

Stalking the Wild TA

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Choose one of the following:

- a. At no time in its history has the teaching of composition offered so many exciting avenues of approach to teachers and administrators.
- b. At no time in history has the teaching of composition been so disorganized and chaotic, with little stability or continuity.
- c. Neither of the above.
- d. Both of the above.
- e. Something entirely different.

The correct answer depends on how you view composition, when you last had any classes on writing, and your opinion of freshmen (that is, as semi-literate at best, or as wonderfully articulate in their own way). The halls of any English department are sort of a sedimentary record of thought in composition, from a Cenozoic product approach—complete with the five-part theme—to a class replete with the latest pronouncements of the process pantheon.

For those reading this review, the most likely answer is A, indicating a feeling that composition is an exciting discipline, one that is opening up whole worlds of knowledge as well as intriguing avenues for research.

However, for even the most enthusiastic proponent of modern composition theory, the torrent of ideas coming from every which way may cause some confusion, especially when that enthusiastic proponent of modern composition theory happens also to be the director of a writing program with faculty—old and mouldy to young and callow—to train.

And it is the problem of training teachers, I would think, that illuminates a major drawback to a process approach to teaching writing. The drawback is that the teacher has to know what he or she is doing. It is no longer possible to walk into a classroom, a B.A. in Victorian Lit with no training in writing, and teach a class by being one-half page ahead of the students. No longer can one blithely assign five pages of exercises, knowing that the answers are in the manual appended to the teacher's edition of the text. One has to by jiminy know what writers do when they write.

It's scary. How does one train—quickly and efficiently (accent on quickly)—incoming teaching assistants, retreated senior faculty whose seminars have dwindled, and part-timers?

Comes the NCTE to the rescue. They have provided the volume under consideration, *Training the New Teacher of College Composition* (Edited by Charles Bridges, with the assistance of Toni Lopez and Ronald Lunsford; NCTE, 1986). It's a series of essays on training comp teachers, including discussions of whom to train, what to teach, how to approach it, and a gaggle of questions posed and answered.

At least, I think the NCTE has come to the rescue, because without a scorecard, it's tough to tell who the players are. The variety of viewpoints, stances, approaches, emphases, postulates, structures, implications, explications, outlines, bibliographies and tangential references is not for the untrained or the faint of heart.

The composition specialists know most of the book's content anyway, but will pick up some good pointers now and again, seeing how their fellow wizards have faced the daunting task of teaching others to teach writing.

The untrained administrator, on the other hand, may emerge from the book more bemused and bewildered than before. I advise this administrator to open the book at random, read the complete essay thus uncovered, and make the ideas contained therein the basis of a writing course and TA training programs.

As an alternative, the untrained or confused administrator might read the following review and use it as a basis for making a decision on what to read.

It's difficult to catalog the essays in the book, as they resist grouping exercises. If I were pushed, I might list them as *overviews*, *seminars*, *specific approaches*, and *miscellaneous*. However, I'd almost certainly flunk this as an English 101 definition assignment, since the categories are not mutually exclusive, and there is one catch-all category.

Nor is it feasible to summarize the content of the book, as my comments would probably make this a book-length review. What I can do is sample representative essays to give the flavor of the book.

Overviews

The best overview is probably Gebhardt's "Unifying Diversity in the Training of Writing Teachers," which is luckily the first essay in the book. Gebhardt discusses who should be involved in training for writing (not only TAs but retreads and part-timers), and then discusses the characteristics of a "responsible" training program. This includes a listing of topics to be covered, beginning with "Writing Process," thence to "Rhetorical Forces of Audience and Purpose," and moving down the line, ending with "Making, Responding To, and Grading Assignments."

Then Gebhardt offers the heart of his essay: "Three Unifying Ideas for Training Programs in Composition." They are worth quoting (though for the text of the explanations, you'll have to go to the essay):

1. A training program in composition teaching should help its clients develop comprehensive, integrating views of writing and the teaching of writing. (4)
2. A training program should help its clients develop a comprehensive, integrating view of "the writing process" as a complex collaboration of physical and mental activities through which a writer discovers as well as communicates ideas.
3. A training program should help its clients use a coherent, integrating view of the writing process as the organizing center of composition instruction. (8)

Seminar Descriptions

A respectable number of the articles describe seminars used to train new teachers of composition. Perhaps predictably, the focus in the seminars is on new Teaching Assistants. Perhaps predictably also, the articles don't mesh together well, so that the reader is almost forced to take sides in what sometimes seems a discussion, sometimes a debate (and sometimes a brawl).

For instance, the essays by Irmischer and Van Der Weghe describe what could be called mainline process approaches, whereas the article by Comely takes the assumptions of the first two to task.

Let me outline each to show you what I mean. Irmischer describes a three-day seminar ("TA Training: A Period of Discovery") in which the TAs compose theme topics, comment on papers, prepare lessons, and respond to one another's work. The work is carefully supervised by Irmischer and two assistants.

Irmischer seems genuinely concerned that his TAs receive a solid grounding before they walk into the classroom, and that this grounding (though he doesn't say so), prepare the teacher to alleviate the writing anxiety that freshmen feel.

On the other hand, he clings quite firmly to at least one proposition that is, at the very least, the subject of vigorous attack. He notes, "appropriate comments on papers are one of the most helpful things a writing teacher does." (31) In fact, he gives his emphasis in the seminar to comments on papers.

Well, the fudge "appropriate" helps, of course, but all the data I know of suggest that comments on papers are usually a waste of time, and an indication that, however much lip-service the teacher is giving to process, the heart belongs to Miss Fidditch and product.

Irmscher also emphasizes the "writing as discovery" aspect of his composition program (as the title to his essay indicates), and his remarks make me believe that he values writing as communication less, and tends to de-emphasize it, perhaps even denigrate it.

The essay shares one characteristic with a great many others: it's quite general, and though Irmscher speaks of his program, the specifics are missing, so that, while he notes every TA receives a syllabus, that syllabus itself isn't discussed at all.

This means that Irmscher's discussion is a good overview of a program, but not much of a guide for the director of composition who wishes to train TAs. Of course, if the program seems sympatico, one can always write William Irmscher at the University of Washington.

Richard Van Der Weghe's article ("Linking Pedagogy to Purpose for Teaching Assistants in Basic Writing") has a little different slant from Irmscher's. He sees the purpose of their training as "linking pedagogy by helping TAs see how theory, research, and practice are interconnected." (37) This is done in an orientation session and "vigorous" workshops.

The orientation session consists of massive doses of Britton, Moffett, Elbow, Shaughnessey, Graves, and others. The conference is, as Van Der Weghe notes, full of current stances: an active, process-oriented, collaborative setting, with all that is being preached being practiced: free writing, journal-keeping, pre-writing, writing, rewriting, editing, peer collaboration, showing writing, and conferences. Nothing seems to be missing.

The vigorous workshops occur not at the beginning of the year (the seminar, Van Der Weghe admits, is "all talk and mostly theory"), but during the school year.

The workshops themselves are not "how-to-do-it" band-aids for panicky TAs, but in-depth examinations of a variety of topics. Among the things covered in the workshops (and explained in the article) are writing apprehension, assignment making, and peer editing groups.

So, Van Der Weghe's article is more pointed toward actually training the TAs than Irmscher's is, and probably more of a complete model for the administrator who wants to train new instructors. Even so, it's not much more than a blueprint.

The article by Nancy Comely ("The Teaching Seminar: Writing Isn't Just Rhetoric") begins ominously. After the colonized title, mine eye was

drawn to the first heading: A Fragmented Profession. Others follow: Readers as Writers (50); Literature in the Composition Class (53); and finally, The Teaching Seminar (55). A quick trip to the calculator, and I figure out that, with one page for bibliography, Professor Comely has 1½ pages to devote to the seminar.

What we have is a polemic. The chord is struck early on, when Professor Comely notes (referring, perhaps unconsciously, to the articles by Irmscher, Van Der Weghe and others):

With their single-minded emphasis on composition, they reinforce the existing split between writing and literature. (47)

That split, one assumes, is not a good thing (an assumption I disagree with). I wasn't even aware, silly me, that *composition* as a field excludes *writing and literature*.

The bulk of the essay is, for the most part, Comely's attempt to create an atmosphere in which the "notorious gaps" (47) that exist between lit, creative writing, and comp people might be bridged. She does make one point that bears repeating: it would be well if the literature people would get off their assonances and learn to teach writing.

When Comely does address the subject of the seminar, her remarks are (of necessity) very general, consisting of a listing, more or less, of the items that one should cover in a seminar. These suggestions make a good deal of sense, and one wishes there were more information in the suggestions.

For instance, Comely notes that one of the important parts of the seminar is "the creation, testing, and analysis of a writing assignment." (56) Apparently, each TA has to construct, use, and report on one assignment that he or she used in the classroom, including such things as what the purpose of the assignment was, and how well things went.

Well and good. Again, though, my soul thirsts for some more information. Are there any guidelines established? Are there any validation procedures or is it all seat of the pants?

In fine, my complaint with Comely's article is the same as with most of the articles in the book: there's just not enough information. In fact, it's almost as if they were all given the essay assignment "Write a five hundred word theme on training TAs" and not told of the audience expectations at all.

Ones I Liked

I liked those essays that immediately got down to some specifics; that allowed the composition chair to walk into the hall, book in hand, and

start shouting orders. Two that I thought especially appropriate were the essays by Larson and Burnham.

Richard Larson's "Making Assignments, Judging Writing, and Annotating Papers: Some Suggestions" was just what the title says—some suggestions. And good ones, too. He starts with assignments; a good place to start, since a great deal of bad writing begins with bad assignments. He then moves to general comments on judging writing, and finally to comments on commenting on students' essays. Since I don't believe in this last, I can say only that if you must comment on students' papers, Larson's ideas are as good as any and better than most.

Christopher Burnham's "Portfolio Evaluation: Room to Breathe and Grow" is ironically one of the best, most pointed, most beneficial essays in the entire collection, but not on TA training at all. It is an explanation of, and a rationale for, the portfolio system of paper grading. Read and enjoy.

