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ABSTRACT

The University of Tennessee trains its graduate students to become composition teachers by requiring them to assist composition instructors with the teaching of their classes, to grade papers, to confer with students, to compute final averages, and to plan daily classes. The graduate assistant is also allowed in the course of a year to work closely with three different instructors, and therefore three different approaches to the teaching of composition. Graduate assistants are evaluated by the instructors that they assist and those who receive high evaluations are promoted to the stage of teaching assistant. Those who do not demonstrate the potential for being effective teachers are offered the option of continuing as research assistants or of working with a Tennessee press publication, so they can at least continue to work toward their degrees and still receive financial assistance. For those graduate assistants who are made teaching assistants, the process of preparation continues with the tutorial and evaluator/advisor programs. In the tutorial teaching assistants and instructor discuss the problems that arise based on their own teaching experiences. Finally, by having an evaluator/advisor, the student benefits from the experience of a tested instructor while also confronting independently and essentially, without direct supervision, the teaching of composition. (HOD)

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Teaching Graduate Students to Teach Composition:
The University of Tennessee

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

We, teachers of English and American language and literature, face the 80's with an interesting perspective, one we do not always share with professionals in other fields; we know pretty clearly what we face, students with poor rhetorical and verbal skills and little understanding about how threatening these deficiencies are to their future success in any field. The problem is acute, and the solution evasive. However, if I may violate HARBRACE 33 and appeal to the authority of Pogo, "we have met the enemy and the enemy is us." For one of the many reasons that our students are so weak with language skills is that we simply are not doing the job. We are producing teachers who do not know the difference between a direct object and a direct quote. We coddle students with intolerable grammar as long as their ideas show some potential for being effective and their sentiments are at least approaching originality, propagating the new myth that we can separate what one is saying and how he/she is saying it when evaluating the quality of a student's writing. We allow into the classroom unqualified and often incompetent instructors and teaching assistants who

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would be better off taking a good composition course than teaching one, thereby freeing our experienced instructors to carry the really tough to teach courses such as introduction to literature, sophomore survey of western world literature, and graduate seminars that consist of a series of papers delivered by the students taking the class. We accept the use of non-standard dialects, indeed we encourage it, in academic situations calling for written work. Oh yes, and we rely heavily on the use of overhead projectors, televisions, tape recorders, anything that keeps us from having to rely on and thereby demonstrate in our own teaching what the effective use of language is all about, this in response to the mistaken philosophy that a fist full of hand-outs can replace a mind full of knowledge.

How can we avoid these errors? We begin by acknowledging that one of the most important functions that a graduate program in language and literature can serve is to prepare composition instructors, this the easy step, the one we have taken. The more difficult step is finding both an appropriate and effective method of doing so without turning our freshman classes into experimental laboratories. Not such an easy task as the first. The purpose of my presentation is to discuss the training program employed at the University of Tennessee for the preparation of composition instructors. I will not banter in detail the various pros and cons of the program--they may very well be obvious--but I will conclude with what I see as the two chief merits of the system, its pragmatic

orientation and the ease with which it is incorporated into the traditional degree program in language and literature that the department maintains.

When the Department of English at the University of Tennessee was authorized to grant a Phd. in 1945-46, funds were provided for twenty graduate assistantships. From the very beginning, these GA's were given the responsibility of assisting experienced composition teachers with their freshman classes. In the mid 70's the GA program expanded to also include a tutorial for first year teaching assistants--promoted GA's and first year Phd. students who come with an MA--and an evaluator/advisor program for first and second year TA's. Finally, in 1979 the requirement was added that every Phd. candidate must serve as a teaching assistant for at least one year, this in response to the many MLA JOB INFORMATION LIST entries calling for experienced composition instructors and the IRS tax break for that one year of required teaching.

In essence, the University of Tennessee English Department GA is an apprentice, the teaching assistant being the journeyman. The graduate assistant's responsibilities are simply to assist a composition instructor with the teaching of his/her class, the grading of papers, and the conferring with students, these being the three substantive areas of concern for any composition instructor, as opposed to the more menial tasks of formulating a syllabus, computing of final averages--although the GA may well be asked to assess

the performance of border-line students--and day to day class planning. The strength here, and certainly the purpose, is to allow the GA to become comfortable with the more difficult aspects of teaching composition and those with which he/she might need the most assistance in mastering.

Perhaps even more important, the GA is allowed in the course of a year to work closely with three different instructors and, therefore, three different approaches to the teaching of composition. And in each situation the GA has the opportunity to learn a variation of one basic system, the HARBRACE system, which dominates all the approaches to the teaching of composition used by University of Tennessee instructors. This aspect of the program is crucial. No one approach or system is, of course, absolutely correct. What is important is that the inexperienced GA learn a system, one with which he/she can become comfortable using. By serving as an apprentice with three different instructors, he/she sees the variant methods of using HARBRACE, works with each, and can then choose those methods that best serve his/her purposes after assuming the complete responsibility for courses. In other words, the GA has the opportunity to learn from experienced instructors and to gain the necessary experience to allow him/her to make sound decisions based on a solid background of dealing with students both in and out of the classroom, this without the pressure of being completely responsible for those students.

GA's are evaluated by the instructors that they assist; those who receive high evaluations are promoted to the journeyman stage of teaching assistant. Those who do not demonstrate the potential for being effective teachers, not just composition teachers, are offered the option of continuing as research assistants or of working with a Tennessee press publication, something out of the classroom, so that they can at least continue to work toward their degrees and still receive financial assistance. What this points up is that at Tennessee not all graduate assistants are assumed to be destined for the classroom simply because they are pursuing a graduate degree in literature or language. In fact, if I might add a short digression, the University of Tennessee English Department faculty has actively tried to serve the purposes of their graduate students by helping them prepare for and find jobs as technical writers, as publishing house editors, agents, etc., and in other positions that require a thorough background in language and/or literature. This indirectly applies to the purpose of preparing composition instructors because by helping these students, Tennessee does not produce graduates who think only about teaching, even though they are not temperamentally prepared for that job.

For those graduate assistants who are made teaching assistants, however, the process of preparation continues with the tutorial and evaluator/advisor programs.

The tutorial is perhaps the most difficult to handle part of the program because it is the only course oriented

part, the implication being to some extent taught to teach by instruction, a false idea to say the least. However, because the process of elimination has to a degree removed those people who do not show the inherent talents needed for being an effective teacher, this problem is skirted somewhat. Generally, therefore, the tutorial is not a course of instruction. Rather, it is a forum in which TA's and a senior instructor discuss the problems encountered in everything from grading papers to setting up an effective syllabus. In a sense, anything relevant to teaching composition is fair game. But the merit is that the discussions are almost always based on the experiences the TA's have had in their own teaching.

One restriction on the tutorial is centered on the effort to have all the first year TA's teach during a term the same of the five freshman courses that are offered at UT. Thus, the tutorial can be geared toward a certain course and can be determined in its content by the course the TA's are teaching at the time. For example, my first year as a TA at Tennessee, we all taught technical writing at the freshman level, something about which essentially none of us knew anything. The tutorial, therefore, became a concentrated course in technical writing, was taught by an experienced technical writer, and offered the basics in subject matter. We used as a text, the text we were teaching and stayed about a week ahead of our classes.

The one real asset here is that the tutorial can be flexible, serving the specific needs of the TA's as they move into

the program at Tennessee. Mainly, the tutorial should and does fill in the gaps left by the GA program. As a GA the student has learned about grading, lecturing, and conferring. In the tutorial he/she can learn the more menial tasks of assigning topics, handling late papers, and such as that.

Last, there is the assignment of an evaluator/advisor for all the first and second year TA's. The relationship between the TA and the advisor/evaluator is not the same as that between GA and supervising instructor. Nor can the relationship really be prescribed. In essence, the evaluator/advisor's purpose is to visit the TA's classroom, go over the TA's papers to check the grading, and to study the TA's student evaluations. Then the two work together to interpret the observations of the advisor/evaluator and the other material to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the TA in hopes of improving his/her teaching. What it all boils down to is that the TA has the opportunity to benefit from the knowledge and experience of a proven composition instructor.

Again, the TA is evaluated, and the screening process continues. Those TA's who do not at this stage demonstrate the ability to do effective teaching are encouraged and sometimes forced to consider other options.

Two things coordinate these three aspects of the training program. First, there is the ever present HARBRACE system. All instructors of composition at Tennessee use it, and in all three aspects of the training program the HARBRACE system is taught. Also, there is almost a complete focus on learning

from experience. As a GA, the student learns from experience the three most difficult aspects of teaching composition: grading, lecturing, and conferring. In the tutorial TA's and instructor discuss the problems that arise based on their own teaching experiences. Finally, by having an evaluator/advisor, the student benefits from the experience of a tested instructor while also confronting independently and essentially without direct supervision the teaching of composition.

This emphasis on experience points up the real benefit of the training program; it is very much pragmatic in design. The student learns by doing, not by abstractly conceptualizing what teaching is all about as would be the case in other more pedagogical training programs used at other institutions. The HARBRACE system, too, is pragmatic in its approach to the teaching of rhetorical, grammatical, and lexical skills. I call this an asset because whatever else teaching is, whatever else one might say in the abstract about teaching, and especially whatever else the teaching of composition entails, no one can deal with teaching effective outlining, demonstrating effective thesis sentences, or deciding on appropriate grading standards without entering into that very special relationship that exists between teacher and student. It is a unique relationship with each student, not one that can be conceptualized any more than can the personality of an individual be realized in the abstract. This acknowledgment of the necessity of experience is the underlying foundation that makes the University of Tennessee training program effective.

Finally, let me conclude by addressing one further issue. Tennessee has retained a very traditional degree program despite the realization by the faculty that their graduates will be teaching composition, not Shakespeare; technical writing, not T. S. Eliot; remedial studies, not Chaucer. Why? If the realities of the 80's insure that most new Phd.'s will face a teaching load so heavily geared toward service work does the program not change? Simply this. The best weapon we have in combating the almost illiterate entering students is that we ourselves develop a complete appreciation for the effective use of language: the splendid structure of Pound's CANTOS, the colorful diction of Shakespeare's MACBETH, the simplicity of language of Milton. While the UT Phd. will, therefore, have a wealth of teaching experience to draw upon, he will also have been exposed to great literature, great ideas, and great writers. This, above everything else, will make him an effective teacher.

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