

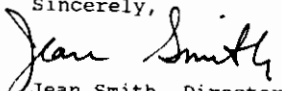
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## The Uses of a Handbook for Teachers

John T. Gage

Perhaps one of the reasons that directors of large writing programs feel that nobody understands them is because a writing program is a multifarious enterprise and only the director sees it as a whole. Students, teachers, colleagues, and other administrators intersect with the program given their own interests in it, and all see it from a different angle. The director of such a show can talk about a given aspect of the program according to the needs of a given constituency—explaining requirements to students, training graduate students to become teachers, defending composition's relevance to colleagues, arguing class-size with administrators—but when it comes to putting it all together . . . well, there's no one to talk to. It isn't that no one cares. But who listens beyond a certain point?

The composition program at the University of Oregon, like many others, has grown rapidly. In the seven years during which I have been its director, the number of teachers has grown from around fifty to over 120, and the number of students taught is up to six thousand a year. Along with that growth has come the addition of services for students and teachers, greater campus visibility (and notoriety), a higher degree of turn-over among the teachers, increased efforts to involve the staff in professional activities, a greater number of connections to other campus programs, and exponential growth in logistical minutiae. In short: more and more headaches for the director, brought on by the need to communicate to more and more people about more and more things.

Among the frustrations of running such a program—or sometimes running from it—has been the sense that I am the only one who knows what all the pieces to the puzzle look like and how they fit together. Some of those pieces are given to graduate students in their teaching seminar, some of them are given out as policy memos related to assorted issues (grade reports, plagiarism, telephones, textbook lists, evaluations, and on and on . . .), some of them are said in open department meetings, some are said to students or administrators in response to problems. But only in the clutter of my head and office do the parts seem in any way related. Or so it seems. It was this frustration that finally moved me to do something very simple and obvious, something that I had always known I should do but that I never quite found the time for: I decided to produce a handbook.

Of course, a handbook for teachers does not have as its primary objective relieving the director of the lonesome sense that no one under-

stands his or her program. But when the lines of communication finally choked—when memos, meetings, seminars, conferences, and chats in the hall no longer sufficed to inform everyone who needed informing, especially the teachers—I realized it was time to write it all down. My frustration was merely a catalyst for doing something that the teachers needed anyway, a single source of information about their job.

It started out as a simple plan. In order to enable teachers to have convenient access to information about all the policies, procedures, and resources that apply to them, I would gather all those memos together, add a word or two about the program, bind it all together, and distribute it to teachers at the beginning of the year. But like everything else around here, that simple plan grew into a complex project. I'm glad it did.

In order to explain what happened next, I have to say something about how I view the job of directing a writing program. It seems to me that if teachers are asked to create classroom situations in which their students will feel challenged and free to commit ideas to writing, then those teachers also need to feel challenged and free by virtue of their situation to declare and develop their own ideas about teaching. If those teachers are asked to make their classrooms into a community of inquiring minds, then they should themselves be part of such a community. And if they are expected to teach students that discourse aims at reasoned consensus (that having ideas creates the responsibility to substantiate those ideas rationally when confronting diversity of opinion), then those teachers too must be given a sense of ownership of their teaching as well as a sense of the need to substantiate their ideas about teaching in rational discourse with each other. So, I have seen my role, in this regard, as providing them with situations in which they can work out teaching strategies for themselves, with a sense of the need to cooperate, especially when they find that other teachers do not necessarily agree with their ideas. Hence, I have tried to create as many opportunities as possible for them to debate their ideas and to involve them as much as possible in the management of the program. These opportunities range from required training experiences to voluntary orientation workshops to weekly colloquia that are entirely the responsibility of the teachers to conduct. I want as much good talk to go on among the teachers as they try to facilitate in their classes among the students. Only by this means, I think, will their teaching be informed by a sense of communal expertise and be challenged to improve.

A teacher who wants to facilitate free and responsible discussion among students must provide them with issues for their response, expectations for their performance, and guidelines for their participation. As always, the difficulty lies in knowing how to set such limits without suppressing the kind of inquiry desired. We look for situations and

constraints that make inquiry possible but that keep that inquiry productive and challenging. Too many rules may inhibit open discussion. Too few may permit students to get away with lazy thinking and performance, thus leading to their failure to learn. It is a delicate balance. The same problem faces an administrator who wishes to challenge the teaching staff to generate and apply their own ideas, but who is also responsible for the shared expectations and guidelines without which the program would be chaos. Staff participation in creating the shared ends of the program is a desirable goal, while staff independence to carry them out is equally desirable.

One consequence of this approach to directing a staff of teachers is the realization that a handbook would have to answer their needs as well as mine. They would have to see it as a place where their own interests and views are represented too. In short, they must be given the opportunity to make it their own, and the director must live with the consequences of that risk. But the helpful guidelines and expectations must be there too.

Consequently, I broached the handbook scheme with teachers and invited any who were interested in helping with it to come to a meeting. Did I say "interested"? They were rapacious. The meeting turned into living evidence that one small spark can set off a brainstorm, provided it ignites the right brains. These hungry minds saw many possibilities that I had not seen. They were full of ideas. We left the meeting with a tentative table of contents as long as my arm.

The plan that eventually emerged called for a handbook that would not simply describe the policies and procedures of the program, but that would explain its philosophy, contain discussions of nearly every aspect of teaching writing, digest for teachers all the resources available to them on campus to help with their teaching or with student problems, offer sample syllabi, compile a bibliography on teaching writing, and answer questions most frequently asked by teachers about the program or their job. I provided copies of all the old memos. The group took it from there.

What eventually resulted was a 99-page book, carefully researched and well-written, that the teachers of this program could call their own (see the Table of Contents in the appendix). I collaborated by writing and editing several sections, but I was only one among many contributors to a group effort. The graduate student teachers and instructors who worked on the handbook took care of assigning various jobs to people with expertise—from writing about the needs of foreign students to describing the copying machines in the workroom, from discussing effective strategies for leading discussion to how to get a campus parking permit, from describing how course assignments are made and how the department chooses who will teach summer school to providing suggestions

about how to grade student writing. It all came together in a document that does what I wanted done—putting the details of the program together into a whole—but much more, as well. It resulted in a document that not only serves the teachers' immediate needs to know who, what, where, and when, but offers them good advice and stimulates them to further thinking about their work. The many ideas about teaching that eventually became part of the handbook were generated from the discourse of the teachers rather than imposed from on high.

The result is a handbook with many functions, and several uses that I had not foreseen.

We divided the handbook into three sections: policies, pedagogies, and resources. It opens with a pep talk from the department head and another one from me, along with a bit of history about the program. The section on policies describes our courses (how students get into and out of them, what they are expected to do and learn) and goes on to discuss how textbooks are chosen and how they are used. It describes the teaching staff, how they are assigned and what services they get from the department. It describes policies governing the teachers' work and how they are evaluated, the terms of their appointments and reappointments, and benefits. And it discusses the ethics of teaching and the obligations of teachers concerning racial and sexual harassment.

The section on pedagogy contains discussions intended to help teachers and to provide them with ideas for further discussion. It is divided into sections on writing and education, teaching critical reading, teaching argumentative writing, conducting effective class discussion, commenting on student writing, conducting student conferences, how to approach correctness and usage, grading, and international and minority students. Each of these sections, which are among the best theoretical and practical statements for writing teachers I have read, were written by individual teachers or small groups of teachers and were then revised and edited by others.

The section on resources describes the activities of the staff: seminars, workshops, colloquia, etc. It details how the office staff functions. It describes our writing lab and teacher effectiveness program, and campus support services, such as the offices for minority education, ESL, affirmative action, academic advising, counseling, and student conduct. It gives examples of several actual syllabi and a selected bibliography.

Like those compendious writing handbooks for students, it is a document that probably no one would want, or need, to read from cover to cover. But it is a reference to be consulted as the need arises. Of course, teachers still knock on my door with questions that are answered in the handbook. It is not compulsory reading as a whole. I don't give quizzes.

But it has generally helped to give teachers the confidence that they have a sense of the program as a whole, where they fit into it, what they are expected to do, how to do it, and how to get help. They had all this before we had a handbook, but they had to stand in line.

Because it is that kind of book, it has functions far beyond simply orienting teachers. I discovered as soon as it was available that the handbook is a splendid piece of public relations for our program. The English Department faculty had, of course, heard me give brief presentations about the program, but they still had no clear sense of what was going on or why. I distributed the handbook to my colleagues and received many comments of the "Now I see what you are up to" variety, and many compliments. I also saw to it that key administrators on campus got copies, and they too expressed increased understanding and respect for the program. As it happened, the handbook contained a spelling bloopster toward the beginning, and even this helped, in its way, by providing the guardians of correctness with a reason to continue to feel slightly superior when they called to commend us on our work.

The handbook even helped to snip the bud of a potential controversy, when a colleague declared in a faculty meeting that he was calling for a "complete investigation of the writing program" because, he averred (on slender evidence), "Gage forbids graduate students from teaching grammar." After sputtering and trying ineffectually to take the faculty back to square one on this complex issue (seen by some as a self-evident matter of right or wrong), I was able to suggest that anyone interested in what we really do about "grammar" should consult the thorough discussion of this matter in the new handbook and then let me know what they think about it. The result was at least a truce, if not a meeting of minds. Now when outside faculty call to complain about the way we do or don't do our job, I can offer, depending on the degree of their agitation, to discuss it with them after they've read the relevant section in the handbook. So, the handbook helps deflect cheap shots aimed at the program. Rumors are maybe a little less likely to be believed.

I also found that the handbook serves as a kind of calling card. When I travel to other college campuses, high schools, or conferences, I often encounter people who want to know more about Oregon's writing program. I don't leave behind handbooks indiscriminately, but I am able to offer them to people who express this kind of interest. The result has been good for our reputation, but more importantly I have been told that teachers have benefited from reading its statements on pedagogy and the handbook itself has been used as a model in other programs.

More immediately, I found that the handbook is a better "text" for prospective graduate student teachers in our composition teaching

seminar than any of those available on the market. In the first place, the discussions of teaching that it contains are adapted specifically to our program and, like most programs, we like to think of ourselves as having our own general approach, if not a prescribed method. While it may be significant to survey all possible approaches to composition for prospective teachers (which is what the textbooks tend to do), it is more important to me that our graduate students have a firm grasp of the theoretical and practical aims of *this* program and can talk about method in relation to them. Hence, the descriptions in our handbook have helped to focus the discussions in this course. And the prospective teachers feel more investment in the process because they know that their fellow graduate students, rather than some distant authority, wrote the book. They can argue about its ideas with a sense of contributing to a dialogue (one which goes on well beyond the seminar itself) and know that they can affect how those statements are expressed in future editions of the handbook. The handbook has increased the graduate students' sense of involvement in ideas about teaching.

It helps, too, to have a document that I can give to new instructors when they are hired, to review and consult well before the orientation meetings that precede Fall term. They feel less at sea. The orientation meetings themselves have become more productive as a result of participants having a shared body of information and advice going in. The handbook, because it contains extended discussions of pedagogy and isn't simply a compendium of rules, has put a keener edge on all of the talk about teaching we do. Parts of the handbook have been used as the "text" for our weekly "brown bag" colloquia. And I no longer have to spend time in staff meetings reading off lists of rules but can get on to more significant issues. The handbook has raised the level of our discourse.

In terms of "management," the handbook has also helped to make me and the teachers more answerable for our performance. It sets a tone that we all have to live up to. There is less ambiguity about what the expectations are. No one can say "I didn't get that memo" or "You never told me to do *that*." But somehow the rules and regulations that are part of the handbook, necessarily, make more sense and have more credibility in the context of advice, guidance, support, and encouragement. It's not strictly a rulebook, and that makes the rules necessary to manage a large program seem less like obstacles and more like assistance, as I intend them to be. I sometimes tell students who complain about taking required writing classes that "We can make you take the class, but we can't make you take the opportunity." The handbook helps me to think of the teachers I must direct as more responsible, too, for their own choices, since I know they have been given the information they need to succeed and the choice to use it or not is with them.

During the spring of the year in which the handbook was first used, I met with graduate students to talk about changes we might make in it for the following year. As we stormed our brains some more, we came up with yet another use for the handbook. The idea in fact resulted from the experience of some of our graduate students who had attended or presented papers at CCCC and decided that our teachers should be more active in presenting their ideas publicly. The idea was to add a section to the handbook in which essays about composition theory or practice written by members of our staff could be published, with new essays each year. A kind of in-house journal.

We plunged ahead. I issued a call for papers, and by the end of the year I had more submissions than we could fit into the handbook. So I asked graduate students and a faculty colleague to form an editorial board to select the best essays, and they came up with five superb choices. Consequently, in the second edition of the handbook, grown to 130 pages, a section called "Perspectives" contained these essays. We gave the handbook a new title, copyrighted its contents, and printed the essays with as professional an appearance as our office computers will allow, and the result is that five of our graduate students can now claim their contribution as a publication. And they can do it honestly: the submissions were reviewed by an editorial committee, revisions were asked for, and copies of the handbook were sent to a list of people around the country that we thought would be most interested in the essays. And here, in the program, these essays have both added to the usefulness of the handbook as a source of ideas for discussion, as well as increased the graduate students' sense that they are engaged in a professional enterprise.

That sense is especially important in a teaching program that employs graduate students who will be competing for jobs on the basis of their experience and expertise as composition teachers, whether or not they have chosen to specialize in that area. The effect of publishing these essays in our handbook has been to challenge and encourage other graduate students to write essays for the next edition and for professional journals. The handbook has been more effective in increasing their desire to be part of a wider professional scene than any number of pronouncements from me that they "ought" to be. That is because it has made our program into a tangible microcosm of that professional scene.

We don't know where the handbook will go from here. It has, I think, given teachers a sense that they can accomplish interesting things if they put their minds to it and that energy will no doubt lead to more projects. The handbook will probably grow too large, and a future revision will show the effects of Occam's razor. There will probably come a time when the handbook will be taken for granted by a new generation of teachers, and perhaps seen as a further imposition on their time. Something else

will then have to take over its indirect functions. But right now, while it is new and evolving, it has given the staff something to feel good about, both because they have been involved in its production and because they know it is well-produced. They read it knowing it addresses them as members of a genuine discourse community.

To me, it is a most useful thing to have around. My job is less frustrating. Many people, in and out of the program, have a better understanding of what we do. I don't deny that such an ambitious handbook is time-consuming and expensive to produce, but the good will, good talk, and good teaching that it is helping to generate is more than worth it. It helps make our program as a whole into the kind of "community of inquiring minds" we envision for our writing classes.

### Editor's Note

I would be interested in finding out from you, the *WPA* readers, what kind of handbook for teachers you are currently using at your institutions. If you are using such a handbook in your writing program, I would greatly appreciate your sending a copy to my attention at the *WPA* editorial address found on page 3 of this journal. If there is sufficient interest, a review of all the handbooks received may be included in an upcoming edition of the journal. Thanking you in advance for your help. CH

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Componere: University of Oregon

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