

Surveying New Teaching Assistants: Who They Are, What They Know, and What They Want to Know

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Writing Program Administrators and others who are responsible for teaching assistant training programs have been helped in recent years by the publication of work such as Bridges' 1986 collection *Training the New Teacher of College Composition* and Reagan's "Teaching TAs to Teach: Show, Don't Tell," which offer WPAs advice about merging theory with practice, designing teaching seminars, and involving teaching assistants in research projects to help them learn about teaching styles. In addition, books like Lindemann's excellent *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, while not addressed exclusively to new writing teachers, offer us texts for our programs which help TAs see the teaching of writing as a theory-driven practice with an intellectual history and integrity.

However, as useful as this work is, it is limited in one important way: because it can only address the generic new teacher, it cannot take into account the concerns or assumptions a particular group of new TAs bring to their work. We can, of course, assume that new teaching assistants will want to know as specifically as possible what their teaching and grading duties are, that they will need to familiarize themselves with the course content and text, that they will need information about holding office hours, the availability of supplies and materials, and how to get onto the payroll.

But some of the major concerns of new TAs can be unintentionally overlooked if we take too much for granted about what these new teachers need to know. And just as importantly, we sometimes forget that what new teaching assistants want to know and what we think they need to know are not the same. This difference can diminish the effectiveness of pre-term orientation programs since the unarticulated concerns of new teaching assistants may prevent them from absorbing the information we provide them. Frequently too shy or nervous or insecure to speak up in front of their peers and supervisors, beginning teaching assistants sometimes are so worried about a particular aspect of teaching that much of what they could learn during orientation simply passes them by.

To address this problem and to make our orientation for new teaching assistants in the composition program responsive to their needs, I have developed a brief questionnaire (Appendix) to solicit information about their

backgrounds and interests. The questionnaire is sent to new TAs early in the summer before they arrive on campus to begin their duties, and their responses are used to help those of us who conduct the orientation plan specific sessions.

The survey elicits several kinds of information. Part I focuses on the prior educational and teaching experience of the respondents, providing me with a basic profile of the group. Part II asks the TAs to rank four groups of items concerning teaching. Neither the grouping of the items nor the items themselves are particularly innocent. Group 1 contains five items which I think should be of fairly immediate concern to new teachers since they involve getting started; Group 2 asks TAs to rank some activities integral to (or traditionally considered integral to) the teaching of writing; Group 3 deliberately asks about rhetorical and pedagogical activities which are generally agreed to be important in the teaching of writing. The responses to Group 3 also help me gain some insight into the assumptions students have about writing as a process and as a social act, two theoretical positions that guide our program and most others. Group 4 seeks information less concerned with the immediacy of teaching than with the TA's new role as teacher / graduate student. Some items, I suspect, are consciousness raising; that is, their very presence brings them to the attention of the teaching assistants. I will address specific items and responses from Part II in more detail later, but first, I would like to look briefly at Part I of the survey.

Part I emphasizes the fact that in part the complexity of working with teaching assistants stems from their heterogeneity. Of our new TAs this year, 79% have not taught composition before, and of those who have, the range of experience is fairly wide: 61% have had no prior training in the teaching of writing, and 47% have not taught at all before. These figures suggest not only that the majority of our new teachers need training as teachers of writing, but also that nearly half will need support in a number of more general matters concerning teaching, such as establishing course policies, dealing with student problems, planning and carrying out class discussions, even—as I have found every year—figuring final grades for students.

The responses to Question 6 point out a disheartening irony of our discipline. Traditionally, the best English students are exempted from or test out of composition, often taking a literature course instead. This August, at least 34% of our new teaching assistants had not taken a course like the one they were assigned to teach. (I say "at least" because the courses respondents identified as "introductory composition" sounded much more like "writing about literature" or "great books" courses.) This is, I think, unlike any other field. In many English departments, some of the people who teach composition have not only never studied their subject matter, they may have never taken a course in it. It is one of the sad realities of how

composition is viewed by both the larger institution and by English departments. Composition continues to be seen as a service course, as a course in skill and technique rather than concept, and so institutional pressure frequently places writing program administrators in the position of providing on-the-job training for staff members with varying degrees of experience, interest, and enthusiasm for their subject. While at some schools, numerical demands for teachers and institutional support for training allow for required courses in composition theory and pedagogy before graduate students are awarded teaching assistantships, the situation we work under at Purdue is all too typical, as the MLA survey referred to earlier points out. And the problem is one which is recognized by teaching assistants. In their 1987 national survey of teaching assistants in all disciplines, Diamond and Gray report that 8% of the English TAs responding say their academic background is inadequate for their responsibility. Although this figure seems small, it is the highest of any of the seven departments which made up 41% of the sample and twice that of the total sample.

The final question in Part I is the result of comments I have heard in the past from several new graduate students. As graduates of small liberal arts schools, they have been as overwhelmed by the size of a 36,000-student, research university as are the new freshmen they are about to teach. These graduate students come from schools where there are no teaching assistants, where all classes are small, where everything is less complicated than it is at a large university. Knowing whether a significant number of our new teaching assistants may find the size of Purdue intimidating allows us to decide how much to discuss the workings of a very large school.

We ask for information about how many students have not attended undergraduate school in the United States only as a way to provide an appropriate response for international teaching assistants. By reviewing application files, we know before we receive this survey how many of our incoming teaching assistants will be new to the U.S., and the Director of the English as a Second Language program and I plan a special session during orientation for international teaching assistants. We discuss cultural differences between American and international universities and students, we show a videotape of an international TA conducting a composition class, and we talk about how to address students' concerns about having a non-native speaker as an instructor in an English class.

I acknowledged earlier that the items in Part II are not innocent. Let me add now that my interpretations of the responses are not innocent either. I realize that sometimes people say what they think others want to hear, and I realize that people frequently hear things other than what has been said. I also understand that my interpretations are open to interpretation, that my reading of the survey responses is not the only possible reading, and that I find myself reading the surveys in sometimes contradictory ways.

One of the messages I receive from the rankings in Part II is that there are some differences between people who have taught composition before and those who have not. In Group 1, for example, the people who have taught before are not particularly concerned with the practical matter of meeting their first class or establishing policies for attendance, grading, etc. In fact, none rank "first-day concerns" any higher than fourth. Nearly half (47%) of the inexperienced teachers, on the other hand, rank this item first, second, or third. Those people who have taught before want more emphasis on commenting on student writing than on grading; the opposite is true of new teachers. This may suggest that those who have had the experience of trying to write helpful comments are familiar with the difficulty of doing so—that it is easier to say that a paper is a C than to write comments which will help the student improve the next paper. New teachers, on the other hand, are likely to be uncertain about standards for grading, and concerned about being unfair. The experienced composition teachers are more concerned about identifying students who need extra help than are novice teachers (Group 2, item 6), and are significantly less concerned about identifying errors in grammar and mechanics—7 of the 8 respondents rank this last.

Experienced teachers are more interested in discussing planning than their inexperienced counterparts, and less interested in organization. They also appear to be more interested in interaction with and between students, ranking both "Helping students respond to each others' writing" and "Talking with students about their writing" higher than the inexperienced teachers. Those TAs who have taught elsewhere before are also more interested in teaching other courses than the beginning teachers, who might be seen as understandably most interested in the course they have to teach first. Experienced TAs are also slightly more interested in how their work will be evaluated and how they will be rewarded than are new teachers. Though none of the experienced TAs rank this item first, 5 of the 8 (62.5%) rank it second and none rank it last. They are less interested, probably because of their prior experience with the role, in their status as student/employee.

There are, however, many areas in which experienced and inexperienced teaching assistants respond similarly. Approximately 50% of both groups rank becoming familiar with the syllabus and text either first or second, and while experienced teachers show much more interest in understanding the theory underlying the course, both groups rank this item very high. Similarly, both new and experienced teaching assistants are concerned about the productive use of class time. Both groups rank "Making writing assignments" high, and both rank "Helping students write for different audiences" comparatively low.

Some of what the data suggest to me is probably pretty obvious. Because, for example, most new teaching assistants show an interest in the theory

underlying the course, I include a theoretical introduction in the talk I give on the first morning of the orientation program, emphasizing the similarities among the three specific syllabi used in the various small practicum (or mentor) groups each will be assigned to for the year, as well as through all of our department's writing courses. As a reaction to the relatively low ranking for audience concerns in the group as a whole this year, I will be sure to include in this early talk a discussion on the centrality of audience to the rhetorical situation and the ways we try to encourage audience awareness through the assignments we make. The same will be true of a discussion of the importance of collaboration in writing and the use of response groups in the class to encourage collaboration. Both the interest by the experienced TAs and the lack of interest by the inexperienced ones makes including a tour of the Writing Lab and an introduction to its services an important part of orientation. We also include as part of the orientation for the whole group an explanation of the mechanics of getting registered, getting teaching assignments, and getting on the payroll, and because usually half of the TAs have attended much smaller undergraduate schools, we talk briefly about some of the "big school" differences, both in terms of how they affect the teaching assistants and how they may affect their students. However, because of the diversity of responses to many of the questions, we have, in recent years, eliminated many large group sessions on particular aspects of teaching writing, and instead have many more opportunities for new TAs to meet in their mentor groups, where specific considerations of syllabi, class activities, and teaching strategies can take place more easily.

By highlighting some of the differences between experienced and inexperienced teaching assistants, the survey led us to change the way we assign students to the small mentor groups in which they will meet weekly. In the past, our groups were deliberately heterogeneous in amount of experience. At present, we have been experimenting with placing the most experienced teachers among our new TAs in one mentor group. While there are advantages to having experienced TAs in the same group as inexperienced TAs—at least for the inexperienced TAs, we have seen several advantages to having one or more groups comprised of those who have had both prior training and teaching in composition. The TAs do not find themselves reviewing information which is "old hat" to them, and the mentors find it easier to arrange sessions which will benefit the whole group. Most interestingly, we have been able to try some less conventional approaches to teaching with the experienced TAs because they are already familiar with the theoretical and practical matters of teaching a process-oriented composition class. For instance, one of my colleagues, Jim Berlin, has been developing a semiotically-based approach to composition— derivative of his theoretical work on social-epistemic rhetoric. The TAs he recently mentored have taught writing as a process and have in most cases had formal training in the teaching of writing. This allows him (and them) to

devote more time in their practicum meetings to developing assignments and class activities that integrate what the teaching assistants already know about teaching writing with what they are learning about semiotics, cultural criticism, and social rhetoric. And while the inexperienced TAs may be missing some of the benefits of having experienced teachers in their mentor group, there appears to be something of a "we're all in the same boat" effect in the groups made up all of novices. In my own group last year, for example, I detected none of the impatience I had sometimes seen when people new to the classroom asked questions which the experienced teachers did not need to spend time on. There also appeared to be more willingness to figure out how to deal with problems within the group, perhaps because they did not feel that someone else already had the answer. Besides, there is plenty of interoffice interaction between old and new TAs to compensate for the lack of interaction in the group sessions.

I must say that I did not expect these questionnaires to suggest revolutionary changes in our orientation program or practicum. Some of the changes they have suggested were, however, unexpected. Those of us who have mentored when orientation consisted of a larger number of meetings of the whole group agree that the new schedule which allows for more small meetings is preferable. It allows mentors and teaching assistants to get to know one another more quickly; it makes discussions of evaluation and grading more productive because the smaller groups can discuss more papers in greater detail; it enables mentors to address specific questions and concerns and to spend time with confidence building. We also are more comfortable introducing theory early in the orientation because we know the teaching assistants are interested in knowing about it.

And it is a concern for what the new teaching assistants want to know that motivated this survey in the first place. If they are most concerned about nitty-gritty things like what they should tell their students to call them or what to do if they run out of things to say after ten minutes, they will not be able to attend as closely to our discussions of writing as process or organizing peer analysis groups. If there is a strong concern for grammar and mechanics (which thankfully there was not this year), we know that we need to address issues of what errors mean, how much they matter, and how to best address them within the context of a composition course. If there is little concern for or interest in audience (as was the case this year), then we know that matters related to audience will demand our attention.

Let me close by saying that one thing I did not anticipate the survey to do was to elicit thanks. Frankly, I have been disappointed by the small number of people who have added comments of their own at the conclusion of the survey. But I have been equally surprised that the majority of those who do comment offer some expression of gratitude for our asking them to let us know what matters to them. And this suggests to me that an important

benefit of this survey has been to tell our incoming teaching assistants that we value their teaching and we care about them.

Works Cited

- Bridges, Charles W., ed. *Training the New Teacher of College Composition*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1986.
- Diamond, Robert M., and Peter Grey. *National Study of Teaching Assistants*. Syracuse: Center for Instructional Development, 1987.
- Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford, 1988.
- Reagan, Sally Barr. "Teaching TAs to Teach: Show, Don't Tell." *WPA: Writing Program Administration* 11.3 (1988): 41-51.



Appendix

By taking a few minutes to answer the following questions, you can help tailor this year's orientation program for new teaching assistants to your concerns and interests.

PART I: Background and Experience

1. Have you taught composition previously?
Yes _____ No _____
2. If your answer to 1 is yes, how many composition courses have you taught?
1-3 _____ 4-6 _____ 7-10 _____ Over 10 _____
3. Have you had other kinds of college-teaching experience? If so, specify the kinds of teaching you have done.
4. Have you had elementary, middle, or high school teaching experience?
Yes _____ No _____

5. Have you had any formal (i.e., classes) or informal (i.e., workshops, in-service programs) training in teaching writing?

Yes _____ No _____

If you answer yes, please describe your training briefly. Use the back of this page if you need more space.

6. Have you taken an introductory composition course yourself?

Yes _____ No _____

If you answer yes, please describe briefly the course (length of course, approximate number of papers, required reading, etc.).

If you answer no, but such a course was generally required, did you test out, were you exempted, or did you fulfill the requirement in some other way (by taking a more advanced course, for example)?

7. Which best describes the type of undergraduate school you attended?

- _____ American publicly supported, over 10,000 students
- _____ American publicly supported, under 10,000 students
- _____ American privately supported, over 10,000 students
- _____ American privately supported, under 10,000 students
- _____ College or university not in United States

PART II: Subjects of Interest to You

PLEASE INDICATE YOUR INTEREST IN DISCUSSING AND LEARNING ABOUT EACH OF THE FOLLOWING BY NUMERICALLY RANKING THE ITEMS IN EACH GROUP. USE 1 TO INDICATE THE ITEM MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU IN EACH GROUP, 2 FOR THE NEXT MOST IMPORTANT, AND SO ON.

Group 1 (Rank 1-5)

- _____ What to say and do on the first day of class
- _____ Becoming familiar with the syllabus and text
- _____ Establishing class policies governing attendance, assignment dead lines, grading, office hours, etc.

_____ Making an initial evaluation of your students' writing skills

_____ Understanding the theory which underlies the course

Group 2 (Rank 1-6)

_____ Making writing assignments

_____ Commenting on students' papers

_____ Grading students' papers

_____ Identifying errors in grammar and mechanics

_____ Using class time productively

_____ Identifying students who need extra help (and knowing where they can get it)

Group 3 (Rank 1-5)

_____ Helping students plan their writing

_____ Helping students write for different audiences

_____ Helping students organize their writing

_____ Helping students respond to each others' writing

_____ Talking with students about their writing

Group 4 (Rank 1-5)

_____ Departmental procedures for evaluating and rewarding your teaching

_____ Your status as a student/employee (fees, benefits, etc.)

_____ Computing facilities available to you

_____ Other writing courses offered by the English Department

_____ Other opportunities for teaching in the English Department

Please feel free to use the back of this questionnaire for any comments you wish to make about matters of concern to you as a new teaching assistant at Purdue. Use the enclosed envelope to return the questionnaire to me. I look forward to seeing you at our first orientation meeting. I'm sure that your responses here will help us make it valuable to you.