

A training program for teaching assistants in freshman English

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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.

Semester 1

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.

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

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

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

²Charles 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.