

## Training Writing Teachers in a Small Program

David Foster

Like most small things, small writing programs don't get much notice. Big programs are generally seen as natural training grounds for graduate teachers of writing, since there are thousands of students for the pre- and post-tests, scores of classes available for experimental and control groups, and numbers pushing correlation figures well into the range of healthy significance. We generally assume that small programs have less interesting problems; when we notice them, it is to the extent that they replicate the strengths and weaknesses of larger programs.

Yet one major problem confronts faculty in any writing program, whatever its size: that of deciding how much freedom apprentice instructors should be given to plan, develop, teach and evaluate their own courses. Big programs tend toward centralization, while small programs may offer considerable latitude to participants and yet retain consistency. Yet the tension between freedom and constraint for apprentice teachers is present in all writing programs, though it can be particularly acute in large institutions. Michael Holzman writes about his discovery that even in the giant-sized program he administers, there was powerful resistance to his efforts to "control the quality of [the] teaching" (290). Many of his colleagues wanted "more latitude for the individual instructor, not less; less program-wide standardization of teaching techniques and goals, not more" (291). The dilemma he faced typifies the tension inherent in any writing program between instructors' desire for freedom and the program's need for structural consistency.

Structure, not size, is the crucial variable in weighing differences among writing programs. Holzman's compromise was to form clusters of "instructional groups" within the big program, to gain the individuality small-group participation allows. In another description of a large program's efforts to nurture teaching assistants, Maureen Potts and David Schwalm outline a "support system" featuring teaching assistants and a faculty mentor grouped in triads; the TAs' freedom increased gradually, accompanied by close supervision in planning and teaching. Both programs reflect an effort to approximate the values associated with small writing programs: personal freedom in planning and teach-

ing, mutual recognition of individual strengths and weaknesses, and the collegiality arising from close interaction of experienced and apprentice teachers.

I'd like to reverse the usual logic of our discipline: I'd like to argue that the ways in which a small program addresses the basic conflict between freedom and program centralization in training apprentice teachers can be relevant to all writing programs. The 4C's "Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing" asserts that English departments should "provide opportunities for the faculty to develop knowledge of theory and skill in the teaching of writing" (448). I'd like to suggest that the inherent advantages of small programs should be exploited even by much larger programs, because these values—freedom, individuality and collegiality—create for the apprentice teacher that "faculty" role which the Position Statement suggests as the basis for writing teachers' professional growth.

Our program is small, decentralized and flexible. The teaching fellows (there are five) organize their own syllabuses, guided only by a few departmental policies; they choose their own texts; and they devise their own assignments. Some might find this a dangerous arrangement. If there is no master syllabus how can inexperienced teachers, themselves still taking courses, develop effective plans for teaching writing? And if text adoptions are not orchestrated by experienced teachers, how can intelligent choices possibly be made? Can the benefits of giving inexperienced teachers freedom to make their own choices outweigh the costs?

The key to this question is the nature of the teaching fellows' role within the program. Our department's position is that with a clear set of goals for a freshman composition course, and a faculty willing to share its experience, a small group of apprentice teachers may be allowed wide freedom to plan, teach and evaluate the course. We believe that both students and apprentice teachers are best served by a structure emphasizing the teachers' freedom in all phases of the course.

The main purpose of our freshman writing course is to emphasize the writing process as it applies to a variety of purposes and audiences. The course policy, adhered to by regular faculty as well as teaching fellows, requires a certain total amount of writing and a range of expressive and expository writing tasks. Beyond these basic goals, there are no specific requirements as to the number or length of the course's writing tasks, the nature of classroom activities, the amount of reading, or other course elements. As they plan their syllabuses the fellows are guided and helped in several ways: by reference to the department's

"Policy Statement on English 1" printed helpfully on bright orange paper, by means of a planning workshop just before the beginning of the fall semester, and through continuous contact with the DFE. These measures are for guidance only, however, not for dictating methodology. The policy statement, for example, clarifies the basic requirements and then discusses some general goals for writing growth at the college level. The presemester workshop reviews a wide range of assignments and classroom strategies, both published and intradepartmental. After participating in this workshop the fellows complete a rough draft of their syllabuses, review them one by one during a group meeting of all fellows, then finalize them in conference with the DFE. All fellows will have taken—or will take in their first semester—the graduate course in teaching writing required for all doctoral candidates. Aside from a required minimum number of pages of writing and a general movement from expressive and personal to expository writing, the fellows are free to devise their own syllabus components, to pace writing and revisions as they judge best, and to formulate grading and attendance policies that they are comfortable with.

In their small universe three interacting forces govern the fellows' daily experience: contact with the DFE and with other regular faculty, their influence upon each other, and their contacts with students. Such methods are common enough in writing programs staffed by graduate students. But one characteristic of our small program is not likely to be found in bigger programs: an intimacy of relationship that confers collegial status upon the teaching fellows. For instance, in large programs the entire staff cannot convene around a round table; but if he convenes them in small groups, the DFE will not be able to make all meetings, obliging some groups to become self-sustaining. Even for graduate students, this is a difficult goal to maintain. Michael Holzman confesses that the study groups into which he had divided the instructors in his large program could not sustain themselves through the school year (291). In our small program the DFE convenes each meeting, with interested faculty often attending, and one of the fellows or faculty leading a discussion of a current topic in writing pedagogy. Faculty and fellows join the discussion as equals, aware that the situation derives its authenticity from the mutual interest of all participants. The fact that the fellows are required to attend represents the force of the system; the ambience of collegiality in the meetings encourages the fellows' sense of responsibility to the program and to themselves. There are disadvantages to this collegial approach. For one thing, the fellows' freedom to try strategies which seduce them sometimes leads to ineffective teaching. If the fellows were handed a carefully-worked-out syllabus, including proven assignments and classroom strategies developed by experi-

enced teachers, their students might be spared the blunders and excesses of apprentice teachers. For example, a teaching fellow whose late-paper policy is dictated by the cumulative wisdom of the department rather than by her own inexperienced judgment might avoid the situation of the fellow who changed her own policy halfway through the semester, thereby enraging several students who pursued her through the university appeals process. Such traumas will inevitably occur incidental to the teaching fellows' freedom to err.

Individual misjudgments are not the only disadvantage of a latitudinarian program. Because each fellow prepares her own syllabus, chooses her own text, and devises her assignments, students in different sections often perceive their experiences to have been quite different. One teaching fellow may believe that red-pen editing is the best way to respond to student writing, while another may follow the minimal-marking principle. Such differences draw exclamations of disbelief from the students exchanging opinions about their comp teachers: "Wow, she didn't mark all your spelling errors? My teacher zapped every mistake I made!" or, "You got a B on that paper? If I had turned that in with so many typos my teacher would've flunked it!" Such variability inevitably produces grist for student grievance-mills.

Faculty in other departments may also be sceptical of such latitude. When they discover students purportedly enrolled in the same course using different texts, assignments, and classroom methods, they are tempted to question the coherence of the course. In Biology 1 or Introductory US History there may be many different discussion sections and even different lecture sections, but chances are that the same schedules and texts will be used in all of them. How else, faculty in these disciplines would ask, can you give students' experience continuity except by binding together lectures, discussions and tests with the same schedules and texts? And faculty attitudes are crucial to the long-term impact of freshman composition: teachers in other disciplines will reinforce its lessons only if they perceive them to have been taught fully and coherently. But as Holzman points out, faculty attitudes can be changed through writing across-the-curriculum cooperation, which may be in the form of shared teaching, shared workshops, or simply ongoing discussions of common goals and methods concerning writing. But freedom for inexperienced teachers brings an inherent risk against which there is no ready protection.

The faculty of the writing program must decide whether the benefits of such freedom outweigh its cost. I think they do. For such is the eagerness of most apprentice teachers to learn from their experience, that not only in the long run will their freedom give them room for growth, but even in the short run—from one semester to the next—they

will seldom make the same mistake again, and so will improve from semester to semester with an alacrity that experienced teachers often cannot match. This eagerness stems from their being fully vested as teachers in the program. Participating in discussions about text choices familiarizes them with the cloned and conservative ways of textbooks. Constructing their own syllabuses after readings and discussions allows them a creator's freedom to inhabit their creation and know it from the inside. Deciding their own policy for responding to and evaluating student writing enables them to feel directly the impact of their decisions' successes and failures. Adjudicating their own absence and late-paper policy forces them to feel the power of student pressure directly, and to devise ways of dealing with it, rather than retreating behind the fence of departmental policy.

But their choices must be informed by the support systems of the program, and the responsibility must be reinforced by the systematic attention of the DFE and, again, cooperating faculty. How are these conditions to be met? In a small program close and continuous interaction occurs naturally, yet this interaction must be carefully organized if it is to be productive. Big programs cannot make themselves small, but all writing programs with an apprentice teacher component can capture something of the small-program ethos, by systematizing the freedoms granted to learning teachers. Here are some initiatives that can generate such relationships:

- *Allow apprentice teachers as much freedom in course planning as possible, especially including choosing texts and developing syllabuses. If texts must be centrally selected, bring the apprentice teachers into the selection process as fully as possible by appointing them to serve on selection committees and asking them to evaluate and report on texts. If a master syllabus must be constructed, make them part of the planning and allow as much freedom for devising local strategies as possible. If weekly assignments and deadlines must be pre-established, allow the teaching fellows to form their own daily plans; permit them to experiment with different kinds of classroom interaction, different ways of responding to student writing, different sequences of assignments, different levels of reading-writing combinations. Program administrators may want to insist that every syllabus has some mix of classroom and one-on-one contact, but they should allow fellows to schedule this mix as they see fit. Some institutions require all officially scheduled time to be in the form of classroom contact, but this kind of inflexibility will prevent apprentice teachers from experiencing the impact of different settings upon their teaching and their students' learning.*

- *Establish working groups of apprentice teachers (no more than half a dozen) to meet regularly with fulltime faculty, not just for routine staffing matters, but for discussion of important current issues in writing pedagogy. These issues need not follow any particular sequence; indeed, group members should be encouraged to read current journals for issues of interest. These groups should be guided by at least one and preferably more experienced writing teachers from the regular faculty, particularly if there are too many groups for the DFE to be fully involved in. Each member of the group (including faculty members) should have responsibility for planning a session, and regular attendance should be regarded as a commitment. Creating commitment is not easy. For the graduate teachers academic credit for the semester's meetings is one way of doing it, justified by a research paper resulting from the required presentation. But the strongest force for group integrity is the bond that will form among group members, particularly when the apprentice members begin to share in the excitement of discussing major issues affecting their daily work. Attending staff meetings for routine discussions of policy and procedure is a grim enough prospect to discourage even the most eager apprentice teacher; but a working group in which each participant's contribution adds to the impact of the meeting will offer strong motivation.*
- *Establish a mentor system wherein each apprentice teacher meets with, visits and is visited by, and exchanges batches of student writing with an experienced writing teacher other than the DFE. The mentor relationship described by Potts and Schwalm is an excellent model of this aspect of apprentice-master collegiality. Ask both members of the mentor relationship for a summary of activity and insight at semester's end. Experience in diversity cannot be gained nearly as well from a course taught by one teacher or from the omnipresent DFE; a series of mentor relationships offers an apprentice education in its traditional sense.*
- *Find small ways to help apprentice teachers see themselves as part of a community of professionals. Appoint them to committees, particularly committees responsible for overseeing the composition program and the graduate program; encourage them to attend department meetings; put them on the published departmental roster with regular faculty; get them into the institutional phone book under the faculty heading; give them nameplates for their offices and building keys for access to mailroom and offices; allow them faculty library and copying privileges insofar as the departmental budget can tolerate it; introduce them to regular faculty in hallways and lounges, eat lunch with them, invite them to faculty*

parties. Gratuitous or trivial as these minutiae appear, they count, because they add vital specificity to the professionalization of apprentice teachers in the composition program.

## Works Cited

- Holzman, Michael. "Articulating Composition," *College English*, 45, 3 (March 1983), 288-95.
- "Position Statement on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing," CCC Task Force on the Preparation of Teachers of Writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 33, 4 (December 1982), 446-9.
- Potts, Maureen and David Schwalm. "A training program for teaching assistants in Freshman English," *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 7, 1-2 (Fall/Winter 1983), 47-54.

