

PREPARING THE IDEAL TEACHER OF BASIC WRITING

Training basic writing teachers is a task which deserves careful attention since, like a chain, a basic writing program is only as strong as its teachers are. Surely, teachers are the key ingredient in any course of instruction, but particularly so when they instruct the high-risk students who typically populate basic writing classrooms.

In preparing basic writing teachers, consideration of the ideal teacher is instructive. If the characteristics of the ideal teacher are well-defined, teacher training can focus on activities which will foster those characteristics. The characteristics of the ideal teacher of basic writing can be captured by three C's (separate from, but no doubt influenced by the journal in our field): commitment, curiosity, and confidence.

The ideal basic writing teacher must be committed to the task. The teacher must have volunteered freely to teach the high-risk yet potentially rewarding basic writing student. Early in the development of The Ohio State University's basic writing program, Andrea Lunsford conducted a survey of basic writing programs, a survey which revealed that one of the primary keys to successful programs was that teachers teach in them voluntarily.¹ The lack of coercion is important in teaching basic writers because such teaching assignments are, almost by definition, destined to tap human resources that are perhaps only latent at best. While students in regular freshman composition classrooms are more capable of teaching themselves regardless of teacher intervention, basic writers desperately need instruction. They have not "caught" composition in their previous twelve years of schooling, as their regular freshman composition counterparts tend to have. They have not developed basic command of that variety of written language taught in colleges and universities, referred to by a range of names: academic prose, expository writing, Edited American English. Moreover, it is not at all the case that basic writers represent the *tabula rasa* which they may have when they entered the educational system

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¹ "Remedial English: A Descriptive and Evaluative Report" (Unpublished report prepared for The College of Humanities, The Ohio State University, July 1, 1976), p. 50.

at the age of five or six. Perhaps if a time-machine could enable the college teacher to become the first teacher of writing, the task would be easier. But since no magic formulas can be invoked, the stark realities of accumulated experience must be dealt with. The varieties of students and of their respective experiences with literacy make the task of teaching them basic skills in their late or post-adolescent years more difficult. Only teachers who are truly committed to this monumental task need apply.

Commitment should not, however, be interpreted as requiring a missionary zeal for saving souls or for saving the English language. Since such a path to salvation would begin in the basic writing classrooms and would, by necessity, involve coming to know students and their language intimately, the missionary could too easily become disenchanted. Only an understanding of the development of basic writers, or a desire to acquire that understanding, combined with the two other characteristics, curiosity and confidence, allows the proper attitude of commitment to the learning process required of the ideal teacher of basic writing.

Commitment to teaching basic writing does involve willingness to invest a great deal of time and energy in the task. It is preferable that the basic writing teacher not be secretly longing to escape to some other discipline, in order to emancipate time, even though that discipline be related by departmental fiat to composition. A genuine interest in the subject is a determining characteristic of the ideal teacher of basic writing.

Commitment, then, combined with a good measure of courage, is one of the principle characteristics of an ideal basic writing teacher. A second, but no less important characteristic, is curiosity. Since the basic writing teacher is primarily a teacher of language, a keen curiosity about all aspects of language facilitates language teaching. It naturally follows that those who are curious about the varied facets of language structure, use, and development will be sensitive observers of language.

The ideal basic writing teacher is especially interested in language variation. Understanding the factors which affect language variation provides a basis for teaching the particular variety taught in college classrooms. A sense of curiosity may arise from observing the ways in which languages change over time. The study of prior stages of English, traditionally divided into three periods--Old English, Middle English, and Modern English (but note the large number of glosses necessary to read and appreciate authors even as recent as Shakespeare)--reveals the inevitability of language change. The sound and spelling systems change, as well as the morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. Examination of manuscripts also reveals the variability of conventions of writing such as punctuation and paragraphing. Realizing that the passage of time guarantees language change provides perspective for basic writing teachers who can only benefit from culling examples illustrating language change from texts to share with students.² But most important, the diachronic study of language

² Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 27.

engenders a healthy attitude towards the synchronic manifestations of language since it allows teachers to envision from a distance, as it were, the relativity of their daily classroom activities. Language changes. We are teaching a code which will change. Only the most prescriptive and anachronistic could maintain that older stages of English are inherently preferable to Modern English.

Curiosity about causes of synchronic linguistic variation provides another rich context for ideal basic writing teachers. The study of sociolinguistics is especially important since, frequently but not accidentally, many basic writers do not speak Standard American English, the spoken variety most closely identified with Edited American English. Socioeconomic factors are typically important variables in sociolinguistic studies. Of course, within socioeconomic levels, additional factors cause variation. Linguistic variables create a range of linguistic styles or registers within socioeconomic strata, depending on the situation, purpose, and audience. Relatively formal styles may be observed when situations involve formal settings, e.g. a job interview, or a conversation with a respected, older audience such as one's minister or preacher. The purpose of the communication act, e.g. persuading an opponent, in contrast to greeting him or her, also governs certain linguistic variables.³ Curiosity, accompanied by keen observations of variation in language, allows basic writing teachers to tap the linguistic skills their students bring to the writing classroom. Awareness of stylistic variation grants teachers recourse to introducing the notion of appropriateness. A particular piece of writing may be extremely inappropriate in a collegiate essay, but suitable in a letter to one's younger sibling. With some prompting, students can make explicit some of their implicit knowledge about appropriateness of language use.

Sociolinguistic studies investigate both language varieties and attitudes toward those varieties and their users. Studies which report listeners' attitudes toward bilingual speakers reveal the sorts of distinctions people make every day simply on the basis of spoken language. A bilingual individual may be judged to be intelligent or undependable based entirely on which language the individual speaks and on who the listeners are.⁴

³ Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1974) provides a thorough introduction to sociolinguistic study. Particularly informative studies for basic writing teachers are presented by William Labov, *The Study of Nonstandard English* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1970) and *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972); Walt Wolfram and Ralph W. Fasold, *The Study of Social Dialects in American English* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); and Pamela Downing, "Factors Influencing Lexical Choice in Narrative," in *Pear Stories: Cognitive, Cultural, and Linguistic Aspects of Narrative Production*, ed. Wallace L. Chafe (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1980), pp. 89-126.

⁴ W. E. Lambert, R. C. Hodgson, R. C. Gardner, and S. Fillenbaum, "Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Language," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60 (1960), 44-51.

Awareness of attitudes toward speech is an especially important characteristic of the ideal basic writing teacher. By recognizing the worth of individuals, regardless of how well they command certain styles of written discourse at the beginning of a basic writing course, by being sensitive to the tremendous human tendency to form negative attitudes toward speakers of less valued varieties of English, and by acknowledging that such attitudes are also possible toward writers, ideal basic writing teachers can become aware of their own attitudes toward the prose they are destined to observe as their students begin to write.

Curious basic writing teachers will also want to become keen observers of the development of their students' writing abilities.⁵ Studying the development of spoken language can also be instructive, if for no other reason than observing that as children master the semantic, morphological, and syntactic systems of their first language the number of errors they produce increases. Through the process known as overgeneralization, a word such as *daddy*, at first used appropriately, is subsequently used inappropriately to refer to any adult male, as a child's contexts expand. By the same process, irregular noun and verb forms such as *feet* and *sang* become regularized inappropriately as *foots/feets* and *singed/sanged*, as the child observes regular alternations such as *cat/cats* and *help/helped*, and then generalizes the rules.⁶ The presence of errors in first language acquisition, thus, is an indication of growth, and the ideal basic writing teacher should be aware of the similarities that may exist between the development of spoken and written language, regardless of the basic writer's age. It is also fairly well documented that adults who are determined to elicit correct speech from children but are unaware of the natural course of language development and who correct children's incorrect, but developmentally predictable utterances can unintentionally cause children to stutter. Because of prior classroom experiences, some basic writers may be scribble stutterers. Thus, some basic writers have learned or come to believe that they cannot write correctly, and thus they hesitate to write at all. These students have learned that regardless of what they put on the paper, they are destined to err, and thus they retreat from the act of writing. They hesitate, make false starts, and give up, convinced of their inability to develop into fluent

⁵ James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, and Harold Rosen, *The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)* (London: Macmillan, 1975) and Walter Loban, *Language Development: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1976).

⁶ Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman, *An Introduction to Language*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978), pp. 252-254; the following authors present helpful introductions to language acquisition, psycholinguistics, and cognitive development: Herbert Clark and Eve Clark, *Psychology and Language* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978); Jean Piaget, *Six Psychological Studies* (New York: Random House, 1967) and "Intellectual Evolution from Adolescence to Adulthood," *Human Development*, 15 (1972), 112; and Lev S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, ed. and trans. E. Hanfmann and G. Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962).

writers. Understanding the possibility of the cause and effect relationship between attitudes toward basic writing and basic writers' writing prepares ideal teachers to shape their responses to basic writers sensitively and wisely.

Ideal teachers of basic writing temper their curiosity with wisdom. In order to determine productive pedagogies, ideal, genuinely curious basic writing teachers will remain open to new methods of teaching, blending the experience of others with their own. Many NCTE publications, including the NCTE journals, publish material which is helpful not only for providing classroom activities but which helps the ideal teacher understand the reasons for success and failure of certain approaches, as our profession heightens its understanding of all that is involved in literacy. The presence of the *Journal of Basic Writing* has eased the task of keeping current. And since teaching basic writing often calls for work with each individual student, whether or not in the physical setting of a lab, the *Writing Lab Newsletter* is an additional helpful resource.

Determined openness and curiosity, combined with the third C, confidence, further define the ideal teacher of basic writing. Ideal basic writing teachers are imbued with confidence; they are confident in their students' ability to succeed, confident in themselves as teachers, and confident in their own abilities as writers. Yet confidence should not be blind; it must be fully informed. Confidence in students' ability to succeed comes from at least two sources. One source is the case studies of basic writers. Mina Shaughnessy's final chapter in *Errors and Expectations* presents excellent support for belief that most basic writers will eventually be able to learn to write expository prose.⁷ Case studies documenting basic writers' progression, and sometimes regression, over a period of time illustrate the processes involved in acquiring basic writing skills. While such case studies document progress, they also provide insight into the diversity of basic writers and show that occasional regression often precedes dramatic gains, leaps which basic writers must make given the distance they need to cover in relatively compressed time periods.⁸

A second source of confidence comes from realizing the viability, the salience of the self-fulfilling prophecy. In one study demonstrating the self-fulfilling prophecy, teachers were told that certain of their students were "late bloomers." Testing had shown that these late-blooming students were due to burst forth soon; they were latently bright students. Although the identified students had been randomly selected, they did, in fact, advance far beyond normal expectations during the course of the study.⁹

⁷ Shaughnessy, pp. 275-284.

⁸ Sara Garnes, Timothy J. Evans, Elizabeth A. Flynn, and Mary E. McGann, "Report of the Writing Workshop: Basic Writing at The Ohio State University" (unpublished report prepared for The College of Humanities and the Department of English, 1979); the report describes the students, the courses, the staff, and an evaluation of effectiveness.

⁹ M. A. K. Halliday, *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning* (Baltimore, MD: University Park Press, 1978), p. 233; Frederick Williams, "Language, Attitude, and Social Change," in *Language and Poverty: Perspectives on a Theme*, ed. Frederick Williams (Chicago: Markham, 1970), pp. 48-49.

Among the attitudes which the teachers transmitted to the students, one must have been their belief that the identified students could and would succeed. It would be naive to think that "believing can make it so." However, teachers' confidence that students do possess the ability to learn to write, combined with informed syllabi, course objectives, and writing assignments, can make the difference for many basic writers.

The old adage, "nothing succeeds like success," if applied to the ideal basic writing teacher, indicates the importance of teachers' own past successes in teaching writing. For several reasons, experienced, if not seasoned, writing teachers are more likely to feel confidence in their teaching abilities. At some point, of course, all basic writing teachers must be beginners. However, if they have taught regular freshman composition, a typical route for many basic writing teachers, and have been successful, and have, even more important, observed with a great deal of curiosity the writing of those students who are relatively easy to teach, they will not only be able to articulate more fully the expectations which basic writers need to meet; they will also have accumulated a store of confidence to draw from while they begin the challenging work of teaching basic writing.

Although it may seem obvious, it nevertheless requires mentioning that ideal basic writing teachers are confident in their knowledge of English. It is not uncommon for those who have passed through the educational system in recent decades to be able to write correctly themselves, but to lack an explicit grammatical knowledge about what they are doing. Understanding the structure of Edited American English and knowing recommended and actual usage practices prepares teachers to speak confidently to their students.¹⁰ Since many requirements for studying English grammar have been waived, ideal basic writing teachers will have volunteered to learn grammar, whether by taking coursework or by studying on an informal basis. Regardless of the means of instruction, ideal basic writing teachers are confident in their knowledge of the range of discourse structures common to edited American prose.

Finally, ideal basic writing teachers are confident in their own abilities as writers. Writing teachers must write. Although it would be uncommon for students to enroll knowingly for music lessons from a teacher who was not a musician, one who could not perform, it is not uncommon for students to study with writing teachers who write very little or have poor images of themselves as writers. Simplistic as it seems, encouraging writing teachers to write can be one of the most efficient means of improving their students' writing--witness the Bay Area Writing Project. A large part of the success of the BAWP and similar writing projects is attributed to the emphasis placed on having participating teachers write.¹¹ Teachers who are

¹⁰ Joseph M. Williams points out the inherent dangers of overly prescriptive usage practices in "The Phenomenology of Error," *CCC*, 32 (May 1981), 152-68; nevertheless, there are limits. Teachers should, for example, be able to instruct students to use sentence terminal punctuation marks such as the period.

¹¹ James Gray and Miles Myers, "The Bay Area Writing Project," *Phi Delta Kappan* (February 1978), 413.

also writers know full well the difficulties of writing; they are able to be introspective about the writing process and to facilitate students' learning the process. Such teachers not only know whether a piece is well-phrased and in tune, they also know how to tell the student how to make it so.

Although it is helpful to consider the qualities of ideal basic writing teachers, we must return to reality--to those actual individuals who do the day-to-day work in the basic writing classrooms. The inherent diversity of those individuals who teach basic writing is no doubt matched by the diversity of training programs. Each program director must make choices under the constraints of time, money, and applicants for teaching positions.

We at The Ohio State University have tried to foster commitment, curiosity, and confidence in our basic writing teachers in a variety of ways, many growing out of the circumstance that most of our teachers are not faculty members. In 1980-81, for example, over ninety percent of the 180 sections of basic writing were taught by graduate students and lecturers. (Although lecturers hold master's or doctoral degrees, they are hired on a quarterly basis and receive few benefits.) In 1981-82, the percentage of sections taught by faculty members has increased to slightly over thirty, but the majority of the sections continue to be taught by graduate students and lecturers.

From the beginning of the program, we have sought volunteer teachers, reserving our right to be selective. Most graduate students who teach in the basic writing program have master's degrees and are pursuing work at the doctoral level. Some of these graduate students have come to us from the Communications Department where they are specializing in rhetoric, or from the Linguistics Department where they are specializing in syntax or discourse analysis. Most of them, however, are English majors who have chosen rhetoric and composition as one of their four areas of specialization. As such, they have studied classical rhetoric with Edward P.J. Corbett, have taught freshman composition, and have taken the freshman composition practicum course with Frank O'Hare. These graduate students have excellent preparation in both the classical and modern traditions and usually bring a great deal of enthusiasm for rhetorical and stylistic analysis to a second graduate-level practicum they take, most often the quarter before they wish to begin teaching in the basic writing program.

In the basic writing practicum, we combine theory with practice. *Errors and Expectations* is the principal text, supplemented by a variety of readings which have evolved as our understanding grows, but which usually include topics on language and cognitive development, language variation, rhetoric, composition, composing processes, discourse analysis, and reading theory.¹² The practical work of the training course involves visiting a basic

¹² We supplement works cited above with Janet Emig, *The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders* (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971); Sondra Perl, "A Look at Basic Writers in the Process of Composing," in *Basic Writing: Essays for Teachers, Researchers, and Administrators*, ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoebler (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1980), pp. 13-32; Frank Smith, *Understanding Reading*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1978); Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett, ed., *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

writing class on a regular basis, tutoring one of the students in that class, and keeping a journal of these activities. On occasion, the practical work has also involved teaching a unit in a basic writing classroom or preparing an exercise which would address a writing problem of the tutee. The resulting exercises and modules inject vitality into our program and serve as important resources to our staff.

Probably the most important activity in the practicum, however, involves the close analysis of texts. Students of literature are particularly skilled in analysis and learn quickly to apply Shaughnessy's methods to basic writers' texts. The graduate students also practice forming a hypothesis about the etiology of a student's difficulties with writing and propose a starting point for work with the student. Based on features in the text or on conversations with the student, future basic writing teachers formulate fruitful pedagogical strategies.

One five-hour course can never prepare potential teachers for the diversity of writing problems they will encounter in the basic writing classroom. In order to provide continuing support to the basic writing staff, we hold our version of *Sixty Minutes*. These hour long, weekly staff meetings are designed to provide the support basic writing teachers need. Staff meetings range from formal presentations made by guest lecturers to informal workshops led by basic writing staff members. At one meeting last year, for example, Edward P.J. Corbett presented a paper, "A Literal View of Literacy." Both our Dean and Provost have attended staff meetings. Additional support is provided by colleagues from throughout the University; thus, a psychologist and a speech pathologist have informed us of resources available for students plagued by writing anxiety or by severe personal problems, and by dyslexia or dysgraphia. In order to facilitate articulation with writing programs preceding and following our students' enrollment in basic writing courses, concerned high school teachers have shared with us their perspective of the writing crisis and discussed samples of their students' writing. Similarly, Frank O'Hare and Ron Fortune have discussed the freshman composition course and sample essays written by students enrolled in the course.

Most frequently, however, the topics raised at staff meetings are immediately applicable in the basic writing classroom, topics such as invention, revision, and grading. Other topics have dealt with preparation and use of audiovisual materials, with models of development and argumentation, and with teaching techniques staff members have found particularly helpful. Perhaps one of the most instructive staff meetings is our quarterly "Write In" at which we all grapple with the same topic, compose our responses, and share our written products. At these sessions, we not only gain firsthand experience with the writing process, but we become vividly aware of the tasks we require daily of our students.

Frequently, we spend sessions sharing our students' writing. Since we have found these sharing sessions especially useful we have recently collected the most helpful materials and duplicated them in a handbook, the longest section of which contains examples of students' graded work and teachers' comments on paragraphs and essays written in each of our three

basic writing courses. Also included are examples of the revision process, consisting of several drafts of a single essay including the final copy. This lengthy handbook (152 pages) also includes a description of the freshman English curriculum, placement procedures, and resources for students such as information on the Writing Skills Laboratory, which is open to all University students for tutorials on an individual basis; the Reading/Study Skills Center, which offers short courses and individual assistance; the Office for the Physically Impaired, which provides support services for dyslexic students; the Learning Resources Center; and the Counseling Center. It also contains writing projects, topics, and exercises; a selected bibliography on writing and basic writing; a summary of the results of the annual evaluation of our effectiveness; materials, aids, and forms frequently used in our program; and appendices of course syllabi and accompanying annotated syllabi for staff.¹³ Having a common reference at hand decreases the administrative time needed to integrate new staff members into our program, but most important, the handbook provides them with exemplary models of the writing process and of teachers' responses to writing and with various clear examples illustrating the care with which we attempt to execute our duties.

Since we found that sharing materials with each other was helpful, we thought that it would be useful for students to share also. Thus, an editorial committee prepares weekly editions of a student newspaper, *Inprints*. *Inprints* consists mainly of student writing, from works in progress to finished pieces. We have now printed a collection of the best of *Inprints* in a volume entitled *Reprints*. Both the weekly newspaper and the collection have become valuable resources to students and teachers alike.¹⁴

The staff meetings, handbook, and publications of student writing help to provide support for our teachers. But a more personal type of support comes from classroom visitations. The director visits classes on a prearranged basis. Before the visit, the director discusses the goals for the class with the teacher. In a followup session, the director describes to the teacher what he observed, and discusses how effectively the teacher achieved the goals laid out in the pre-observation interview.¹⁵ Just as we encourage teachers to share experiences and materials, we encourage them to visit each others' classes. In effect, we strive to establish an ambiance of informality and openness.

¹³ Nancy Woodson, ed. "A Handbook for the Basic Writing Program" (Columbus: Writing Workshop, Department of English, The Ohio State University, 1981-82).

¹⁴ The assistant director of the basic writing program in 1979-80, Phil Boshoff, initiated our publications of student writing, based on his positive experiences with such publications at Purdue University.

¹⁵ Edward Lotto, director of our basic writing program, observes classes using a system described by Michael Flanigan in "Observing Teaching: Discovering and Developing the Individual's Teaching Style," *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, 3 (Winter 1979), 17-24.

We view the preparation of basic writing teachers as an ongoing process. While we began that preparation in a formal course, we have found that continued support eases our tasks and makes possible the realization of our common goals to become better teachers of basic writers, sensitive to their problems, yet aware of their potential; eager to share in their frequently rapid progress, yet strong enough to endure their inevitable backsliding; confident in our program, yet open to discover even more successful pedagogical approaches.