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WPA on Campus

Parallel Academic Lives: Affinities of Teaching Assistants and Freshman Writers

Thomas E. Recchio

Mike Rose in *Lives on the Boundary* suggests that most first year students are under-prepared, given their difficulty in acquiring the critical literacy necessary for a fully-realized university education. "It is a source of exasperation to many freshmen," Rose writes, "that the university is predisposed to question past solutions, to seek counterexplanations--to continually turn something nice and clean and clear into a problem" (189). The students in Rose's discussion seem totally innocent (in terms of critical consciousness), and their experience of the fundamental "critical stance" of university work feels like a fall, a loss of innocence. When even quite successful high school students, who have succeeded by memorizing facts and by mining sources for ideas to parrot, realize the difficulty of learning how "to use knowledge creatively" (191), they feel a sense of estrangement. The rules have suddenly changed, and they're not quite sure what the new rules are. They want their expectations met; they desire the certainty of the familiar. Rose suggests that the university fails to serve students adequately because most courses "are not taught explicitly and self-consciously as courses on how to think as a chemist or a psychologist or a literary critic" (191). We can infer that if Rose is right, then most teachers neglect to consider the relation between the conceptual frames (the theory) and the facts (the practice) of their disciplines. Without the theory, it is clear that the transmission, critical application and, ultimately, positive transformation of the practice are difficult to achieve.

In Rose's formulation, then, teaching writing involves the development of a critical consciousness. In the context of academic writing we can say that critical consciousness embodies the following abilities: to construe the contours of an argument, the structure of a text, the inner dynamics of a system, and the shape and project of a discipline; to test applications and probe for weaknesses of an argument, text, system, and discipline; and to function within a discipline with some consciousness of its limitations and its further possibilities. Critical consciousness is thus a significant goal of

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a university education, and teaching writing can be the central means through which that goal can be achieved. Consequently, it may seem that the task of the writing teacher is truly daunting, an unreasonable burden to put on the shoulders of the least experienced teachers in the university community: graduate students.

The situation of new graduate students in particular is similar to the situation of freshmen, since both are going through a major transition from one institutional context to another. Both are trying to navigate in what seems to be a new discursive world where language is used in unfamiliar ways, where the demands for attentive reading, detailed analysis, and critical response seem to be increasing tenfold. Both are losing a sense of their competence as more demands are made on their critical capacities. When we fold in the teaching responsibilities of teaching assistants, the challenge to their sense of competence doubles. How, if they are uncertain as new graduate students, can they be expected to have the necessary confidence to function successfully as teachers? If teaching writing is so central to the university's mission, then surely the most experienced among us (almost always teachers of literature) should do that teaching. I would like to suggest, however, that the apparent weakness of a graduate student's position within the university is, in fact, the graduate student's greatest strength; for the transitional status of graduate student compels an experientially immediate sensitivity to the process of learning, a sensitivity that all too easily diminishes with age and experience.

Let me first discuss the weakness of the argument that the most experienced teachers of literature should also teach writing. While writing is the central activity of literary scholars, that activity is thoroughly embedded in a system of literary discourse. The various "schools" of criticism--new critical, mythic, psychological, marxist, feminist, historicist, structuralist, deconstructionist, etc.--provide the contexts for the literary criticism. Success as a scholar/critic depends on the critic's skill in functioning within the terms of discourse of a school or schools, placing one school, usually, in opposition to another or mediating among them. Once a critic is established in a specialty, the precise terms of discourse, the strategies of argument, the central texts, and the place of the specialty within literary studies in general function as assumptions. What once had been new ideas, strange and intriguing concepts that stimulated a desire to specialize, become axiomatic. The struggle for entry into the discipline becomes a dim memory. Once established, the experienced scholar finds that what feels most immediate in teaching is to demonstrate expertise in literary study through lectures and directed discussions. In Mike Rose's

terms, the scholar teaches literary criticism without addressing explicitly how a literary critic thinks. The scholar sets a standard of critical practice in the classroom and measures the success of student papers in relation to how close the papers come to the standard. Scholar/teachers can thus be excellent judges of the disciplinary quality of their students' writing (the "products"), but they can also be far removed from their student writers' uncertainties as novices trying to find a way to function within a new discursive and conceptual practice (the "process").

The pattern of instruction I have criticized here is effective for students already interested in literary study, who have had success in English classes, and who are motivated to find a place for themselves in the discipline. As an undergraduate and graduate student English major, for example, I sought out professors whose critical practice appealed to me, which I then emulated with some success. But this pattern does not function so fortunately in writing classes (or even literature classes) where the students are not already predisposed toward "English," where even the most rudimentary aspects of literary study (thematic textual analysis, for instance) seem foreign and alienating. If such students are not shown how implicated "readings" and analyses of literary texts are within a context of disiplinary discourse, if the axioms and processes that define the discourse are not openly discussed, and if the characteristic conceptual, organizational, and stylisic strategies of the discourse are not addressed, students can succeed mainly through doggedness and luck. Mike Rose generalizes the problem in this way: "Virtually all the writing academics do is built on the writing of others. Every argument procedes from the texts of others. [Most students are] only partially initiated to how this works: [Most] are unsure as to how to weave quotations in with [their] own prose, how to mark the difference, how to cite whom [they use], how to strike the proper balance between [their] writing and someone else's--how, in short, to position [themselves] in an academic discussion" (180). And here is where the strength of a graduate student/teacher's apparent weakness is most pronounced.

As freshmen must struggle to position themselves in academic discussions in general, new graduate students of literature must do the same in a more specialized way. Both are engaged in a version of the same process: to develop a critical understanding of the conventions of the academic community at their respective levels and to learn, through reading, writing, and thinking, how effectively to function within their own delimited area of the academy. The closeness of the transition from high school to college and from undergraduate to graduate study puts the new

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graduate student teacher in a position to deal with the conceptual, procedural, and discursive imperatives that freshmen need to understand with some immediacy. The conclusions I draw from the fact that new graduate students/teachers share a common ground with their freshman, I present (in language directly addressed to teaching assistants) as suggestions for how they can orient themselves to their teaching tasks:

1. Share your expertise as a student with your students. You can begin to do that by working out for yourself what made you successful as a writer while you were an undergraduate and by discussing your own writing strategies with your students. In other words, exploit the real authority you have as an experienced academic writer.

2. As you are assigned writing tasks in your graduate courses, and as you begin working on those tasks, discuss with your students your strategies for positioning yourself in your papers.

3. Examine how you deal with difficult readings. How do you begin to find a way into texts that seem to resist your efforts? What role does writing play for you in your reading?

4. Consider your behavior in your undergraduate and graduate classes. What do you do to make a class work for you as a student? How do you react to different teaching methods and classroom activities? How do you connect your classroom work with your written work for the class?

5. Try to define for yourself your motives and desires as a student. Where do reading and writing fit in?

What these suggestions ask, essentially, is for new teachers to theorize about the way they have navigated successfully through their portion of the academic landscape, and how writing has been central to that success. By addressing the suggestions, new teachers should find a wealth of conceptual paradigms and reading and writing strategies that they can draw on in designing assignments, responding to papers, dealing with questions in class, and in responding critically to graduate work in writing theory and pedagogy. The suggestions should aid new teachers in beginning to develop a critical self-consciousness about themselves as students, as teachers, and as scholars. As they think about what they have done and how they have succeeded as students, as they think about how they are managing their transitional status, as they continue to think about their growth as academics, and as they discuss these things with their students, their graduate professors, and their WPA, they can pave their own way to becoming reflective practitioners.

Notes

This article began as a piece about the WPA as teacher, writer, and administrator. The argument in it was framed by a discussion of a simple device designed to combine those three functions. This device, a practice I learned from Kurt Spellmeyer at Rutgers, is called "Notes to Teachers," and this is how it works. Each fall semester, I teach a course in composition theory and practice designed for new teaching assistants. The course has the explicit agenda to introduce students to the increasingly sophisticated forms of inquiry and theorizing in composition studies with the ultimate goal to prepare new teaching assistants to be reflective teachers of writing. The implicit agenda, brought to the course by the teaching assistants, is for the course to guide them through their first semester of teaching. Ideally, those two agendas need not be in conflict, but particularly early in the semester they seem to be.

So after each class meeting, I write some "Notes," in the form of an essay, that address the theoretical concerns of the course in the context of the practical concerns of the TAs. The notes, which I copy and distribute weekly to all teachers in the Freshman English Program, draw on course readings, class discussions, and informal conversations with TAs in order to synthesize ideas and stimulate further discussion in the class and throughout the program as a whole. The weekly "Notes" serve an administrative function by focusing discussion in the Freshman English Program, they serve a teaching function by re-capitulating and extending work done in the graduate classroom, and they serve a writing/research function by committing me to a regular schedule of serious writing.

This article is a revised excerpt from the "Notes" for the second week of the semester. Those "Notes" were written in response to my students' answers to the question of what they hoped to get from their composition theory and practice course. The emphasis in their responses was on their anxieties about their knowledge and competence and on a desire for immediate practical suggestions from me.

In the three years that I have been writing "Notes to Teachers," I have received some fascinating responses, from mockery to praise, from mailroom jokes to anonymous notes objecting to a particular point or approach, and even detailed critiques which I have incorporated into and addressed in subsequent "Notes." They have been very successful in stimulating discussion in the two Freshman English Programs I have administered.

Work Cited

Rose, Mike. *Lives on the Boundary*. New York: Free Press, 1989.