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# TRAINING AND EVALUATING TRADITIONAL AND NON-TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTORS OF COMPOSITION

Finding qualified teachers to staff a large, diverse writing program is always difficult. Most public universities are too large and their budgets too small to hire trained and experienced Ph.D.'s or even M.A.'s in English to staff the many sections of composition they teach. Like Penn State, many universities rely on graduate teaching assistants to cover most of the freshman composition sections, but with declining enrollments in English graduate programs and increasing enrollments in upper-division courses such as business and technical writing, the pool of graduate assistants may not be adequate to cover all the sections not staffed by regular faculty members. Schools in urban areas may be able to hire trained part-time teachers from the community, but in an isolated community such as State College, Pennsylvania, where the main campus of Penn State is located, the pool of available teachers may be shallow. Thus, many composition programs must choose between leaving sections unstaffed or hiring and training inexperienced, "non-traditional" composition teachers, teachers who lack formal training in English.

The Composition Program at Penn State hires a number of such non-traditional teachers each year. The training program we describe below serves these and other, more traditional instructors who are teaching composition for the first time. Our evaluation of the effectiveness of these new teachers suggests that, with thorough training and supervision, they can be assimilated successfully into a traditional writing program and that, in fact, such non-traditional teachers may be valuable additions to a composition staff. Our research may be of particular interest to other programs faced with hiring instructors from other fields or implementing writing-across-the-curriculum programs where writing courses are staffed by faculty members from other disciplines.

## THE STUDENTS AND THE COURSES

Admission figures suggest that the entering students at Penn State's main campus form a somewhat homogeneous group, with aptitude somewhat above the national average. Of approximately 3,500 freshmen who enroll at University Park annually, roughly 2.5% bypass the regular freshman courses and move into Honors Composition. About 14.5% receive

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some developmental instruction before they enter the first freshman course or while they are enrolled in it. The great majority of students, however, move directly into the regular two-course freshman sequence.

The first course in the sequence, English 10, asks students to write primarily from their personal experience in papers developed by the traditional patterns of exposition. Students concentrate on developing their skills at all levels of composition, beginning with planning the whole essay, then refining the parts: paragraphs, sentences, words. Most classes work with sentence combining, expanding students' stylistic options and developing their sense of rhetorical choices. Students are introduced to the rhetorical concepts of invention, arrangement, and style; their writing, which is for the most part informative, is usually addressed to their classmates or other student audiences.

The second course, English 20, deals with argumentation and persuasion. Subjects extend beyond the students' immediate personal experience, requiring research and documentation. Students are encouraged to write for audiences less familiar and less receptive than their fellow students in argumentative forms such as evaluation, causal analysis, refutation, and proposal. By the end of the course, students are expected to write fully documented and accommodated arguments for specific audiences.

Both English 10 and 20 are rhetorically based courses with a clearly defined sequence of objectives. Instructors use a common syllabus for each course, and while teaching methods, textbooks, and individual paper assignments may vary, the course requirements, grading criteria, and general objectives are consistent across all the sections. Assuring some degree of uniformity among sections is necessary because a large number of sections are taught each term and because the program is a two-course sequence, with the second assuming a number of skills learned in the first. The common syllabi for the courses make supervising new instructors less difficult than it might be in a program with more variety among sections.

## THE STAFF

Only 11% of the two regular freshman courses are taught by faculty members. (The proportion of courses staffed by faculty is higher in honors and advanced writing.) That means that approximately 350 sections of English 10 and 20 (and the developmental course and tutorials) must be staffed each year by instructors who may have little formal preparation or teaching experience. While the majority of courses are taught by teaching assistants from the English Department, others are taught by teaching assistants from other fields. The rest of the staff is made up of non-student lecturers, with M.A.'s or higher degrees in English and related fields. These T.P.L.'s ("Temporary Part-time Lecturers," their title apparently intended by the University to describe unequivocally their tenuous status) are typically either Penn State Ph.D.'s who have not yet found permanent jobs, local residents who cannot find or do not want to find full-time teaching positions, or A.B.D.'s from English or other departments who need support while completing their degrees. While there is a fairly regular turnover among the first and third of these groups of

T.P.L.'s and among T.A.'s, the local residents form the core of the continuing writing faculty and are sometimes involved in training or assisting their less experienced colleagues.

## THE TRAINING PROGRAM

In the fall of 1980, 42 new instructors joined the composition staff, a number unusually high (the number for 1979 had been 28) because of faculty sabbaticals, completed Ph.D.'s, and the transfer of a number of experienced teachers to other courses, notably business and technical writing. This group of instructors represented a range of fields: 28 teaching assistants from English and Comparative Literature; one teaching assistant each from Speech Communication, History, and Psychology; and eleven T.P.L.'s, including two A.B.D.'s from Philosophy, one from History, and eight non-student lecturers with degrees in English, Music, French, Philosophy, or Sociology. All of the T.P.L.'s had had some teaching experience as had some of the T.A.'s, but only three new T.A.'s had more than one year's experience teaching composition, and none had taught writing at Penn State.

Ranging in age from 21 to 42 and having vastly different experiences and interests, this large group of new instructors required a training program that would introduce them to the discipline of rhetoric and composition, teach them practical skills for use in the writing classroom, and give them confidence and a sense of professionalism as they entered a new field. Despite their numbers, each received training that required approximately sixty hours of staff time from faculty members and experienced T.A.'s and T.P.L.'s. Their training continued through the instructors' full first year of teaching and included a two-day orientation, a thirty-week course in the teaching of writing, and close supervision and counseling by the Teaching Coordinator, a faculty member who visited the classes of all new teachers and consulted with them about grading, student problems, and other concerns.

## ORIENTATION

The training program for composition began in the summer, when all new teachers received the texts for the first of the two freshman courses and material explaining the courses and the Composition Program. In 1980-81, all new instructors of English 10 used the same rhetoric text, *The Writer's Work*, by Dean Memering and Frank O'Hare (Prentice-Hall, 1980) and *Penn Statements*, a collection of essays from the previous year's English 10 students that is published by the Composition Program and required in all sections. In addition to the texts, the new instructors received a resource book for English 10, written by the composition faculty and containing discussions of special topics in teaching writing as well as information about procedures and policies in the Composition Program. Topics covered in the resource book include "Teaching Writing as a Process," "Teaching Sentence Style," "Teaching Invention," each section designed to give practical teaching advice and, more important, to put teaching methods informally but firmly in the context of recent research

and theory in the teaching of writing. Teachers were asked to read the material before they came to campus; bibliographies in the resource book identified other readings of potential value.

When instructors arrived for fall orientation, held for two days during the week before classes began, they knew a little about their courses and their students. The orientation introduced them to the staff of the Composition Program, explained the training program, and prepared them for the first few weeks of their teaching. While some new instructors may have had years of teaching experience in other disciplines and others may have come only recently from freshman English themselves, we assumed that all of them needed a thorough introduction to the ways students are likely to improve their writing and the techniques which teachers can use to aid their students' improvement. Experienced teachers explained the sequence of assignments in English 10 and the writing skills their students could be expected to develop. Workshops involved the new teachers immediately in considering the composing process through a brief writing assignment and a discussion of their own difficulties in responding to it, demonstrating the importance of audience and purpose to successful student writing. Other workshops covered formulating writing assignments, using instructional time, and evaluating student writing--commenting and grading. The presentations and workshops were supplemented by information on additional resources for teachers.

## THE TRAINING COURSE

Orientation ended by introducing new instructors to the other components of the training program: a three-term course in the teaching of writing and individual consultation with the Teaching Coordinator. The training course, English 602, met for 75 minutes a week for thirty weeks; graduate students took the course for one hour of credit per term, while T.P.L.'s audited it. There were three sections of the course, each with 10-15 students, taught by faculty members involved in the composition program. The sections were rotated each term, so that each new instructor had three different teachers and studied three slightly different approaches to teaching writing.

In the fall term, sessions of the course were devoted primarily to "what to do next week"--discussions of theme assignments, class activities, exercises for developing paragraph, sentence, and word-level skills, and special problems with each assignment. These activities were supplemented by discussions of evaluation, analysis of student or professional essays, and discussions of pedagogical or theoretical articles on composition. The new teachers often brought to 602 questions about teaching problems or troublesome students and new approaches or activities they had developed on their own.

In the winter term when the new teachers taught English 10 for a second time and 602 sections were freed from the week-to-week preparation of classes, the instructors introduced more thorough discussions of evaluation, of the writing process, and of the value of various classroom activities. In addition, new teachers read and discussed William F.

Irmscher's *Teaching Expository Writing* (Holt, Rinehart, 1980). The last few weeks of winter term introduced English 20, a course in argumentation that is difficult for both students and teachers; the class discussed the aims of the course, studied the techniques of argumentation and persuasion, and devised methods for continuing to develop the skills students had learned in English 10. They also received a resource book of supplementary materials for English 20 and the texts for the course (a handbook and the *Penn State Reader*, a collection of argumentative essays developed especially for use in English 20). In the spring term, 602 focused once again on week-to-week activities in English 20 with particular emphasis on finding resources for class in newspapers and magazines and on rhetorical analysis of argumentative essays.

## SUPERVISION

While Orientation and the teacher training courses dealt with groups of instructors, each new teacher worked individually with the Teaching Coordinator, who was available for consultation with all instructors but spent most time with those in the first year. Because of the large number of new instructors, the Coordinator was assisted by five experienced full-time lecturers, who were compensated for the time they spent working with inexperienced teachers. The Coordinator primarily helped instructors solve individual problems outside the day-to-day curricular activities handled in 602. With other experienced lecturers, the Coordinator also served as a kind of supervising teacher. In addition to observing the new instructors' classes, the Teaching Coordinator examined teaching files from their courses (containing assignments, exercises, class notes, and other material from their courses) and a selection of student papers (usually a range of A-F papers and a complete set of papers from one student). These materials were discussed in a conference at the end of the term.

In summary, the new teachers, whether traditional or non-traditional in background, received extensive training and supervision during their first year in the program. But we were unsure how effective the program was until we examined the differences between experienced and inexperienced teachers, especially those without formal backgrounds in the teaching of writing.

## EVALUATION

To evaluate the training program and determine the effectiveness of our non-traditional instructors, we compared the teaching effectiveness of three groups of new composition teachers at the end of their first term of teaching. Each group of eight new teachers, a stratified random sample of our teaching staff, represented different backgrounds for teaching composition: group 1 consisted of experienced teachers of college-level composition (some faculty, a few lecturers, and T.A.'s with several years of experience); group 2 consisted of T.A.'s and lecturers without graduate training in English and without experience in teaching composition (the non-traditional teachers); group 3 consisted of new T.A.'s in our graduate program, with B.A.'s or M.A.'s in English (a more traditional group of new

composition teachers).

In our evaluation, we examined five kinds of data:

- students' writing;
- students' evaluations of their teachers;
- teachers' grade distributions;
- students' attitudes toward various aspects of composition;
- students' writing apprehension.

Our findings disclose some interesting differences and similarities among the three groups.

## STUDENTS' WRITING

At the end of the term, we randomly selected five papers from each teacher's final set of essays. After we trained raters in holistic evaluation and achieved a satisfactory degree of reliability, two raters evaluated each essay on a four-point scale. Based on these holistic evaluations, we found no statistically significant differences in the quality of student writing among the three groups. We were surprised by this finding since the teachers in group 1 averaged slightly more than three years of full-time teaching and four years of part-time teaching; teachers in group 2 and group 3 were very inexperienced. We had expected that teachers' experience would be associated with students' improvement in writing, but our data do not support this common-sense assumption (see appendix for supporting data).

## STUDENTS' EVALUATIONS

Analyzing students' evaluations of their instructors on a standardized teaching evaluation instrument used in the composition program, we found that students regarded experienced teachers (group 1) as significantly more effective ($p<0.048$) than beginning teachers. We hypothesized that freshmen might prefer teachers who were somewhat older, even if not more experienced, than beginning T.A.'s, but even when we controlled for the effects of age, experienced teachers (group 1) were still rated significantly higher than teachers in the other groups. Whatever these evaluations measure--teachers' confidence or competence or congeniality--seems to be related to instructors' teaching experience. Students of experienced teachers may not write better than students in the other two groups, but they are more satisfied with their teachers.

## GRADE DISTRIBUTIONS

We wondered whether differences in student evaluations could be explained by grading practices, but we found non-significant differences in the mean final grades for the three groups. The non-traditional teachers (group 2) tended to be more demanding graders than teachers in the other groups, but the difference was not significant ($p<0.12$).

## STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPOSITION

We asked students to characterize their attitudes toward various aspects of rhetoric and composition, using a survey instrument developed for this purpose. (A copy of this instrument is available upon request.) For example, we asked whether "knowing your audience makes writing easier," whether "any student can learn to write," whether "the composing process never varies," whether "content is more important than expression," and so on. We found no significant differences among the groups except on one item: "grades are just a matter of opinion." Students of teachers in group 1 (experienced teachers) disagreed most strongly and in group 2 (non-traditional teachers) disagreed least strongly. To put it more simply, beginning teachers (and especially non-traditional teachers) were less effective at communicating the basis for evaluating their students' writing. As we noted above, non-traditional teachers gave slightly lower grades than the others, but since the difference was very slight, grades alone probably do not account for the differences in students' attitudes. How students perceive grades may be affected by how teachers explain assignments, provide feedback about writing, or discuss student and professional writing, so we are unable to explain completely the difference in students' attitudes toward grading.

## WRITING APPREHENSION

We used the writing anxiety instrument developed by John Daly and Michael D. Miller to measure students' writing apprehension and found statistically significant differences among the two groups of beginning teachers ($p<0.011$). On five questions we found significant differences that may indicate significantly different pedagogical practices and consequences. On one of the questions,

> #2 I have no fear of my writing being evaluated

students of new T.A.'s (group 3) disagreed more strongly than those of experienced teachers or of non-traditional teachers. That is, students of new T.A.'s expressed greater concern about being evaluated. But the students of non-traditional teachers agreed more strongly than their counterparts on these four statements:

> #8 Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time;
>
> #21 I have a terrible time organizing ideas in a composition course;
>
> #22 When I hand in a composition I know I'm going to do poorly;
>
> #26 I'm no good at writing.

These differences suggest that non-traditional teachers were less successful at allaying their students' anxieties about writing than the traditional

teachers or perhaps may have raised their students' anxieties. While higher anxiety might be related to the slightly lower grade distributions for non-traditional teachers, such slight differences in grades probably do not explain all the differences in attitudes that the writing apprehension scale uncovered.

## SUMMARY

We believe that with adequate training and supervision, faculty or lecturers from disciplines besides English can provide effective instruction in composition. Student evaluations for new teachers--both traditional and non-traditional--are positive, though students prefer experienced teachers over beginning teachers. Students' writing does not seem to suffer--or benefit--because of their teachers' backgrounds and experience, and students of non-traditional teachers tend to perform slightly better than students of beginning T.A.'s. The major difference, we conclude, is in students' attitudes toward grades and anxiety about writing. Since the differences are very slight, we are uncertain about their practical consequences, but the differences do suggest that thorough discussions of such matters ought to be included in the training of all new teachers of writing, particularly those from other disciplines.

There are, of course, professional considerations that are relevant to hiring non-traditional teachers: more and more English Ph.D.'s may go unemployed if we turn to other kinds of instructors in significant numbers. And assimilating professors from other disciplines who are transferred to writing courses because of declining enrollments in their own departments (a possibility that seems more and more likely at some institutions) will have its own difficulties. In general, however, based on teachers' performance and the staff's morale, we believe our own experience with non-traditional instructors has been successful.

## APPENDIX

### Table 1

Evaluation of Student Writing

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 24.750 (8) | 24.250 (8) | 21.875 (8) | 23.625 (24) | 1.139 | 0.339 |

### Table 2

Student Evaluation of Teacher Effectiveness

N = 24 teachers

Group 1 = experienced teachers of composition
Group 2 = "non-traditional" lecturers
Group 3 = beginning T.A.'s

Cell Means

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5.62 (8) | 4.32 (8) | 4.58 (8) | 4.84 (24) | 10.273 | 0.001 |

### Table 3

Grade Distributions

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2.768 (8) | 2.671 (8) | 2.93 (8) | 2.790 (24) | 2.313 | 0.1236 |

Table 4

Attitudes Toward Writing and Writing Classes
"Grades are just a matter of opinion"
(1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2.59 (194) | 2.33 (201) | 2.39 (188) | 2.44 (583) | 3.057 | 0.048 |

Table 5

Writing Anxiety
(1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree)

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 86.49 (194) | 84.58 (201) | 89.51 (188) | 86.80 (583) | 4.526 | 0.011 |

Question 2, "I have no fear of my writing being evaluated"

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2.96 (194) | 2.90 (201) | 2.64 (188) | 2.83 (583) | 4.191 | 0.016 |

Question 8, "Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time"

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4.22 (194) | 3.95 (201) | 4.13 (188) | 4.10 (583) | 3.423 | 0.333 |

Question 21, "I have a terrible time organizing my ideas in a composition course"

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3.31 (194) | 3.18 (201) | 3.51 (188) | 3.33 (583) | 4.116 | 0.017 |

Question 22, "When I hand in a composition, I know I'm going to do poorly"

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3.71 (194) | 3.55 (201) | 3.95 (188) | 3.73 (583) | 7.536 | 0.001 |

Question 26, "I'm no good at writing"

| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Grand Mean | F | Sig. Level |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3.74 (194) | 3.65 (201) | 3.93 (188) | 3.77 (583) | 3.427 | 0.033 |