

Teaching "Teaching Composition"

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What is it that graduate students need to know in order to teach composition? I ask that question each time I prepare the syllabus for our seminar entitled "Teaching Composition," a non-required course which enrolls teaching assistants, ESL majors, public school teachers, and even creative writers. This short essay will describe some of my answers. But I would like to say at the outset that perhaps the key element of my seminar is not so much one of content but rather of style and direction. Like graduate students everywhere, especially those struggling to define themselves as teachers of composition, the students who enroll in my seminar want answers. Actually, they want the answer, the failsafe method that will spell them from the dark tower of uncertainty and failure. But there is no answer, and much of my energy throughout the semester is devoted to side-stepping their pleas, dodging certain issues, removing myself as the authoritative Casaubon of the classroom. I prefer that my students be frustrated and confused (at least at first); I prefer that they struggle on their own terms for contingent solutions while remaining aware of their contingency.

So I teach by deflection. At the same time I offer my students considerable information about theory, research, and practice. I show them Fred Wiseman's documentary, "High School," to give them a jaundiced but powerful account of the needs and educational experiences of their freshman students. I open up debate about dialects, Black English, usage, and FAE. I ask them to read widely and write frequently in varied forms. I try to get them to think of their courses from the outside in as theorists and teachers, and from the inside out as students and writers. I push a great deal into the ten-week term--too much, really, for the students to comprehend all at once. But graduate students need this education, and often this one course will be their only opportunity to get it. English Departments can ill afford to send out Ph.D.s ignorant of the problems and possibilities of teaching writing. Few of these students will ever come my way again.

I begin my class with a lecture-discussion entitled "Fifteen Ways of Looking at a Comp Course." I want my students to see immediately that they possess a great many choices. They can create a "text-centered" course, or follow a "classical" paradigm, or emphasize "style" or "correctness" or "literary masters and models." The basic assumption of this opening discussion--and my entire seminar--is that knowledge and experience lead to flexibility, that an increased understanding of different approaches allows a teacher greater chances to succeed. Moreover, such a rough taxonomy serves as an excellent framing device to help students sort out one possibility from another during the quarter.

Early on, I want students to grapple with ideological and political issues, and I want to encourage open debate. No better text exists even now for these purposes than CCC's "Students' Right to Their Own Language." By the second or third day of class, students have read this pamphlet and we spend considerable time examining its assumptions and pedagogical effects. (As a supplement, I ditto Geneva Smitherman's "'God Don't Never Change': Black English from a Black Perspective.") Our discussion inevitably looks forward to later books in the course: Coles's The Plural I, for example, and Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations. Next we take up the issue of "goals" which ties

together the previous discussions. Early in my seminar I ask students to list their teaching goals and then offer a means to achieve them. Such a critique is unsettling. Some students have no specific goals; most of us cannot quite articulate what we mean by "clarity" or "economy." I supplement the discussion with excerpts from Richard Lanham's Style: An Anti-Textbook and our anthology of essays, The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook.

In the meantime, students have been reading two first-rate short texts: Strunk and White's Elements of Style and Trimble's Writing with Style. I ask the students to consider themselves members of our Freshman Composition Textbook Committee. They are to analyze the texts and recommend one for adoption. In class, we debate the merits of the two books, discussing especially what they imply about writing and writers. I should add that the almost unanimous choice has always been for the Trimble text.

Students also have been reading Irmischer's Teaching Expository Writing, to which the following assignment is greatly indebted. I ask my students to create a collage "which means something to you." They are to bring the collage to class along with an essay which offers a short explanation of it as well as a description of the composing process which produced it. Students greet this assignment with cries of dismay, and yet it often proves to be the key one of the quarter. Verbal English students are compelled to create visual forms of expression. That is, they experience the same kind of anxiety and inadequacy that their "unverbal" freshman students feel having to write essays. Moreover, like their students, they too are publicly accountable; collages, like many student essays, are offered to the class for discussion and appraisal. In their essays, the graduate students explore their own composing process, now made visual by the medium. Among other things, this assignment creates an ideal climate for discussion of "invention" and "getting started." It often takes three entire class periods to view all the collages, but it is time well spent.

Our subsequent focus is on "assignments." My conviction is that assignments need to be linked stylistically, thematically, rhetorically. Coles' The Plural I offers one rich possibility; my own "situational sequences" look in a somewhat different direction. But just reading Coles and inventing sequences of their own did not help the students much. Now my students actually write essays in a sequence of my own devising. The results are positive; students experiment, struggle, and gain an improved understanding of the ways sequenced assignments help writers. We devote class sessions to both theoretical discussions about assignments and sequencing, and to critiquing various essays written by the graduate students for the sequence. The Plural I serves as an anchor and as the source of considerable debate and discussion.

We turn, then, to "sentence combining" and "Christensen's New Rhetoric." The two fit together well and both are significant developments in composition. I spend approximately one day on each. My students attempt exercises, hear about theory and research, and see examples from texts. For the altogether practical students, this week may well prove the highlight of the course. I should add here that sprinkled throughout the quarter are various lecture-discussions on important theory and research in composition. E. D. Hirsch's Philosophy of Composition is appropriate during this week. At some other point, I give one entire class-session to Vygotsky, Britton, and Moffett. Kinneavy gets mentioned early as does Janet Emig. I want the students to see that composition is more than the study of teaching methods.

I have, at the end of previous courses, devoted two or three weeks to response and evaluation, with a close examination of Errors and Expectations. (I would also bring in Diederich's Measuring Growth in English, various NAEP exercises, and short lectures on holistic, analytic scale, and primary trait scoring.) Such information is useful, but peripheral. My preference now (after one quarter's experience) is to ask students to be in a writing group. Modeled after Elbow's account in Writing Without Teachers, the group consists of four to five students who bring a piece of writing each week, read it twice, and then listen to the written responses generated by the second reading. Writing groups train participants to listen closely and respond quickly, perceptively, and intuitively. In between the three writing group sessions (which are two to three hours each), we discuss group theory and implications for the classroom, and then move on to Shaughnessy and evaluation. Not the least benefit of the writing groups is that they get the students to write creative, personal, un-academic non-fictional prose. For many graduate students, this is the first self-sponsored writing they have done in years, and the very first time they have seen how a collaborative group effort can improve writing.

By the end of the quarter, then, my students have examined quite a wide range of subjects: language, textbooks, goals, usage, assignments, sentence combining, writing groups, evaluation and response, to name just some. Sandwiched between major units of the course have been thin slices of major theory and research. The students have written eight varying essays not counting the final exam essay which asks them to apply what they have learned to a problem such as designing English 101 or writing a defense of freshman composition as a Core Humanities course. And they have read Strunk and White, Trimble, "Students' Right to Their Own Language," The Plural I, Errors and Expectations, Teaching Expository Writing, and most of The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. This list does not include all the discussion and supplementary reading in the course, but it represents the main thrust. Given the absurd brevity of the quarter system, I think the students get a fair sampling of what's most useful in current composition theory and practice.