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ABSTRACT

Graduate teaching assistants are too often given only "survival training" to prepare them to teach freshman composition. For the following reasons, the focus of teacher preparation in this area should be on rhetorical theory: (1) the study of theory informs the practice of teaching, (2) the study of theory is likely to give the beginner an increased sense of professional identity, and (3) the study of theory is valuable for its own sake. Southwest Texas State University provides a graduate seminar in the theory and practice of composition. The syllabus, using Lindemann's "A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers," provides an overview of the discipline, covering everything from rhetoric, cognition, and linguistics to the evaluation of student essays. The remaining material in the course consists of readings from professional journals and a sampling of important books written between the early 1970s and the mid 1980s by Emig, Shaughnessy, Moffett, and others. The course makes students think critically about what they do in the classroom, encourages fruitful pedagogical experimentation, and generates an intellectual excitement and a sense of professionalism among the teaching assistants. (A sample syllabus and final paper assignment for the graduate seminar are provided.) (SRT)

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## Theory Before Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers

In her chair's address at the 1985 Minneapolis CCCC convention, Maxine Hairston spoke of the necessity for writing teachers to establish their discipline on a solid ground, both inside and outside the academy. The first step we must take toward that end, she argued, is to know our own past and to "construct theoretical frameworks that inform our practice." Unless we do so, she said, "we will not be taken seriously. Nor should we be; being a professional means more than having a knack for one's trade."

Hairston was speaking, of course, to a group of practicing writing teachers, most of them with considerable experience in the profession. What I wish to consider here, though, are the implications of her remarks for the newcomers of our profession--the graduate assistants who teach countless sections of freshman English in hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country. And I am not thinking of those students enrolled in graduate programs in rhetoric and composition, but of those in literature departments where

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composition is rarely taken seriously as a discipline, at least not by those who wield the power. The training of this group, I'm afraid, is sometimes only marginally better than it was years ago when graduate students were handed a textbook, admonished about grading standards, and sent into the classroom.

By and large things have improved since then, but probably not as much as we'd like to think. As active members of CCCC we easily lose our perspective, forgetting that those who attend this meeting represent a tiny minority in the profession at large. It is impressive to look at the growing number of subscribers to College Composition and Communication (now more than 10,000), but we should remember too that the Harbrace College Handbook reportedly sold more than 400,000 copies in the first year of its 9th edition. Many of the people teaching in the trenches are still unaware of the dramatic changes in our discipline during the past fifteen years. And it is the most insulated group of all that concerns me here: the graduate students in literature who have little opportunity to learn about the concerns of our profession, whose training in the teaching of writing is often "survival training," basic preparation to enter the war zone of freshman composition armed with a B. A. in English, a few informal "training sessions," and a great deal of enthusiasm and good will. Such weapons, however, aren't likely to win the war. Yet survival training is still too often the norm in our preparation of writing teachers. Pressed

for time and eager to help fledgling teachers survive the battle, we are more often concerned about what they will do in class Monday morning than with what they may do as future members of our profession.

The graduate students I have been describing don't all go on to teach composition after graduate school. But many do. Some enter the ranks of the tenured and the tenure-track; others join the vast army of lecturers and part-timers who, at my institution, teach nearly half the composition courses offered each semester. And it seems to me that we do these graduate students a real disservice by giving them little more than a "knack for their trade." In large measure they are the future of our profession, and if we are to establish our discipline on solid ground, then we need to attend to the training of those who are just now entering the profession, especially those in traditional English departments which, at least for the immediate future, are likely to be the main source of composition teachers. We must see to it that our training of these people is not merely "survival training."

## II

But the obstacles to training such teachers are often formidable. For one thing, many graduate programs offer little opportunity for the formal study of writing and rhetoric; in my

department, for example, the single graduate course in composition is considered a "pedagogical course" and does not carry credit toward the M. A. The implication, of course, course, is that composition is, at best, the weaker sibling of the literature curriculum; that despite a rhetorical tradition extending back more than 2000 years, composition is not really welcome in the English department. There is also precious little time for informal study of composition. If graduate students are prepared to teach writing, that preparation typically comes from the one or two department members interested in the field and consists of nuts-and-bolts advice about conducting class, making assignments, and evaluating essays. Even this sort of training, of course, can go a long way toward improving the lot of the novice writing teacher. And such training is surely better than no training at all. Most of us working with graduate assistants, in fact, probably have carved out the time to develop respectable training programs: colloquia, workshops, maybe guest speakers, classroom visitation, one-to-one conferences. But if I'm right, most of this training addresses immediate issues of classroom practice.

Stressing pedagogy is probably a natural thing to do. After all, those we train are understandably eager for advice about formulating assignments and evaluating essays. But what I propose here is that we resist our inclination to limit teacher training to practical matters; resist the urge to concentrate on

survival training that may turn out tradespeople rather than professionals. Training in pedagogical practice makes sense, has real value, but it may have short term benefits that are not necessarily in the long-term interests of those we train or of our profession in general. What is likely, I believe, to have a more lasting value is a foundation in the growing body of theoretical knowledge that underpins our discipline, the knowledge that James Kinneavy has in mind when he describes the field of composition "as a rich and fertile discipline with a worthy past . . . an exciting present, and a future that seems as limitless as either linguistics or literature." To conceive of our discipline as a discipline and to conceive of themselves as professionals, beginning teachers need more than "how to" knowledge. And however expedient it may be to limit our training to that kind of knowledge, we must not ignore--indeed I believe that we should place first--the "why" knowledge of composition theory. Unless we do so, those entering our profession are likely to see themselves as little more than hired hands.

### III

Perhaps at this point I should clarify here exactly what I mean by "theoretical" or "why" knowledge as opposed to "practical" or "how to" knowledge. Although the two obviously overlap, the former is what might be called "book learning," the

diverse body of material that justifies teaching practice by telling us why, for example, one method of teaching writing is more efficacious than another. In this body of "why" knowledge I would include the historical study of rhetoric, work in discourse theory, emperical studies of written products and the writing process, applied research on composition, and the growing body of material on the teaching of writing as a profession. This body of material, the product of what Kinneavy calls our "worthy past" and our "exciting present," is the foundation of our discipline, the place where we find the justification for what we do as teachers. This is the knowledge Richard Gebhardt refers to as the "important conceptual underpinnings of composition," or what Frank D'Angelo calls the "underlying principles and concepts" that "make intelligible everything we do."

To say that such a body of knowledge exists is not of course to say that it is monolithic or even coherent. Like any rapidly growing field, ours is marked by conflicting theories, competing paradigms, contradictory research results. But we have today, as a book like Erika Lindemann's A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers demonstrates, a body of information that is to some extent amenable to summary and codification. And we also have a number of primary and secondary texts generally recognized as key works in the discipline. If there is, then, an important body of "why" knowledge, and if that knowledge is at least as important as the tradesperson's "how to" knowledge, what can we do to see

that apprentice teachers--those graduate students I spoke of earlier--are exposed to that body of knowledge?

#### IV

A full answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper. But I would like to offer what for me are the strongest reasons for introducing novice writing teachers to the "why" knowledge of our discipline. Even when departmental or university politics, or the nature of our graduate curricula, make it difficult for us to do so, we should find ways to teach composition theory. There are at least three good reasons for doing so:

(1) First, and most obviously, the study of theory informs the practice of teaching. Frank D'Angelo argues that "a grasp of basic principles is a necessary precondition for effective teaching. Course 'content,' teaching techniques, approaches to evaluation, and the choice of the best available texts . . . depend upon a knowledge of underlying principles and concepts." That knowledge probably seems less relevant to a beginning teacher than does practical advice on what to do in class. But in the long run, if writing teachers are to make informed professional decisions and to spare themselves and their students some of the strain of trial and error learning, the study of theory makes good sense.



(2) Second, the study of theory is likely to give the beginner an increased sense of professional identity. Even a basic grasp of the larger concerns of the discipline is likely to help teachers see what they are doing as a coherent activity, to regard themselves as professionals whose field has a past, a vital present, and a vision of its own future.

(3) Third, the study of theory is valuable for its own sake. As an intellectual activity, the disciplined exploration of a body of knowledge needs no elaborate justification. The excitement of entering and exploring a new discipline is surely an experience well understood by graduate students who, presumably, are drawn to the academic world not by the promise of high salaries but by a love of learning. Those who know the discipline that underlies what they do in the classroom are surely better equipped to sustain and develop intellectual vigor in themselves and in their students.

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Having talked in general terms about the values of theory in the training of writing teachers, I would like to conclude with a few practical suggestions. Some of us may have ample opportunities at our institution's for introducing apprentice teachers to composition theory. Others, though, are hampered by a lack of time or by political constraints. In my department

over the years various writing directors have adopted ways to work within those constraints. We have conducted informal seminars about current issues in composition, invited guest speakers to campus, or asked members of our own faculty to speak.

But probably our most successful effort has been a graduate seminar in the theory and practice of composition. The course carries three credits. Unfortunately, those credits, as I mentioned earlier, do not count toward the traditional M.A. But even the traditionalists in the department see the folly of placing untrained, freshly-minted B.A.'s in the classroom, so we do require the course for all inexperienced TA's--usually about five to ten each year. The students take this course during their first semester while they are team teaching a composition section with an experienced faculty member. Thus, we combine booklearning with practice.

Obviously the amount of material that could be included in such a course is nearly limitless. While we can't hope to do everything, we do try to make the course a broad introduction to the field. The attached syllabus indicates what was included last fall (see Attachment A). Like any syllabus, this one is provisional, subject to modification, even abandonment, but the readings, I think, give a good overview of the discipline. The central text in the course is Lindemann's A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers, which surveys the field, covering everything from rhetoric, cognition, and linguistics to the evaluation of

student essays.

The remaining material in the course consists of readings from professional journals and a sampling of important books written during the past fifteen years by Emig, Shaughnessy, Moffett, and others. The course as a whole moves gradually from the theoretical to the applied, starting with broad questions about the nature of writing and ending with questions about how to plan assignments and grade essays. The readings--some of them classics in the field, others less well known--are certainly not the best or the only possible choices, but I think that within a single course they do expose students to an impressive range of material that is intellectually stimulating and accessible enough for beginners. I should add, by the way, that the course involves a great deal of writing, including frequent responses to the readings, a book reviews, a "freshman essay" taken through multiple drafts and peer edited in the seminar, and a term project that encourages students to synthesize theory and practice in the design of a composition course. (See Attachment B for a description of the project.)

What benefits do I see from such a course? Briefly, there are three. First, it has made our students think critically about what they do in the classroom. Second, the course seems to encourage fruitful pedagogical experimentation; our graduate assistants try things they mightn't have tried without the course. In some cases, I have seen a wholesale shift

in attitude and method in an assistant who started out with strong preconceptions about what it meant to teach writing. Third, the course seems to generate a certain intellectual excitement and a sense of professionalism among the teaching assistants. Last year one student--interested primarily in medieval and Renaissance studies--submitted a paper on composition to a professional meeting. And another student is thinking about pursuing a doctorate in rhetoric, something that hadn't occurred to her before she took the course.

## VI

So I think that our department's effort to place theory before--or at least beside--practice has paid considerable dividends. But does it necessarily follow that a teacher who hasn't read Ong, Kinneavy, and Elbow is less effective than one who has? Obviously not. Nevertheless, a teacher who is introduced to a diverse range of booklearning or "why knowledge" is better equipped, I think, to make sense of what goes on in the classroom, to make intelligent judgments about what to teach and how to teach it. Of course no amount of booklearning can assure success, and much of what any teacher learns can only be learned by trial and error. Presumably, though, there will be fewer errors, less frustration, and more professional and intellectual

gratification for those who are introduced early on to the body of knowledge that underpins our discipline.

## Works Cited

- D'Angelo, Frank J. "The Search for Intelligible Structure in the Teaching of Composition." College Composition and Communication 27 (1976): 142-147.
- Gebhardt, Richard C. "Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers." College Composition and Communication 28 (1977): 134-140.
- Hairston, Maxine. "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections." College Composition and Communication 36 (1985): 272-282.
- Kinneavy, James. A Theory of Discourse. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971.
- Lindemann, Erika. A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers. New York: Oxford UP, 1982.

Attachment A

Hennesy  
Course Calendar  
English 5383  
Fall 1985

- G = Correll, Robert M. et al. The Bedford Bibliography for Teachers of Writing (St. Martin's, 1984).  
L = Lindemann, Erika. A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers (Oxford, 1982).  
T = Tate, Gary and Edward P. J. Corbett. The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook (Oxford, 1981).

- Sept. 5 Introduction  
Social, Cognitive, and Expressive Theories of  
Composition  
"Composition Studies" as a Discipline
- 12 What Is Writing?  
L, Chapters 1-3  
Walter J. Ong, S.J., "Literacy and Orality in  
Our Time" (T, 69)  
Janet Emig, "Writing as a Mode of Learning"  
(T, 69)
- 19 Theories of Discourse: Overview  
Frank J. D'Angelo, "The Search for an  
Intelligible Structure in the Teaching of  
Composition" (T, 80)  
James L. Kinneavy, "The Basic Aims of Discourse"  
(T, 89)
- 26 The Rhetorical Tradition I  
L, Chapter 4, 33-49  
G, 1-6  
Edward P.J. Corbett, "The Theory and Practice of  
Imitation in Classical Rhetoric" (in G, Item  
33; copy in my office)  
Marcus Fabius Quintilian, "from Institutio  
Oratoria (Book X, iii-iv)" (in G, Item 33;  
copy in my office)
- Book Review: Janet Emig's The Composing  
Processes of Twelfth Graders (Folbre)
- Oct. 3 The Rhetorical Tradition II  
L, Chapter 4, 49-57  
Richard Young and Alton Becker, "Toward a Modern  
Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Contribution"  
(T, 129)  
Wayne C. Booth, "The Rhetorical Stance" (T, 117)

- Book Review: James Moffett's Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Kennedy)
- 10 Prewriting and Drafting  
L, Chapters 5 and 6  
 Donald M. Murray, "Write Before Writing" (T, 170)  
 David V. Harrington et al., "A Critical Survey of Resources for Teaching Rhetorical Invention" (T, 187)
- Book Review: Peter Elbow's Writing without Teachers (Mitchner)
- 17 Revising and Editing  
L, Chapter 12  
 Nancy Sommers, "Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers" (G, Item 118; copy in my office)  
 Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte, "Analyzing Revision" (G, Item 117; copy in my office)
- Book Review: Edward Finegan's Attitudes Toward English Usage (Falkenberg)
- 24 Grammar and Usage  
L, Chapters 7 and 8  
 Joseph M. Williams, "The Phenomenology of Error" (G, Item 143; copy in my office)  
 Sarah D'Eloia, "The Uses--and Limits--of Grammar" (T, 225)
- Book Review: Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (Stelter)
- 31 Style: Diction, Sentences, and Paragraphs  
L, Chapters 9-10  
 Francis Christensen, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence" (T, 353)  
 Arthur A. Stern, "When Is a Paragraph?" (T, 294)  
 Richard Braddock, "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose" (T, 310)
- Book Review: Donald Murray's A Writer Teaches Writing (2nd. ed.) (Harwell)



- Nov. 7 Guest Lecture
- 14 Making and Evaluating Writing Assignments  
 L, Chapter 13  
 Richard Larson, "Teaching Before We Judge: Planning Assignments in Composition" (T, 208)  
 Timothy R. Donovan, "Seeing Students as Writers" (T, 220)  
 Nancy Sommers, "Responding to Student Writing" (G, Item 152)  
 Selections from How to Handle the Paper Load (copy in my office)
- 21 Designing and Conducting a Writing Course: Issues of Professionalism  
 L, Chapter 14  
 Selections from William Irmischer, Teaching Expository Writing (G, Item 145; copy in my office)  
 Selections from Jasper P. Neel, Options for the Teaching of English (G, Item 40; copy in my office)
- 28 Thanksgiving Holiday
- Dec. 5 Seminar Papers
- 12 Seminar Papers

## Attachment B

English 5383  
Seminar Paper Assignment  
Fall 1985

How should freshman English be taught? The seminar paper gives you the opportunity to answer this question, to present your ideas about the teaching of freshman English. Specifically, the paper should be a detailed plan for a one-semester freshman writing course. This plan must include a rationale for the course, a discussion of teaching methods, a description of the major assignments, and a calendar showing how you will organize the semester. Besides these items, you may wish to include other information or documentation. The finished paper is due in class on either December 5 or 12 (I will assign specific due dates later). On the night your paper is due, you will present it to the other members of the seminar. Your presentation may be a formal reading of all or part of the paper, or you may informally explain your ideas, using handouts to illustrate key points.

The following notes may give you some ideas about what to include in the paper. You needn't follow these suggestions exactly, but they might serve as a starting point:

1. Rationale: Include a theoretical justification for your course, an explanation of the principles behind it. You may wish to draw from some of the theory we've read, but there is no need to tie yourself slavishly to a single point of view. This part of the paper should allow you to develop your own principles and goals for teaching composition. (Why?)
2. Pedagogy: In light of the principles and goals you establish, how exactly would you teach the course? Would you use lecture, discussion, group work, individual conferences, in-class exercises? "Pedagogy" might also be taken to include such relatively minor concerns as attendance policies and late paper policies. (How?)
3. Assignments: Given the theoretical basis for your course, what types of assignments will you include? How many assignments of each type? What sequence of assignments will you follow? How much reading will you include? How much writing? What kind of reading and writing? Tests? Quizzes? Besides addressing these and similar questions, you should consider textbooks and other course material you might use. (What?)
4. Calendar: The calendar need not be a day-by-day plan for the course, but it should include a specific outline and indicate

the approximate amount of time devoted to each topic. You may wish to indicate when various assignments are due. (When?)

The above guidelines are not intended to be a straightjacket, and obviously the four categories leak into one another. You may organize your paper in any way you wish as long as it covers the required information. Imagination and flexibility are encouraged.