade, for a short while, those targeted areas and the student vowing to do his or her best to learn the correct grammatical and paragraphing principles. Assigned remedial exercises or workbook lessons often are most effective here.

Allied to this targeting approach might be general instruction in how TAs can improve their essay evaluations. Teaching TAs to write positive summary comments, in which two or three areas for improvement are specified, can improve freshman writing when the student must complete remedial work in these areas, presenting it to the TA before the next essay is due. Thirdly, defining a performance plateau to be reached by groups of students within a class by the end of a semester, or at various points within a semester, can have beneficial results for a teacher as well as students. According to diagnostic essays, students can be grouped by common problems or by varying skills-levels; the TA then might meet with each group, agreeing on different performance plateaus and creating the programs to reach them. Such plateaus do not need to be tied in with essay grades but can exist independently of them to reinforce the learning process. Finally, I have found that encouraging TAs to structure classes around revision workshops helps improve freshman writing. A detailed plan for revision of a draft, perhaps in the three phases described by Maxine Hairston in *Successful Writing*, permits the student to write a paper that does not frustrate the TA during evaluation. All of these methods are designed to allow the TA and the freshman to perceive definite improvement in some aspects of the student's writing, thereby averting the graduate teacher's impression that he or she is wasting time teaching.

Furthermore, teaching such imaginative techniques of pre-writing as looping and cubing, and instructing freshmen how to sensitively create articulated cumulative, periodic, and mixed sentences, for example, help freshmen realize that expository writing can be every bit as "creative" as it appeared to be during high school English classes. Imaginative assignments in stylis-

tics can thus create a positive attitude within the freshman that makes the teaching assistant positive about his or her classroom.

Directors of Freshmen English can do much during their initial training workshops, their weekly meetings, and in their guidance systems to alleviate TA burn-out. During the initial workshop, the Director might supply data about how important writing skills will be for freshmen later in life, about how, for example, 20 to 25% of a new employee's time, regardless of profession, is spent in writing tasks. Moreover, during the workshop a faculty advisor, or "buddy," might be assigned to each TA; by meeting individually each week with the TA, the advisor, through suggestions for lesson plans, essay evaluation, and so on, helps the TA to understand that his or her work is understood, appreciated, and guided. Finally, during the workshop, TAs should be encouraged to create their own syllabi for their classes; required course units can be described generally so that the TA must decide upon their sequencing and the details and strategy of their implementation. Reflected in an individual syllabus, these decisions insure that the TA "owns" the class he or she teaches. When the syllabus is *not* the Director's, the TA is likely to become invested in the success of his course plan. Of course, any alterations in the TA syllabus ought to be done delicately at the conclusion of the workshop.

At some point in the semester, TAs might participate in in-service training with teachers of writing in the regional secondary schools. Such participation often begins a dialogue between high school and college English teachers that can go a long way toward dissolving the TA's feeling that high school teachers somehow have made life more difficult for the TA. Such in-service training works best when high school and college teachers, including the graduate teaching assistant, alternate non-threatening presentations of what has worked in the composition classroom. After such an in-service session, TAs might be sent on a tour of local high schools, where they can constructively discuss with secondary school teachers how the TAs and the teachers can form a liaison effective for the college freshman's learning.

The weekly meeting offers the Director several opportunities for activities that can prevent burn-out from occurring. Straight instruction in the weekly meeting should always be mixed with periods in which the TAs teach each other. Having different graduate teachers present a lesson that worked in the writing classroom not only bolsters the presenter's confidence; it also allows him or her to realize that he has something important to communicate. Such presentations can be constructively critiqued and discussed, thus involving everyone actively in a learning process. The videotaping of some of these presentations, with the TA's permission, of course, provides a forum for the non-threatening discussion of improving teaching techniques. In addition, during the weekly meetings TAs might learn imaginative ways of teaching grammatical principles so that they and their students do not feel bored to death. One way involves the wholesale and repeated use of the blackboard; different groups in a class might be assigned the writing of compound, complex, and compound/complex sentences. Volunteers from each group then write sentences on blackboards, thus permitting the whole class to judge their correctness with respect to the requisite number of dependent and independent clauses. The TA might encourage the class as a whole to refashion sentences on the board, so that compound/complex sentences of several clauses are created. This approach allows the TA to teach the use of commas and the semicolon as well as parallelism and correct modification without the drudgery of workbook exercises.

Finally, teaching assistants should be encouraged to share their own writing with a freshman class in order to help students understand that the TA is practicing what he or she preaches. By showing students various pre-writings, drafts, and revisings of a graduate seminar paper soon due, the teaching assistant can describe how he struggles and succeeds through a disciplined use of the writing process. Such a description often commands the student's respect, helping the freshman to perceive the TA as an ally rather than an aloof adversary. When conveyed to the teaching assistant, such respect is contagious: the instructor finds it easier to "like" not only his class but his profession as well.

All of these suggested approaches and techniques are not guaranteed fire insurance against TA burn-out. Still, carefully implemented, they can do much to inoculate graduate teachers against their most common complaint.

## Toward Honesty

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Honesty is getting away from me.

I used to be able to write on my students' papers, "Good job, Joe, an honest attempt at a difficult topic." Or "Nicely done, Lil, I especially appreciate the honest — although I know painful — attempt you made to communicate something of yourself." And while I couldn't be sure just exactly what I meant, I knew that somewhere, deep in Joe's psyche and Lil's psyche, I was twanging a bleeding, honest, moral fiber that would reverberate with the spiritual teachings of Elbert Hubbard:

Honest people are those who have been lifted up into a more spiritual atmosphere. They exercise an attractive force, and the better they are, the stronger this silent force they exert works for good. (159)

and Norman Vincent Peale:

Sincerely attempt to heal, on an honest Christian basis, every misunderstanding you have had or now have. Drain off your grievances. (210)

and Donald C. Stewart:

Writers settle for nothing less than absolute honesty in their work. This requires a special kind of writing discipline because you have to learn to throw away whatever else is false, no matter how much it pleases you. (19)

and George Washington:

I hope I shall possess firmness and virtue enough to maintain what I consider the most enviable of all titles, the character of an honest man. (Peter 246)

and Donald M. Murray:

The student should learn not only to see, but to see honestly, and he should discover the excitement of hearing another person's honest voice. (132)

In fact, even up to last month, I was more than willing to believe in some simple, divine, Honesty that I could recognize and promote along with Norman Vincent Peale and Elbert Hubbard.

But things are not so good anymore. Honesty is getting away from me.

I suppose I can trace my initial misgivings to Gregory Gump — one of those unsavory greasy types who spend most of their time molesting the neighbors' cats. (Gump is, of course, not his real name.) In a moment of inspired kindness, I told Gump that while his paper certainly deserved no better than a C- for mechanics, I would give him an A for revealing his honest feelings about Jews, wimps, nurds and queers. And Gregory sneered at me and said that seeing as he had lied about his feelings about Jews, wimps, nurds and queers to begin with, he probably couldn't take what I had said seriously, either. And I said that I honestly didn't know what to say — I had taken his response as a typical adolescent hangup revealing itself in some kind of absolutely honest, though idealized antisocial tribal ritual and I had responded as sincerely and — yes — as honestly as I could. I pursued my point and asked him how in the world could I respond spiritually if I didn't even know what was going on in his twisted demented head. And he said, "Don't you ever call me demented again," wrenching my arm behind my back and throwing my forehead against the blackboard. While I was drooling into the chalk tray, he made me confess that I really didn't like him as immensely as I had claimed on his previous papers and any problems I had with his writing were my own and that I was the one who had asked him to be honest to begin with and that was my main mistake, trying to get him to address his own inner conflicts and feelings toward life and existence. And as he left me, he said that lying was more fun, har har.

That har har still echoes in my head — even though my bruises were slight — most of which have faded now. (I was able to cover up the largest one on my forehead by combing my bangs down low and tilting my head forward when I talked to people.)

Who could take such a person seriously — a known cheat, a professed liar and molester of cats? I've asked that question a lot lately as I continue to tell my students to "Be honest! Find your true selves! Strip yourselves down to the barest shred of humanity before my very eyes and I will see you as you truly are! I truly will!"

But I'm saying so with less assurance than I used to because I've begun to doubt my own ability to recognize that treasured honesty that separates good students from the personally malnourished.

I had another encounter with honesty a short time later in Suzy Somes's journal. I found myself asking, How do I know if Suzy Somes is actually pregnant by her uncle's second cousin as she revealed to me on October 7? She looked honest enough. And there was real excitement in her words. I remember that I seemed to detect a slight rustle of fear in her eyes. I wasn't sure if that was caused by her pregnancy or not.

About a week later, I kept Suzy after class and asked her whether she had seen a counselor at all about her problem and she said "No" and what was I talking about anyway? I said something about her sexual "thing" and she said her "thing" certainly wasn't any business of mine anyway. And I said that I read about it in her journal and if she didn't want me to know, then she should stick to descriptions of her pet goldfish or maybe dreams of trees. And she laughed at me, saying that all she was trying to do was to reach out with a special kind of writing discipline and grab all that rich raw material I was always telling my class to write about. And she had nothing to write about so she made things up.

I still don't know whether Suzy was honest with me or not. I have never had the nerve to bring up the subject again and all she writes about now is her recent abortion and the terrifying dreams she has of the sycamore trees in front of the dorm at night.