

A New Crop of Teaching Assistants and How They Grew

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As I look around the lounge, I see twenty-seven diverse people: twenty-four to forty-six-years-old, male and female, beautiful and plain. There are three librarians, a technical writer, a junior high science and three high school English teachers, a journalist, a white water guide, an Alaskan tour bus driver. Some are aspiring creative writers while others dream of becoming literary scholars. They sit quietly, not talking to each other. It seems they have only one thing in common--TERROR--terror at being new teaching assistants.

I, too, am somewhat terrified. Can I help these people learn enough to alleviate their fears, to get them through a semester of teaching two sections of English 101? I realize what a paradox it is to be a writing program administrator in charge of training new teaching assistants: we're in these positions because we have experience and, ideally, because we have had success in the classroom. However, having a proven "track record" doesn't ensure that we will accurately remember what it's like to be a new teacher. How can we give information about what is now second nature to us?

The best thing we can do is listen carefully to new TAs, so we can help other beginners. To this end, I ask the TAs to keep journals about their teaching from which they write reports at the end of their first semesters. The reports are to describe where they started and to assess what and from whom they learned.

After I received these end-of-term reports, my belief in the value of orientation activities, support courses, a relationship with a mentor, and the experience of teaching itself is reaffirmed. The insights the TAs recorded are important for both WPAs and other beginning teachers as well. I present here a summary of what the TAs recognized about their growth as teachers, using their words as much as possible.

SEEDS: FIRST THOUGHTS AND EXPERIENCES

For many of the teaching assistants, the panic I saw that first day of orientation began even earlier when they learned of being awarded a

teaching assistantship. One of the new TAs marveled "at the fools who'd let me into this University of New Mexico." She writes, even though "I'd been at ease with the idea of writing ever since I first curled my fat fingers around a crayon, . . . I'd never learned the rules." Another wonders how UNM could let someone with only a Bachelor's degree teach a university course. One of the more experienced teachers knew she could teach junior high, but she didn't know if she could teach writing because she herself didn't enjoy writing as she thought a "true writing teacher should." Although five of the TAs had teaching experience, others had never thought of or even wanted to be teachers. One admits, "I assiduously avoided all education courses (while getting my undergraduate degree) because the thought of teaching English made my blood run cold." She "thought all the education majors seemed overly earnest, were out to save the world, and had cotton candy for brains." Most TAs question their abilities to teach: Melanie thought, "I did not know how I--the student--could become her--the teacher."

The week of orientation--filled with workshops, meetings, and social gatherings for the beginning and experienced TAs and instructors--helps alleviate some of the initial fears but adds others. Dave, who feels "like a green recruit sitting in awe before the battle-scarred veterans," likes listening to "the war stories of the experienced teachers." Most of the inexperienced find out teaching might not be as "horrific" as they expected because there are experienced teachers and other support programs on campus to help. Some are disappointed, however. Don, for example, discovers that his notion of the "vibrant," eager student might be inaccurate. Likewise, Dave's "grand, abstract idea" of doing away with the five-paragraph essay begins "to feel like a cross between an outdated 1960's free-form religion and some sort of neo-Thoreauvian work ethic. They work fine in the woods, but this is the real world." For most, the best part of orientation is having coffee and conversation in which they discover others are as nervous as they are.

As the first day of classes arrives, a different kind of fear sets in. Even though a support system exists for them on campus, the TAs realize they will be alone in front of their classes. More than one describes nightmares of "faceless, bodiless students." To prepare for meeting these students, David wrote his lecture on the need for writing skills while Eddie rehearsed "his opening speech a hundred times out loud and a thousand times silently." One TA remembers being afraid she "would not come off tough enough in the beginning." Another had the opposite concern: she didn't want to be an "authority figure who had to wear a skirt."

The TAs lived through those first classes, though. Eddie was relieved when the students in his first class were polite enough not to point out he had misspelled his name on the chalkboard. Mary also survived her "perspiring palms and Velcro tongue" by writing cues in her notes like "BREATHE," "SLOW DOWN." Like others with prepared lectures, Tim found himself "standing stupidly in front of a room of glazed eyeballs, wondering what to do next," when he had delivered all of his notes. Jenny remembers the first day a little differently. In her journal, she wrote

For 12 years, it had been us and them, the students and the teachers. Even after I learned that teachers were human and that teachers could be friends, there was still an invisible line between us. . . . I crossed to the other side of that line today.

The TAs, of course, did not change overnight, but they did change. Some settled in quickly while others, like Donna, "didn't feel too comfortable coming from behind my teacher's table for many weeks." She writes that her "Mt. Rushmore School of Teaching . . . thankfully . . . got better." From the most inexperienced and frightened to the more relaxed, all of the TAs grew.

GROWTH: LEARNING

Learning about Teaching

Experienced teachers of writing don't spend time lecturing, but this is the method of teaching with which graduate students are familiar, so the teaching assistants discovered their most important job was undoing years of lecture indoctrination. They had to find ways to establish a comfortable atmosphere and create activities to encourage the development of reading and writing skills. Monday night seminar became a place for generating these ideas for the next week and sharing successes and failures of the previous week. The end-of-term reports gave the TAs a chance to reflect on, then highlight, the most significant of these lessons. Beth learned to give students "as much control in the class as possible." Like Beth, Lynne discovered the students and she could "figure things out together"; she didn't have to have all of the answers. Jeff saw he could be a "coach." But, like so many, Dave found out that, while he could break the barrier established between teacher and student in one of his classes, he couldn't

in the other. This "curious contrast" taught many that a good instructor has to be able to evaluate the class and be flexible. Lori says she had to achieve "a balance between having expectations of my students and demonstrating flexibility and understanding." Many also mention their need to motivate students. To do this, Tim discovered that his own enthusiasm for reading and writing were often "contagious," so he tried to talk honestly about his reactions to an essay or his enjoyment of writing. Eddie had to rethink his idea of the value of teaching grammar; after a few weeks, he admits "learning English grammar does not make a student a better writer. I need to teach them how to *use* the language," not just *study* it. The TAs all learned there are "no easy answers to the riddle of teaching composition"; much is "the result of trial and error." Dave gave up his notion of the "free-form" essay and "gave a detailed listing of the standard essay format" while encouraging the students "to bend it, work against it." Another also discovered she "had to give them some format." Her classes were full of games "to let students play at writing"; however, although the students were having fun, she realized this, by itself, doesn't guarantee writing improvement.

Nearly all of the teaching assistants felt grading was the most difficult part of their new experience as writing teachers. Melanie describes the "visible tension" when she returned papers. It wasn't just the students who were tense, though: Lori "had no idea how disheartening it would be to grade that first batch of essays, looking for strengths amidst overwhelmingly apparent problems." She recalls, "I was discouraged, and my students were angry. One slammed out of the room. A few looked close to tears, and another confronted me after class saying that he couldn't accept a C-." Pru's first experience grading notebooks was similar. Her students "said they hated English, that their teacher was too young, and that they were all into business and engineering." She was "ready to quit." For many, the grading didn't become any easier. Melanie admits, "I still tote my students' essays around with me for days before I'm able to start grading them." For Ginny, grading is "easier than it was in the beginning of the semester," but "it still requires hours of my time."

Learning about Students

While learning about structuring classes and grading essays, the TAs were also learning about the students they faced two or three times a week. Many TAs went to their mentors with questions about students. Although these experienced instructors gave suggestions or comments, learning about

students is an individual activity for the TAs. The most obvious realization is that the freshmen are more frightened of the teaching assistants than the TAs are of the freshmen! This was just the first of many preconceived ideas which some TAs reconsidered. Jeff, for example, thought the students would do what he told them as they had when he was a tutor. Some didn't. Equally optimistic were the preconceptions that all students would have basic writing skills because they had been placed by an ACT score and that they "would already be readers and writers." Many weren't. The TAs learned to talk to their mentors and peers about separating their expectations, both realistic and unrealistic, from reality.

Perhaps the most important thing the TAs hadn't anticipated was the individuality of teaching writing: "not all students will respond to me." The TAs also were surprised that for many students the "true objective" was "passing the course"--not "developing good writing skills." Despite this goal, or maybe because of it, some found students following the advice the TAs gave, coming in to discuss problems, and "eager to help each other." Don learned he was expecting too much from his students. Once he began to show more patience and not expect "huge gains," he saw more progress, but this was not without interruptions. In his journal he recorded the following supposition:

I wonder if writing's like weight-lifting: that is, the first time these reading and writing muscles are exposed to real labor, they probably strengthen very quickly--to a point, then they probably (I hope not, but I'm thinking so) hit a plateau and level off for awhile.

Fortunately, this leveling didn't last the entire semester. Beth saw that by the end of the semester "the students (were) not waiting passively for my responses and for my answers; they (were) actively pursuing their own." Like her, Jeff realized, "Once I got my ego out of my own way and out of the class's way," often the students taught themselves.

In their reports, all of the TAs shared at least one story about a specific student from whom they had learned. Pru had the pleasure of hearing a student, who had taken 101 three times, say that she was the first teacher to help him. Virginia remembers her student who had cerebral palsy, "whose speech was almost incomprehensible and who went nowhere without her aide": she "trusted me enough to come alone in her electric wheelchair to my office to ask about rewriting a paper." Donna recounts the story of an "avowed non-reader" who said she reread an essay because Donna had said she liked it.

Learning from Others

These experiences show that the TAs benefited from being in the classroom and working with students. However, they also learned through interaction with experienced instructors and other TAs. Mary, who observed an experienced teacher as part of a mentor program, feels she gained such important skills as time management, discussion techniques, and most important, how to laugh. The required teaching practicum, which met once a week for three hours, gave the TAs ideas on "what to do tomorrow." Because they all taught the same syllabus for the first eight weeks, the TAs were able to discuss plans, reactions, and results in the practicum. David says the practicum "gave me a skeleton around which I could build a class." He also admits that the discussions helped him know what he "was failing to present." The theory course, taken by teaching assistants with no previous rhetoric background, gave a framework on which to base practice and encouraged them to do further reading. Many cited such authors as Kinneavy, Booth, Elbow, Reither, Moffett, and Murray as influences. Of course, other TAs were a major source of inspiration and commiseration as well. Marilyn describes these interactions as a "self-help group." Mary agrees: The group helped her "find a way off the island of isolation that I was on when I first started teaching."

MATURITY: EMERGING TEACHERS

Because of these relationships and experiences, the TAs developed definite attitudes toward teaching. They learned not to prepare lecture notes but to design activities to promote reading and writing skills. They also discovered they must keep a sense of humor and not be offended if something or someone fails. Most agreed with Marilyn: "The more I learn about teaching composition, the more I feel I need to learn." The new recruits had experienced the positive power they had in the classroom as well as what Lori called "the (unwanted) power to intimidate, to silence, and to repress." Jennie sums up this problem with power: "When people trust you to lead them, the temptation is to lead all the time, not just when it's needed." There are no "easy answers" and seldom any absolutely "right answers."

Through their sharing with each other and experienced instructors and being in the classroom, these new teaching assistants have grown to be outstanding instructors. In fact, all but one (who decided on law school)

are still teaching. Fortunately, they didn't give up their original goals to do this. Two recently defended their creative writing theses; five more have finished their master's degrees in literature. Nine are pursuing doctoral degrees in literature; five have given papers at CCCC. The TAs and I now share more than terror! We agree with Don who wrote, "Strangely enough, in discovering the hard work, the agony, and the frustration teaching entails, I have grown to love it more than I ever thought I would."



Helping TAs Across the Curriculum Teach Writing: An Additional Use for the *TA Handbook*

Ellen Strenski

Graduate student teaching assistants do much of the responding to student writing on university campuses. TAs usually outnumber faculty, and since TAs are often themselves future faculty, TA development is an exceptionally cost-effective investment of a WPA's time and energy with both pedagogical and political payoffs. This article recommends one easy way that a WPA can influence TAs—by providing copy about undergraduate writing for publication in the campus *TA Handbook*.¹

Most universities have some kind of handbook given to campus TAs. Usually titled "Handbook," as in *Handbook for Teaching Assistants* (Delaware), or *A Handbook of Resources for New Instructors at UTK* (Tennessee, Knoxville), they also appear under such names as *Instructional Resource Book for Teaching at UNL* (Nebraska-Lincoln) or *Pathfinder: An Introduction to Teaching at UNR for Teaching Assistants* (Nevada, Reno). Some are published under the auspices of a special office, like the Texas A & M University Center for Teaching Excellence. Others, like Rutgers' or the University of California at Irvine's, are sponsored by their Graduate Divisions, and some are prepared jointly, like the University of Georgia's. At the least, these handbooks describe bureaucratic issues such as class rosters and record keeping. At best, they are complete "How To" manuals for good teaching. Most fall in the first category.

As for authors, these handbooks are written by one or more graduate students (an English Department graduate student at Brown), or by one or

more administrators (at the University of Texas at Austin), or are compilations of various pre-existing documents, (such as the University of Arizona's). Academic backgrounds of authors range across the curriculum, with a representative sprinkling from English and Education, but including other disciplines too. Few, if any, are faculty, certainly not English or Writing faculty.

Not surprisingly, then, composition specialists will find most of these TA handbooks unenlightened about student writing. Of approximately 50 different TA handbooks I examined, the most common co-occurrence with the topic "writing" was the topic "cheating." That is, if undergraduate writing was discussed at all, it was in the context of helping TAs discourage plagiarism, and every handbook referred to plagiarism and the university's policies about it, sometimes within a discussion of "ethics" rather than writing.

The number two writing topic discussed was "grading," often synonymous with "correcting" papers, and usually in a context exhorting TAs to judge student work by the public, supposedly agreed-upon, standards described in its University catalog (A=excellent, B=good, etc.). The third most common co-occurrence was information about other available help on campus (like tutorial or writing centers). Although some of these TA handbooks are excellent, most do not even mention topics like ungraded writing, drafts, assignment design, peer editing, or commenting on papers.

Most authors of these TA handbooks clearly do not know about recent advances in our understanding of the thinking-writing process. Moreover, these handbooks for TAs are much less enlightened than comparable guides for campus faculty, probably because only a few campuses with strong WAC programs, like La Salle College or the University of California at Davis, have such faculty publications, whereas almost every university has some kind of generic handbook for TAs.

Although more and more universities are now instituting regular TA training seminars to instruct graduate students in various pedagogical issues, including handling undergraduate writing, much TA development is still perfunctory at best. A 1986 MLA survey found that under 60% of Ph.D.-granting English Departments provided courses or internships to prepare their graduate students to be TAs. What about the other 40%? And what about the teaching preparation of TAs in departments other than English, departments that inevitably pay less attention to undergraduate writing?