

# Teaching Teachers of Writing: Making a Center That Can Hold<sup>1</sup>

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One of the reasons, I think, that so many talented beginning teachers of writing have a tendency to burn out in one way or another after five, seven, ten years in the profession--become more and more accomplished in teaching less and less that makes any real difference to anyone--is that they are not at the outset of their careers given enough opportunity to capitalize decently on the ways in which their greatest liability is their greatest potential strength: the fact that they are a good deal more concerned with themselves than they are with either their subject or their students. "They're betrayed by their own deepest instincts," a colleague of mine once said of the TA's of our Composition Program, and of course I knew what he meant. The boiled shirt formality that alternated with a casualness as comfortably assumed as a pair of worn dungarees. The shell games played with literary materials. The maanderings with media. The earnest excursions into consciousness razing. The pleasantly anarchic class discussions. The irrelevantly overmarked student papers. The hours and hours spent in individual conferences, making friends, sealing the commitment of youth to itself. I'd spent too many hours myself in all these ways as a beginning teacher not to know exactly what my colleague was referring to. However inexperienced I may have been in other ways, I was very good at substituting myself for what was intended to be our subject in such a way as to meet my most immediate need. The primary business of my classroom, without anyone's being aware of it then, was getting myself adored.

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<sup>1</sup>Sections of this article appeared in other forms in College Composition and Communication and Composition and Teaching.

But it was not my instincts exactly that I was betrayed by then, not any more than I believe this to be the case with the best of the young teachers I now work with. In resorting to talking about what I knew as a beginning teacher, or what I liked to think I knew; in going to what I cared about or believed mattered--and less, God knows, in the name of anything I really was or stood for than in the name of what I wanted to be seen as standing for and caring about--I was feeling for a teaching identity, for a way of having a life in the classroom. I was fumbling for the very thing that makes effective teaching effective and keeps it something, for a teacher as well as for students, that can be worthwhile. I was looking for a teaching style. Of my own. For myself.

What young teachers are betrayed by is not their instinct to be concerned with themselves first, before their students, before their subjects even, but what they have a tendency to make that instinct mean, which in turn determines how they act on it, the forms the instinct takes. The trouble with the easy routes of the easy gratification of this instinct is that they end in boredom, unacknowledged self-contempt, despair. Inevitably. Sooner or later. The game of intellectual seduction is exciting only so long as one has energy to play it. And when it comes to returns on the teaching of writing measured in terms of the performance of one's students, there simply aren't enough satisfactions in that to keep people going. Not after a while there aren't. Not for any teacher who isn't either a fool or a liar. Nobody, and I mean nobody, can teach writing that well.

There are ways, however, of providing beginning teachers of writing with an opportunity to use rather than be used by their preoccupation with their own teaching presences that will not only turn this potential liability into a strength, but into the kind of strength that can give them ways of growing as teachers for the rest of their professional lives. It is possible, in other words, to work with the instincts of new teachers rather than against them by involving such teachers in a training program that has as its intention the same intention we have in teaching the students of such teachers to write to begin with.

For if, as I believe is the case, what we are up to as teachers of writing is to enable students to develop voices or styles of their own, the kind of control of language, specifically the various languages of written English in use at a university, that will enable them to shape and control, rather than to be shaped and controlled by their environments; then it would seem reasonable to suppose that our primary responsibility in the training of teachers to teach writing is to provide them with exactly the same opportunity. As teachers of composition, we are less interested, presumably, in a student's being able to generate at our command, for an occasion we specify, and in our terms, a Theme of Definition, say, or of Argumentation, than we are in her having internalized (in the sense of having made her own) the process that a paper on the subject of definition is only an example of, the activity of argumentation as an approach. By the same token, it would seem less important to acquaint beginning teachers of writing with Compositional Issues or Compositional Theories or even Compositional Techniques than to give them the chance to see issues as leading

to theories which are in turn indistinguishable from techniques--a connectedness that, root to branch, is important or valuable to know about in direct proportion (and only in direct proportion) to what an individual teacher can make such knowledge mean in the context of her own style in her own classroom. For since the discipline of writing is a process, knowledge of it is important only as it leads to approaches and methods, and even these are no more than what Henry Adams called the sorts of tools and models that may be thrown away. If we are concerned with supplying our students with more than a formula for writing, then we teach with the demand that they assimilate only what they can transform and this only in order to transcend. Similarly, teaching teachers of writing should be a matter of offering a subject with the kind of style that will demand the response of another style. A certain readiness of sensibility on the part of our students, readiness as Hamlet defines it, ripeness as it is argued by Lear: that's what we're after as teachers of writing. And the same kind of readiness, of ripeness, is what I think we ought to be after in teaching teachers of writing as well.

In order to explain how I translate these parallels into a syllabus and a procedure for a course in teacher training, it is necessary that I say something first of the notion of writing with which as Director of Composition I built a composition program at the University of Pittsburgh. I based this program in its entirety on the assumption that for anyone anywhere in the United States today to attempt to teach writing without enabling students to understand what there can be in the activity for them is futile. Further, for better or worse,

and for a variety of reasons, composition teachers can no longer either define writing or describe the benefits of it in traditional terms only. It is no longer possible, that is, for teachers to get very far by offering writing as a purely mechanical activity the importance of which is asserted only with the half-truths of predominantly negative arguments. (If you don't write well, then you will not be thought of as well-rounded, genteel, educated, etc. If you don't write well, then you will not obtain a high paying job.). For it is no more difficult to see how people could fail to care very much about writing conceived of primarily as a set of conventions or rules to be mastered, than it is to see why they might have trouble believing that such mastery is a necessary condition for virtue or success--let alone an indicant of knowledge, intelligence, or character. To understand and present writing as a uniquely powerful instrument for learning, however, as a special way of thinking and coming to know, is for composition teachers to establish an effective relationship with their students through having established an effective relationship with their discipline. Because to understand how writing is reflexive, capable of recasting feelings and concepts in the process of reflecting them, is to see and to be able to offer the activity as involving hand, eye, and brain in a uniquely powerful reinforcing cycle. It is to see and to be able to offer writing as having something to do with the writer.

I defined composition at the University of Pittsburgh therefore in more than the ordinary utilitarian terms. In my description of our course offerings, for example, I addressed the undergraduates of the university as follows:

It is customary when speaking of writing as a subject, of composition as it is usually called, to begin by explaining why writing is important, particularly to a college student. It is usually said, for example, and said rightly, that a student's college career will depend in large part on his or her ability to read and to write what is known as Edited American (or Standard) English, to read this lan-

guage easily, to write it correctly and fluently. It is, after all, the primary language of the university, and a facility with it therefore is required by the totality of a student's university experience. No one, in other words, can expect to remain a student at the University of Pittsburgh without availing him or herself of the opportunity to develop an ability that the university in order to remain a university must take for granted.

It is also said, and correctly, that chances for employment and/or advancement in the world for which the University is training students is often directly dependent upon an individual's ability to express him or herself decently. For it is unreasonable to suppose that someone who gives the appearance of incompetence or irresponsibility will make the same impression as someone who knows how to present himself another way.

These are important reasons for learning to write, but they are more an explanation of how an ability to write is valuable than they are an explanation of why the ability should be so valued in the first place. Only in a limited way do they suggest that there can be something in the activity of writing for the writer, even when the writer is a student who does not find the activity particularly enjoyable, even when the writer is a student who does not intend to make writing an essential part of his or her life. The reason that the ability to write is valued is that the activity of writing understood in its fullest sense is an activity of thinking. From this point of view, the ability to compose may be seen as the ability to conceptualize, to build structures, to draw inferences, to develop implications, to generalize intelligently--in short to make connections, to work out relationships--between this idea and that idea, words and other words, sentences and other sentences, language and experience. The real reason that writing is important then, is that it is an activity of language using that can enable students to become better composers, better conceptualizers, better thinkers, in whatever languages they work with: mathematical or chemical symbols, colors and shapes on canvas, gestures, words. The activity of writing is valuable, therefore, primarily because it is an avenue to power. To work at it, even at a non-professional level, is for a writer to gain in power--and as more than a writer. The ability to write is valued in the first place because powerlessness means victimization.

Implicit in that statement is the single

idea of the Composition Program that was intended to inform all of what we did at the same time that it served to hold the Program together in all of its workings. The idea is this. Since it is possible to see language using (in its broadest sense) as the means by which all of us run orders through chaos thereby giving ourselves the identities we have, we offer writing as an activity of language using in order to provide students with a way of seeing that to get better at writing can have something in it for the writer, the writer as student, the writer as more than student.

Given this informing idea, it is clear what I wanted in the way of a course for our teaching writing to undergraduates. I wanted a course that would be focused on making the students' writing (and not something else), and the students' writing understood as a form of language using, the center of everything. I wanted this course to be structured to facilitate the developmental refinement of abilities that students already in some measure have; a course that day by day, class by class, writing assignment by writing assignment would be sequenced in such a way as to offer students a series of what I. A. Richards calls "assisted invitations" to become more and more accomplished composer-editors, editor-composers, writers. What I wanted was a course to teach students to teach themselves not just how and why their working at writing can be important, but how and why such work can matter.

Such a course I already had more than an idea for,<sup>2</sup> and since most of our teaching staff was made up of TA's who had never taught before, the way to implement the course I wanted taught would seem

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<sup>2</sup>I have described my way of putting together what I say I think that a writing course should be in a number of articles and most notably in Teaching Composing: A Guide to Teaching Writing as a Self-Creating Process (Rochelle Park, New Jersey: Hayden Book Company, 1974) and The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1978).

obvious. For clearly, nothing could be more wishfully irresponsible than simply to turn a group of new teachers loose on students with no more than the pious demand that they create effective composition courses on their own--or more wishfully still, than to provide them with a syllabus from which to evolve a structure as God is said to have made light by moving in spirit upon the face of the waters. We might more reasonably approach Chaucer with the expectation that he describe the super highway. I have never worked with a TA who in his or her education had experienced anything like a developmentally structured composition course. Only the most elaborately educated of them have experienced courses that were even organized. The models that teachers new to the teaching of composition have for composition courses, then, most of the time are as predictable as they are predictably bad. When writing does remain the center of whatever it is the inexperience and the instinct of such teachers dictate that they do, it is not as the writing of students, or indeed as writing at all, that it is likely to remain the center; when writing does not remain the center of such courses, which given the force of a new teacher's instinct is what happens most of the time, the course becomes something other than a course in composition. Obviously then, since the ability to structure a composition course is at one and the same time the sine qua non of the effective teaching of composition and the last thing in the world to be able to expect teachers new to the teaching of composition either to bring to their teaching immediately or to develop on their own, obviously, the seemingly reasonable solution is to provide such a course for new teachers to teach--particularly when the course in this instance, a beautifully constructed thing, was the Director's own.

But this, I think, though the solution is a very common one, the one in fact most often opted for by most Directors of Composition, does not work very well either, at least not in just those terms, primarily because to provide new teachers with a completely prefabricated course to teach, no matter how good it may be, is

to provide the kind of organization that is the enemy of structure, and to make an enemy of structure is to put one's self at war with instinct.

A structured composition course is a course of one's own. It is an organized course to be sure, but as other than some generic Teacher's way of imposing the result upon a group of generic Students. A structured composition course is rather a particular teacher's way of putting things together for herself as an offering which is an opportunity for her students. Structure, in other words, is an enactment of an individual teacher's style, not just of the best she knows, but of the most she can imagine shooting for. At its most ideal it is the image of a specific, experientially developed and organically unified approach to the teaching of writing in which philosophy and method, tone and procedure, syllabus and manner, how this is made to lead to that and how something is seen to follow from something else, are all adjuncts of one another. A structured composition course and a teaching style have the same relation as do the planes of a Moebius strip.

To give teachers what will forbid their involvement in the evolutionary process through which a real teaching style has to be developed then, is likely to have the very opposite of its intended effect, and for students as well as for teachers. It is true that the more highly organized and sensibly integrated the prefabricated course given new teachers of composition to teach, the less chance there is for the course to become directionless or for students to escape inculcation in what are often referred to as the fundamentals of good writing. But by the same token, the extent of which such a focus can be guaranteed by a given prefabricated composition course is the extent to which such a course must replace the notion of course-composing as a process with course as product. Organization replaces structure not only in such a way as to discourage new teachers from seeing their composition courses as theirs, but in such a way

as to make it impossible for them to imagine any way of making them that. It is in this way, and why, the prefabricated composition course so often turns out to be text-centered or syllabus-centered, or (in the worst sense of the term) student-centered. It is also why such a course, even when it does purport to deal with student writing, positively militates against the seeing of that writing as anything other than non-writing, as anything other than the mechanical product of a completely mechanical activity that anyone can be taught to produce by anyone else, but that in consequence no one gives much of a damn either about teaching or about learning. No wonder, given the kind of situation most teachers new to the teaching of composition are given, the most talented of them will be operating in such a way as to have their instincts at odds with what they think they are being asked to do.

No more than either laws or the absence of them stops crime, or than rules or the absence of rules makes writing, does the provided course on the one hand or the bare demand for one on the other result in the creating of a structured composition course by teachers new to the teaching of composition--let alone in the development of the ability of such teachers ever to create such courses on their own, to feel that their training can be a way of gratifying their instinct to make something that is theirs as teachers, something for themselves. What can enable teachers to begin to evolve teaching styles of their own is an opportunity to work with a set of materials organized, that is styled, in such a way as to constitute both a reasonable and an inescapable demand for structure, for another style.

Well in advance of when our new TA's would be teaching their first composition class, and in the context of a three-day-a-week teacher training seminar which operated in part as a staff meeting,<sup>3</sup> I distributed a general course description,

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<sup>3</sup>In this article I am describing only the staff meeting part of the teacher training course.

a set of writing assignments and class exercises on the nominal subject of freedom and confinement, and an explanation of these materials which began like this:

The material on the following pages is that from which both you and your students will be constructing composition courses this fall term—a way of phrasing things intended to make clear that what you are being given is not itself a composition course. For even as no more than a syllabus, you will notice, the material here is incomplete. In fact, what is being given you has been deliberately devised as that which will have to be modified, adapted, and shaped by individual teachers if it is to be usable at all. This material is only the vocabulary for which the syntax is going to have to be individual teachers, individual students. Or another way of seeing what is being offered you here is to see it as the kind of common organizational plan (like a university curriculum) which demands individual structuring in order to be made sense of. Or you may understand the material as making up the sort of narrative ("The father died and then the son died.") that each teacher and each student must become responsible for turning into a story ("The son died even though the father died"; or "The son died happily after the father died"; etc.).

As you will see, the nominal subject of the material for this non-course that you will be shaping into a course of your own is that of freedom and confinement. The real subject of the material is language: what it is, how it functions, why it is important. We will be seeing our nominal subject in terms of our real one by understanding freedom as a term we apply to a state in which the defining and handling of experience is managed with language systems that for one reason or another are claimed to be life-giving and are therefore regarded as possible to live within. Confinement, on the other hand, is a term we apply to language systems we assert are life-denying.

The organizational drift of what I asked our teachers to work with was as loose as its philosophical orientation. I began

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How the more formal operations of the seminar—the readings assigned, the compositional theories and issues considered—were integrated with our TA's day by day experience as teachers, I have described in: "Teaching the Teaching of Composition: Evolving a Style," College Composition and Communication, (28 October, 1977), 268-70.

the set of class exercises and writing assignments by asking students to consider a number of different ways of seeing what it means to be in prison, dealing with the term first in an obviously figurative way (a bad habit) and then more literally (in terms of bars and walls), but in both instances with the intention of bringing students to an awareness (since habits can be good as well as bad, and the experience of being in a prison can be seen differently) that the term "prison" is a metaphor. I then moved to a consideration of some of the ways in which metaphor using connects with metaphor users, with whom we become on the basis of how we use language. What does it mean to be imprisoned or confined by language? Can one be freed by it? We then shifted to ways of defining a university: How it can be seen as a prison (and what does that mean?); how it can be seen as something other than a prison (and what does this mean?). I came full circle by asking the students in a final assignment to define themselves as students at a university. Were they free as they saw it? Confined? Or what exactly? And what did they mean by saying so?

The materials I gave our TA's to make their courses from had a focus then, and in the sense that the materials formed a kind of progression, they were arranged. But I deliberately did not define that progression as more than a general contour or rhythm. For example, I left three assignments of the set unnumbered. As part of the teaching seminar I had the TA's establish some seriatim order of their own for these assignments as well as an explanation of the order and the changes of wording in the assignments that the selected focus made necessary. Also, as noted, the materials I provided were deliberately incomplete. I gave the TA's passages for which they were to create the apparatus necessary to turn the passages into class exercises--sometimes with suggestions on how to move with them, sometimes not.

How at this point in the composition course you are teaching do you use this passage by Eldridge Cleaver on

why he started to write to bring your students into confrontation with the question of what there might be in writing for them?

I left whole assignments for teachers to construct on their own:

Here might be a good place to devise an exercise for your students that will help them to see why education doesn't work very well. Ever. For anybody. And no matter how much we may want it to.

I asked the TA's to develop various ways of fusing the different activities of a composition classroom:

Elect a piece of student writing that you worked with in class at least two weeks ago and use it as the basis for an assignment that will enable your students to see that they have learned something about writing.

Create an assignment that will have your students rewrite their earlier papers in the context of some section of the course description.

And again and again I sought ways of making our seminar about composition as a subject a course in composition as well, a course in which the process of articulation could for our teachers become the opportunity to find out what they knew, to find out what they knew in order to be able to create what they could then believe in:

Write two paragraphs of what you could pass off in your class as student prose addressing Assignment 15, one passage that is what you would call instructively bad, the other that contains something you admire. Explain how you would use these paragraphs in class with your students.

Write a letter of help to a TA friend of yours who is working with the same set of materials you are (but at another university), and who is puzzled as to how to handle Assignment 6 in class.

What our teachers had to work with, in other words, was a sequential movement of things, rather than a firm sequence, a set of quasi-assignments moving spirally rather than a fully finished group of assignments marching syllogistically to some predetermined conclusion. Because the materials for the course they were teaching did not in the ordinary sense have a form, the final forms of the courses made from the materials had to be made by individual teachers for themselves.

A composition course for undergraduates is a course, I believe (as opposed to both a random collection of classes on the one hand and a straight arithmetical progression of them on the other), to the extent that it is structured to enable students to develop as writers by creating what I have referred to metaphorically as their own stories from a common narrative, stories that the constant invitation to revise constantly brings closer and closer to organic unity--as this image sharpens under the pressure of that idea, as characters fill out and change to adapt to the demands of different scenes, as metaphors begin to pattern, as the story-teller's ability as a story-teller grows through practice. By the same token, a training program that seeks to enable teachers to develop such courses for students must, it seems to me, be based on principles that will give such teachers the same opportunities we expect them to provide. This is why the analogue of what I asked teachers to make available to students I sought to offer our TA's in the form of teaching materials in a narrative sequence which in having to be shaped as a story could make it possible for each composition teacher in working with other composition teachers to learn the art of structuring through her efforts to create a structure, a story, of her own.

It is important to notice that though such a program does not automatically make people in charge of writing courses into teachers, not any more than the courses they are teaching automatically change bad writers into good ones, it did

give me a way of doing more than just acknowledging that both writing and the teaching of writing are concerned with product and process both. By working with the deepest instincts of the people involved, by conceiving of and presenting the process in both instances as a way for a particular someone to develop something for him or herself, I had a way of being able to insist upon the quality of the products of this process--decently written papers on the one hand, effectively constructed courses on the other--that could make some sense. To offer writing to our undergraduates as a form of thinking, as a way of coming to know, and to invite them in a variety of ways to see their experiments with various styles and various modes of discourse as forms of self-consolidation--dependable and fulfilling only as they are precise and full--put me in a position to insist upon grammatical correctness, say, in the name of something that can matter to students. Similarly, the best way I had then of guaranteeing that our undergraduate composition course offerings taught by inexperienced TA's would be courses in writing with a shape, a direction, and a purpose was to provide such people with the kind of teaching materials and the kind of teaching situation in which to use them that would make the act of teaching a first composition course as important to the TA's for what it was about as for what it was: an act of structuring that could enable them to learn something of the art of structure, an act of composing that could enable individual teachers to begin to develop teaching styles of their own.

Such an approach--my style with those I would have develop styles in order that they be able to encourage the development of styles in their students--reflects my central belief, prejudice, idea, whatever, that what teaches, finally, is less a set of assumptions about how writing ought to be taught or even a set of methods for implementing the assumptions than a teacher's belief in her assumptions, the degree to which she is able to enact for her students a commitment to whatever she is doing in

the classroom as that which in having something to do with who she is, has something to do with something that matters. This ultimately is what people respond to. And why they learn. And to work at creating in a classroom what one can believe in doing as a teacher, a belief that can compel the belief of others in what they do: this is to work at developing what I would call a teaching style.

It is this that can save: against the time when teaching can no longer be a matter of nerve and nerves, against the otherwise inevitable hardening of the arteries, the hearing, the sensibility. For in specifying the necessity of having a belief in what one is doing as a teacher, I am speaking of style as a good deal more than an effective way of behaving in a classroom. For others. A teaching style that a teacher believes in is not simply a presence assumed for an occasion--a pose, a mask--any more than it is one's self displayed in nakedness. It is more than a manner also, unconscious and inalterable. Style as I am referring to it is a deliberately constructed metaphor not just of one's self as one already is but of what one would have that self become. It is the expression not just of being but of wished for being, offered in the form of a role, performed through the agency of a subject, that is the best one is capable of imagining for one's self at a given moment. As the organic outgrowth then, not just of a present understanding of experience but of a longing for what one would have as the quality of one's future engagement with it, a style for the stylist is an effort of self-extension--that which in being good enough for someone's own becoming is worth working to become good enough for; that which in trying to grow toward it is possible to grow within. Thus my style as a teacher is the purest amalgam of actuality and desire I am capable of devising at any given point in time, and so the ultimate, though scarcely the final, refinement of those biases, principles, predilections, standards, that in their less articulated, muddy, unrefined and lumpish limitedness are the stuff of



which my life is built and lived. I can assume virtues in a classroom that I don't begin to have. I mime a constant unaching sanity. I have time between periods to figure out the perfect question, the classical three cushion rejoinder. Each year I have one more chance to construct the archetypal set of assignments, the sequence that will this time put the world together: life with God, change with the still point of the turning wheel, love with grief, the secret of how to stay young forever. My style is not who I am. It is better than who I am, whatever anyone else may think of it. But in being the saving illusion of all that I would be, it is my way of getting to tomorrow.

The ante goes up of course. Only today is my style today my way of getting to tomorrow. Tomorrow, it has always been

the case, is another day. But to have a style is to have a sense also of its own momentariness as a stay against confusion. It is to know that in the day by day pitting of role against roles in the classroom, in the never-ending process of complication, demolition and re-creation that this engagement brings, there is the inevitability of one's becoming strange to one's self--awakened to a sense of meannesses and riches that were never suspected, never known--an inevitable return of the confusion that must then, if the stylist is to remain a stylist, be better ordered, better stayed, better styled. To have a style then is to know above all that the style is not the center. The ripeness to know what having one can mean and the readiness to continue to evolve what it does: this is the center--that can hold. And that in holding, holds.