Harvey S. Wiener

PREPARING THE TEACHER OF WRITING

In her article, "Those Undertrained Ph.D.'s in English," Gertrude S. Fujii raises important issues about the qualifications of college teachers. Ph.D.'s in English, she says, are not by their intense work in literature overqualified, as some have argued, to teach the freshman writing courses filling most English instructors' programs these days. Her point is that these Ph.D's, fresh from graduate school and unskilled in teaching the rudiments of the language, are undertrained. For these teachers, limited in experience with concepts in grammar and spelling, Fujii maintains it is insufficient "to be able to recognize a structural error in a sentence. The teacher must be able to explain why it is an error and must understand the principle that makes it an error."[1] Fujii's point is not unfamiliar: good graduate instruction would train Ph.D.'s to teach freshmen how to correct their mistakes. Yet, anyone teaching basic writing over the last decade knows that before students can address error—and certainly they *must* address it—they must understand and practice the writing process in order to learn to think of themselves as writers. The instructor's task is as much an effort to bring about synthesis as it is a guide to analysis.

I do not quarrel with requiring good language skills of college writing teachers or with the assertion that training at our graduate schools does not adequately prepare teachers of English to meet classroom challenges today. The interesting question for me is just what aggregate of skills and talents *will* qualify an instructor to help beginning students best in becoming writers? Four years ago when I addressed a related question, I raised ten more that focused on what seemed to me then and now as well

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[1] Gertrude S. Fujii, "Those Undertrained Ph.D.'s in English," *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* 23 February 1981, p. 25.

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to be essential skills for instructors who teach writing. I return to this issue of qualifications, however, for several reasons.

First, I believe that the profession, through its national organizations, is turning its attention at last to college teaching and to the best way to prepare those who will have to do the job in the next decades. At open hearings, Modern Language Association members have pressed MLA's Commission on the Future of the Profession, for example, to address in its final report the issue of appropriate graduate preparation. There is reluctance to charge colleges of education with responsibility for prescribing correct programs for college writing instructors, given a general dissatisfaction with past and current programs of teacher preparation and a growing awareness that specialists with advanced degrees in language and literature should assume a more active role than before in training their future colleagues. Only professors of content in the profession can help avoid what Francis Bacon calls in *The Advancement of Learning* "the over-early and peremptory reduction of knowledge into arts and methods."

Second, I note the growth in size and number of graduate programs in teaching writing over the last few years. That, too, encourages me to discuss qualifications for instructors because I suspect that these programs, unfortunately, are mushrooming in much the same way that basic writing programs have mushroomed since 1970—in response to a perceived audience but, ironically, uninfluenced by the kind of consensus college English instructors (through the MLA and other associations) seem now just on the verge of sharing. This is a consensus that only practitioners can develop: a definition of just what successful graduate training for prospective writing teachers entails. With little agreement about what works where and for whom, programs and courses proliferate.

Third, after many years as a teacher in the basic writing classroom and in various positions as a writing program administrator where I have had to evaluate the qualifications of teaching faculty, and after a few years as an instructor of graduate students preparing for careers in writing instruction, I want to update my earlier recommendations by adding some and by elaborating upon others. And last, I want to draw together some of the important suggestions I have read and heard about suitable

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[2] Harvey S. Wiener, "Questions on Basic Skills for the Writing Teacher," *College Composition and Communication*, 28, No. 4 (1977), 321-324.

training for teachers from colleagues who have addressed this issue in a variety of forums.

I now believe that the first and most important qualification for teachers of basic writing is that they be practicing writers who apply whatever formal training or finely tuned instincts they have about the creative process, about linguistics, grammar, and stylistics, about editing, revising, and polishing a piece of work. Only teachers who write—stories, poems, novels, essays, books, speeches, articles, reports—can continue to broaden their vision of the incredible challenge that inheres in the production of words and sentences on a page. Only writers who frequently write in different contexts can develop the range of skills their beginning students require of them.

Richard Marius, head of Harvard's Expository Writing Program, points out quite correctly "that writing teachers should themselves regularly publish and that their publications should not all be about teaching writing."[3] Extending this point, James Raymond argues that teachers who are not good writers and editors will not develop as good teachers. Tracing the sorry history of language training, Raymond believes "that teachers are often insecure as writers and editors, and that the guidance they give their pupils is chancy at best." He suggests that "proper training for English teachers might reasonably include healthy doses of writing and editing courses in addition to courses that view language from the value-free perspective of linguists."[4]

Programs that provide the kind of balance Raymond suggests—I would add intensive training in literary analysis for reasons I shall come to later—are few and far between, so far as I can tell. Departments seeking teachers of basic writing advertise for those with degrees in rhetoric or in linguistics, but I have not seen much to support the idea pretty well accepted in many quarters that such programs of study make major contributions in producing teachers who write, in helping them create strategies that encourage reluctant writers to explore language, or in stimulating the kind of expansive approach to student writing that beginners require. We must await evidence that connects graduate

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[3]Richard Marius, "Faculty Indifference to Writing: A Pessimistic View," *Writing Program Administration*, 4, No. 2 (1980), 9.

[4]James C. Raymond, "Epilogue: Literacy from Five Perspectives," *Literacy as a Human Problem*, forthcoming from the University of Alabama Press.

programs in rhetoric and linguistics with the day-to-day lessons by which basic writing teachers must unravel the writer's craft.

I do not mean to suggest with my doubts, however, that I think the more traditional graduate study in literature currently prepares basic writing teachers to achieve these goals. As it stands now, the "straight English" advanced degree does not achieve them adequately either. However, it is inadvisable to reject out of hand literary training, with its demonstrable strengths, in favor of other, less proven, training. Undoubtedly, all graduate programs that prepare writing teachers must offer courses in writing, in editing, and in language study; and there must also be courses in how to teach writing to beginners offered by experienced and successful writing teachers with impressive publication records. (Strong programs over the country do include some of the training I am suggesting, but in too many institutions it is insufficient, unfocused, and intermittent.) In this sense, graduate students *are* undertrained. It is particularly ironic that at the City University of New York—where the basic writing effort began, really, with the advent of Open Admissions in 1970—there is no systematic instruction for doctoral students in the kinds of writing, editing and teaching skills demanded for the writing classroom.

Recognizing the shortcomings in graduate instruction and the dearth of hard data that would suggest the prototype for a full course of study, I am convinced, along with many colleagues, that skills in literary analysis are exactly the kinds of skills that, placed in the appropriate perspective, have the strongest potential for creating the best teachers of writing. In a paean to Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations,* Kenneth A. Bruffee establishes the perspective I am talking about. Bruffee says that Shaughnessy "puts much conventional academic research in English to shame" because she applies to the work of beginners what "other scholars in English reserve exclusively for conventional problems in literary criticism."[5] There is in this statement, of course, censure of the kind of one-track activity by which much of our profession moves. But Bruffee's point is, finally, very positive. Shaughnessy's efforts are a model for us. They imply that the teacher's goal is to make a real difference in the lives of other human beings by helping them to know and to use their minds. *Errors and Expectations,* he continues, "shows how much highly intelligent, truly sophisticated, engaged scholars can do with the tools of

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[5]Kenneth A. Bruffee, "A New Intellectual Frontier," *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 27 February 1978, p. 40.

their trade to generate new knowledge through serious research into their subject, and into the process of teaching it, at the basic and introductory level."[6]

The point I am trying to make here is that conventional training in literary analysis does equip writing teachers to deal intelligently with student prose—if they learn to apply their skills to it. I agree with Fujii when she praises the advanced degree because I believe, too, that it provides essential perceptions about literature and language and that it offers the kind of knowledge that helps not only to improve skills for students, but also to give them "appreciation of cogently expressed thought, recognition of logic and ethics, and comprehension of the greatness of the human spirit expressed through the written word."[7] Further, writing a dissertation and completing it is an experience of great value, beyond whatever contribution it might make to personal knowledge of content or to literary scholarship. The long creative effort of the thesis is the work of a writer suffering the craft; the practice with language on paper is precisely the kind of practice with process and product that teachers can learn to recall and to reexamine in developing a course of study for beginning writers. Certainly, it is not the doctoral degree in literature per se (Shaughnessy had none, although her academic training was, in fact, in literary criticism) that creates conditions for excellence in the basic writing classroom. However, the habit of mind nurtured by advanced degree programs, the kinds of insights about writing that such programs in literature cultivate, are what basic writing teachers must bring into the classroom and to a page of a beginner's efforts. Questions we ask about an essay by Bacon, a poem by Shelley, a story by Faulkner are questions we must ask in order to interpret and to evaluate student writing, too. It is regrettable, as Nancy Sommers points out, that "we have been trained to read and interpret literary texts for meaning, but, unfortunately, we do not hold the same set of assumptions for student texts as we do for literary texts."[8] Experienced writing teachers who now serve on advanced degree faculties can help correct this dislocation of assumptions. Equipped with skills for examining literary prose closely and intelligently, literature Ph.D.'s must learn to bring those skills to bear on student writing.

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[6]Ibid.

[7]Fujii, p. 25.

[8]Nancy Sommers, "Responding to Student Writing," Section A1, Conference on College Composition and Communication, Dallas, 26 March 1981.

My earlier recommendations for writing teachers were that they develop the basic skills of research and evaluation, learn to identify objectives clearly and to influence budgets, offer instruction in grammar that is appropriate to growth in writing, develop textbooks and classroom strategies for effective teaching, train others (both newcomers to the discipline and those in other subject areas), and see the task of instruction in basic writing as one emminently worth doing.[9] Still I emphasize those skills as crucial. I would add all the personal, human qualities that distinguish any professional who works with people: patience, determination, energy, dedication, sensitivity, sincerity, gentleness, honesty. There are others, certainly. Yet for the basic writing teacher, the skills I have laid out in this paper are the most important qualifications: preparation for the specialized teaching we do must continue to emphasize literary criticism, along with other language study and along with editing skills that teachers can use to help beginners. (I am not suggesting that instructors edit student writing, merely that they be able to guide students to do it.) Equally important, writing teachers must *write.* And they must learn to apply their talents as writers and as critics to the work produced by their students.

The question of how to achieve these goals as I have laid them out is by no means easy to answer. Our first response might be to create new courses; and surely, as I have suggested, we can enrich graduate programs by adding a few courses that would teach critical reading skills to advanced degree candidates and show them how to teach those skills to undergraduates and other courses that would teach non-literary research skills, rhetorical and composing process theory, and the kinds of linguistic and grammatical information useful to basic writing teachers. But given the financial conservatism currently plaguing higher education, I do not think batches of new courses are the answer.

In the first place, we must bring to masters and doctoral programs a sense of the riches in intellectual inquiry awaiting those graduate professors who teach and study writing, no matter what their particular literary interests. Shaughnessy's work already has captured the imagination of some of our best scholars and writers, among them E.D. Hirsch, Adrienne Rich, and Irving Howe, and will inspire many others. Next, we must ask literature faculty to attend more than they have in the past to the

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[9]Wiener, 321-24 *passim.*

centrality of writing—of producing pages of sustained prose—to courses currently offered for graduate students. Surely, many professors already focus in their lectures and class discussions upon the composing process as some great writer worked it through to achieve a magnum opus. We look, for example, at Milton's drafts for *Lycidas,* at Eliot's drafts for *The Wasteland,* at Fitzgerald's drafts for *Tender is the Night,* at the two editions of *Sister Carrie,* and we know that there is much to learn about the creative imagination by following the record of a writer's choices on paper. But I have more in mind when I ask for a central role for writing in the graduate program. We must help English faculty, as Elaine Maimon argues, to "formulate a consistent philosophy for teaching composition"[10] within the literature courses they now teach. Maimon points out there will be problems in developing that philosophy: "A consistent theoretical formulation of this kind requires many English teachers to break old mind-sets and to reflect seriously on unexamined prejudices about teaching composition."[11] As she notes, we must "work with English instructors, frequently senior colleagues, who were nurtured to expect that professional advancement meant no more 8:30 a.m. classes and no more teaching composition."[12]

I am not suggesting here that graduate literature faculty should teach freshman writing (although I would welcome it, certainly); but I am suggesting that they demand of their students in graduate seminars enough writing and enough good student responses to writing so that students immersed in analytic explication are, at the same time, synthesizing ideas in original prose and are reflecting on the process that stimulates sentences and paragraphs. Such an approach would require the production of drafts in a healthy collaborative setting, where students think on paper, write in an atmosphere that encourages risks with language, work with their peers, and revise, edit, and rewrite whatever they produce.

Of course, with this plan graduate instructors will need to read more of what their students write; but with students counseling each other on drafts and of course improving content, instructors will be evaluating

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[10]Elaine P. Maimon, "Writing in the Arts and Sciences: Getting Started and Gaining Momentum," *Writing Program Administration,* 4, No. 3 (1981), 9.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., p. 10.

papers at more advanced stages of completion than before. Thus, more writing for students need not mean more editing and grading for teachers. Students responsive to collaboration and guided by their teachers can evaluate the work of classmates. The instructor should see himself, ultimately, as one reader alongside others who are less skilled in subject matter, certainly, but who are no less able than the instructor to explicate the prose of their peers. Reading graduate students' papers is work not much different in kind from literary explication.

Studying in a program where more of their courses followed the plan I propose, modern graduate students along with colleagues thirty years their senior could begin to see the fruitful connections between what one studies in graduate school and what we teach in the university. And yet, it will not be easy convincing literature faculty that they can and should direct energies toward helping their apprentices to write. Ironically, just as we are convincing colleagues in disciplines other than English to assume more and more responsibilities for advancing skills in writing, we discover the disorder in our own houses. Maimon reminds us with her reference to Walt Kelly that the enemy we have met is us.

But there are no enemies here. Those of us with backgrounds in literary scholarship who, for whatever reasons, have given much of our time to writing instruction and who have discovered the rewards in such a plan must urge senior colleagues to join us in a collaborative spirit. At one institution, perhaps a series of workshops like those Toby Fulwiler describes at Michigan Tech[13] will spur graduate faculties to reevaluate their courses. At another, perhaps a consultant from outside the university will stimulate a new direction for graduate seminars, like those to be offered by Robert Lucid, Humphrey Tonkin, and Peter Conn in the University of Pennsylvania's graduate English program. At another, a talented department chair or a strong writing program administrator, perhaps, can lead the way to change among colleagues who teach advanced degree candidates.

These suggestions by no means exhaust the possibilities for achieving a program that I think might train a generation of successful teachers of writing. Whatever the method, the goal is the same. Already in place as fertile seeding grounds, American graduate programs in English need to broaden their emphases and, in so doing, to propose courses that connect

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[13]Toby Fulwiler, "Writing Across the Curriculum at Michigan Tech," Writing Program Administration, 4, No. 3 (1981), 15-20.

solid research in literature, a commitment to writing and editing, and instruction in writing in the classroom. This combination of offerings will bring us all much closer to the "new intellectual frontier" Kenneth Bruffee sees for opportunities in basic studies.[14] It is a frontier only somewhat more developed than in the past, a frontier still awaiting critical exploration from those well enough trained to carry the work forward.

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[14] Bruffee, p. 40.