Preparing the Writing Teacher by Guided Practice

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When it was first offered at Eastern Michigan, the seminar on teaching college composition drew two kinds of students: the university's own graduate teaching assistants and many established school teachers. But the two kinds of student had quite dissimilar practical needs which could not be reconciled in one seminar: the school teachers did not require basic instruction in teaching, as the graduate student did, and the advanced work they required was in their own specialties, not in the college teaching to which the graduate student aspired. To be sure, all students shared important interests, and when the seminar became at times a writing course or a rhetorical theory course it was the better for its diverse membership. But when it addressed teaching, it could only be a forum, the participants abstracting from their special teaching circumstances whatever they could share with one another. It was, however, really the special circumstances themselves, not the abstractions, that the students, the graduate students most obviously, but the other teachers too, needed to explore. So we began last year to offer a separate seminar for middle school and high school teachers, which gives more help to those teachers and complements our writing assistance team's visits to the schools. The seminar on teaching college composition, as a result, now concentrates on the graduate students and the teaching they do.

Our seminar is the chief provision for assisting the graduate assistants, who may begin to teach as early as their first semester here. In its present form, it is a humane provision, allaying some anxieties by the attention and information it gives, providing the fellowship of participants all engaged in the same teaching task, guiding the students through their first teaching, and generating thought out of practice and out of the testing of textbook theory against our sharp local experience of teaching. In the coming semester the graduate students will approach theory and technique through the study of Wiener's The Writing Room, Tate and Corbett's The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook, Lanham's Revising Prose and McCrimmon's Writing with a Purpose (the freshman rhetoric we study this year, succeeding Corder's Contemporary Writing, which was for recent seminars a model of clear and temperate instruction). The students will write two papers and a final examination and report on the principal subjects which make up our agenda--conducting classes, teaching the composing process and responding to student texts.

We offer no methods instruction, if methods instruction means imposing on the graduate students a repertoire of teaching techniques or fitting the teacher into a mechanistic instructional system. All our discussions of classroom teaching attempt to lift impositions and strip away unnecessary constraints. When the teaching assistants offer profiles of their freshman students, or analyses of theme conferences and class sessions, or propose lesson plans, they are detaching themselves from processes which at first they think they cannot control. Getting free is the first step, which leads afterwards to their discovering their own teaching objectives and their own teaching. Significantly, of all the essays we read in the seminar, Lou Kelly's "Toward Competence and Creativity in an Open Class" (CE, February 1973) arouses the strongest interest. The teaching assistants acknowledge a potent ideal but wonder if their students are in fact free, are form-finders and form-creators, to use Ann Berthoff's terms. More to the point, they ask how they can believe in the freedom Kelly describes when they do not experience it

themselves as they teach. So our discussions attempt to release them from the more threatening exigencies they report. Later we try to draw out each teacher's strengths and gifts, and we survey, in the literature, teaching techniques that others have designed to suit their objectives. Perhaps because the teaching assistants do come to see their classes as gatherings of persons, if not exactly the open classes Kelly described, and do reject all notions of managing and motivating, many of those classes are warm and spontaneous, appropriate settings for good teaching. And if the teaching itself is not always good, in that it lacks fulness or accuracy or point, the remedy is not better teaching technique but improved knowledge of prewriting and rewriting, of grammar and rhetoric.

Well before the graduate students can master even the first steps in teaching the composing process, they discuss the importance of their attempts: free students conceive and order the ideas they write about, and responsive teachers assist the students' efforts to discover and design. Even knowing how to begin to assist the processes of thought, however, is difficult. The graduate students cannot easily sort out or apply the heuristic devices they read about in Corder, Young, Becker and Pike or Winterowd, although they understand that heavy directions for formula essays are not heuristic, and neither are light brainstorming and wet ink exercises. After some weeks of teaching, they try a few deliberate, sustained preparations, usually starting from Pike, Burke or the Wiener of "Media Compositions: Preludes to Writing" (CE, February 1974), going about it somewhat in the way Johannessen Kahn and Walter recommend in their recent Designing and Sequencing Prewriting Activities (NCTE, 1982). Their best results, though, come from less exact plans that they patiently develop and clarify in discussions and conferences. The graduate students fit their prewriting instruction into projects that they design more and more carefully as they learn rhetorical situations and the composing process; they bring to the seminar what Richard Larson calls bulletins, describing a theme assignment carefully, with occasion, purpose, audience and voice considered. Late in the seminar they think about sequencing their writing projects, and by the final examination they are designing a whole course in writing and presenting a rationale.

Diagnosis, revision and grading, though practiced in separate exercises in the seminar, are for us just shifting aspects of a semester-long preoccupation with student texts, designed to help the graduate students develop their technical competence and their respectful attention to the work their students do. The ability to perceive enough in a student composition requires at least the preparation advocated by Christensen in CCC 24(1973). But our persistent scrutiny of texts does improve the graduate students' skill. For preliminary analyses of freshman writing and the related discussions of grammar and rhetoric, we draw on Shaughnessy, Wiener, Christensen and many dittoed exercises. For practice in revising and for planning the teaching of revision, we use Lanham's Revising Prose, the articles by McDonald and Thompson in CCC 29(1978) on stages in revision, the article by Flanigan and Menendez in CE, November 1980, on using revision guides, and Cooper's analytic scales, which we turn into revision checklists. For practice in grading we try to apply the criteria for the University System of Georgia essay test, after first studying the California Scale and commentaries and Irmscher's chapter on evaluation.

Our seminar is obviously more than the agenda I have briefly described, and our community of new teachers is more, and much more important, than the formal seminar itself. I am satisfied with our new way of preparing the writing teacher. I much prefer practicum to forum and--what I have not

really conveyed in this description--the solidarity and buoyancy of people engaged in the same daily work, and the spirit of inquiry and experimentation which the newness of that work makes especially keen. I think our seminar does some good, and I think small, specialized seminars are not too costly, considering how much teaching, present and future, they affect.

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