

## **Creating the Profession: The GAT Training Program at the University of Arizona**

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Writing program administrators who prepare and implement training courses for graduate students newly assigned to teach composition must wrestle with a difficult rhetorical problem: They must think of the audience for the course not only as individuals, with varied backgrounds and degrees of commitment, but also in terms of their department's institutional goals and attitudes. A traditional departmental view holds that graduate students are hired hands, duespayers on the lowest rung of the university ladder. It then makes perfect sense that when the department must offer service courses, the services will be provided by the academic equivalent of truck stop waitresses. This view reinforces the image of graduate students as cheap, untrained labor with little chance and less inclination to do their work well. Graduate students teaching composition sling literacy like hash, and their customers, freshmen without the good sense or past advantages to earn AP credit or otherwise bypass the composition requirement, deserve no better. Year after year program administrators gather the ingredients—texts, syllabi, standards—and the help cooks up the same old slop and calls it a curriculum.

A contemporary, and we think a more humane and ultimately more constructive, view of graduate student teachers assumes that all composition instructors become members of a legitimate academic discipline the moment they are hired to teach. Accordingly, at the University of Arizona we attempt to welcome Graduate Assistants in Teaching (GATs) as junior colleagues. Training courses offered to these new professionals should showcase the strengths of the profession in the form of the best available scholarship, old and new, while admitting that questions remain about how best to teach writing. These questions pose the challenges that occupy the current generation of writing specialists and that will draw young people into the field. To hold this view, we first must believe that we belong to a worthy profession, however disdained the teaching of writing may be by tradition. Further, since the future of

literacy may depend on the teachers, scholars, and researchers who will replace us, we have the responsibility of shaping the profession as we perform what seem to be routine administrative duties.

Thus we must abandon a basic skills approach to training graduate students to teach, just as we must refuse to accept that freshmen deserve only instruction in the most basic skills of writing. We must empower graduate students by giving them access to rhetorical control in the classroom, a control born of a mastery of the elements of the teaching situation. We must train them to respond nimbly and confidently to the various problems writing teachers face in the performance of their duties and allow them to feel that the choices they make have consequences for their students and the society in which we all live. Professionalism involves accepting responsibility for one's actions, and if we want responsible adults representing us in our departments' composition classrooms, we must define and foster this comprehensive and flattering view of our common goal.

Pursuing this goal of empowerment is particularly important in programs as large as the one in Arizona. According to statistics offered by Joseph Gibaldi and James V. Mirollo in an MLA study, the largest Ph.D.-granting institution in 1979 employed 142 GATs, and only ten departments had more than 100 GATs (1). Our program this fall has over 100 GATs, 30 of whom are in their first year of teaching writing. Of these 30, fewer than one-third have any previous teaching experience. And like 75% of the programs described in the MLA study, our program immediately places these first-year graduate students in the classroom. Well over 90% of our freshman level writing courses are staffed by GATs, and over 50% of the sections of English 101, the course in expository writing that most incoming students take, are staffed by first-year GATs. To keep English 101 classrooms from becoming a composition ghetto shared by the least experienced students and least prepared teachers, new GATs must be given both a sense of mission and the methodology that will allow them to teach successfully. They must believe in what they're doing; they must trust the people who are training them to do it.

The following description of features of our program illustrates several ways we have tried to foster a sense of shared purpose and collegiality at Arizona.

### **Revising the Guide: The Program's Voice**

*A Student's Guide to Freshman Composition* is a required text in all English 101 and 102 classes at the University of Arizona. As such, it functions as common doctrine for GATs. The Guide contains program policies that all GATs must enforce and procedures that all GATs must follow. It also

contains superior freshmen essays, the winners of an annual contest, a three-page description of grading standards, and sample graded essays that provide concrete examples of how the program expects student writing to be evaluated. In the first several editions of the *Guide*, the supervisory staff of the Composition Program graded the sample essays, even though their students had not written them. It seemed obvious that the most experienced teachers could do the best job of evaluating student writing. After all, the supervisors had read and evaluated thousands of essays from scores of sections. This original editorial policy led to grading guided by the criteria set out in the "Grading" portion of the *Guide*. Essays were seen in terms of content, organization, expression, and mechanics and usage. These hardy categories are certainly useful for objective discussions of finished essays, but student essays are notorious for being unfinished and in need of the subjective though reasoned intervention of a concerned teacher. As experienced as the supervisors were, they had no personal knowledge of the particular essays put forward as models each year. Only the GATs could respond fully to these essays, for they had overseen their creation in the classroom.

Thus, the four most recent editions of the *Guide* have featured student essays accompanied by comments written by GATs; these comments evaluate not only the finished product offered for a grade, but also the early generative writing and drafts that led to the final product (these are also printed, as part of the student writer's overall process). This new policy serves several ends. First, students and new GATs alike are provided valuable insight into the writing processes necessary to the successful completion of assignments given in freshman composition. Second, freshmen are introduced to the kind of responses they will receive from their instructors and to the role of GATs in the program. Indeed, in some cases the students' instructor is the writer of the published comments; this helps the students see the person in front of the room as a teacher, a writer, and an established member of the department, which undermines the usual criticism that the instructor should not be respected because he or she is "just a TA." Third, and most important for this article, GATs learn that their contributions to the Program are valued and respected. Their students' essays are no longer wrenched away from them and judged by unforgiving standards in the Valhalla of faculty offices. If their students appear in the pages of the required text, they appear too, to describe and celebrate their successful interaction with their students' writing. GATs who work on the *Guide* join the Program's teaching community in a concrete and publicly acknowledged manner, and their names appear with their comments as evidence of their membership in the profession.

This policy, which aims at treating new teachers as responsible professionals, does result in several administrative problems. GATs whose comments are not solicited for the *Guide* may feel that they are being placed lower in the program hierarchy than those who are asked to write for the publication. Participating GATs may be perceived as slavish or obsequious by those GATs who hold an us-vs.-them view of the training program. The editors of the *Guide* know from experience, however, that the GATs have a personal stake in the publication of their comments, and that they often resent the revisions the editors suggest, seeing those changes as concessions to a standard at the expense of their students and their own views of the essay. In the end, though, these tensions are healthy for the program, because they force both supervisor and GAT to accept that standards are constantly revised and negotiated by the professional community.

### The Mirror in the Classroom

Gene Krupa argues that for GAT training programs to be effective they should be “book, model, and mirror” (442). That is, as book, a program should equip new teachers with the profession’s published knowledge about how writers write and how teachers teach writing. As model, it should show—preferably in workshops—how to teach writing. Finally, as mirror, it should encourage new teachers to examine their own teaching. At the University of Arizona we have tried to clean the mirror so that GATs see an accurate reflection of their teaching.

A supervisor visits each GAT’s classes two or three times during the semester. Most GATs view these visits as tests of their ability. Inexperienced teachers, particularly, fear that their weaknesses will be harshly spotlighted by the supervisor in a white glare of criticism. However, as Peter Elbow points out in “Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process,” effective teaching involves playing dual roles. Although GATs may expect a punitive judge to visit their classrooms, we endeavor to send a nurturing coach, a guide, to mirror the GAT’s progress as a teacher. If we intervene in the GAT’s process of learning to teach, just as Maxine Hairston says we should intervene in our students’ process of learning to write, we must take into account the stage of development the GAT has reached. Thus, the process approach to training teachers does not expect perfection immediately; rather, the supervisor attempts to show the GAT how his or her teaching persona and strategies affect students. As Krupa states, “New teachers need to have their teaching reflected because of the difficulty of observing a process while participating in it” (443).

To make class visits into supportive, mirroring visits rather than authoritarian, judgmental visits, supervisors have used several strate-

gies. First, some supervisors have invited GATs to visit and critique the supervisor’s lessons. That practice communicates to the GAT that the supervisor is willing to accept constructive mirroring as well as offer it. The supervisor is willing to make a transaction. Second, some supervisors encourage GATs to determine not only the time but also the purpose of class visits. That is, the GAT will say to the supervisor: “I’d like you to visit my class next Friday because I’m holding a discussion on refuting opposition objections. I’d like you to tell me how well things go. I guess I’d also like you to suggest ways for me to improve my skills at leading a large group discussion. Maybe you could pay particular attention to the types of questions I ask.” Following that class visit, the supervisor will probably ask the GAT to assess his or her own teaching performance. The supervisor’s recommendations—and commendations—usually grow out of that self-assessment. In such a transaction, the GAT has much control.

One objection to giving the GAT such control over the supervisor’s evaluation is that the conniving GAT may only perform well when expecting observation; at other times, the GAT may slack off. Student evaluations at the end of the semester will reveal such poseurs, and the benefits of establishing mutual goals shared by supervisors and GATs make this approach worthwhile. The GAT is offered not only guidance but also responsibility for improving as a teacher. Supervisors write formal evaluations of GATs with this goal of mutual responsibility in mind. The top half of the standard GAT evaluation forms for both class visits and paper grading solicit objective descriptions of the GAT’s methods. Supervisors try to reflect exactly what happened in the classroom and exactly what messages are being sent by the GAT’s comments on student essays before beginning to evaluate the effectiveness of the GAT’s lesson plan or approach to grading essays. Then, on the bottom half of the evaluation, supervisors point out strengths and weaknesses and offer specific suggestions aimed at sharpening the skills and expanding the techniques available to new writing instructors. Thus the evaluation forms serve primarily pedagogical purposes rather than judgmental purposes. This approach sometimes makes it difficult to rank GATs, as there are no quantitative measures involved, no numbers, no mean level of performance. Individuals teach and progress as individuals, and the training course cannot be flunked unless a GAT flatly refuses to behave responsibly.

### Cells of the Organism: Supervisory Small Groups

In addition to working with GATs individually, each supervisor also works with a small group consisting of five GATs. It is in small group meetings that some of the most important and difficult work of learning

how to teach is done. Perhaps the biggest challenge for most supervisors is coordinating five people with different objectives and teaching styles into a workable group. The actual small group meetings are usually informal, and once the official business is discussed the session is given over to questions, problems, commiseration and, occasionally, back-patting. A small group is generally a comfortable arena for exchanging and assessing the effectiveness of techniques and approaches, and comparing assignments and essay exam questions. Many supervisors solicit and use suggestions from the students to set the agenda, thus addressing specific problems rather than following a doctrinaire syllabus. For instance, in small group sessions devoted to how to respond to student essays, GATs are asked to choose an essay written in one of their sections to supplement the sample essays provided by the *Student's Guide*. These essays are reproduced and distributed to other small group members, and thus the group as a whole determines the agenda for the meeting. The chosen essays illustrate particular problems each GAT wants to discuss in a friendly setting among peers.

Another effective method in a small group is to leave the discussion open and the topics broadly defined: This portion of the training is as individualized as possible and is the main support system for the GATs. Questions and discussion are simply more spontaneous than in large meetings, and so all questions get asked rather than just those of general interest. As we all know, the trivial questions often spark solutions to more important problems. As in any teaching situation, some problems are particular to individual GATs while others seem to plague a majority of new composition teachers. Recently, for example, one supervisor noticed that several of his own GATs were having difficulty developing classroom discussions. Of course, he worked with those individuals immediately to help them perceive the process of developing a classroom discussion as analogous to developing an essay. To extend this analogy, one needs to perceive discussion questions as devices for soliciting assertions and support for those assertions. The process can be either deductive (general assertions followed by supporting specifics) or inductive (specific details leading to or followed by general assertions).

After helping those individual GATs to understand one possible method for developing a classroom discussion, he surveyed other members of the small group to determine what strategies they employed for structuring discussions. The survey indicated that those GATs also needed some explicit (not tacit) model to help them structure discussions. In the small group setting the supervisor and the two GATs who had received the individual guidance teamed to work with other members of the small group. That supervisor subsequently polled the

other supervisors and discovered that many GATs needed help with structuring discussions. As a result part of the next large group meeting was devoted to the orchestration of classroom discussions. This example typifies the interplay of concerns across various segments of the training program: small group sessions, large group discussions and lectures, and the individual relationships between supervisors and GATs.

### **Making Statements in the Professional World**

Within the fields of rhetoric and composition some well-known scholars have collaborated on books, articles, and conference papers. Among the more familiar teams are Cooper and Odell, Tate and Corbett, Flower and Hayes, Knoblauch and Brannon, Fulwiler and Young, Witte and Faigley, Daly and Miller, and Lunsford and Ede. (The last team has even written about such efforts.) While such collaborative work is not uncommon in composition, it is usually the case, as with those people just mentioned, that both partners are tenure-track or tenured faculty. It is far less common to see this sort of scholarly collaboration between a faculty member and a graduate student. Too often, faculty exploit graduate students in research and publication by assigning them to the drudgery of research without inviting them to share in the rewards of such scholarship. We believe that such exploitation is immoral. It cheats graduate students out of the learning and the self-esteem that come from actively contributing to the profession, and it cheats the profession out of contributions that graduate students have to offer.

In terms of pedagogy, particularly, even the least experienced GAT has statements to make about the process of teaching writing. New eyes see new connections and can contribute to the profession accordingly. Too many senior administrators and scholars no longer teach the basic courses they're entitled, by experience and status, to make pronouncements about. Through collaboration, we can combine theory and practice to better serve ourselves and our students.

To make certain that our GATs become fully responsible professionals, some of our composition faculty have collaborated with them in research and publication. These efforts have resulted in co-authored articles in journals such as *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *The Writing Instructor*, *Journal of Teaching Writing*, *Journal of Business Communication*, and *Arizona English Bulletin*. Other co-authored manuscripts are currently being considered by journal editors and review boards. At other times faculty members have acted more as coaches and cheerleaders, as well as preliminary readers, to GATs who have been sole authors of journal articles in *Indiana English* and *Arizona English Bulletin*, as well as chapters in several of NCTE's annual Classroom Practices books.

Our GATs and composition faculty have also collaborated on papers delivered at conferences by the Arizona English Teachers Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Association of Business Communication. And, again, faculty simply coached and cheered as some GATs wrote and delivered their own conference papers.

By far the most ambitious GAT/faculty collaborative effort to date is a book-length manuscript on writing across the curriculum. In that project faculty and GATs are co-authoring some of the twenty-one chapters, and other GATs are writing their own chapters. Further, a GAT and a faculty member are co-editing the book, which is currently being considered for publication.

### Conclusion: Speaking With One Voice

Through a series of colloquia, GATs at the University of Arizona are introduced to the ideas of major figures in the fields of rhetoric and composition. In recent years, speakers including Andrea Lunsford, James Kinneavy, Daniel Fader, William Irmscher, Susan Miller, Gene Piché, and Frederick Crews have spoken to the assembled GATs about their theories and related teaching techniques. These people stand as role models for people just entering the profession; they represent the potential for achievement in scholarship and teaching that is open to writing specialists, rhetoricians and composition specialists alike. These colloquia, which are often keyed to selected readings in the field, comprise the conventional academic component of the training program.

The training course at the University of Arizona is required of first-year GATs; all GATs must attend all large group meetings and lectures, and they must participate in small group activities and work with a supervisor. Up to four units of academic credit for the training course can be earned during the first year of teaching, although GATs are not required to sign up for these units. (This option illustrates that old ways die hard; some degree programs will not accept teacher training/methods courses as a legitimate part of a graduate student's professional preparation; students who choose to sign up for such credits are slumming and will not be rewarded by the faculty in their major field.) Ultimately, then, each GAT must decide whether to be satisfied with basic skills teaching literacy or to strive for a standard of professionalism not commensurate with the salary and status awarded them and the people supervising them. It is up to teacher trainers and writing program administrators to persuade GATs that they are valued, whatever the attitude of the greater academic community consisting of students,

faculty, and university administrators. Our ethical appeal, establishing our knowledge of the field, our integrity and goodwill, and our emotional appeal, which attempts to instill professional pride in our new colleagues, must leaven the logical appeals that have dominated our approach to training graduate students up to now. Logic tells us that a low status job is a low skills job, which ignores the overwhelming complexity of teaching writing well. Logic tells us that inexperienced teachers need rigid guidelines within which to function effectively, which ignores that most new GATs are experienced writers with rich backgrounds solving the rhetorical problems their students will face. Finally, and hardest to admit, logic tells us to ignore the political and economic contexts in which GATs teach because we have to some degree escaped the condition that they are just entering, and we have an interest in protecting our positions at their expense. If we obey the logic that tells us to preserve the status quo because it is expedient to do so, then we have no right to presume to teach others the noble art of teaching.

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