Faculty Development and the Teaching of Writing

Joseph F. Trimmer

Every year those of us who attend 4C's leave the convention reassured of the vitality of our discipline and recommitted to improving our own teaching and writing. On Monday morning, still glowing with professional good will, we meet the department curmudgeon at the coffee urn. We start talking enthusiastically about what we have learned and what we are going to do until we catch that look in his eye—we have all seen it—and suddenly our enthusiasm starts to whistle harmlessly into the void like air escaping from a punctured tire. Are we hopelessly deluded? Is 4C's nothing more than an early summer camp? Uncertain, we try a quick composition fix—a workshop, a seminar—but the results are the same. The romance blossoms briefly only to wilt beneath the world-weary gaze of our colleagues. It is at this point that we pronounce the words for the first time: FACULTY DEVELOPMENT.

Five years ago, our university's band of 4C's regulars decided to embark upon a modest mission. We would design a faculty development program to inform our colleagues of the intellectual revolution that was occurring in the teaching of writing. Our university had always professed its belief in the value of writing, just as our English Department had always professed its belief in the virtues of its writing curriculum. But we wondered how these public pieties squared with private performance. Was our faculty really committed to teaching writing? And if it was, was it sufficiently committed to reconsider the writing curriculum in light of the new research on the teaching of writing?

We realized that our mission was doomed from the start unless we acquired the political clout of our administration and the intellectual respect of our colleagues. At our suggestion, the Provost formed (and funded) an interdisciplinary committee to study the status of writing at our university. Again, at our request, the Provost appointed the most eminent scholars on our faculty to serve on this committee. After several weeks of discussion about the purpose and problems of teaching writing, the committee decided to act like most university study committees. It drafted a questionnaire to solicit the opinions of the university community.[1]

Over 600 of our faculty and students replied to this questionnaire, providing the committee with an extensive index to the attitudes and assumptions on our campus. For example, virtually 100% of the respondents agreed that writing competency should be a graduation

requirement. But there was considerable disagreement about how that competency should be measured. Only 30% of our faculty and students felt that the existing sequence of freshman composition courses was sufficient to insure writing competency. Almost 60% of the faculty favored some kind of competency exam. To no one's surprise, only 20% of the students indicated a preference for this option. Interestingly enough, however, almost 40% of the students favored an upper division writing course, a suggestion that appealed to only 10% of the faculty. More importantly, of those who preferred an upper division writing course, 60% of the students felt that the course should be taught in their major or by an interdisciplinary faculty, while 70% of the faculty suggested that if such a course had to be taught it should be taught by the English Department.

The questionnaire also revealed that faculty and students were confused about basic definitions. What was writing—themes, laboratory reports, essay exams, research papers? What was teaching writing—planning assignments, grading papers? 94% of the faculty stated that they required writing in all their courses, but only 18% of the students indicated that they were required to write in any course except freshman composition. Both faculty and students agreed that most writing assignments were given in less than five minutes and were rarely reinforced by individual conferences. 70% of the faculty insisted that they announced their grading criteria in advance and required some kind of revision. But 50% of the students claimed that they were never informed about grading criteria in advance and were never asked to revise their papers. Even if the committee allowed for the distortions that always accompany self-justification, such figures seemed to call for a campus-wide re-education on the teaching of writing.

Before proposing such a re-education, the study committee, again acting quite predictably, requested the opinion of outside consultants. The consulting team—supplied by the Council of Writing Program Administrators—was provided with the results of the questionnaire, policy statements on the university's writing requirements, course syllabi, and other public documents that attempted to explain the philosophy and pedagogy of the writing curriculum.[2] The team spent three days on campus talking to administrators, tenured and part-time faculty, and a large cross section of students. They visited the writing center, the reading laboratory, and several composition classes. Their report, when combined with the findings of the study committee, suggested that the university follow a four-stage process of faculty development. We have attempted to respond to these recommendations in the following ways:

1. Provide Constant and Current Information on the Teaching of Writing to All Members of the Faculty

We conduct an in-service training program for new English faculty that includes a two-day orientation workshop, a year-long seminar on the teaching of writing, and an extensive monitoring system. We sponsor a faculty symposium where staff members discuss topics such as error analysis, mode theory, writing about literature, the research paper, and computer assisted instruction. We inaugurated a special lecture series where scholars such as Ed Corbett, Frank D'Angelo, Maxine Hairston, Joe Williams, Erika Lindemann, Peter Elbow, James Moffett and James Kinneavy have presented their research to faculty from various disciplines. And finally, we arranged a faculty exchange program with Westminster College, Oxford, that has enabled us to learn how our British colleagues teach and conduct research on writing.

2. Encourage Faculty to Design Research Projects on the Teaching and Evaluation of Writing

We have experimented with several forms of a language skills exam both as a placement tool and as a proficiency test. We developed a writing across the curriculum testing project in which forty faculty members from other disciplines were trained, along with the staff of the writing program, in the methods of analytical and holistic scoring. We have established a writing consultancy program in which writing faculty work with faculty from other disciplines to enrich the writing component in their courses. We are developing a comprehensive computer software program for use in the writing center and basic writing courses. And individual faculty members are conducting research in areas such as rhetorical theory, cognitive psychology, corporate literacy, and collaborative learning.

3. Publish the Results of this Research to the Profession

We publish an English Department Newsletter, featuring the research of the writing faculty, that is mailed to over two thousand parties—faculty in other English Departments, program officers in funding agencies, and distinguished alumni. Our faculty presents papers on all aspects of teaching writing at state, regional and national conferences. In particular, our senior faculty has made joint presentations with doctoral students at the annual conventions of the National Council of Teachers of English, the Modern Language Association, and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. We have been successful in applying for a number of internal and external fellowships and grants to underwrite the work of individual scholars, group research endeavors (such as the computer software project), and summer workshops. We have published the results of our research in the major scholarly journals and in several major textbooks.

4. Convert Research Findings into Permanent Institutional Programs and Policies

We are constantly revising our writing curriculum to reflect the faculty's growing sophistication about the teaching of writing. We have added upper division writing courses for majors and non-majors, and are slowly converting features of the writing consultancy project into permanent curriculum changes in other departments. We have hired gifted new faculty with specialized training in composition and rhetoric to develop graduate courses for the growing cadre of doctoral students interested in studying and conducting research in composition. And finally, we have implemented a Ph.D. in composition that features an imaginative interdisciplinary component and several innovative internships in the English Department, in other departments throughout the university, and in the corporate world.

I have described our university's attempt to follow this four-stage faculty development process for three reasons:

1. I wanted to demonstrate that our program emerged from a systematic planning procedure.

2. I wanted to show-off the number and variety of successful activities we have attempted.

3. I wanted to confess that although we have created a successful program, we have yet to convince our department curmudgeons that we are doing anything except whistling into the void.

As I analyzed the mixed results of our program, I wondered whether we were typical. Were other departments designing activities or instituting policies that were more successful in convincing curmudgeons? To answer that question, I sent a simple questionnaire to English Department chairs throughout the country asking them to describe and comment on the programs they had sponsored in the last five years to educate their faculty about the latest research in the teaching of writing? I was able to draw three conclusions from the 400 responses I received:

1. 40% of those responding offer no faculty development programs on the teaching of writing.

2. 60% of those responding offer some form of faculty development on the teaching of writing, but none listed activities that we had not already considered or implemented.

3. Virtually all those who offered faculty development programs indicated that the activities had little effect on the unconverted—on those faculty members who were disdainful of or disinterested in the research on the teaching of writing

To supplement my findings, I called the program officers at those agencies who have been most active in funding faculty development programs in the teaching of writing—NEH, FIPSE, The Lilly Endowment.[4] What was their assessment of faculty development in the teaching of writing? All agreed. The most successful programs have taken place at small liberal arts colleges where administrators and faculty are dedicated to and reward excellence in teaching, where all faculty believe in and insist on writing as a way of learning, and where all English Department faculty, regardless of rank, teach writing as part of their regular assignment. The least successful programs have been attempted at large state universities where administrators and faculty are dedicated to and reward excellence in traditional areas of research, where all faculty believe that writing is a transcription skill that is taught in the English Department, and where English Department faculty show little interest in changing the established order in which teaching assistants and adjunct faculty teach writing courses and the senior faculty preside over literature seminars.

I was not surprised by the results of my questionnaire or the assessment of the funding agencies. If anything I was disappointed by the predictability of my findings. There were no magic solutions, no magic kingdoms, only the ordinary world I already knew. But as I read and re-read my stack of 400 replies, I became intrigued by the language of the responses. The assumptions, the tone, the metaphors, the rhetoric seemed to fall consistently into three categories. I call these categories the Rhetoric of the 3C's.

1. **The Rhetoric of Cynicism:** Those who employed this rhetoric seemed to be senior faculty who had devoted their lives to reading and writing about literature. Although they no longer taught composition, they believed that they still knew how and that no abstract theory or empirical study would improve the writing of their students or their ability to grade a set of papers. They were convinced that considering composition as a discipline was a silly fad, like Black Studies or Women Studies, induced by an unfortunate market and supported by misguided funding agencies that performed services similar to CETA. In particular, they believed that research in the teaching of writing was a sham, a self-indulgent, jargon-ridden concoction of unreadable inanities that would be better forgotten than foisted on an intelligent faculty.

2. **The Rhetoric of Conflict:** Those who employed this rhetoric seemed to be junior faculty who had discovered a new field and were now possessed with an evangelical zeal to preach their message to the uninformed. They believed that teaching writing was a complex and creative discipline—not a simple-minded and oppressive duty. Indeed, their ultimate mission was to restore rhetoric as the ruling monarch of English studies, a monarch who had been dethroned by a group of counter-revolutionaries known as literary critics. Rather than seeing composition

as a silly fad, this group perceived it as the force of the future, induced perhaps by market realities but empowered by a wider and older vision of language studies that would eventually reshape the political map of the university. As for composition research, they believed that its minor imperfections were the by-products of venture scholarship. While literary critics labored endlessly in the rearguard of learning, composition teachers were working at the cutting edge of imaginative, interdisciplinary study.

3. **The Rhetoric of Complacency:** Those who employed this rhetoric were faculty of all ranks who seemed bewildered as to what all the fuss was about. Like well-meaning Rip Van Winkles, they seemed to have wandered into the middle of a revolution they did not understand. They believed that English teachers had always taught literature and composition. There was no conflict between the two enterprises. They were two sides of the same coin, two interrelated processes. Confused and annoyed by the unnecessary conflict, they uttered the fundamental pieties of the profession. They saw no reason to consider composition a separate discipline. They had not read the latest research on the teaching of writing. Indeed, they saw no reason to reject a new fad or restore an old tradition. They were content with the status quo: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it."

Like all rhetorical positions, the rhetoric of the 3C's offers us a partial view of reality. The rhetoric of cynicism sees composition as a momentary blip on the intellectual test pattern. The rhetoric of conflict sees composition as the savior of a moribund discipline. The rhetoric of complacency sees a blissful world in which composition and literature exist in unexamined harmony. What we need to complete these partial views is the rhetoric of a 4th C, a rhetoric I will call the rhetoric of compromise. By compromise, I do not mean giving up in fatigue, going over to the other side, or ignoring fundamental differences. I do mean exploring the areas of agreement that will bind the contending parties to collaborative effort and mutual respect.

If the rhetoric of compromise is used for a program in faculty development, then it must establish its purpose, identify its audience, and develop a strategy.

Purpose. There are at least three purposes for such a program:

1. To improve writing

2. To improve the teaching of writing

3. To improve the status of writing teachers

According to the rhetoric of compromise, these three purposes can be accomplished without converting the entire English Department, much less the whole university, to the latest research findings on the teaching of writing. No monolithic theory is sufficient to accommodate the variety of teachers and writers in the academy. We should provide current information on research and encourage healthy debate about its value, but we should not feel its complete adoption is crucial to the improvement of teaching writing or our status as writing teachers. After all we were taught by writing teachers unfamiliar with heuristics and tagmemics and most of us can compose a decent sentence.

Audience. There are at least three audiences for a faculty development program in any department:

1. **Talented Ten.** 10% of any department contains faculty members who are so innately curious that they will develop themselves whether or not there is a faculty development program.

2. **Untouchable Forty.** 40% of any department contains faculty members who are so habitually committed to one point of view that they will never change or so fundamentally ineffective as teachers that their conversion would be meaningless.

3. **Dormant Fifty.** 50% of any department contains faculty who if given the right information, encouragement, and incentives would be willing to re-think some of their attitudes toward writing, the teaching of writing, and writing teachers. According to the rhetoric of compromise, there is no point in trying to convert the untouchables—it is an endless and enervating activity. Cut your losses, learn from the talented ten, and awaken the dormant fifty. Sixty percent is still a majority.

Strategy. The strategy for such a program acknowledges that all faculty members live with deeply embedded images of their professional identity. To abandon these images would be to deny their self-respect and intellectual integrity. Such images cannot be changed without tearing out a cluster of beliefs and lifetime habits. If we attack them directly, we will only intensify faculty resistance. If we ridicule them, we will only alienate those who regret our insensitivity. The best strategy is:

1. To recognize that faculty members will change only when they can transfer their commitment from an original image to a more compelling image.

2. To show our understanding of and respect for that original position by restating it in terms faculty find acceptable.

3. To explore possible compromises between contending positions.

Such a strategy, if directed by the right purpose, at the right audience, should reduce antagonism and encourage our colleagues to listen. Our concessions should also encourage concessions. No longer forced to defend their self-image, our colleagues may be willing to consider

modifications in their position and move closer to our position. Finally, if no acceptable compromise is possible, we will have projected an image of equity and integrity, thus accomplishing at least one of our purposes— respect for the intellectual status of writing teachers. If we do no more than develop that image, then we have taught our coffee-room curmudgeon something he wasn't expecting to learn about what we are learning at 4C's.

Notes

[1]"Report of Faculty Committee on the Status of Writing," Muncie, IN: Ball State University, 1981.

[2]The WPA Consultation was conducted September 30-October 2, 1981.

[3]The questionnaire (See Appendix) was sent to the MLA mailing list on English Department chairs in January, 1984. The list contains over 1,600 names. The 400 responses (representing 25% of the total) was tabulated for presentation at 4C's in New York, March, 1984.

[4]Interviews were conducted with senior program officers at each funding agency in February, 1984. These interviews were supplemented by Alice L. Beeman's *Toward Better Teaching: A Report of the Post Doctoral Teaching Awards Programs of the Lilly Endowment*. Indianapolis: The Lilly Endowment, 1981; and Richard Hendrix's *Priorities for Improvement: Essays and Views on Needed Improvements in Higher Education—Funds for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education*. Washington: American Association for Higher Education, 1984.

Appendix

Questionnaire on Faculty Development in the Teaching of Writing

1. What kind of programs has your department sponsored in the past five years to introduce the latest research in the teaching of writing to your faculty? Make a list.

2. What specific programs have proved most successful in interesting your senior literature faculty in the teaching of writing? In other words, which programs did senior faculty attend? Which ones stimulated discussion in the coffee room? Which ones produced curriculum change?

3. What specific problems (political and/or intellectual) have prevented your senior literature faculty from acknowledging the value of research on the teaching of writing?

4. To what extent have these programs appealed to other audiences— graduate students, faculty from other departments, faculty from high schools or other universities?

5. As you look toward the future of your department, how will this generation of English teachers view the connection between the teaching of literature and the teaching of writing? In what ways will their views change the nature of your department?