

## **WPA**

### **Writing Program Administration**

Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators  
Volume 7, Numbers 1-2, Fall-Winter, 1983

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The Editors of *WPA* invite contributions that are appropriate to the interests and concerns of those who administer writing programs in American and Canadian colleges and universities. Articles on teaching writing or research in composition are acceptable only if they deal with the relationship of these activities to program administration.

Article length (flexible), 2,000-4,000 words. Authors should submit two copies and retain a copy for their own files. Material should be suitably documented using the *MLA Handbook*, although as much reference as possible should be included within the text. Annotated bibliographies accompanying articles are encouraged, as well as any other apparatus which might make material more conceptually and practically valuable to working writing administrators. The editors reserve the right to edit manuscripts accepted for publication to conform with the style of the journal. Article deadlines: fall-winter issue, January 15; spring issue, September 15. Relevant announcements are also acceptable. Announcement deadlines: fall-winter issue, October 1; spring issue, January 5. Address contributions and editorial correspondence to William E. Smith, Editor, *WPA*, English Department, Utah State University, Logan, Utah 84322.

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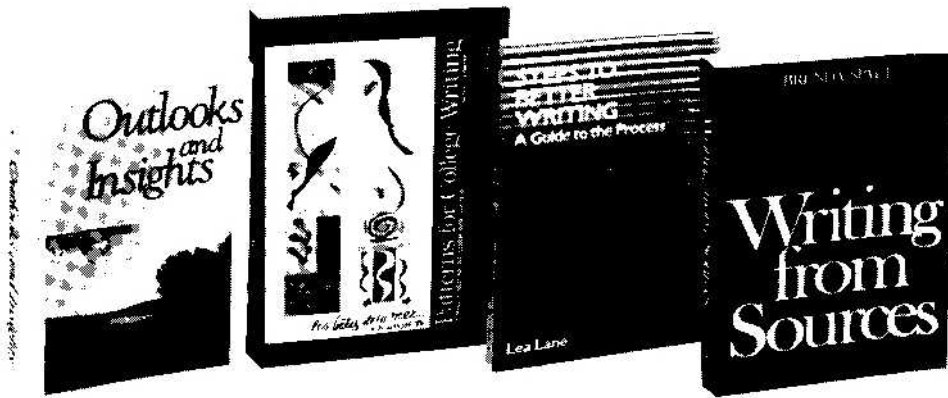
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## Editorial



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With this issue I resign my post as editor of *WPA*. I do so in favor of Bill Smith of Utah State University, confident that the journal will be in the very best editorial hands and grateful that the faculty and administration of Utah State have given *WPA* a fine new home.

As a result of the decision to hand the journal on, however, this is the last chance I shall have to publish something in it without undergoing the scrutiny of *WPA*'s editorial board. It is a chance not to be missed. I shall try to make the most of it.

I consider it a privilege to have been able to help create a new medium of exchange in our profession. In doing so I have learned a great deal. I have learned about the art and technique of publishing, about writing, about editing, about the profession itself, and about the nature of our colleagues who run writing programs. What I have learned about publishing and editing is that they involve a good deal of hard, exacting, but often exciting work. What I have learned about writing is that I must strive to be a clearer, better organized, more concise writer myself. What I have learned about the profession at large is that at the present time it is undergoing profound changes. Ten years ago writing programs were for the most part back room affairs, run on a shoestring. Some may still be. But today most writing programs are increasingly well supported and increasingly recognized as central to the curriculum. They are where the action is.

But what I have learned most as editor of *WPA* is about the people who have effected this change, writing program administrators themselves. In 1976, when the National Council of Writing Program Administrators was organized, WPAs were largely a divided, exploited, politically weak, and unsophisticated lot. Three years later, when *WPA* first appeared as a journal, our situation looked a little brighter. We had begun to identify ourselves professionally. We had begun to identify our needs and the nature of the particular skills we needed to acquire in order to do our jobs adequately. Most important of all, perhaps, we had begun to identify each other.

This task of professional self-definition seemed difficult at first because the tasks people did as WPAs were diverse and the role itself unique to the profession generally. It was this diversity and uniqueness that I strove to express in the first editorial I wrote for *WPA* in which I tried to suggest the journal's purpose:

*WPA* is necessary to writing program administrators and to the larger educational community, we believe, because it helps define an important field within our profession. Although many of us do most of the other things that college and university administrators do--hire and fire, tinker with budgets, schedule classes, and keep our programs running from day to day--WPAs also serve an institutional function quite distinct from that served by presidents, deans, chairs, provosts, and the like. Most writing program administrators continue to be writing teachers, differing from other writing teachers only in the nature of the people we teach. We teach not only college and university students, but often other college and university teachers as

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well. We are called upon sometimes to teach other administrators, trustees, and legislators, and even the general public. As a result, WPAs are not just teachers who also administrate, or administrators who also teach. We administrate in part by teaching. We teach in part *through* administration.

At the time I wrote that paragraph, what I was saying seemed as much guesswork as fact. I frankly didn't know enough about what we all did as WPAs to more than speculate. A measure of the sudden growth of writing program administration as a part of our profession during the past four years is that the paragraph now strikes me as commonplace. It will certainly seem commonplace to the fifty-eight WPAs who found themselves jammed together in an upstairs room of a rather good Greek restaurant in Detroit last March for the first annual WPA dinner.

What that noisy collocation of politic, hyperkinetic, superverbial academic *ubermenschen* revealed to me is that from the ranks of WPAs will certainly come much of the leadership in higher education during the next decade. This professional apotheosis will occur, it seems to me, not just because writing is recognized today as central to higher education. It will occur because some of the most talented young people we have are finding their way into the profession of "English" as writing program administrators. It will occur also because for really sophisticated, really knowledgeable, really skillful administration at all levels of higher education, there is no more rigorous training than writing program administration.

The task of the association's journal, *WPA*, is to increase that sophistication, knowledgeability, and skill, and to serve as a medium through which writing program administrators can identify and talk with each other. For that reason, I must again express my enormous gratitude to everyone who has helped so far to accomplish this task.

My thanks to Teresa Edge, Joyce Shader, Marcia Silver, and the many others who helped design the journal, edit it, and manage it from day to day. Thanks to the many colleagues who have loaned me much needed expense as members of the board of editors over the years. Thanks to Ben McClelland and Bill Smith for an excellent job of guest editing this past year. And thanks to Brooklyn College and its President, Robert Hess, for supporting the journal faithfully during its fragile early years.

Ken Bruffee

## **Editor's Note**

Nietzsche wrote that gratitude is the worst form of slavery. If he is correct, then the *WPA* and I are shackled with indebtedness to colleagues across the country. The major portion of our thanks goes to Ken Bruffee, who turned the *WPA* from a newsletter into a refereed journal and who articulated administrative issues to countless WPAs through his excellent editorials. Without Ken's knowledge, humor, and support, the *WPA* would be much less than it is today.

We are also indebted to the faculty and administration of Utah State University for supporting the *WPA* and giving it a new home. We owe thanks to William F. Lye, Vice President for University Relations, Bartell Jensen, Vice President for Research, Kenneth B. Hunsaker, Head of the English Department, Patricia Gardner, Acting Head of the English Department, and Randy Gessel and Vikki Vitali, USU Printing Services.

Numerous others have helped make the journal's transition from New York to Utah a pleasant one: Harvey Wiener, Joseph Comprone, Arthur Dixon, and Barbara Weaver. Finally, we wish to thank the Editorial Board, who referees, advises, and encourages the contributing authors to the *WPA*.

William E. Smith

## **An experimental program to increase the efficiency of freshman composition at Montana State University: An initial report**

*John C. Bean and John D. Ramage*

Two years ago the English Department at Montana State University began experimenting with a more efficient system for teaching freshman writing. Our experimental program, relying on a progressive writing center, a coordinated sequence of assignments, an elaborate network of upper division tutors, and a commitment to collaborative learning, has allowed us to raise the size of Freshman English sections from 25 to 60 students. Each section demands no more instructor time than a traditional 25-student section.

News of our experiment has begun to spread around the country--to the understandable horror of writing program administrators, many of whom have spent much of their professional lives justifying small writing classes to cost-cutting deans and financial officers. We are concerned that our experiment may tempt upper level administrators to impose our program at other institutions where it would be entirely inappropriate and unworkable. This concern was shared by our two outside evaluators, Harvey Wiener of CUNY-LaGuardia and Andrea Lunsford of the University of British Columbia, who recently reviewed our experimental course under the Exxon-supported WPA Evaluation Program. Wiener and Lunsford's first recommendation, which we quote verbatim so readers can sense the urgency of their tone, is as follows:

The Writing Program director should write and publish a report, outlining the strengths and pitfalls associated with the experimental design of the [new freshman writing] course, particularly stressing the inadvisability of imposing this design on programs at other universities and cautioning against an oversimplified or overly optimistic view of what such a course can practically achieve. We give this recommendation our highest priority.

We of course agree with the evaluators that our methods should not be imposed on other institutions. Nevertheless, because we seem to be demonstrating that writing can be taught more efficiently than the composition community currently believes, our program raises profound issues for writing program administrators, for the English profession itself, and for education in general.

### **Background and development of ideas**

An external review of the MSU English Department in 1979 identified heavy teaching schedules and the threat of midlife burnout as pressing problems for our

staff. Having no graduate program in English to provide teaching assistants, an English Department with 18 full-time faculty and 4-7 part-time faculty had been trying to meet the composition needs of more than 11,000 students enrolled at MSU. Despite carrying among the heaviest teaching loads in the university, the department had been able to offer freshman writing (a one-quarter, 4-credit course) to only half of the freshman class, turning away more than 1000 students per year. Faced with this demand for more sections of freshman writing and encouraged by a FIPSE grant in writing-across-the-curriculum, several members of the writing staff began "conceptual blockbusting" on the paperload problem, working simultaneously on ways to increase the size of freshman writing sections and to permit essay assignments in large classes throughout the curriculum.

During Winter and Spring Quarters, 1982, the department offered two pilot versions of its newly conceived experimental course, settling on 60 students per section as a workable number. During 1982-83, the department offered twelve additional experimental sections taught by twelve different instructors. To measure the effectiveness of the large sections, the department compared final examination essays and student evaluations from the large sections with final exam essays and student evaluations from traditional small sections serving as controls. During the same year, the department began the operation of a newly funded writing center designed to support both the large sections of freshman writing and an aggressive writing-across-the-curriculum effort. As explained in the following pages, the department considered the experimental year to be successful, and voted to implement the program completely beginning Fall Quarter, 1983. The English Department, for the first time in the institution's recent history, will now be able to offer freshman writing to the entire freshman class. As a result of the new program, the teaching loads of full-time faculty will become commensurate with teaching loads in other departments, and the professional status of part-time instructors will be enhanced.

### **A brief description of the new program**

The basis of the more efficient curriculum is a method for conducting 60-student sections of freshman writing. These sections require approximately the same number of instructor-hours per week as an average 25-student section, but eliminate most paper-grading for the instructor. Rejecting the lecture method as an ineffective means for achieving efficiency in composition courses, the writing staff has adapted the collaborative learning model of Kenneth Bruffee of Brooklyn College, CU NY, one of the outside consultants for the university's FIPSE-funded writing-across-the-curriculum project. Under the collaborative model, the sixty students in each section are divided into ten groups of six students each. Instructors devise collaborative tasks that require peer interaction at all stages of the composing process--interaction that provides training in listening, reading, and critical thinking, as well as in writing. Each instructor is assisted by at least two undergraduate tutors, who are paid by the writing center after completing an upper division course in peer-tutoring.

The hub of the program is the university's new Writing Center, where both course tutors and instructors hold their office hours. Because writing assignments are relatively uniform across all sections, students can receive help on drafts from

any instructor or tutor in the program, making it possible for the department to offer individual or small group assistance in the writing center during all hours that it is open. The regular presence of instructors in the writing center provides backup support for course tutors and underscores our department's decision to make the writing center the visible center of writing activity on campus. Although there are 60 students for each instructor in the program, the "help ratio" for Fall Quarter, 1985, is approximately 1 to 12 because of our abundant supply of tutors.

The program depends on a coordinated sequence of writing assignments with clearly specified purposes and criteria. The essays assigned during 1982-83 are described in the first year's course textbook, Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing*. During 1983-1984, most instructors are experimenting with a wider range of assignments designed to overcome limitations found in Bruffee's approach. Besides writing individual essays, students write occasional group essays providing practice for the kind of team writing frequently required of business, scientific and technical communicators.

Feedback on students' writing comes from individual or small group conferences at all stages of the writing process rather than from instructors' comments placed on finished products. While drafting essays, students can come to the writing center at any time for help. Instructors convert to conference hours the time they would normally spend marking and grading papers for a 25-student section. The course tutors hold frequent consultation hours also, so that students in the large sections have considerably more opportunity for one-on-one tutorial help from an instructor or tutor than did students in our former system with conventional small sections. Students also receive feedback on their drafts during peer-editing workshops in class. Throughout the course instructors refer students with sentence-level problems to a special program within the writing center for individual tutoring, small group mini-courses, or computer-aided instruction (to be operational on an experimental basis during 1983-84).

Finished essays are graded by trained teams of upper division students who, under the supervision of the Director of the Writing Center, staff-grade them holistically on a 6-point scale. (Many of the tutors are also graders, but the roles are kept distinct.) The essays are returned to students with grades but without comments or other marks. Students who wish to challenge the grade make appointments with the instructor; others are free to see anyone in the writing center for further feedback on their finished products. Because all students are doing the same kind of writing task, instructors can provide considerable feedback by discussing selected essays in class.

### **Issues raised by the new program**

The model we have developed raises many theoretical and practical issues, some of which we believe we have resolved, others of which continue to trouble us. The following are examples of the kinds of issues with which we have been wrestling:

*--Is the use of upper division students for grading freshman essays reliable?*

We can now offer a fairly certain "yes." Data collected during our experimental year suggest that with a moderate amount of training and supervision, student

graders can reach agreement rates of above 90% on holistically graded essays with clearly defined formats and features. This figure exceeds, in fact, the agreement rate we achieve with faculty scorers. (Independent checking of students' scoring by instructors and writing center personnel supports the validity of these scores.) We have found, however, that such agreement is possible only if instructors across all sections give similar assignments with similar directions.

*--Is the use of student graders ethical?*

This is a knotty problem, and we confess to several hours of heated debate with Ken Bruffee over the issue when he spent a week on campus as a consultant for our writing-across-the-curriculum project. Bruffee contends that being part of a grading team compromises the tutors' roles as fellow students and learners by identifying tutors both actually and symbolically as extensions of the teacher. We argue in return that staff-grading establishes a uniform and hence reasonably just grading system, and that in practice none of our tutors feel compromised by the dual roles nor less able to form a congenial peer relationship with students. Because these pedagogical and philosophical issues continue to concern us, the department has been especially scrupulous in its attempt to keep the present system fair. Every essay is read independently by two trained graders, all essays with split grades are referred to a faculty member, both student writers and student graders remain anonymous to each other, the graders never evaluate the writing of students whom they tutor, and the department has a systematic review procedure for students who think their grades are unfair. Throughout the process, the instructor remains responsible for every grade and regularly checks the work of the graders. This system produces more uniform grading across multiple sections of the course than was possible in our previous system, wherein the instructor was both coach and judge. (we should add that although the ethics of our system remains an arguable issue, the legality of the department's procedure seems assured, based on conversations between the department head and the university's attorney.)

*--Are instructors themselves compromised in giving up their role as graders?*

No longer weighed down by the burden of grading and marking papers, instructors generally report a new enthusiasm for teaching writing and an enjoyment of conducting tutorial sessions in the writing center. Thus, most instructors have felt liberated in becoming full-time coaches of their students' writing. Hostility about grades is generally deflected away from the instructor and individual course tutors, who can then counsel students objectively without needing to be defensive. But it should be understood that instructors can change the graders' score on an essay if an injustice is apparent, so that the final responsibility for grades remains with the instructor. That so few grade changes have been necessary suggests that centralized staff-grading can lead to a sense of shared philosophy and common goals. We should note, however, that some instructors have bridled at the system and have had considerable difficulty during norming sessions accepting the standards agreed upon by other colleagues.

*--What is the effect of not giving individualized written comments on each student's essay?*

This is probably the most controversial issue in our program. Many teachers have long suspected that the benefits students receive from teachers' written comments do not justify the teacher's time. It was with a feeling of liberation, therefore, that we agreed, as a community of teachers, to experiment with increased conference hours in place of individual comments on essays. And in many ways we have been satisfied with the result. Person to person conferencing, we have found, allows us to respond more richly, subtly, and humanely to our students' writing, and we have been especially pleased to discover that students come to us increasingly for help with drafts in progress rather than for critiques of finished products. The effect of our not placing comments on essays has been an enormous increase in the amount of personal conference time a student seeks and receives--a benefit we would lose if we returned to commenting on essays in lieu of holding conference hours in the writing center. Currently, each student has available a minimum of 20 minutes of personal conference time for each required essay. Many students receive more help, as much as one or two hours on a single essay.

And yet students still long for written comments. On student evaluations during 1982-83, the most frequently cited suggestion for improving the course was "Please put comments on essays." Harvey Wiener and Andrea Lunsford, as external evaluators, also recommended that instructors personally comment on at least a few of the essays each term. And, indeed, most teachers in the program feel guilty about returning essays without comments, partly because they believe written comments can sometimes be effective in showing students how to improve their writing, and partly because written comments may provide a "sense of a reader" more essential for beginning writers than we at first appreciated. An essay returned without comments can seem anonymous, void, "unread"; ironically, perhaps live conferences do not give students the same sense of a real reader as does an occasional "awk" scribbled in the margins of their essays. Finally, at least ten to twenty percent of our students do not take advantage of the conference time available in the writing center. In our program, these students get no formal feedback at all on their writing. We are left, then, with a dilemma. At present we believe that the advantages of omitting comments from essays--happier teachers, greatly increased numbers of student conferences, a shift in emphasis from product to process--outweigh the disadvantages; but we still regard this problem as one of the unresolved issues in our program.

*--Can student tutors provide adequate feedback on drafts and on graded essays?*

Our tentative answer is that tutors do give effective feedback once they complete our peer tutoring course, especially since they have written essays similar in form to those expected of students, and since they participate with faculty in regularly held norming sessions. We have had unfortunate instances, however, of tutors giving poor advice, and while we believe we can minimize such instances through improved training and supervision, we cannot expect tutors to replace experienced instructors.

*--Do students learn to write in the large sections?*

Our data so far are encouraging. A pilot 60-student section taught Spring

Quarter, 1982, was carefully monitored, with two sets of essays from the large section compared with essays from small sections serving as controls. (See Figure 1 for results). On both sets of essays, students in the large section scored somewhat higher than those in the control sections. Controlled testing also occurred during the 1982-83 experimental year. Eleven large sections were compared with sixteen small sections. The testing instrument for each quarter was a two-hour in-class essay written during finals week. The essay task was constructed to permit process work such as generating ideas and planning a design prior to the exam itself. (Details of our experimental design, the construction of the final examination including copies of exam topics, forming criteria, staff-grading procedures, and so forth will gladly be supplied upon request.)

The results for the experimental year are shown in Figure 2, which displays comparative mean scores from large and small sections. Although the differences are not statistically significant, the experimental groups did slightly better than the control groups, re-affirming the results of the first pilot experiment in Spring, 1982. These results suggest that the large sections are apparently as effective as the small sections in teaching composing skills and may perhaps be slightly more effective.

*--Do students like the large sections?*

Here the data suggest that students, on the whole, prefer small sections. Student ratings of the course were collected on Montana State University's standardized student evaluation form, which allows students to rate teachers from 4 (high) to 1 (low) on eight items. Figure 3 shows comparative scores for experimental and control groups on four of these items: stimulation of interest, availability for assistance, concern for students, and overall effectiveness. Figure 4 shows the comparative distribution of scores, section by section, throughout the year, on "overall effectiveness" for experimental sections versus all small sections, including controls.

As these figures show, small sections scored, on the average, somewhat higher than the experimental sections on "overall effectiveness," "availability for assistance," and "concern for student," and considerably higher on "stimulation of interest," suggesting that the writing staff should address itself seriously to improving the attractiveness of the course as perceived by students.

Several features of the evaluations are encouraging, however. More than half of the large sections (7 of 11) scored above the university average for "overall effectiveness" (based on averages from Winter Quarter, 1983, of all university courses larger than 25 students), and at least two of the sections received impressively high scores. These results suggest that skilled teachers can make the large sections attractive to students. Moreover, all of the large sections were taught "for the first time" by teachers new to the concept of large composition courses. Most instructors are looking forward to eliminating their initial mistakes and thus improving their teaching of the course. We should point out also that in optional written comments students did not complain so much about the large size of the classes as about group work itself and about the occasional confusion of the teachers who had not yet mastered classroom techniques for conducting collaborative sessions. (It is clear that students themselves are not used to studentcentered classrooms with all the attendant responsibility that students must take

for their own learning.) One of our chief fears--that students would find the large sections depersonalizing and anonymous--was not borne out since students rated "concern for student" and "availability for assistance" consistently above the university average although lower than the small section average.

### **Implications and significance of our program: pitfalls**

The potential Impact of our program at both the local and national level is considerable. By nearly tripling the size of typical small sections of writing, the English department has transformed freshman composition from one of the least cost-efficient courses on campus to one of the most cost-efficient. Other institutions adopting our methods could expect similar improvements in student credit hour efficiency for an entire English department. There are, however, a number of disquieting consequences that must be considered before any English department could be expected to experiment with, let alone implement, our model. While upper-level administrators are likely to be attracted to the budgetary efficiency of our program, composition specialists must point out that it has features that limit the possibility of its being adopted elsewhere, and that it may yet self-destruct from its own internal complexities. This is therefore an appropriate place to list some of the major problems associated with our program--what our external evaluators called "pitfalls."

First, the amount of coordination required demands enormous administrative time, mainly in the form of staff meetings for designing and coordinating assignments, agreeing on goals, setting criteria, holding forming sessions, and training and supervising tutors. Unfortunately--and this continues to be a major problem for us--the burden of making the program work at MSU has fallen disproportionately upon our small staff of part-time faculty, who teach the course each term, and much less upon the full-time faculty, who teach the course periodically in rotation. The department is now trying valiantly to redress this inequity by improving both salaries and employment conditions for part-timers. But other departments should be forewarned not to attempt a program of our kind unless their own houses are in order regarding part-time faculty.

Second, the program depends on instructors' giving up their individual freedom in favor of a centrally planned curriculum. Many of our faculty have been willing to do so because the new curriculum offers a sense of coherence missing in our former decentralized writing program. But some faculty are not happy with the new program, objecting both to the lack of flexibility in the way the course must be taught and to the whole notion of "efficiency," which seems a sellout to the budget makers. Unless a department can count on the goodwill of most of its full-time faculty, and the voluntary cooperation of all instructors who will teach in the program, it should not even consider adopting our method.

Third, the need to staff-grade essays and to provide uniform assistance in the writing center requires--or at least so we currently believe--specified formats for essays, such as Ken Bruffee's three and four-paragraph argumentative writing tasks. Such formats seem uncomfortably close to the traditional 5-paragraph essay, tainted as it is with all its accompanying symbolic baggage. The left wing of the process movement will never be persuaded that tasks with prescribed forms can truly be integrated into a process approach to writing, although our writing staff

now believes it has developed a set of form-specified assignments that accommodate a process approach and yet remain amenable to consistent scoring from staff graders. Nonetheless, our program will invite criticism from many process teachers.

Finally, our program demands highly skilled instructors who know how to conduct collaborative sessions in a room packed with students, who can design challenging tasks that guide students through each stage of the writing process, who can conduct individual and small group conferences efficiently while remembering all their students' names and their individual writing and thinking problems, and who can remain contented, year after year, teaching composition in such a high stress environment. Each new teacher in the program needs extensive orientation and at least one term of on-the-job training before beginning to master techniques for teaching the course successfully. Traditionally, writing programs can tolerate a few poor teachers, but a poor teacher in our program sets off a chain of troubles with tutors, graders, other writing center personnel, and 60 visibly disgruntled students. Moreover, the ineffective teacher can readily blame his or her troubles on the system itself. The program thus provides us frighteningly little flexibility: we don't dare hire part-timers at the last minute, and we don't know what to do about the full-time faculty who dislike the new program in light of our department's longstanding policy that every faculty member teach freshman writing on a regular basis. Moreover, our reliance now on a truly professional staff of part-time instructors exposes more sharply than ever the way higher education can exploit its low status teachers.

#### **Implications and significant of our program: why didn't we do something else?**

As we should have now made clear, the large sections of freshman writing at Montana State University have arisen out of particular historical circumstances largely unique to our own institution. Let us review again the constraints under which we were working: a freshman writing program that could enroll in any given year only half of the freshman students on campus; an English faculty already burdened with too many writing courses; a federally funded, highly visible writing-across-the-curriculum program which was highlighting the need for MSU students to take more writing; the absence of a writing center and hence the absence of means to continue writing-across-the-curriculum once grant money was depleted; and the availability of very limited extra resources that could be given the department because of severe overcrowding in many other curricula across campus.

Given these constraints, we had no opportunity to design an ideal curriculum, only to improve on a system that turned away half of MSU's freshmen from freshman writing. We would argue, however, that our decision to raise class sizes--while hardly an ideal method for teaching composition--should nonetheless give WPAs around the country a troublesome awareness of freedom. For our experiment at least raises the possibility that writing can be taught effectively in sections much larger than the limits prescribed by the WPA, NCTE, or MLA guidelines on class size, which may now appear, unfortunately, as self-serving to skeptical administrators. In existential terms, the significance of our experiment is

that small classes can no longer be comfortably regarded as an essence, an unquestioned "given, of an effective writing program. Rather, small classes are choices, like other choices institutions must make for their writing programs, such as the amount of pay they will give part-time faculty or the percentage of sections they will allow to be staffed by graduate students. Thus the implications of our experiment for other institutions can be fully appreciated only in light of the choices we didn't make. What other options did we have?

Our first option was to do nothing. For years, the status quo had been part of our "strategy" for change. According to this gambit, we tenaciously clung to classes of 25 while turning hundreds of students away each quarter--as visibly as possible, urging the disgruntled to stack their zapped registration cards outside the dean's door. In this way we tried to call dramatic attention to our plight and justify a number of new FTE's. We pursued this strategy relentlessly for eight years. It didn't work. It couldn't work at an institution like ours where everyone's resources are similarly strained. For example, increased enrollment in the Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Programs at MSU have placed even greater strains upon their faculty than those felt by the writing staff because those faculty, teaching required courses within a popular major, have not had our attractive option of insisting upon small classes.

"Pressuring" administrators by turning masses of students away is effective only if an internal reallocation of resources is possible. But when an entire institution suffers shortfalls, then we find ourselves competing for nonexistent resources with the very departments which we supposedly "serve" by teaching freshman writing. Only if increased funding were made available by the legislature (and only if we were at the top of the pecking order) could the status quo strategy possibly bear fruit. We decided not to hold our breath any longer.

Our second option was to expand our entire staffs teaching load, moving from 12 to 16 hours, and replacing low enrollment literature courses with composition sections. Why not? Many other public institutions place this kind of teaching burden on their English staff. Unfortunately, it would mean that our staff could not measure up to the escalating research standards imposed by the university for both promotion and tenure. Lip service to the importance of teaching notwithstanding, tenure and promotion decisions were increasingly made on the basis of scholarly productivity. We found ourselves being compared to scientists with half the teaching load; we'd already had a couple of close calls on tenure cases. And among older faculty, a 1979 external review of the English Department had cited the possibility of widespread burnout as a growing problem. So we considered the odds of selling an increased teaching load as nearly nil, whatever its wisdom.

Next there was the "more part-timers" alternative. Instead of demanding money for expensive full-time lines, we could use less money more efficiently by hiring cheap labor. But several considerations both practical and philosophical ruled out this alternative. A practical consideration was that Bozeman, a small community more than 350 miles from the nearest institution with an English doctoral program, couldn't supply enough potential composition teachers to triple our part-time staff. And philosophically, while we were clearly violating the WPA, NCTE, and MLA guidelines on class size, we were trying to take very seriously their guidelines against the exploitation of part-time faculty--what Wayne Booth has called "the worst scandal in higher education today." Moreover, we doubted that an expanded staff of insecure part-timers, even if we could find them, would really

provide a stronger writing program than our 60-student method. While smaller classes are surely preferable to larger ones for the teaching of writing, could we justify spending many thousands of dollars to create the kind of program that our profession is coming increasingly to regard as scandalous? Mightn't the university be better off placing extra money into a state-of-the-art writing center that could support writing-across-the-curriculum? In short, we thought our 60-student sections, combined with an effective writing center, a better option than small sections taught by a heavily expanded part-time staff.

As a fourth option, we also considered resurrecting our proposal for a graduate program from the legislative scrap heap where it had been thrown two years previously. For some of our faculty, the appeal of this option was strong. Not only might we be blessed with a platoon of low cost TAs to teach freshman writing, but many regular faculty could trade their freshman composition courses for graduate seminars.

In truth, however, given the prevailing economic, political, and educational realities of Montana, we had no chance of starting even a small graduate program, let alone one large enough to staff freshman writing. And for some of us, the idea of solving our problems with this model was more philosophically distressing than any of the other options we considered. Whatever the ethics of staffing freshman writing with unseasoned teachers or of urging more graduate students into an already overcrowded profession, the message that T.A.-staffed writing programs give to the educational community is clear: Writing can be taught in a low priority compartment of the curriculum requiring a minimum of expertise and thus a minimum of university resources. The equally clear message being given to TAs is that freshman composition is a grunt course, and if a person is smart she'll get to a large research institution where she won't have to teach it. The gap between high status literature scholars and low status composition teachers--a gap socially created and perpetuated by large research institutions, where research means literary scholarship and where the teaching of writing is a job for graduate students--is a dangerous one, as several articles in Winifred Horner's recent *Literature and Composition: Bridging the Gap* make painfully clear.<sup>2</sup> English departments can hardly create innovative writing programs if their most prestigious researchers disdain the teaching of writing. Nor can English departments become models for writing-across-the-curriculum if their literature scholars turn over the trench work of writing instruction to their graduate apprentices.

We also had to weigh the quality of teaching the TAs might do against the quality of our trained part-time staff, all of whom would have to be let go. As our outside evaluators wrote in their report, we are "in the unusual position of having [a small core of] committed and highly-trained part-time instructors." The issue which we faced here was one we ran up against repeatedly in our deliberations: how to weigh quality of instructor against quality of methodology and class size.

In particular, when we were considering the large section notion, we were attracted by the fact that through increasing the size of the sections, we could limit the number of sections. Ten sections per quarter could hold as many students as 24 traditional sections. Because it is much easier to staff 10 sections per quarter, rather than 24 sections per quarter, with talented writing instructors (drawn from both the full-time and part-time staff), we could put our best composition teachers into the classroom more frequently. The effect of this is hard to gauge. Most empirical testing in composition measures some aspect of methodology. Instructor

quality is typically "controlled for" in such experiments, It's difficult to say what the relationship might be between instructor quality and student learning. We hope that it is positive, for we proceeded on the assumption that 10 large sections taught by 10 highly trained professionals would be preferable to 20-30 small sections taught either by M.A. candidates or by largely itinerant and underpaid part-timers over whom we had little quality control.

A final option we considered was to bring into the department a half dozen post-doctoral lecturers on three-year non-renewable contracts. The appeal of this option is that it would allow us to bring in bright, energetic young teachers just out of graduate school who might share with us their expertise. We might also be performing a humane service--as UCLA and other places with post-doctoral writing programs appear to be doing--by giving young professionals a start in the profession.

Unfortunately, to get any kind of cost-efficiency out of this option, we would have to ask these people to teach three composition courses per quarter at low wages. Given the load we'd have to impose upon them, it's doubtful that we could get the full benefit of their expertise. It also appears doubtful that they'd be able to do the sort of research necessary to obtain a tenure track position. Unless we could offer significant post-doctoral training, a reasonable load and salary, such a system would simply be exploitive, offering more false hopes than fresh starts. And once again, to be able to hire these full-time temporaries, we would have to dismiss most or all of our present highly qualified part-time staff.

These then were the major options we considered before entering into the large section experiment. In a world of limited resources, we found ourselves engaged in a number of zero-sum games, where every gain seemed to entail an equivalent loss. What we wish to emphasize for other WPAs is that we placed much of what goes on in other writing programs--large part-time staffs, excessive use of TAs, temporary full-timers on in-and-out contracts, a mind-crushing paper-grading burden for permanent faculty--in the negative column of our deliberations. We concluded that having sixty students in a section may not be, in the long run, as detrimental to the goal of improving student writing as other choices regularly made in writing programs around the country. We would have preferred to pursue other alternatives first had they met our multiple and conflicting needs. But in our view, the large sections met more of our needs, at a smaller cost, than any of the other options.

#### **Implications and significance of our experiment: Benefits**

But adopting large sections did more than simply meet needs. It created an enormous amount of goodwill for our program among administrators and freed further resources to strengthen our program. And here a crucial point needs to be made. From the very outset of our experiment, we negotiated with our administration to ensure that dollar savings would return to the department. We found that our willingness to experiment with 60-student sections gave us a surprisingly powerful bargaining chip in the negotiations for university resources. Though budgets are still tight, we were able to gain a number of benefits through our efficiencies, including: (1) a new FTE position for a tenure-stream Writing Center Director; (2) operational funding for our newly developed writing center;

(3) a research laboratory for computer applications in composition; (4) funding for an innovative outreach program in writing-across-the-curriculum; and (5) reduced teaching loads for English faculty, permitting more research and professional development. In the future, we hope to secure a permanent budget for our part-time staff and to continue increasing their professional status within the university.

In addition, we may also be discovering some curricular advantages to the program that we hadn't fully anticipated--advantages accruing directly to students rather than to budgets or faculty. We would like to conclude our report by suggesting some of them.

For example, if our program demonstrates that students can learn to write within a less teacher-centered environment, we may facilitate an increase in the total amount of writing students do in college. Moreover, since nearly all students in higher education take freshman writing early in their college careers, a significant change in the structure of that course could have widespread effects. Our model, in training students in small-group problem-solving and in peercritiquing at all stages of the writing process, as well as in writing group papers and short essays designed to increase thinking skills, lays the foundation for a writingacross-the-curriculum program that can work at a large university. Because freshmen at Montana State University will now share the common experience of a course focusing on independent, small-group learning, faculty in other disciplines can perhaps experiment more confidently with alternatives to the traditional lecture, such as guided design (Charles Wales), Piagetian inquiry techniques, or team problem-solving.

In fact, several faculty in other disciplines at MSU are examining our 60-student model as an alternative, not to small classes in their own departments, but as an alternative to mass lectures. Although Ken Bruffee may understandably cringe at the way we have bastardized his collaborative learning model, we may yet have a substantial impact in promoting collaborative learning across the disciplines at a large university. And surely the notion of 60 to 100 students sharing their writing in small groups seems like a progressive idea if the class is Business Management 219, say, rather than English 101. If we believe that faculty in all disciplines should require some writing in all their courses--no matter how large--our willingness to teach writing enthusiastically in 60-student sections may do more for writingacross-the-curriculum than any other single act we could have taken.

As a result of our method, faculty outside of English can also feel more comfortable designing writing assignments to enhance learning and thinking--and use them in large classes--because students will be accustomed to writing for each other without expecting extensive teacher comments. Most of the techniques for assigning writing in large classes, developed by faculty outside of English during the FIPSE grant, will now be introduced to students in freshman writing. Thus the department's large sections of writing might be an entirely appropriate way to teach introductory composition at a large university where regular writing is a part of all academic life--assuming, of course, that faculty in other disciplines create appropriate writing tasks that build upon the skills we develop in freshman writing.

In sum, then, we don't wish to apologize to the profession for our experiment. While we agree with our external evaluators that our experimental program should not be "impose(d)" on other departments and that no one should have "an

oversimplified or overly-optimistic view" of its potential, we do think that the positive as well as negative features of the experiment ought to be carefully considered and weighed by other WPAs. Perhaps the most positive consequence of all, and one that we have so far only implied, is the enormous professional development that our new curriculum has brought to our department. The act of creating the curriculum has generated an air of excitement about the teaching of writing that we imagine few departments in the country can equal. While much of the ferment of change has been unsettling, it has also been productive and exciting, and we hope to retain as much of that excitement as possible as we now move from the experimental stage into the implementive stage of our program.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"A Cheap, Efficient, Challenging, Sure-fire and Obvious Device for Combatting the Major Scandal in Higher Education Today." *Writing Program Administration*, 5(1981), pp. 35-39.

<sup>2</sup>*Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap*, Winifred Bryan Horner, Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). See especially Horner's introduction and the articles by Richard Lanham and Wayne Booth.



**FIGURE 3**  
**Comparison of Student Evaluations for Experimental and Control Sections of Freshman Writing and for all University Courses with Twenty-five or more Students**

	Overall Effectiveness	Concern for Students	Availability for Assistance	Stimulation of Interest
Average for Experimental	2.90	3.10	3.16	2.44
Average for Controls	3.00	3.28	3.21	2.68
University Average for Courses with Twenty-five or more Students (Winter 1982-83)	2.86	2.94	2.91	2.65

**FIGURE 4**  
**Comparative Distribution of Student Evaluation Scores for "Overall Effectiveness," Experimental Sections, Control Sections, and All Small Sections**

Experimental	All small sections
	3.73
	3.68
3.57	3.55
	3.47*
3.46	3.44
	3.42*
	3.38
	3.37
	3.37
	3.35*
	3.27
	3.25
	3.24
	3.23
	3.22*
	3.22*
	3.21
3.20	3.15*
	3.15*
	3.14*
3.14	3.06
	3.05*
3.05	3.00
3.04	3.00
	2.95*
	2.95*
	2.94*
2.91	2.90*
	2.86
2.78	2.79
	2.74
	2.64*
	2.59
	2.55*
	2.43
	2.35
2.29	2.35
2.28	2.24
	2.17*
2.16	2.10
	2.05
	1.76
Experimental Mean: 2.90 Median: 3.04	All small sections Mean: 2.96 Median: 3.06 Control Mean: 3.00 Median: 3.05

\*Control sections

## **Students or staff: Thoughts on the use of peer tutors in writing centers**

*John Trimbur*

The establishment of peer tutoring programs in writing centers is one of the most promising educational innovations to emerge from the 1970s. It is promising in part because it shows that administrators and faculty are catching on to something that is deeply rooted in student culture—the power of peer influence when directed toward learning. Educators have recognized since at least the early sixties that peer relationships constitute an important potential source of learning. In 1962, the social psychologist Theodore M. Newcomb presented his findings that peer-group influence is the single most powerful force in shaping college students' attitudes toward their education.<sup>1</sup> Peer influence, of course, can lead to *Animal House* antics and worse. But it can also lead, on the other hand, to the intellectual commitment of conversations where students talk, in deeply personal and meaningful ways, about everything from the death of Socrates to Einstein's theory of relativity. Students have always banded together to interpret and cope with their undergraduate experience. If the social energy generated by college peer groups sometimes manifests itself in anti-intellectual and anti-social ways, this energy also powers the rap sessions and informal study groups that seem to arise spontaneously in student culture, the self help circles students have traditionally organized to deal with the intellectual demands of their coursework.

Peer tutoring in writing centers, then, is an attempt, as Kenneth A. Bruffee says in his seminal article "The Brooklyn Plan: Attaining Intellectual Growth through Peer-Group Tutoring," to tap into the "immense natural educational resource" of peer influence and to mobilize that influence in an academic context devoted to intellectual and social development.<sup>2</sup> Writing centers formalize what had existed before only informally, the networks of mutual aid that students have always developed among themselves. But what happens when we institutionalize practices that previously emerged spontaneously, outside of the conventional academic structure? For those of us who administer writing programs and writing centers, the question is critical. Do the ways we use peer tutors in writing centers begin to realize educational promise of peer influence directed toward learning? Just to ask the question, I suppose, is to suggest some misgivings on my part. My fear is that in our attempts to innovate, we still carry old habits with us and at times reproduce old attitudes and relationships that undercut the great educational promise of peer tutoring.

### **Writing centers and academic support services**

One old habit most writing centers must shake is the stigma of remediation associated with academic support services. Writing centers, at least in the way they

appear on some deans' flow charts, tend to be located in the larger realm of basic skills and academic support services. Administrators, faculty, and students alike often look upon writing centers as clinics for the sick and wounded to get a checkup and a cure. According to this unfortunately common view, student writing is a matter of public hygiene, something to be cleaned up or patched up by first aid. But it's not simply these clinical connotations I'm worried about. What concerns me is that this support service model duplicates the traditional academic hierarchy by assigning the most "difficult" students and the most mechanical tasks to the lowest ranked staff, in many cases to peer tutors who work in writing centers.

The dramatic growth of writing centers in the seventies occurred with the arrival of what are often called non-traditional students: minority students formerly excluded from higher education, students from the working class and lower middle class families, older returning students, and so on. Whatever their backgrounds, these students, as well as an apparently growing number of traditional college-bound students, did not seem to perform well in the traditional classroom. And they certainly perplexed the faculty who held traditional assumptions about teaching and learning. Writing centers emerged in the seventies in the midst of a wider response to the learning styles of these new students, as part of an attempt to keep the open door from becoming a revolving door.

Remediation and academic support services became a growth industry, quickly producing and marketing its own line of student-centered services--learning labs, self-paced modules, math and text anxiety workshops, study skills centers, computer assisted instruction, even the faintly onanistic auto-tutorial. And these new services created a new stratum of jobs for faculty and administrators in basic skills programs and academic support services, mostly in low prestige positions often with only a marginal relationship to an academic department, in learning centers staffed by students and paraprofessionals. The job assigned these services is to support classroom instruction by preparing non-traditional students for college work--to help these students fill in the gaps in their education and to get them through their coursework. This is known as "being in the trenches," and in the traditional academic hierarchy, there is an inverse correlation between status and "being in the trenches."

Many writing centers were set up originally to support classroom instruction in the composition sequence by providing additional drill, practice, and tutoring. An argument often presented for writing centers says that one of their functions is to release valuable instructional time from the drudgery of drill and exercise. In some cases, particularly in basic writing courses, lab assignments in a writing center are a required course component. In other cases, faculty refer those students most in need of extra work, the students our colleagues sometimes call "basket cases." In either case, according to the division of labor in this support service model, students who work in writing centers are not really peer tutors. Rather they operate as lab aides who administer various exercises and writing activities and thus free faculty to devote more time to the higher things in teaching writing. If this argument has been successful in explaining the role of the writing center, it is also a rationalization of the academic caste system. By the traditional academic hierarchy's scale of values, the writing center's time is less valuable than a faculty member's. Time is a commodity, and in the political economy of writing centers, undergraduates can most afford to spend time in the trenches, to wage the war with grammar and syntax.

To put it bluntly, students are a down-right cheap source of labor compared to faculty or paraprofessionals--a fact, I'm afraid, that has done as much to legitimize the use of undergraduates in writing centers as any of our educational theories. Students are a cost-effective solution to the problem of staffing the tutoring programs that have expanded in a time of tight money. This solution, however, has only led to another set of problems.

### **Students or staff: The issue of exploitation**

Most writing center directors have had to face the argument from traditionalist colleagues that students are just not qualified, that they do not possess the experience and expertise to tutor other students. In many respects the support service model of writing centers accepts the logic of this argument by restricting tutors activities to helping other students negotiate grammar drills and the most basic kinds of writing problems. The tutors themselves often feel that they are not qualified to tutor. Beginning tutors especially are prone to anxiety about their ability to help peers learn how to write. Socialized by years of schooling, tutors have internalized many of the traditional academic hierarchy's values and notions of authority. When we use tutors as adjuncts to classroom instruction, we run the risk of reinforcing these traditional values and re-creating feelings of dependence on the faculty's authority.

When tutors provide lab practice as part of a division of labor in a writing course, they become implicated in the traditional hierarchical structures of academia. Not only are they underpaid for performing work that is essentially instructional in nature, but also they become in effect the agents of someone else's will, servo-mechanisms of the faculty. The exploitation that can occur unwittingly in a writing center is only partially an economic matter. (And I should note here that there is often little WPAs can do about economic exploitation because the pay scale for tutors, usually minimum wage or slightly higher, is set in many instances by work study programs and student employment offices.) Exploitation does more than underpay tutors. It also expropriates the product from the producer, alienating tutors from their own activity by making them part of a division of labor they neither design nor control. What's innovative and educationally promising about peer tutoring--the power of students learning together collaboratively--gets domesticated by the old order, and peer tutoring becomes simply a new way of supplementing the old business of instruction. Tutors confront tutees not as colearners, but as extensions of the faculty, identified with the traditional authority of the classroom instructor.

This identification can have serious consequences for the relationship between tutors and tutees. Students who are required to put in lab time are particularly likely to ascribe traditional kinds of authority to the tutor and to see the tutor in a writing center as a surrogate for the classroom instructor. At just the moment initiative should shift to the learners--when tutor and tutee invest authority to learn how to write in each other--the authority of the classroom, of course requirements, and of grades intrudes and confuses roles that should remain separate, that of tutor and that of evaluator. Linking tutoring to coursework, particularly in those courses where tutors report back to the classroom instructor on the tutee's progress, makes the tutor into a monitor, a representative of the instructor's authority to

evaluate. This, in turn, creates ambiguity about whose side the tutor is on, the student's or the teacher's, and about the role of the tutor, as an ally or an adversary. And when the tutor's role is ambiguous, the social distance between students--between tutors and tutees--will increase and undercut the power of the peer relationship. What gets lost is precisely this peer relationship, the shared status of being undergraduates, as the social matrix of collaborative learning where the tutor and the tutee arrive at their own mutual understanding of the process of learning to write.

#### **WPAs and tutor training**

If the support service model makes the tutor-instructor and the tutor-tutee relationship problematical, it can also affect the relationship between the director of a writing center and the tutors who work there. The tie-in between writing centers and writing courses produces business, tutoring sessions that can be counted in annual reports for deans and funding agencies to ensure the center's--and sometimes the director's--continuing existence. The task of WPAs, of course, is to provide a service, but the connection between lab and coursework is a delicate matter because it is potentially self-serving. External pressure for results can cast WPAs in a narrowly supervisory role, managing the staff that produces the service and tallying the body count. Too often this supervisory role has led WPAs to define tutoring in similarly narrow terms, as a job instead as a part of the tutor's undergraduate education.

Certainly there are job-related skills that undergraduates gain by tutoring--responsibility, a knack for working with other people, a feeling for the complexity and social dynamics of institutional settings. A supervisory relationship between WPAs and staff, however, can cause WPAs to overlook the most valuable resource of the tutors, their immersion in the activity of learning to write. The potential strength of peer tutors is not their mastery of grammar, usage, organization, or style but the fact that they, like their tutees, are learning to write. The experience of how we learn to write is often distant to faculty and difficult to reconstruct. WPAs need a sustaining educational connection to the tutors, to bring their experience learning to write to consciousness and to maintain it as the central focus of a writing center. The best peer tutoring programs, such as those modeled on Bruffee's Brooklyn Plan, usually include a tutor training course for academic credit as a means to accomplish these goals.' But even in those circumstances where for some reason a tutor training course is impossible, and in the case of those students who have taken such a course and continue tutoring, WPAs can play a broadly educational role.

To make the tutors' education the central focus of tutor training, WPAs should put primary emphasis on the tutors' personal development as learners and writers rather than on their acquisition of tutoring techniques. Tutors need to write and to talk about the process of writing, the frustrations and rewards of turning thought into prose. The struggle tutors go through in their own writing can help keep tutor training sessions from becoming simply problem solving meetings where tutors learn technical skills--how to work an rhetorical strategies or dropped "-ed" endings. These techniques can be useful, but the danger is that the tutors will begin to look upon their tutees as walk-in problems that need to be solved, a view often held by the tutees themselves. It's easy for tutors to forget the emotional and intellectual

demands of writing and to seek quick results by correcting their tutees' errors in organization and grammar. If isolated from the tutors' own experience writing, training in pedagogical techniques will invariably produce a staff of mini-teachers set apart from their peers.

I would argue that it is in the best interest of WPAs to treat tutors as students, not staff, as a way to tap into their experience learning to write and to make that experience explicit to tutors and tutees. The tutors' increased awareness of how they write can help them transcend the clinical connotations of many writing centers. As peer tutors come to grips with the way they write and make that understanding available to other students, they become more than lab aids. The tutors' education in writing not only helps prevent their exploitation by providing an educational return for their effort, but also it creates the conditions for a writing center that mobilizes peer influence and develops the intellectual commitment it takes to become a writer. What peer tutors are best suited to do is neither teach other students how to write nor supplement faculty instruction with drill and exercises. Rather, peer tutors can best help their students become writers by joining with them as partners to inquire into the writing process and to find a common language to talk about writing.

#### **The future of writing centers**

Such talk about writing, moreover, has implications for the role of a writing center in the larger design of a writing program. The way WPAs organize students in writing centers offers an important measure of their program's sense of identity and purpose. As Ben W. McClelland notes, "What tutors do says who we are."<sup>4</sup> Writing centers that administer drill and exercises reflect one view of what's involved in learning to write; writing centers that provide a context for students to interpret their experience writing reflect a considerably different view. I suggest here, however, more than a theoretical argument about approaches to education--the support service model versus collaborative learning. I think the pragmatic issue of the simple survival of writing centers also may be at stake.

I think we have to recognize the fact that writing centers have been riding a larger trend in academic support services and that, despite the proliferation of writing centers in the seventies, this trend is reversible. Support services, after all, are creatures of what they're supporting: alternative institutions whose political economy relies in a sense on the failure of the official curriculum and traditional instruction. Alternative institutions in this regard are cursed by their birth: if instruction improves; if we no longer face the learning styles of non-traditional students; if the literacy crisis loses its power to attract funding, then we're deprived of many of the rationales we've used to set up writing centers and keep them going. For writing centers to become a permanent part of higher education, we're going to have to find arguments that go beyond the support service model and institutionalize practices accordingly.

The great educational promise of peer tutoring programs in writing centers is that they are based on practices already present, in the mutual aid and intellectual commitment of student peer-groups. What WPAs need to see is that writing centers may well be transitory phenomena if they're tied too closely to curriculum

and instruction. The contribution peer tutoring programs make enriches student culture by formalizing and sanctioning the practices of collaborative learning students have always engaged in. Looking ahead through the eighties and nineties. I think the future of writing centers rests on the power of peer influence directed toward learning.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>"Student Peer-Group Influence," in *The American College*, ed. Nevitt Sanford (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1962), pp. 469-88.

<sup>2</sup>*Liberal Education*, 64 (December 1987), 447-68.

<sup>3</sup>A suggested syllabus for training peer tutors appears in Kenneth A. Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979).

<sup>4</sup>Personal correspondence.

## The shadow of testing

*Carolyn Matalene*

No doubt we have all seen students denigrated for making surface errors and ignored when offering creative responses. And we have also seen the fear and cowardice and mindlessness and hatred of writing (and of reading far that matter) which mindless, begrudging, pinched and prescriptive composition (or literature) teaching has caused in our students. Between the idea we have of language teaching and the reality of classroom practices, between what Alan Hollingsworth calls "a rich model of language instruction" and what students actually get, falls the shadow. The more language instruction I observe and the more students I hear from, the more inevitable seems T.S. Eliot's line: "between the idea and the reality falls the shadow."

Our current cultural response to this educational--if not human condition--seems to be: into the shadows insert a test. A test, we easily assume, will remove the shadow, will make the ideal equal the reality. Now at last, that lumpen reality will have to shape up--like Tennessee 'round Wallace Stevens' jar--though the unstated assumption that a test will in fact cause learning is seldom examined.

Ever since the media decided to make copy out of students' language deficiencies, testing has become chic. It sells. Some of us have even figured out that getting into testing will also get our pictures in the paper, our names on the governor's committee, and our pay raises (and travel requests) past the dean. Others have been ordered into testing by administrators at their institutions. At year before last's CCCC workshop which I conducted (and which got me to San Francisco), participants from all over the country had been so directed: produce a test.

Testing language skills these days is as common a practice as cutting the budget, and sometimes the two are linked. As Oedipus discovered, however, obvious solutions sometimes yield unexpected results, a phenomenon we are all too well acquainted with in the twentieth century. Therefore, we should be aware of the unexpected, bizarre, and ironic effects that tests can cause.

As language teachers, we are usually interested in testing students to gain information for placement, to design appropriate courses, and to evaluate the effectiveness of our instruction. At my institution, for example, the students who score lowest on our Writing Proficiency Test are placed in Basic Writing; at the end of the semester we administer the same test again to see what, if anything, we have accomplished, and what major problems remain. But our colleagues in other departments or in the administration are more often interested in tests for exclusionary purposes. Thus, when we implemented this proficiency test for purposes of placement--to be scored one, two, three, or four--several people suggested that we add a score of zero and use it to deny students admission to the university. So, ironically, the placement tests which for many of us were inspired by responses to the Open Door policy at CCNY would now be used by many to Shut the Door.

Tests designed as instruments for measuring can easily become instruments for eliminating. When exclusion is the issue, few seem to care about the nature of the instrument. (Dr. Guillotin was widely lauded as a humanitarian in his day.) This results in an effect I had never expected, the "Mind if I borrow your test?" syndrome. Someone is always willing and anxious to use whatever test is around for something else, anything else. It was recently suggested to me that students' scores on that same Writing Proficiency Test, when high enough, could also be used to exempt honors students from a sophomore literature course. I found it difficult to retain my genteel voice as I explained that a student who can swim across the pool is not necessarily proficient at hang-gliding as well. Test-borrowing now seems to be a national phenomenon. After arguing in print that an objective test of particular writing skills could perhaps be useful but if and only if it were carefully designed according to local standards, devised by local faculty, and related to the specific content of a specific course, I was surprised by the calls and letters I received from all over the country asking, "Mind if we borrow your test? We've been told we've got to have one." Clearly, any test in a storm.

Those of us from states with minimal competency testing legislated into the public schools now know how many ways these test results can be used: to pressure teachers, to worry administrators, to heap abuse on colleges of education, to despair of today's youth, or to denigrate low-brow parents. But I hadn't expected them to be used for selling real estate. In my town test scores--and percentage increases--are reported on the front pages of both papers, school district by school district; the scores then are quoted by real estate agents as they push particular neighborhoods. No doubt as test scores rise and fall, so do house prices. But then, who would have expected the competition for high SAT Verbal scores to save the teaching of Latin?

We probably cannot control the peripheral effects of test scores, but we can admit that much of our own dependence on test scores is that tests make the best flak-catchers. As Eliot also told us, humankind cannot stand very much reality, and the unpleasant reality of education is that some will do very poorly, some will fail utterly. This reality is not pleasant, either for the person who failed or for the person who must make the announcement. The reason, after all, that educators hang on to SAT and GRE scores is not because we believe in them--they are disproved before our very eyes daily--but because numbers are the best flakcatchers. When lines have to be drawn somewhere, it seems so much kinder to show a student a number than to reveal an evaluation by another human which finds the student sorely wanting. Anyone who has ever had to be the flak-catcher, to hear the appeals and arguments, and to say to the student "this isn't very good" (always heard as "I'm not very good") knows that. Flak-catching could surely be added to the list of stressful situations which the life insurance companies circulate. And they also know why the numbers spat out by batteries of objective tests are so tempting. Thus, the testing phenomenon betrays a natural tendency to move toward numerical and objective evaluations, a tendency not lessened by the sublime and ubiquitous efficiency of the computer. And in fact, the more I try to analyze the shadow which always falls between the goals of our tests and the actual results or between our idea of instruction and the reality we have to settle for, the more it seems that a number of ineluctable Natural Laws lurk here. We might as well admit some of them.

### **Law I: We never teach what we think we're teaching.**

This may sound preposterous. but it is truer than we dare to admit. It was brought home to me one day after I had taught a particularly fine class on Flaubert's great story "A Simple Heart." A rather spacey young woman approached me with unusual enthusiasm, "May I ask you a question, may I ask you a question?" At last, I thought, I have interested her. "Tell me," she said, "where's your diamond ring? I always watch your diamond ring during class, and you weren't wearing it today]" When students tell us, years hence, what they got from a particular class, it is seldom what we had in mind. Who knows what in fact I might have been teaching students about women academics who wear diamond rings--all the while that I thought I was teaching point of view, or Flaubert, or cumulative sentences? And who knows what the student was ready for or interested in receiving? In any classroom, the variables are innumerable: the levels of ability and achievement, the mixtures of interests, and motivation are so complex that what any one student is getting from any one teacher is not only unique, but also unpredictable.

### **Law II: We never test what we think we're testing.**

This was revealed to me when a student, who had done poorly on the Writing Proficiency Test and who, with her daddy, had given me considerable flak, came by a year later to tell me of her progress through our course sequence. She said, "You know, I found out why I did bad on that test. I know what I did wrong. I only had three paragraphs. Now I know you have to have five."

Tests tend to measure the test taker's ability to take tests. Test-taking is a ritualized activity which, like praying, some are more comfortable with than others. There really are smart students who "test poorly" and lazy ones "who test well." (They often turn up in the bosoms of academic families.) Furthermore, tests will not make test takers learn--at least probably not what we want them to learn--see Law I--or at any rate the test takers who need to learn probably won't. Unless at least 12 to 15% of the takers fail or do poorly on any given test, it isn't worth the energy and expense to administer it. The 85% who pass then prove that the test was too easy and therefore unnecessary, and the 15% who fail the test--those who were supposed to be motivated by the test to pass--prove that the test has failed in motivating them. Naturally, in the population of failures, there will always be some who should not have failed and of those who passed, some who should not have passed. Thus, a test introduced to bring the real closer to the ideal will probably only introduce into the world more injustice and, as an accompaniment, more flak.

### **Law III: The effects of a test are never quite what we had in mind.**

Not only do students draw crude conclusions about the ontological existence of the five-paragraph theme from the tests they take, they also draw conclusions about

what constitutes an education, what they need to know, and why they need to know it. Teachers then easily follow the line of least resistance and teach to the test. When an extremely competent young teacher explained to me how he taught his students to analyze the test writer's mentality and then second guess it, I realized that the test he was teaching to had indeed affected instruction, but in an unexpected way. In my state, the Basic Skills Assessment Program, as the minimal competency tests are officially designated, has been renamed "Be Sap" by the teachers; they and their principals generally agree that although this carefully designed testing program has so far produced multitudinous ring binders of regulations, it has not yet improved instruction. Some cynics even argue that the time spent on form-filling both diminishes teaching time and further demoralizes teachers.

These three laws about teaching and testing are but corollaries of a fourth law which accounts for why there must always be a shadow.

#### **Law IV: Nobody ever gets anything right.**

Some people, upon reading or hearing about a plane hijacking think the news item is not a report but a direction to do likewise. And when it comes to testing, points of view also tend toward the personal. Administrators and legislators assume that tests will cause both improved instruction and increased learning; teachers see the same tests as harassments which interrupt instruction. Parents believe that test scores should be directly proportional to the money they have spent and the study hours their children have invested; students know that tests are cruel and mysterious determiners which often reward the dilatory and punish the diligent. Thus, students who do poorly on proficiency tests or who fail exit exams or qualifying exams or final exams seldom in my experience blame themselves or the education they have thus far received. Instead, they blame the test or the Director of Freshman English or the Dean or the institution, or, like the Greeks, the messenger. From the test taker's point of view, we are never testing what the test taker knows, but what he or she doesn't know--and we're back to Law II, we never test what we think we are testing.

#### **So what's a conscientious WPA to do?**

To be serious (but only mildly and briefly so), I should perhaps say that I do believe in tests. They undoubtedly have a legitimate place in our educational system. They can provide essential information; they can fulfill positive and useful functions. They can be made to do what we want them to do, and we can learn a great deal from designing and administering them--though usually not what we expected to learn. We can also effect change--sometimes even for the better.

The essential issue, too easily and too often overlooked, is what might be called the rhetorical context of testing. Tests are not simple cures--they are accompanied by many side effects--nor are they single events. Like writing, testing occurs in a

social context and is as complicated as is discourse itself. If a rich model of writing should inform our teaching, so should a complex model of testing inform our educational policies.

That perpetual *vade mecum* of writing teachers, Jakobson's diagram of the elements of discourse, might well serve as a model for testing programs as a heuristic for anticipating the unanticipated. This familiar six-part model specifies that any piece of discourse between an addresser and an addressee is transmitted in a Code, through a medium (Contact), about a subject (Context) and with a Message. Similarly, a test is a piece of discourse between the test giver and the test taker. It is transmitted in a Code (the test format), through a Contact (the actual administration of the test), about a Subject (the information given or received), and with an inevitable Message.

These components are easy enough to analyze; the catch is to remember Law IV, "nobody ever gets anything right." That is, the test giver and the test taker tend to have two profoundly different points of view. That the interpretation of any text can never be stabilized has, after all, kept us in work for these many years. Quite naturally, the test-giver's point of view is institutional and educational, while the test taker's is profoundly personal--maybe even paranoid. Consider, for example, the differences of interpretation that may result from a now common procedure in English departments, the placement test. Using the testing heuristic, let us look at such a test from these two points of view.

From the test-giver's point of view, *Context* is what matters. The information received from the student, revealing the student's level of competence, is the only reason for bothering with placement tests. Thus, the central debate in testing circles is over which kind of test, essay or objective, gives the most reliable and valid information. Not that test-givers seldom care *what* students say in placement essays, only how well or badly they say it. This kind of writing is not seen as communication, but as information. Therefore, the test format (Code) is determined according to how easily or cheaply that information can be obtained. (Mind if I borrow your test?) The ideal format, of course, is inexpensive, trouble-free, and easy to score. Test-givers commonly pay little attention to *Contact*, that is, the pens, paper, rooms, and proctors needed to make the test happen. Whatever rooms are available, preferably far from the department, and whatever proctor can be summoned, preferably not us, will do. The time for administering the test--days and hours--is often a problem, but test givers with political influence usually manage to borrow time from an orientation program rather than from scheduled classes.

The interaction of Context, Contact, and Code yield the Message sent by a particular test. But when it comes to Message, writer and reader or test-giver and test-taker commonly disagree. Certainly, test-givers seldom think carefully or deeply enough about the Message that they ought to send or that a particular combination of Context, Contact, Code will in fact send. A failure of self-consciousness is all too common, and test-givers often assume with relish that students are hearing smug threats, "Now we've got you. You can't fool us anymore. Off to the basics for re-education."

But the students are all Jamesian characters; their points of view are forever personal. For them, the Context of a placement essay is not the level of their writing skills, but the subject matter which the topic demands. They must invent reasonable responses, on the spot, to whatever topic or topics stare up at them. To

be given impossible, unsuitable, or dumb topics naturally confirms their worst suspicions about English teachers. Of course, one person's dumb topic might be another's special interest; but one group's current interests may not be another's. One of our topics which began, "Your high school guidance counselor..." incensed older students. The test-takers in almost any testing situation are not a homogeneous audience of eighteen-year-old middle class Americans; age-bound or culture-bound topics hardly allow a fair chance to all. Test-takers tend to view Context as content--not as information--and thus, they frequently assume that a low score means the grader disagreed with their opinions, even though the grader probably didn't even notice them.

The testing situation, Contact, is much more important to test-takers than test-givers assume. Most of us remember vividly the rooms we sat in to take important exams, and the distractions we had to endure. Hot, overcrowded rooms, rude proctors who won't stop talking, and seats that squeak all affect test-takers, though test-givers tend to ignore them. The test's format, however, is surely the most important element in the Message that students receive from a test. The format of a test used to place students in writing courses actually provides a constitutive definition of writing itself. Tests that require students to fill in bubbles on computer-scored answer forms assert that writing is "bubbling." Tests that ask true/false or multiple choice questions define writing as a matter of right or wrong decisions, of knowing rules and spotting errors. Essay questions about such old chestnuts as the value of an education remind students that any collection of clichés will do so long as it is an orderly and carefully punctuated collection.

The Context, the Contact, and the Code then of any placement test do indeed add up to the test's Message, a message about what writing is, what our philosophy of writing instruction is, what our definition of writing competence is, as well as how we value writing and how we respond to it. Thus, we had better be careful. Furthermore, we reveal our response to writing by how we score tests and by how rigidly we maintain the validity of these scores. Second chances and appeal procedures send the message that a writer's skill can vary according to the task and according to the day; they also send the message that the test-givers and the test-scorers are human.

By now it should be clear that as far as I am concerned, the Message a test sends is vastly more important than any information we gather, and that therefore, the debate over whether objective tests or essay tests gather more accurate information is useless. Objective tests send such bad messages that it hardly matters what placement information we get from them. The information we get from essay tests is, as we all know, very crude and very messy and often unreliable. Few of us are ready to defend our graders' decisions in a court case. But the messages they send are much closer to our goals as writing teachers. Moreover, these messages are explicit, and they reverberate.

A second set of receivers is listening quite carefully to the message we send: the high school teachers. Students do go back and do complain and praise and blame and question. Here is a tremendous force for change--in teaching methods as well as in curriculum. As more students carry the message back, more writing is taught and more writing courses are offered. A test that sends the right message, then, can provide high school teachers with a political lever in their own institutions and can also provide a much-needed channel for communication between high school and

college English teachers. Students and teachers both assert the final Law of Testing: The message matters more than the information gathered. (And that is why we never test what we think we are testing.)

Thus, a complex set of factors is involved in the design and administration of any test. The best we can do is anticipate as many problems as possible and imagine as many of the messages as possible. The urge to test is likely to be around for a while, so testing should be seen for what it is. It is not the solution for making the reality equal the idea; it is rather another shadow, another distorting lens falling between the idea and the reality, one that should be used with great circumspection, lest our best energies only serve to deepen the shadows.

## **A training program for teaching assistants in freshman English**

*Maureen Potts and David Schwalm*

A recent survey by Joseph Gibaldi and James Mirolo shows universities across the country finally attending to the training and use of teaching assistants. In the summer of 1980, as part of this national trend, the English Department at The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) redesigned its TA program to make it more responsive to the needs of graduate students teaching lower division university courses--specifically freshman English. The new program initially had two basic components: required coursework in rhetoric and classroom experience under the close supervision of a faculty mentor. A third component has subsequently emerged--a support system for faculty mentors, on whose skill and commitment the success of the program depends. Our program, as it has evolved, successfully provides graduate teaching assistants with the training and experience to make them effective teachers of writing. At the same time our program ensures a quality education for our freshmen students through the increasing use of full-time faculty as graduate student mentors. More important, our program serves as a model to WPAs contemplating their own M.A. programs in the teaching of writing.

### **I. Supervised teaching**

One of the fundamental principles we have discovered from our research and experience with TAs is that although they must be allowed to teach to gain vital experience in the classroom they also must be closely supervised as they learn to teach, at least in the beginning. To implement this principle, we have established a supervised teaching component in our program which involves a close working relationship between a full-time faculty mentor and two TAs. The mentor, assigned to work with two TAs, supervises a cluster of three composition classes, distributed as illustrated in the following paradigm:

Basic Writing section 1 MWF 9-10 Faculty Mentor  
Basic Writing section 2 MWF 10-11 TA 1  
Basic Writing section 3 MWF 10-11 TA 2

Both TAs must attend every meeting of the mentor's class to observe an experienced teacher at work. The TAs must be active observers, listening carefully and observing both content and teaching methodology. Some mentors have their TAs keep journals of their observations, at least for the first semester. In addition, the TAs help out in writing workshops, editing sessions, or any other classroom activity with small group or individualized instruction. During the following hour, TAs meet their own sections of the same course. The faculty mentor attends these classes, alternating between them, observing the TAs and also helping out during in-class writing activities. Usually, the TAs teach the same lesson as did the faculty mentor, but some teams prefer to build a one-day lag into their syllabus to give the

TAs time to assimilate what they have observed and learned. This assignment--teaching one section and supervising the TAs in two sections--comprises the equivalent of six hours in the faculty mentor's required load of twelve hours.

As part of the program, mentors spend time with their TAs planning their classes. The group meets at the beginning of the semester to discuss the general workings of the course and to plan a general syllabus. Then, mentors meet with their TAs once a week, specifically to plan classes in detail for the following week, but also to have continuing discussions on the strengths and weaknesses of the TAs' classroom performance.

Included in the supervisory tasks for the mentor is a review of the TAs' grading several times each semester. This activity is essential, not only because grading and marking are important aspects of teaching writing, but also because the mentor is the teacher of record for all three sections of the course and ultimately accountable for all grades. The mentor must be sufficiently familiar with the writing of the TAs' students to be aware of their weaknesses and to ensure that the TAs address them. Moreover, if a TA becomes ill or drops out in the course of the semester, the mentor takes over the class.

In the second and subsequent semesters, the supervision becomes somewhat looser. The TA now teaches two sections of the course, only one of which the mentor visits. Furthermore, the TA is generally not required to visit the mentor's classes as frequently, although the mentors can decide how much freedom or supervision their TAs should have. The group still meets for planning sessions every week and holds periodic grading sessions. In the second year, the TAs have the option to switch to another course in our composition sequence (3001-Improving Reading and Writing, 3110-Basic Writing, 3111-General Expository Writing), thus enabling themselves to gain a wide range of experience. If the TAs do switch to a new course, however, they must be ready to work with a new mentor and under the tightly controlled system encountered the first semester.

The mentor is responsible not only for the daily conduct of the classes assigned to the team, but also for an on-going critique and evaluation of each TA's performance. At the end of each semester, mentors submit to the Director of TAs detailed written evaluations of their TAs, addressing such matters as their classroom performance, contributions to course planning, conscientiousness, and growth as teachers. These written evaluations become part of the TAs' permanent record and the basis on which the selection committee makes reappointments and writes recommendations.

There are several advantages to this arrangement. The TAs have their own classes and thus gain experience in every aspect of teaching, yet they are supervised closely enough that the interests of the students are protected. Their students adjust to the mentor's presence with remarkable ease and readily take advantage of the extra help at revision and editing sessions. The relationship between mentor and TA is not one of policing, but of mutual support and sharing. The group fuses as a team rather quickly, learning from each other and planning more creatively together than they might have done separately.

The faculty mentor also has much to gain from this arrangement. The actual number of hours the mentors spend in the freshman classroom weekly is the same as if they were teaching two sections of freshman composition except during half of these hours they are observing and helping, not teaching. Furthermore, the

grading load is lessened as the TAs generally grade their own papers, albeit with periodic checking by the mentor. Finally, faculty mentors report that the arrangement forces them to plan more meticulously and with greater thought than they would have on their own. Teaching two novices how to teach composition has often forced them to examine their own assumptions and methodologies.

## II. Coursework

Not only do the mentors support the TAs' work in the classroom with immediate and constant supervision, but also coursework in both rhetorical theory and composition teaching methods aids them. During their first semester of employment, all TAs take a graduate seminar in rhetorical theory, which, for most of our TAs, is largely unexplored territory. We follow the advice of Bridges and Van De Weghe, who caution us to incorporate theory into our pedagogy courses

...because those teachers want as much help as they can get as quickly as they can get it, [and] the tendency to present the gimmick that works in a particular situation is strong. But rather than providing only the bag of tricks, we should be providing information from which teachers can knowledgeably fill and then replenish their own bags. Rather than simply presenting successful strategies for teaching writing, we should be focusing teachers on the necessity of practice supported by theory and research.'

In this seminar, our TAs study the products and processes of writing through close analysis of texts and through reading the classical rhetorics of Aristotle and Cicero, the modern rhetorical theories of Toulmin and Perelman, as well as the more pedagogical theories of Kinneavy, D'Angelo, Hirsch, and Corbett. This course is an important feature of our program, providing the necessary theoretical basis for a TA's development as a resourceful, creative, and effective teacher of writing. As each TA assumes greater independence in course planning and classroom performance, the course in rhetorical theory takes on increasing significance.

Starting in the second semester of their employment and continuing through the third, TAs attend a weekly seminar in composition teaching methods taught by the Director of TAs. While the seminar explores general topics such as motivation, learning theory, classroom management, and teaching styles, the emphasis is on writing pedagogy--marking and evaluating papers, developing writing assignments, diagnosing writing problems, designing an integrated syllabus, and using a variety of teaching strategies. The seminar does not duplicate the work of the mentors. Rather, it allows TAs outside the context of immediate classroom needs to explore a variety of theory-based approaches to problems in teaching writing, thus increasing their knowledge of classroom techniques. At the end of the seminar, each TA must prepare a detailed syllabus for a writing course, complete with course objectives, daily lesson plans, assignments, and a rationale for the course design. We have found it useful to start this course in the TAs' second semester, after they have discovered first-hand the problems all teachers face and confronted in particular the problems all writing teachers encounter.

- Mentor attends TA's classes occasionally. -
- Mentor and TA hold weekly planning session.

Coursework:

May continue to attend Seminar in Teaching Composition Methods.

### III. Administration and selection

The program is administered by a committee of the Director of TAs, the Director of Freshman Composition, the Director of Graduate Studies, the Director of Creative Writing, and the Department Chair. This committee as a whole oversees such matters as initial selection of TAs, on-going evaluation of the program, and evaluation of TA performance in the process of reappointment. It also serves as an appeals committee in the event of a termination. In addition, several members of the committee have individual responsibilities. The Director of Freshman Composition makes the course assignments, the Director of Graduate Studies oversees the academic progress of the TAs, and the Director of TAs serves as the main point of contact between the graduate teaching assistant and mentor and is directly responsible for the smooth running of the program. As their own teaching schedules permit, the Director of TAs and Director of Freshman Composition also periodically visit the classes of new TAs. The Director of Creative Writing is on the committee because over half of our TAs enroll in our graduate Creative Writing Option.

The committee meets every spring to review all applications for teaching assistantships, taking into account such matters as the applicant's GRE scores, undergraduate record, and letters of recommendation. Each applicant also submits a recent sample of non-fiction prose--a term paper, for example--as evidence of writing competence. We have learned from past experience that it is wiser to proceed with something less than a full complement of TAs than it is to select dubious candidates. Consequently, not all of the applicants are selected, even though they may qualify for admission to the graduate program. We generally do not hire applicants whose first language is not English unless their spoken and written English is exceptional. During a semester, the TA committee will occasionally recommend that a TA whose work is unsatisfactory be removed from the classroom and assigned other duties for the duration of his or her appointment. At the end of each academic year, the committee reviews the performance of TAs and recommends whether they should be reappointed for another two semesters.

### IV. Support for faculty mentors

Requiring TAs to take courses in rhetorical theory and composition teaching methods along with their classroom duties is now fairly common practice in TA training programs in English departments across the country. The unique feature of our program, however, is the particular supervisory relationship between the

#### Semester I

Supervised Teaching:

- TA teaches I section of Basic Writing, holds office hours, attends mentor's section regularly.
- Mentor attends TA's class regularly.
- Mentor and TA hold weekly planning sessions.

Coursework:

Seminar in Composition Teaching Methods

#### Semester 2

Supervised Teaching:

- TA teaches 2 sections of Basic Writing, holds office hours, attends mentor's section occasionally.
- Mentor attends TA's classes occasionally.
- Mentor and TA hold weekly planning session.

Coursework:

Seminar in Composition Teaching Methods I

#### Semester 3

Supervised Teaching:

- TA teaches I section of Expository Writing, holds office hours, attends mentor's section regularly.
- Mentor attends TA's class regularly.
- Mentor and TA hold weekly planning session.

Coursework:

Seminar in Composition Teaching Methods II

#### Semester 4

Supervised Teaching:

- TA teaches 2 sections of Expository Writing, holds office hours, attends mentor's section occasionally.

mentors and their TAs. The mentors are the key to the success of the whole program, for not only do they have primary responsibility for guiding the day-to-day performance of TAs, but they also oversee the TAs' integration of coursework with classroom experience. Predictably, the problems that have emerged in the two years this program has been in effect are usually traceable to breakdowns in the mentor-TA relationship.

We have generally been successful in selecting mentors who present models of effective teaching for their TAs. Occasionally, however, we have paired a TA with a mentor whose teaching style the TA cannot comfortably imitate or assimilate, and the lack of a congenial model has inhibited the TA's development. Such mismatches are likely to occur in the TA's initial assignment and, while difficult to avoid, are not so difficult to remedy. Sometimes the mentor, recognizing the problem, has undertaken to help his or her TA find a comfortable role in the classroom. In other cases, program administrators have, in subsequent semesters, made more congenial pairings, honoring when possible a TA's request to work with a mentor whose style he or she admires.

While nearly all of our mentors have provided good examples for their TAs to follow, a few have been less successful in providing timely, rigorous, and constructive criticism of the TA's classroom performance. Such criticism is, of course, crucial both to the TA's development as a teacher and to the interests of the TA's students. Although most new TAs, according to a questionnaire circulated among them this year, were satisfied with the guidance they received from their mentors, they also expressed a desire for somewhat more rigorous and regular critiques.

It is essential that mentors give their TAs room to grow and to become increasingly independent as teachers. Mentors have primary responsibility for the design and daily conduct of the course, and new TAs generally do not contribute much to either, being quite grateful to have a secure syllabus to follow and a model to imitate. But as the TA gains experience and knowledge about teaching composition, the mentor and the syllabus must become more flexible. Problems have occasionally arisen, for example, when the course design or teaching methods of the mentor did not coincide with approaches TAs were learning about in the pedagogy seminar or had discovered themselves through independent study. When mentors were flexible and open, the dialogue about composition pedagogy initiated in the seminar continued in the weekly planning sessions held by mentors and TAs. These mentors encouraged their TAs to participate increasingly in overall course design and in planning classroom strategies for achieving course objectives and gave them freedom to experiment with some of the methods acquired in the seminar, even if the mentor chose not to use them. Inflexible mentors confused and unsettled their TAs, making them feel as if they were caught between two masters.

Such conflicts can usually be traced to the mentor's lack of awareness of current research in composition theory and pedagogy. Ideally, all of our mentors should be current in the field, but in a less than perfect world, we have often had to choose two or three mentors who have not kept abreast of the profession. Some of these, apprehensive about new approaches, responded by holding fast to some traditional teaching methods research has shown to be relatively ineffective. Such mentors, unfortunately, impede their TAs' growth and frustrate the objectives of the TA program. Fortunately, they have been few. However, when mentors who are not up-to-date in composition theory and methods have other qualities a mentor must

have along with a willingness to learn and grow with their TAs, our program has often achieved its objectives most successfully. Indeed, involvement in the writing program as a mentor has awakened in some of our colleagues excitement about teaching writing and about recent developments in discourse theory, excitement which they have communicated to their TAs.

The problems we have experienced have made us realize that we must pay more attention than we have in the past to the selection and subsequent support of faculty mentors. The mentor, we have come to realize, is crucial to the effectiveness of the program. But the mentor's role is a complex and difficult one. All of our mentors are experienced teachers, but many of them are as new at mentoring as the TAs are at teaching. In the next academic year, we will take steps to ensure that mentors have a clear understanding of their responsibilities and that they have the support they need from each other and from program administrators to fulfill those responsibilities effectively.

We felt the first step was to ensure that those faculty who volunteer for the role do so for the right reasons. This past spring, we circulated among them a document candidly explaining the responsibilities and benefits of the position so that volunteers would have a clear idea of what they were expected to put into the program and what they could expect to get out of it. This document quickly squelched a rumor that being a mentor was an easy way to pick up a three-hour reduction in teaching load, thus discouraging volunteers whose interests in the program went no further than a desire to lighten their course loads.

We also feel that program administrators should become more actively involved in supporting mentors and monitoring their relationships with TAs to facilitate more open communication among all participants in the program. Before the fall semester begins, administrators will hold separate orientation sessions for mentors and TAs in which their responsibilities will be detailed, the importance and complexity of their relationship explained, and the problems that have emerged in the past discussed. TAs will then be introduced to their mentors at a formal meeting, followed by a considerably less formal social function, the first of several. During each semester, administrators and mentors will meet monthly to exchange ideas about supervising TAs, to share problems, and to search for solutions. The Director of TAs will meet with TAs individually once a month outside the methods seminar to see how they are progressing and to encourage them to report any difficulties they are having. These regular meetings will encourage both mentors and TAs to bring problems promptly to the attention of administrators at any time. Finally, in the coming year, mentors will be invited to attend the pedagogy seminar so that they may see first-hand what their TAs learn in the course and to learn new approaches to teaching writing. All of the mentors, as experienced teachers or as composition specialists, have something to contribute to the seminar, thus enhancing everyone's learning experience.

Admittedly, many of the particular aspects of our program have been tailored to the needs of our own campus and our own student body. We feel, however, that the program could be adopted by other English departments with minor modifications. A department similar to ours (M.A. granting in an institution with what amounts to an undergraduate open admissions policy) could adopt this program wholesale. A department larger than ours and one which grants a Ph.D. would have to make some changes. We would suggest first year TAs be assigned

faculty mentors and second year TAs be supervised by senior TAs. In their third and fourth years, the TAs could be freed from direct supervision in their own classes and could monitor the work of second year TAs. We see no reason why other departments in the humanities could not also adopt our program with some refinements.

Basic to our entire program is the assumption that TAs should never be assigned to teach a lower division class armed solely with course guidelines and a textbook. Such an arrangement does an injustice both to the TAs and to their students. We estimate that our program costs us approximately twice as much as one in which TAs teach without supporting supervision or coursework; the benefits, however, fully justify the costs that accrue to all concerned- freshman students, TAs, faculty mentors, and our profession as a whole. The graduate students who go through our TA program leave us as fully competent writing teachers, secure in the knowledge they have been exposed to the latest in theory and practice.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Teaching Apprentice Program in Language and Literature*, ed. Joseph Gibaldi and James V. Mirollo (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1981).

<sup>2</sup>Charles W. Bridges and Richard Van De Weghe, "Teachers, Knowledge, and Power: Setting an Informed and Informing Context for a Writing Project." *Arizona English Bulletin*, 22 (1980), 61.

## Notes on contributors

**John C. Bean** is an associate professor of English and Director of Writing at Montana State University. He has been active in writing-across-the-curriculum, having written grants to establish cross-disciplinary writing programs at the College of Great Falls (Lilly Endowment, 1977-80) and Montana State (Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education, 1981-83). He has conducted numerous workshops on writing-across-the-curriculum and has published articles on that and other composition topics. He has also published essays on Spenser and Shakespeare in *Modern Language Quarterly*, *Studies in English Literature*, and elsewhere. He and John D. Ramage are currently finishing a textbook, *Form and Surprise in Composition: Foundations for Writing and Thinking Across the Curriculum*, under contract with Macmillan Press.

**Carolyn Matalene** was the former Director of Freshman English from 1978-82 at the University of South Carolina, where she is a faculty advisor for graduate students enrolled in the composition and rhetoric Ph.D. specialization. She has taught as an exchange professor at Shanxi University in China, where she became interested in contrastive rhetoric. Professor Matalene has published articles in *College English*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, *International Journal of Women's Studies*, and in the Newsletter of The National Testing Network in Writing.

**Maureen A. Potts** is an assistant professor of English and Director of Composition at the University of Texas at El Paso. Professor Potts has published numerous reviews in *World Literature Written in English* (Division 33 of MLA). She currently has several articles in press including essays on Geraldine Fitzgerald and Judy Holliday in *Notable Women in the American Theatre: A Biographical Dictionary*. She is the co-author with Willard Gingerich of "The Performance of Hispanic Students at the University of Texas at El Paso in Basic Writing Courses," which will appear in a book of readings entitled, *The Role of the Nonstandard Dialect in Spanish-English Bilingual Education*.

**John D. Ramage** is an associate professor of English at Montana State University and one of the leaders of their writing-across-the-curriculum project funded by FIPSE. His research interests include the relationship between deconstructionist literary criticism and new directions in writing theory. He has published in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *Critique*, and elsewhere. In 1981 he attended Ann Berthoff's NEH Summer Seminar on Philosophy and Composition. He is also interested in film making, and has participated in film projects which have won national awards for historical biography. He and John Bean are collaborating on a textbook forthcoming from Macmillan.

**David E. Schwalm** is an assistant professor of English at the University of Texas at El Paso, where he teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in composition, teaching methods, rhetorical theory, and 18th-century British literature. He also serves as Coordinator of TAs and Director of the MA program in Professional Writing and Rhetoric. Professor Schwalm has published articles on topics in rhetoric, composition, and biography. Currently, he is in the process of establishing the West Texas Writing Project and is writing articles on the degree of difficulty of writing assignments and on the influences of oral speech on the acquisition of the written language.

**John Trimbur** is assistant professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Rhode Island College. He is a Fellow of the Brooklyn College Institute in Training Peer Tutors, was recently appointed to the WPA Board of Consultant/Evaluators, and chairs the NCTE Committee on the Underemployment of College Teachers of English. He is contributing an article on collaborative learning to the forthcoming *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition*, edited by Ben W. McClelland and Timothy Donovan, and is Co-Director of a symposium on "Collaborative Learning and the Reinterpretation of Knowledge," to be held at Yale University in May 1984. He received a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo and has published articles and reviews on John Gardner, Charles Olson, and Jack Spicer.

## Announcements

### *1984 ADE Seminars*

The Association of Departments of English, which is part of the Modern Language Association, was established in 1963 to serve the needs of those who administer writing programs and those who chair departments of English or divisions of humanities and communications in two- and four-year colleges and universities. Each summer, ADE holds regional seminars that bring together small numbers of department and program administrators to exchange ideas on their academic and professional concerns.

The 1984 Midwestern ADE seminar will be hosted by Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, 21-24 June, under the direction of Robert T. Eberwein and Donald E. Morse. Accommodations will be available to a limited number of participants in Meadowbrook Hall, the mansion donated to Oakland University by the heirs of Mabel Dodge Wilson. Among the topics scheduled for discussion are coherence in literary study, creative budgeting, and microcomputers in the classroom.

Brigham Young University, Utah State University, and the University of Utah will jointly host the Western Seminar, 12-15 July, under the direction of John B. Harris, Kenneth B. Hunsaker, and Michael Rudick. The seminar will be held at the Prospector Square Hotel, Park City, Utah. Topics scheduled for discussion include evaluating writing programs, technical writing, academic freedom and new issues in the teaching of literature.

From July 19-22, Yale University will host the Eastern seminar, under the direction of Thomas R. Whitaker. This seminar, which will be held on the old campus in New Haven, Connecticut, will feature discussions of the aims and methods of literary study in general education and advanced courses, curricular strategies in the two-year college, and collaborative programs with the schools. The seminars will also include special sessions for new chairs and discussions of ADE's draft checklist for department evaluation. Local excursions and private film screenings will be included on the seminar program.

For additional information on the seminars and registration materials, please write to Carl R. Lovitt, Assistant Director, ADE, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011.

### *WPA Summer Workshop*

The Council of Writing Program Administrators and the University of California, San Diego, Third College Composition Program announce the 3rd annual summer

workshop on the administration of writing programs. The 1984 workshop will be held in La Jolla, California, from August 18-26 under the direction of Maxine Hairston, University of Texas, Austin. For additional information and registration applications write to Harvey Wiener, WPA Summer Workshop, Department of English, CUNY LaGuardia, Long Island City, NY 11101.

## Calls for Papers

### *Exercise Exchange*

*Exercise Exchange* is a bi-annual journal designed to foster an exchange of practical, classroom-tested ideas for teaching English at the secondary and college levels. The journal seeks articles from classroom teachers on any aspect of teaching English--language, media, writing, literature, speech. Articles should be concise but fully developed explanations of specific teaching strategies and activities. The magazine particularly welcomes manuscripts from teachers who have not previously published. Guidelines for manuscript preparation are available on request, as is editorial assistance. Subscription is \$3 for one year or \$5 for two years to individuals. Institutional rates are slightly higher. Direct all inquiries, manuscripts and subscriptions to *Exercise Exchange*, Department of English, Murray State University, Murray, Kentucky 42071.

### *Temple University Working Papers in Composition*

The *Writing Program at Temple University* solicits previously unpublished manuscripts for inclusion in *Temple University Working Papers in Composition*. Our emphasis is on work in progress, new ideas that are thought-provoking, critical, even speculative. Papers may be theoretical or applied and may treat from any perspective writing at the college level. Upon acceptance, titles will be included among a list distributed periodically to the academic community. Write F. J. Sullivan, Writing Program, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA 19122, for details.

### *The Association of Teachers of Technical Writing*

The *Association of Teachers of Technical Writing* is arranging two sessions on technical writing for the 1984 MLA Convention. The topics for these sessions, listed below, focus on research issues and pedagogical concerns. Anyone interested in participating should submit a substantive two-page proposal by February 10, 1984, to Carol S. Lipson, English Department, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York 13210.

**Topic 1: What Do We Do When We Teach Technical Writing?** Proposals will be considered on issues involving the proper content and subject matter of technical writing courses. Theoretical, pragmatic, or other justification should undergird any discussion of goals, course designs, methods, etc.

**Topic 2: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Technical Writing Research.** Proposals are invited applying techniques and theories from disciplines such as the social sciences, linguistics, etc. Papers might point to fruitful or promising directions, consider problems and limitations, provide cautions, etc.

### *WPA Special Sessions at MLA and CCCC*

WPA plans to propose special sessions, entitled "The Changing Role of the Writing Program Administrator," at both the 1984 MLA Convention and the 1985 CCCC. Past or present administrators interested in proposing a paper (considering such aspects as research, curricular planning, and coordination with English and other departments) should send a 2-page abstract to Linda H. Peterson, 3813 Yale Station, New Haven, CT 06520. Deadlines: 30 March 1984 for MLA, 30 May 1984 for CCCC.

### *Rocky Mountain Writing Center Association*

Montana State University, nestled in the lovely Gallatin Valley, will host the second annual Rocky Mountain Writing Center Conference on June 16, 1984. Possible topic areas include computers in the writing center, writing across the curriculum, composition research, tutor training, tutor/student interaction, writing center activity in the public schools and the community. One page proposals or completed papers are welcome, preferably by April 1, 1984. The keynote speaker will be Frank O'Hare of Ohio State University. Author of *Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction* and *The Writer's Work: A Guide to Effective Composition*. Professor O'Hare directs Ohio State's writing program, one of the largest and most comprehensive in the nation. Send proposals and requests for more information to Mark L. Waldo, Department of English, Montana State University, Bozeman, Montana 59717.

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