

A Retrospective on Training Teaching Assistants

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In 1980 Joyce Carroll wrote that "what is necessary for writing to improve . . . is a change to occur deep within the writing classroom. And this change must focus first on our greatest resource—the teacher" (70). Because teaching assistants have been and continue to be largely responsible for much of the teaching of freshman composition at many universities, the resource to which Carroll referred includes the graduate teaching assistant. According to John Wahlquist, teaching assistants are "*de facto* instructors" (44). He claims that "it is common knowledge that the traditional TAs learn the practical tasks of instruction by trial and error" (44) and that because "much of the college instruction is done by graduate assistants, the improvement of college education in general depends upon their improvement" (44). Responsible to students, the department, the college and the university, and in some people's estimation, to the fostering of a literate society, teaching assistants cannot be overlooked. Nor can their training be taken for granted.

As early as 1930, critics turned their attention to the preparation of college-level teachers, and in that year the Institute for Administrative Offices of Higher Institutions, organized by the University of Chicago, had as its central theme "The Training of College Teachers." The papers read at the conference, and subsequently edited by William S. Gray, ranged from inquiries into weaknesses in college teaching and methods of training college teachers to sample preparatory programs at three universities (Woodward 1). It is interesting to note that three years earlier in 1927, a Committee on the Professional Training of College Teachers stated that "indifference in the need for such training is all but universal in the graduate schools" (Woodward 1). During those three years, however, "there . . . [were] heard from the general direction of the colleges low rumblings of discontent, ominous mutterings of dissatisfaction, savage growlings of complaint, accompanied by flashes of forked criticism directed immediately at the teaching capacity, or, to use the word of the critics, incapacity of the brilliantly hooded products of our graduate schools" (Laing 51-2). Evidently, the dissatisfaction heard during those three years produced a need to attend to, if not remedy, the problem of college teacher training.

At the 1920 Institute, Henry Suzzallo cited three basic requirements for prospective college teachers: "civilized and cultured . . . intellectual

understandings and appreciations"; "more than ordinary mastery" of the content area; and specific mastery of "some of one subject or part of a subject" (20-3). While these requirements were said to have addressed the academic side of the prospective college teachers, other requirements were said to have fulfilled the professional side of the picture. Included in the professional requisites were an understanding of the American educational system, knowledge of the psychology of learning, and supervised experience in the actual teaching of students (25-6). One notes with interest and amusement that the University of Iowa also required a physical examination of all graduate students, and if any "impediments or psychopathic tendencies" (Gray 83) were displayed, the students would be discouraged from pursuing a teaching career. Of particular concern to the participants of the 1930 Institute and a concern which lasted for a number of years, however, was prospective teachers' actual experience in pedagogy.

Critics saw some sort of "professional training" necessary for prospective teachers, and in 1930 the most frequently cited training program consisted of a course on teaching methods conducted by a senior member of the department who was particularly interested in pedagogy. In that course, the prospective teachers, along with an experienced faculty member, discussed problems which might present themselves to beginning teachers. The other major recommendation of the Institute was for prospective teachers to enroll in an education course to learn about the developments in and the current state of education (Laing 57-8). Hence, the responsibility for training college teachers was shared by the particular department of the prospective teachers and the school of education. One interesting remedy to the problem of preparing prospective teachers was offered by Ernest H. Wilkins who saw the need to recruit more students of "high potential teaching ability" than the university had been doing, thus alleviating the need to rely so heavily on training programs. To successfully accomplish such a goal, Wilkins also saw the need to make the field of teaching more appealing to prospective teachers, thereby encouraging graduate students with the most potential to pursue the teaching field (Laing 70).

Despite the rhetoric on what "should" be done to train and improve new teachers of college courses, and despite the findings of the 1930 Institute, few universities demonstrated any appreciable commitment to preparatory programs. Columbia University officials, for example, stated that their university had no general program for preparing prospective college teachers, nor did it have any plans to institute one (Gray 218). Harvard College officials had no program to aid prospective teachers, and thought that one was not critically needed because, in their estimation, prospective teachers could learn the most from observing their own successful professors. Moreover, Harvard officials felt that graduate

students should teach in their specializations or where their strengths lay, and not necessarily in low-division courses for which they were frequently unprepared. Because of such thinking, graduate students would naturally be prepared for their teaching duties and would not need a training program (Gray 221-2). The University of Iowa's graduate students entered the university with certifications in education and, therefore, were considered knowledgeable in teaching. Although Iowa urged its students to attend departmental seminars in teaching, the university required only physical examinations of the students, and speech tests and coaching when needed (Gray 224-5).

In short, while many of the universities surveyed by the Institute recognized and acknowledged the need for training programs—or at least for prospective college teachers to be trained—few had made a concerted commitment to providing them for their graduate students. And if any commitment was made, it took the form of one seminar, non-compulsory supervision of senior faculty as well as a recommendation for prospective teachers to study the state of education through the education department.

As is the case with trends in education, the issue of college teacher preparation received renewed attention almost twenty years after the Institute. This time, a report of a 1949 conference on college teachers' preparation, chaired by O. Meredith Wilson, President of the University of Oregon, noted that in spite of the lip-service paid and minor gestures offered to alleviate the problem, few schools had made an active commitment to helping college teachers prepare for their jobs; rather, it was concluded, the attention to preparatory programs was expressed by a few interested professors, with little consistent or ongoing support and involvement evident from the rest of the department or university community (Wise 77).

While the 1949 conference participants noted that graduate schools were concerned with turning out qualified teachers, they found that the overwhelming sentiment was for graduate schools to produce the learned scholar, and only secondarily the accomplished teacher. Hence, one discovers some rationale for graduate schools' lack of commitment to supporting strong and active preparatory programs for their prospective college teachers. Finally at the 1949 conference, questions were raised concerning the professional needs that graduate schools would better serve. Among those questions or concerns were the fostering of individual teaching styles of prospective college teachers, prospective teachers' understanding of their students' motivations for learning, the content or subject matter of doctoral work becoming broad enough to help new teachers, and, most germane to the discussion of training programs, an inquiry into the extent to which graduate students are prepared by the universities to become the best teachers possible (Wise 78-80).

The recommendations made or the issues cited as needing continued support from graduate schools included assigning reduced teaching loads to new teachers, requiring new teachers to work under the supervision of experienced professors, providing new teachers with a diverse range of teaching experiences, monitoring new teachers' responsibilities from initial observation of classes to assuming full responsibility for teaching, and providing new teachers with seminars and workshops on teaching to be conducted by superior faculty members (Wise 88). Thus, the 1949 conference, more so than the 1930 Institute, generated not only specific areas of concern but, more importantly, remedies or recommendations to aid prospective college teachers. It should be noted that these recommendations, over thirty years old, are now the ones most frequently adopted in graduate teaching assistant programs in universities, especially in departments of English.

Almost a decade elapsed before two more conferences on college teacher preparation were held and a renewed commitment to the area was demonstrated. In its discussion of pertinent issues in academia, the American Council on Education's January 1956 conference, whose proceedings were published in 1958, included inquiries into masters and doctoral programs as well as graduate study's commitment to preparing prospective college teachers. Like the 1930 Institute, attention was given to several programs in college teacher training at universities. The participants of this 1956 conference, however, disagreed on the kind of pedagogical training needed to prepare prospective teachers. Nonetheless, they did reach consensus that some sort of training was necessary, and that requiring graduate students to take a course in college teaching was insufficient to the demands of real teacher training (*English Journal* 537-47).

The most significant issue raised at the American Council on Education's conference was the long-overlooked distinction in teacher training programs between the prospective teachers' mastery of course work (content or subject matter) and the methods of teaching that content or subject matter. While the 1930 Institute had focused primarily on the professional preparation of prospective college teachers (e.g. handling student problems and becoming *bone fide* members of the profession) and the 1949 conference had focused on pedagogical issues (e.g. class loads and the supervision of new teachers' classes), all of the conferees at these two conferences had failed to talk specifically about the prospective teachers' mastery of the material they were to teach as an important feature of college teacher training. In reporting on the proceedings of the 1956 conference, Joseph Axelrod noted that the participants agreed that "two obvious fallacies are to be avoided: the assumption that such preparation [college teachers'] is exclusively a matter of content preparation, and the assumption that pedagogical competence can serve as a substitute for

scholarly knowledge" (1-3,95). Thus, under examination at the 1956 conference were not the methods behind teaching (pedagogy) as much as the knowledge of subject matter required of college teachers that informs what will happen pedagogically—the distinction between the knowledge of course material and the presentation of that course material to students, with the 1956 conference addressing the former.

Held in 1958 under the auspices of the American Studies Association, the College English Association, the Modern Language Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English, the Basic Issues Conference posed thirty-five issues which the participants deemed worthy of investigation, and of those thirty-five, seventeen dealt with the preparation or training of prospective English teachers. Hence, the concerns of the 1930, 1949, and 1956 conferences received renewed attention. Of the issues germane to teaching at the college level, the committee asked "What preparation for college teaching should the Ph.D. candidate receive?" and "How can we achieve articulation of teaching and teacher training at all levels in English?" (Axelrod 95). While the issue of teacher training for prospective college teachers was not a major consideration at the Basic Issues Conference, it was given some attention, and suggests that while previous conferences had focused on college teacher preparation, the area was still open for further consideration; no hard and fast conclusions had been reached in almost thirty years of discussion.

Perhaps the one issue that united all of the conferences on teacher training for the college level was the question of whose responsibility it was to train prospective college teachers. There appears to be consensus on this question, and the answer, according to a number of critics in recent years, rests with the individual academic departments, and not with the graduate school or department of education. In *The Miseducation of American Teachers*, in 1963, for instance, James D. Koerner wrote that the "academic departments must accept major responsibility both for the present state of teacher education and for affecting improvements" (263). The conclusion of a program for college teacher training at the University of Michigan during 1967 and 1971 was that "a move toward active departmental responsibility for preparation of college teachers was gaining momentum. More time and resources are being devoted to this responsibility" (Stockdale, Wochok 90). While the Michigan program involved the departments of botany, history, philosophy, physics, and psychology, it appears that English departments are not exempt from similar commitments to college teacher preparation. In his article "How the Candidate Learns to Teach College English," for example, Warner G. Rice made just that claim: "If, then, departments of English think that college teaching is important, they must accept the obligation for providing a more thorough discipline in the art than they have attempted in the past" (583).

Certainly one of the most damning and inflammatory commentaries on the issue of responsibility for college teachers' training also came in 1963 from Albert R. Kitzhaber:

... much of the poor teaching that one so often finds in freshman English is less the result of inexperience and indifference than of inadequate professional preparation—as indeed it is in the high schools also. The blame for this state of affairs must rest squarely with the college departments of English that have given these teachers their undergraduate and graduate education. (15)

Kitzhaber cited the English curriculum's reliance on the study of literature (and not on writing and its teaching) as the culprit. Despite the interest and care that prospective college teachers bring to their own classes, such qualities, according to Kitzhaber, do not take the place of training or preparatory programs. Good intentions and hard work, while complementary to, are no substitute for training in the teaching of college English. Commenting on the need for teacher preparation, one critic noted, "... all the high-priced texts and high-powered materials will not replace a well-prepared teacher" (Carroll 7).

It is interesting to note that the early to mid-1960s produced a tremendous amount of interest in the training of college English teachers. In 1963, for example, Alfred H. Grommon edited *The Education of Teachers of English for American Schools and Colleges*. Also in that year, Albert R. Kitzhaber's *Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College* appeared. Two years later, in 1965, John C. Gerber edited *The College Teaching of English*. Clearly, critics in the field of English were concerned with how English might best be taught at the college level and how prospective teachers might be trained to become effective college writing teachers.

Despite the 1960's interest in the training of prospective English teachers and the call for English departments to shoulder the responsibility of preparatory programs, Ann M. Heiss reported in 1970 that "in half of the fifty institutions which produced 90 percent of the Ph.D.s each year, [training] program[s] for teaching assistants had remained substantially unchanged during the past decade or more" (231). Thus, from the 1960's call to prepare future college teachers to 1970, more talk than action had been given to training programs. Despite the call for individual departments to be responsible for training their graduate students how to teach, less than full and active commitment was being given to preparing prospective college teachers for their new role.

Addressing the issue of teaching assistants and training programs during a panel discussion, Edgar W. Lacy contended that "The system of using graduate students to teach freshmen can be regarded as functioning satisfactorily..." (36). However, Lacy was quick to add that one of the

"safeguards" was that the teaching assistant "must not be asked to do more than he has experience to do" (36). Twenty years later, in 1974, Maxine Hairston amplified Lacy's stance when she wrote that "In many ways, Teaching Assistants may do a better job of teaching freshmen than some of our senior colleagues. They will do a good job, however, only if we have effective ways to train them and to supervise them during the first years of their apprenticeship in the profession" (52). National English conferences such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication have included in their programs entire sessions which addressed the training of teaching assistants and ways to help them become successful college writing teachers. Such conferences, it is important to note, come twenty years after a 1959-60 survey on the issue of college teacher training which reported that "If there is a grave lack... it is in the production of teachers of freshman composition who are specifically trained and psychologically conditioned to perform with enthusiasm and real distinction" (Gorrell 113-4).

Most recently, a National TA Conference, sponsored by and held at The Ohio State University in 1986, convened at which course directors, college deans, university presidents, faculty, and TAs discussed issues such as TA training programs, ways to monitor and evaluate TAs' performance, the TA's role of student and employee, the establishing of national databases, etc. Such an enclave demonstrates the interest in preparing TAs to be informed, well prepared, and equipped to handle the responsibilities they are to assume; it also speaks to the need of different disciplines exchanging information of how TAs are trained in their specific programs. After all, much can be learned from shared experience.

Because of the need for well-trained college writing teachers and the plethora of research now emerging on the writing process and the most effective ways to teach college writing, the issue of preparatory programs continues to be a concern among directors of composition programs, English professors, and university administrators. The issue of college teacher training—at least in English departments and writing programs—has received more than lip-service, and has not been relegated to the departments of education or graduate schools as it had been in the past.

Increased interest in and knowledge of writing theory and pedagogy have determined the ways in which to best prepare prospective writing teachers. From the 1930 Institute's focus on teaching methods and educational history to the 1949 conference which debated the scholar versus the practitioner to the 1956 conference on mastery of course work and methods of teaching to the 1960's pointing to the culprits of inadequate teacher preparation, we now discover that newfound understandings and appreciation of the composing process dictate the content of training

programs in composition for teaching assistants. We now must address the writer in the teacher, the composing process, ways that composition theory and research can be translated into practice or "why [TAs] are being called on to do what they are doing. Superficial objectives produce superficial programs" (Irmscher 30). Indeed, training programs appear to have followed Richard C. Gebhardt's thinking when, ten years ago in *College Composition and Communication*, he identified four kinds of knowledge the writing teacher should have: an understanding of the history and structure of language, rhetoric, and composition theory, as well as ways to translate that information into a pedagogy (134-140). More recently, Gebhardt reiterates his belief in the importance of "helping . . . clients develop integrating perspectives on the diverse field of composition teaching" (1986, 4). And from the descriptions of writing and TA training programs in *Composition and the Academy: A Study of Writing Program Administration* and *New Methods in College Writing Programs: Theories in Practice*, it seems as though TAs are being trained and research in composition is finding a home in the classroom:

. . . [M]ethods are replacing muddles. The daily practice of writing instruction is now generally informed by the rich theory and research of the past quarter century. Increasingly, writing classes are influenced not only by the writing of James Britton, Janet Emig, James Moffett, Peter Elbow, and Ann Berthoff, for example, but also by the thoughts of Lev S. Vygotsky on the development of concepts in children; Walter J. Ong and Shirley B. Heath on orality and literacy; Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, and Thomas S. Kuhn on the social authority of knowledge; Suzanne K. Langer on the cognitive dimension of feeling. . . . The 'literacy crisis' has initiated a radical inquiry into learning, and [scholarship] record[s] not so much surface changes in teaching—another day's survival strategies—as emergent methods of learning: theories in practice. (1)

Because of this, training programs for teaching assistants have begun to succeed because some universities have done more than merely acknowledge composition in the academy. Some have done more than provide TAs with a crash course in the history of education; some have done more than "ease" TAs into their responsibilities; and some have done more than fall into the quicksand of politics, to emerge still discussing whose responsibility it is to train teachers. Rather, some schools have finally begun to engage TAs in a program of writing themselves as well as a discussion of writing theory and its implications for classroom practice; some have begun to use the resources available to us, and have seen them implemented in the classroom. Graduate students, once required to take the perfunctory Practicum in the teaching of college composition, are finding composition a rich field—and certainly one they need preparation in if they are to be viable job candidates and effective teachers. Training programs have also given rise to increased enrollments in composition theory courses and master's theses in composition, both of which extend teachers' knowledge of composition and its

teaching. As Carol P. Hartzog points out in *Composition and the Academy: A Study of Writing Program Administration*,

"many of the graduate courses in composition that have been developed are associated with TA-training programs. In addition, a number of faculty-development programs have been designed, either for temporary faculty members, to ensure the consistency and quality of instruction or to provide professional development for those who will return to the job market, or for regular faculty members, often in connection with a writing-across-the-curriculum program. Development programs for faculty members and TAs have received much attention and care in recent years" (48).

In short, the redefinition of composition and its place in the college curriculum has helped in beginning to put the teaching of writing in its rightful place. The change to which Carroll referred is being felt by those willing to abandon the politics, fear, and disdain associated with the emergence and importance of composition as a discipline and field of inquiry, not some "impoverished charge of the untenured" (Connolly 1). And for that, not only have our TAs—but their students—become the benefactors.

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