

TA Training at Marquette University

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At Marquette University, the primary aim of the TA training program is not to turn out life-long teachers of Freshman English. Not all of our graduate students want to teach in colleges or universities. Given current enrollment figures, not all who want to will. What they do want, clearly, is to learn enough about language and literature to qualify for the Master's degree in English. Our TA training course accommodates them here: we offer a course, taught by the Director of Freshman English, in the theory and history

of rhetoric, the precursor of present-day literary studies. While it supplies a theoretical background for classroom practice, this is not a service course, but a three-hour academic course carrying graduate credit. Its reading list for Fall, 1982, includes Plato's Phaedrus, Aristotle's Rhetoric, Augustine's De Doctrina, The Rhetoric of Blair, Campbell, and Whately (Golden and Corbett), and Rhetoric and Change: Kenneth Burke, et al. (Tanner and Bishop). Readings on the Renaissance (Ramus, Bacon) and the 18th century (Fenelon, the Royal Society) will be on reserve, and so will copies of some contemporary rhetorics like Pike's and Kinneavy's. One or two papers and sometimes an exam are required in this course, which has a reputation, along with Literary Criticism, as the hardest of the required graduate courses.

Whether they plan on college teaching careers or not, a maximum of 34 Marquette Master's students in English take on the job temporarily each year. In exchange for tuition remission and an additional stipend, each semester each one teaches two sections of Freshman English. This obligates both them and us, but not to the extent implied by Ross Winterowd in his descriptions of the teacher-training program at UCLA ("The Effective Composition Program: The University of California Huntington Beach Model," typescript distributed at the CCCC, 1980). We do not expect graduate students, who may not be prospective teachers and who are taking two or three courses as well as teaching two more, to become current in the literature of rhetoric and composition, nor do we expect them, as many schools do, to make essential text and curriculum decisions. What we do expect is that our TA's know enough about their subject and about teaching it to do the job their Freshman students deserve. To this end, we are active. We choose the set of textbooks all Freshman English courses will use, and we provide a syllabus, prescribing daily reading, homework, and multi-version theme assignments, to be followed in all classes. (We offer a separate Freshman English course to students in the honors program, and supply laboratory assistance to those who need remedial work. Otherwise, assuming that all college graduates need the same basic knowledge of the uses of written language, we offer a single course to all freshmen.) A 200-page instructor's manual goes along with all this, explaining departmental and program procedures, providing material to supplement the texts, and offering pedagogical suggestions.

During the week before classes begin in the fall, all TA's are required to attend a five-day, six-hour-a-day orientation program. In the mornings, the primary text used in the freshman course is taught to the TA's by the directors of the program and by other full-time faculty members of the Freshman English staff and of the Committee on Freshman English. By the end of the week we can be confident that TA's are at least somewhat familiar with the content and overall shape of the course, the approach, style, and direction of the text. And they have observed experienced instructors teaching the same material they shortly will. On the first afternoon of orientation, TA's begin by writing an in-class essay (on the same topic they will assign their students during the first week of class) and being introduced to the evaluative rubric we recommend they use in responding to student writing. Roughly, this involves isolating the most severe problem each paper possesses in four areas (ideas, organization, style, and grammar; adapted from Paul Diederich, Measuring Growth in English, NCTE, 1974), describing each in a sentence or two at the end of the paper, and indicating with two marginal comments where each error surfaces within the paper. The most significant error of the four gets first attention, including a revision which focuses mainly on it. Positive comments are also encouraged. Once the TA's have this rubric in hand, they form groups each afternoon to apply it to sample papers (including those they wrote on the first day), and meet together afterwards to discuss results with

the program directors. Afternoon sessions also include classes in grammar and usage conducted by experienced TA's, who are encouraged to use the most imaginative--some say bizarre--teaching techniques they can dream up.

Following orientation, experienced TA's check in with the program directors periodically for review of teaching and writing-assessment practices. They submit student theme folders for examination; we visit their classes and confer with them about what we saw. During some semesters, two TA's and a regular faculty member of the staff will form a group to visit each other's classes and to exchange and discuss student writing samples. At least twice each semester, all Freshman English teachers attend a staff meeting devoted to theoretical concerns; discourse analysis, cognition and language, and logic and rhetoric have been recent subjects. One of these staff meetings is a departmental colloquium featuring a noted outside scholar as speaker. In 1981 it was Martin Steinmann; in 1982, linguist Alton L. Becker.

During their first year, new TA's attend a weekly practicum conducted by the program directors, regular faculty, and, occasionally, experienced TA's. These hour-and-a-half-long sessions have two parts. In one, the week's speaker demonstrates how he will present the coming week's material in Freshman English, with emphasis on how reading selections will be used to demonstrate principles introduced in the primary text. In the second, activities are varied: sometimes a TA will present copies of a problematic student theme he has received; or the group will view a videotape of a class conducted by one of its members; or there will be a general discussion of current problems.

The program I've described obviously is not designed to teach a broad range of approaches to composition and composition teaching or to give TA's a free hand in devising and conducting courses. It is designed to fit Master's students to teach the course we, as specialists in Freshman English, have determined best for our freshman students. This acquaints TA's thoroughly with one unified and integrated approach to the subject of Freshman English, which they can alter or augment as they choose if their careers lead in that direction. And it protects both them and their students from the more unfortunate effects of inexperience.