

Teaching TAs to Teach: Show, Don't Tell

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Last fall marked my tenth year of teaching college students. Like most English professors, I began as a Teaching Assistant, or TA, wholly responsible for teaching three classes a year. And like most TAs, I had never taught before. To make matters worse, I had tested out of freshman composition, so I had little idea of how the course should or should not be conducted. The only preparation I had was the traditional pre-semester workshop for new TAs.

Now when most people say they're bad, they're just being modest. But I was worst than most. Two examples illustrate my lack of expertise. First, my lectures—and I did lecture—were taken verbatim from the instructor's manual at the back of the textbook. Occasionally I'd paraphrase. To supplement my lectures, I designed additional, stimulating discussions from the *Harbrace Handbook*. But the real proof of my inexperience occurred the first time my teaching was observed.

Promptly at 8 a.m., I started in bravely as my supervisor, Joe Trimmer, sat in the back, observing and taking notes. I had my "lecture" prepared, I had developed some thought-provoking questions, I had devised some engaging exercises, and I planned to do some board work. More than enough work for a full period.

By 8:15, I was done. I had exhausted my material! I managed to add five more minutes by asking for questions about the next assignment. But by 8:20, I had to dismiss class. I had no idea what to do with the rest of the period.

In 1977, my experience and training were not atypical; in 1987, TA training remained much the same. According to a recent MLA study, 75% of graduate programs "immediately place . . . first-year graduate students in the classroom" (Diogenes, et al., 52). To prepare them, we still rely primarily on pre-semester workshops, monthly in-service meetings, consultations with mentors, and the "trial by fire" of classroom observations. These are helpful to some extent. But they have not kept pace with changes in the composition classroom.

We all know that the past few years have seen new directions for the teaching of composition. Traditional lecturing is gone. We have realized,

as Donald Murray says, that when the teacher is talking, the students aren't writing. Consequently, the writing class has become a discourse community, a place for collaborative learning. We have learned, as John Trimbur points out, "the importance of social interaction to learning how to write" (87). As we have come to recognize writing as a social act, we have surrendered our authority as teachers; we're willing to help our students by letting them work together in small groups. By implementing these changes, composition teachers have met the challenge put forth by the Carnegie Forum's Task Force on Teaching: we have helped our students become "active learners, busily engaged in the process of bringing new knowledge and new ways to knowing" (30). Our focus has shifted from "the passive acquisition of facts and routines to the active application of ideas to problems" (45). In sum, we have quit telling our students how to write; instead, we are now showing them.

But that's not the case when our students are TAs. Pre-semester workshops tell them how to start teaching. Classroom observers tell them how to improve their teaching. In-service meetings tell them different solutions to teaching problems. None of these show them how to teach. Jerome Bruner states that for learning to take place, students need demonstration of, engagement with, and sensitivity to the learning task. Workshops, observations, and meetings demonstrate what needs to be learned. But for learning to occur, the TAs, just like our undergraduate students, must be actively engaged. Teaching might appear the most logical engagement. But here again, the TAs are learning by trial and error. What we need are training programs that parallel teaching strategies in the composition classroom—programs that shift "from the passive acquisition of facts and routines to the active application of ideas to problems" (45).

During fall semester, 1986, I began research on a TA training program that would address this problem. At that time, I was beginning my second year as WPA at Drake University. I had inherited four TAs who had gone through the traditional training program: they participated in a two-day pre-semester workshop, after which they were responsible for teaching two freshman composition courses per semester; they were observed twice a semester; and they participated in monthly in-service meetings. I felt they needed a new and different training program.

The primary goal of this research project was to show the TAs different pedagogical approaches and strategies used by English professors to make them aware of their effects on different types of students. The secondary goal was to introduce the TAs to empirical research by having them participate in designing the project, making observations, and collecting data.

To reach these goals was a seven-step process: the TAs were to select a professor's class to observe; administer a personality inventory to the professors and their students; use the inventory results to choose interview subjects; interview the professors and at least one of their students once a month; conduct monthly course evaluations with the entire class; analyze their taped interviews; and present their findings in a final meeting with me and the participating professors at the end of the academic year.

Fall Semester—The Pilot Project

Following Dewey's theory of education—that learning should be experienced and not something imposed by the teacher—the first step was to involve the TAs in the project's methodology. During fall semester, we all took the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory and listened to Drake's psychometrist explain what our answers meant. Taking the test involved TAs in the project by making them aware of their own personality types and possible effects on their students. It also showed them how to administer the test so they could explain it to their professors and chosen classes.

I chose the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory because of its validity and applicability to this type of research. The *Mental Measurements Yearbook* says its purpose is not "to measure people, but to sort them into groups." The Myers-Briggs is intended for normal people and is non-judgmental, which aids in sharing the results with the test-ee (1030).

The inventory is based on Jung's type theory, which views personality types in terms of polarities: introvert/extrovert, intuitive/sensing, feeling/thinking, and perceptive/judging. "According to type theory, an individual's four preferences or dichotomies interact. Given the four dichotomies, sixteen different four-letter types are possible" (1030). Individual profiles have specific characteristics associated with them. The ISTJ (introvert-sensing-thinking-judging) type, for example, was described as serious, quiet, practical, orderly, logical, realistic, dependable. In explaining these characteristics, the psychometrist also pointed out how certain personality types influence and annoy opposing types. All of these findings seemed pertinent to our teaching, since our personalities are bound to clash with some of our students, and vice versa. Understanding these differences could thus help resolve or explain classroom tensions.

The second step in the research project was to involve the TAs in the design of interview questions and in-class course evaluations. The TAs used these in their own classrooms during fall semester to test their

effectiveness; we then planned to fine-tune them for spring for use in their professors' classes. We ended up with six questions:

1. What is working well? (i.e., lectures, class discussions, editing, writing, etc.)
2. Why is it (are they) working?
3. What isn't working well?
4. Why isn't (aren't) some thing(s) working?
5. What are you learning?
6. What problems are you having?

These questions served a number of purposes. Designing them made the TAs think about what type of feedback they'd like from their own students; administering the evaluation during the semester helped them refine or revise their course as it progressed rather than after it ended. Giving the in-course evaluations also helped to further break down the barriers between instructor and students, so that a line of communication was established which went beyond classroom discussion and written responses to essays. Finally, asking the students' opinions and responding to them added another dimension to collaborative learning—it moved the students from passive "victims" to active participants in the learning process.

Spring Semester—The Research

The Interviews

At the end of fall semester, the TAs selected their professors and explained the research project to them. Because the purpose of this project was to make the TAs aware of teaching strategies, selection was not limited to teachers of writing. They could choose any professor whose teaching they admired. The TAs' choices yielded an interesting (if small) mix of age, sex, personality and teaching style: there were two males and two females ranging in age from 34-57. Two taught composition; two taught literature. One was extremely conservative and traditional; two were liberal and innovative; one was intense and dramatic.

On the first day of class, the TAs gave the Myers-Briggs to the professors and their students. Based on their profiles, three of the TAs selected one student who was exactly the opposite of the professor. These students were to be interviewed throughout the semester to see if their personality type influenced their response to the professor, the teaching strategies used, and the material learned. The fourth TA, who

was fulfilling the requirements of an internship, selected three students—one just like the professor, one opposite, and one in the middle—to provide a wider basis for comparison.

The TAs had prepared three sets of interview questions. The first set was generic, to be used for the professor, the interviewees, and as in-class evaluations. It consisted of the six questions above: what's working? why is it? what isn't working? why isn't it? what are you learning? and what problems are you having?

The second set was for the student interviews. These asked: what expectations of the class did you have? what surprises have you found? how do the writing assignments relate to you and to the purposes of this class? and how do you perceive yourself as a reader and writer? In addition to the generic questions above, these were used as starting points for monthly tape-recorded interviews, with the expectation that as the students relaxed, they would expand on their answers. We also continued to use them to see if the students' answers would change as the semester progressed.

The third set of questions was for the professor alone. These asked: why did you go into the profession? how would you describe your classroom 'voice'? how does this voice differ from your out-of-class voice? what is your relationship with your students? what is the most important element of your profession? and what is the students' role in your classroom? During monthly interviews, the TAs asked their professors the generic questions as starting points. This last set was used at the beginning and end of the semester to see if the professors' answers had changed as a result of their recent teaching experience.

In-Class Course Evaluations

At least twice during the semester, the TAs also administered course evaluations to their professor's class, asking them the generic questions (what's working, etc.). Since the TAs were interviewing only a few students, they used the evaluations to add some depth to and establish validity for our findings. To maintain the students' anonymity but simultaneously code the evaluations, we asked them to put their Myers-Briggs personality types—the four-letter profile—on them. Thus we were able to cross-check their answers with those from the interviews.

Monthly In-Service Meetings

To keep the interviews on schedule and to use them as a learning tool, we discussed their results in our monthly meetings. Each month, we invited two of the participating professors to attend so

that they could give their opinions about their students' answers and their feelings about how the class was going. During our next-to-last meeting, we put together a final evaluation which expanded upon the second set of interview questions. We wanted to make the final evaluation more explicit so that the students would provide more than the one-word answers we often get on the last day of class.

The responses to these final questions and to the interviews formed the basis for discussion at our final meeting of the year. These discussions included a description of the professor's teaching strategies, the students' reactions to the professor's teaching, the application of these findings to the TAs' own teaching, and an attempt to discover some correlations between personality and teaching effectiveness. All of the professors were invited to hear what the TAs had learned and were encouraged to respond to these findings and to present their own thoughts on the efficacy of their class and this project.

Results of the Project

Teaching Strategies

The TAs observed two types of approaches: traditional and innovative. The traditional was what you might expect. The American literature professor lectured, believing he brought "order to the chaos of the students' minds." There was no room for questions and little desire to discuss different opinions. The students were expected, for the most part, to write papers and essay exams which echoed the professor's lectures.

The innovative professors used a variety of teaching strategies. The business writing professor relied heavily on small group work to discuss and organize projects and to critique peer writing. The Honors English instructor used non-traditional texts—essays on the composing process—and required his students to complete and analyze an oral protocol of their writing process. The students were not told why this approach was used, nor what the texts were "about." They had to discover their own purpose and process, and present these in class discussion. The Shakespeare professor also chose not to lecture. She assigned the plays and raised points to consider, but left class discussions wide open. The students had absolute freedom to generate ideas and to make gut-level reactions in class, but were expected to justify them in their written work.

Students' Reactions

When the semester began, the TAs found that the students in the innovative classrooms resented their professors' approaches. These students complained that the professors didn't lecture or outline the important points, that the purpose of the reading assignments wasn't clear, that they disliked relying on themselves and their peers for an understanding of the work. The student in the traditional classroom, however, began the semester comfortably. She accepted her instructor's approach because it fulfilled her expectations of what a professor "should be."

As the semester progressed, these feelings changed. The students engaged in collaborative learning slowly began to understand what was happening. In Business Writing, the finance major who initially complained about the worthlessness of small group work came to believe that his writing had improved as much from the interaction in peer editing groups as from the professor's feedback. In Honors English, the math major who disliked writing and had no love for the language found that when he took responsibility for discussing essays on composing, the proverbial "lightbulb" came on—he began to understand how and why he wrote. This independent search for understanding led to a new respect for writing. In Shakespeare, the theatre major who wanted to be told what the plays "meant" discovered that participating in class discussions led him to write an essay which the professor praised and urged him to develop. Not surprisingly, he came to value the collaborative approach.

The student in the traditional classroom did not fare as well. Although she began the semester welcoming the professor's staid approach, she soon grew uncomfortable. She wanted to discuss what she'd read. She believed that other interpretations were equally valid, then felt guilty for her thoughts. Consequently, when the professor finally allowed the students to choose a paper topic, she tried to write on what she thought the professor wanted. Each topic became more convoluted and frustrating, until the professor finally convinced her that on this assignment, she really was free to pursue her own interests. Only then did she begin to enjoy her writing.

Applications to Teaching

This project showed the TAs that students come into the classroom with certain expectations. Based on prior educational experiences, they expect learning to be passive. They expect to be told what to know. When their initial expectations aren't met, the students' reactions are often negative. They feel threatened because they aren't used to independent thinking. Such attitudes could create problems for TAs trying new strategies and

perhaps make them hesitate to break out of the traditional mode of teaching. However, this study showed them that despite the students' initial reactions and regardless of personality type, when they became involved in their learning, their attitudes changed. The TAs saw that students enjoy making discoveries; they blossom when their opinions are valued. Equally important, the TAs discovered that collaborative learning is as important in the literature classroom as it is in composition. Since many TAs will eventually teach literature, such findings are especially important for their future careers.

Analysis of the Project

Caveats

I was generally pleased with the results of this project. Nevertheless, there are some elements which need to be recognized as potential trouble spots. Some of these were apparent at the time; others have emerged as I prepare to replicate this study at another institution.

Possibly the largest potential problem is the time element. Developing the questions for interviews, administering the Myers-Briggs test and monthly course evaluations, interviewing student and professor once a month, analyzing the data for monthly meetings, attending the meetings, and preparing a report at the end of the semester involved more time than TAs may be willing to expend on a non-credit requirement. I would estimate that they worked approximately three hours a month, plus an additional three hours altogether at the beginning and end of the semester. That doesn't seem like a lot, but wedged in with teaching, grading, and doing their own coursework, some might resent the imposition on their time. What resentment I encountered was in inverse proportion to the TAs' commitment to teaching and graduate work, probably not an uncommon ratio.

There was slightly more reluctance on the part of the faculty. Half didn't like to give up class time for the Myers-Briggs or for the course evaluations, and, particularly with the latter, their attitudes affected the amount of time and thought the students devoted to their answers. For the final course evaluation, we tried to alleviate this by asking the students to complete the evaluations out of class, but then some didn't do them at all. In both instances, the problem stemmed from the professors' attitudes. A logical solution would be to let them know exactly how much of their time is involved, and how much their cooperation is necessary to the successful completion of the project. With this knowledge, they can decide whether to participate in the project or not.

An understanding of the project may still have no effect on attitudes, however, once the interviews begin. Despite an initial explanation, one professor found the interviews and observations very threatening. He balked after the first interview and essentially repeated himself whenever he could be "cornered" thereafter. While his reactions produced some interesting data, the TA interviewing him suffered throughout the semester. The most obvious advice here would be to take more care in selecting participants; however, too much caution could preclude observation of a variety of personality types and teaching styles, which could limit the usefulness of the findings.

Selecting subjects is also affected by the size and type of the institution. Drake is a small, private university. While size limited the number of faculty to choose from, it also meant that the TAs knew their professors pretty well, which aided in their selection. A larger university will offer a wider pool of professors to draw from, but may have the disadvantage of unfamiliarity. A university's size also affects the number of TAs involved in the program. Clearly, a small number is easier to manage and supervise. However, at a larger institution with a Ph.D. program, the TAs might be more committed to research. But this commitment may also be affected by the TAs' teaching experience.

When I proposed this project at Drake, my TAs were in the third year of their assistantships. Consequently, they had tired of the monthly "in-service" meetings and were ready for something more challenging. Upon presenting this same project to my present TAs in a two-year MA program, however, I encountered much more resistance, for they felt the need of additional in-service training. But there are ways to meet the TAs' needs while also involving them in non-traditional training. As the findings indicated, the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory is not an essential element. More important are the interviews and classroom observations. For less experienced TAs, the project can be scaled down to include only these elements with observations limited to experienced composition teachers. Such a focus would be less time consuming, and, perhaps, more obviously instructional.

Problems such as these can be recognized and avoided if the WPA is thoroughly acquainted with the job and the institution. For this reason, I'd recommend that a new WPA not undertake such a project immediately. Management theory suggests we get to know the present system and try it out. New WPAs need time to build rapport and relationships with TAs and colleagues so that they will respect and be willing to undertake such a project. WPAs also need time to become acquainted with what services the university has to offer, such as distributing and evaluating tests; what restrictions they may have regarding use of human subjects; and what grants may be available to underwrite the costs of the project.

Accomplishments

Once the WPA has amassed knowledge and support, this project is not only workable, it's valuable. As a rule, TAs teach only freshman composition. This project allowed them to observe professors teaching Shakespeare, American Literature, Business Writing, and Honors English. While I realize TAs may take some of these as graduate courses, this project changed their points of view from students to nascent teachers. Their observations showed not only that collaborative learning can work outside the composition classroom, but also that there are different types of teaching strategies to use.

All of the professors observed were informed and experienced; nevertheless, the TAs discovered that knowledge alone did not guarantee success in the classroom. Rather, the TAs saw the truth of what they'd been told: classes which moved beyond lecturing and actively engaged the students seemed to produce better attitudes towards learning. These findings led TAs to believe that learning in turn would be enhanced.

Finally, the TAs saw that teacher personality need not adversely affect students' learning. They learned that professors were able to reach all of their students by actively involving them in the learning process. These discoveries in turn led to professional growth and involvement. Two of the TAs involved in this project developed proposals discussing their findings which were presented at the 1988 Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Conclusions

While these findings may be obvious to us seasoned professionals, they come as significant revelations to new teachers. Our TAs are products of the same educational system as their students. Consequently, they have many of the same expectations of what a college classroom should be. They will be hesitant to surrender their newly-won authority. They will feel the need to tell their students what to do. Lacking a solid background in composition theory, unaware of what the composing process entails, they may be tempted to lecture.

Reading about teaching strategies, being told what should be incorporated, or discussing different approaches to teaching does not have the same impact as showing their effects on students. If we expect our TAs to move beyond the bounds of the traditional composition classroom, their training should parallel the new pedagogical approaches. Classroom research shows TAs how to teach. And showing the TAs how to teach has the same effects as showing our students how to write: by engaging them in the process, they learn much more than they would as passive recipients.

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