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AUTHOR Hudley, Janice Edgerson
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ABSTRACT

Through the examination of case studies, this paper discusses a method in which the English Department at West Point can improve their junior military instructors' preparation to teach composition. Twelve departing and incoming instructors were surveyed on the quality of the preparation for teaching they received. Most were generally supportive of New Instructor Training as currently conducted; most agreed that they needed both theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching composition. Several mentioned that they found themselves "reinventing the wheel" as they went through the freshman writing course (EN 101) their first semester. The instructors were grateful for the structured syllabus provided by the course director, but one lamented that cadets were not prepared for freshman composition. One expressed dismay at the subject matter; another felt that the cadets did not take the course seriously. Not one of last year's six new instructors felt well prepared to teach composition at West Point. All six believed that some changes need to be made in teacher preparation--two advocated complete overhaul of the program. Two instructors volunteered as "guinea pigs" for case studies, because they wanted feedback on their planning and classroom effectiveness. Both instructors made substantive revisions in the syllabus, changing the course to fit their understanding of the preparation cadets would need. West Point's strength is that it has a self-renewing faculty which provides insight into the types of writing students can reasonably expect to do during military service. (NKA)

Storying the (Military) Academy:

Transforming Soldiers into Writing Teachers

Paper Presented at the 1998 CCCC Convention in Chicago, Illinois, on April 2, 1998
By Lieutenant Colonel Janice Edgerson Hudley, Associate Professor of English, United States Military Academy at West Point, New York

I. Background and Overview:

I teach English at the United States Military Academy at West Point. My first experience teaching there was 1984 to 1987, when I was still a captain. Like most of my colleagues, I arrived at West Point fresh from a fully funded Master's program in Literature in English. But our initial responsibilities lay in teaching EN101—the freshman writing course. The preparation program at USMA did very little to ready us before the first classes met in August.

From 1984 until I left in 1987, though, the two follow-on core English courses, EN102, Introduction to Literature; and EN301, Advanced Literature, provided us the opportunities we needed to put our literature degrees to good use. In time, too, we became better teachers of composition. Since then, West Point's core courses have become primarily composition courses, but we still send new instructors to Master's programs in Literature in English. Nor have we done much to improve our departmental preparation for incoming instructors.

This was brought home to me very graphically last May when a woman about to graduate, and who had been one of several cadets I had mentored for two years, recounted to me an experience she had had with her EN101 instructor. One afternoon, about mid-semester, she went to him with a question about her grade on a paper. She told him that she believed he had not graded the paper on the quality of the writing but on the position she had taken—one with which he clearly disagreed. He responded that "a soldier is not supposed to question the

commander's decision. The grade that you received stands as is." That instructor had come to the department the same year she entered USMA, direct from his Master's program. He had completed our one-week New Instructor Training Program, and had been teaching composition for about six weeks. We had not provided him the tools he needed to deal with a cadet questioning her grade, so he used the only tool with which he felt comfortable—his authority as an officer. This young woman went on to major in English and is currently on our list of prospective instructors once she completes mandatory Army requirements. But that experience remains vivid for her. I want to do all that I can to insure that no future instructors fall back on the pat "I'm the leader, you're the follower, so there," answer to cadet questions.

My presentation today reports on the portion of my dissertation research that considers what we might do as a department to improve our junior military instructors' preparation to teach composition.

Importance of the Study

The Academy's research arm conducts yearly studies of the quality of entering classes, but we assume that an officer who has been successful leading soldiers will be equally successful teaching cadets. My study is important because, for the first time since the Academy opened in 1802, our attention is turned toward the English instructors rather than the students. Who are the people we bring into our classrooms? Can they become, in Hillocks's terms, "reflective practitioners"?

In sharing my study with a broader public, I hope to obtain more insight into ways that I can further refine both the study and our approach to new instructor training. We at the Academy are, in many ways, isolated from our colleagues at colleges and universities around the country. Over the years, we have come to think of ourselves and our courses as being necessarily different

from other instruction staffs and programs. The students who join the United States Corps of Cadets come from the same high school classrooms as their civilian counterparts. Our instruction staff must be prepared to teach the products of those classrooms, rather than the idealized officers-in-training that so many instructors arrive expecting.

Background Information—West Point

Because what we do at the Academy will seem foreign to some of you, let me first provide some background information.

On March 16, 1802, Congress authorized establishment of a military academy. President Thomas Jefferson signed the bill that same day. The United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, went into official operation on July 4, 1802. The staff consisted of one major, two captains and two lieutenants. There were ten cadets in the first class.

During the 19th century, English was taught as part of the Department of Modern Languages, or the Department of Belle Lettres, or not taught at all. In 1926, a separate Department of English was established. Until 1960, the Academy offered no electives or majors—All cadets graduated with a degree in engineering. In 1960, the Academy instituted a program of free electives.[1] Today, in addition to the core courses that all cadets take, cadets may choose from among 19 majors or 23 fields of study, including those in Arts, Philosophy, and Literature, offered by the Department of English.

Departing Instructor Survey

The second and third portions of my presentation will be brief discussions of the surveys I conducted of departing and incoming instructors on the quality of the preparation they received

[1] Bessell, William W. "The Proposed Curriculum." *Assembly* Spring 1960: 14-15.

from the Academy's English department. I will then briefly sketch the story of my work with two new instructors last fall. Finally, I will end with a few general thoughts about the future of our program.

Instructor Preparation

The twelve military instructors who departed the USMA Department of English during the summer of 1997 were generally supportive of New Instructor Training as we currently conduct it. Most agreed that they needed both theoretical and practical knowledge of teaching Composition. Several mentioned that they found themselves "reinventing the wheel" as they went through EN101 their first semester. One even admitted that such reinvention recurred each fall, complaining that he "was never able to capture my lessons learned and apply them to the next semester's students."

EN101

Few instructors felt comfortable teaching EN101 during their first semester here. They were grateful for the structured syllabus provided by the course director.

One lamented that cadets were not prepared for Freshman Composition:

> I think the most significant failing in the West Point writing program is assuming that cadets can read well or that cadets can read closely. I don't think they do either. . . . The cadets are supposed to think about an ongoing discourse about date rape, race relations, you have it, and they are supposed to become informed about this discourse through the essays we have them read. Unfortunately, they lack the skills necessary to access the texts. . . . I usually end up telling them what each article is about simply so I don't have to read too much garbage.

One expressed dismay at the subject matter:

I can't say that I am a big fan of using social issues as the subject matter for a composition class. Among other things, I believe that models of good writing (i.e. literature) best serve to inspire intelligent, graceful writing by students.

Another felt that cadets don't take the course seriously:

[This course] really provide[s] a service to the Academy & the Army. Unfortunately, most cadets don't understand or believe this. I always felt it was my most important job to show the cadets at every opportunity the connections between reading/writing and the "real" world of what we do in the Army.

The new instructor survey

Not one of last year's six new instructors felt himself well-prepared to teach composition when he reached West Point. New Instructor Training was somewhat effective for them, but two of them advocate complete overhaul of the program. All six believe that we need to make some changes in New Instructor Training. These instructors also believed that they would have been better served in graduate school to take courses on teaching pedagogy rather than literary criticism and research. Fortunately, they have all found the more experienced rotating faculty—and, to a lesser extent, the permanent faculty—extremely helpful in planning for individual classes. They also observed that periodic lesson conferences reveal that there are as many different EN101s as there are instructors, which they see as possibly being unfair to the cadets.

A Dual Case Study

This is a very brief version of the story of my work with two new instructors last fall. Both officers had volunteered to be my "guinea pigs" for the final portion of the fall 1997 semester because they wanted feedback on their planning and classroom effectiveness. Captains Smith and Jones (obviously not their real names) and I worked out a plan for my visits to their classrooms and briefly discussed their responses to my questionnaire.

The final block of instruction, Unit 4: Story Frames, was a series of eight lessons that ran from October 27, 1997, to November 20, 1997. The instructor-group lesson notes, prepared by two experienced instructors to assist colleagues through the block, set up a plan that would, theoretically, help instructors guide cadets to successful course completion—writing a simple argumentative essay in a three-hour term-end exam. The notes provided an objective for each fifty-five minute lesson within the block of instruction (e.g., Lesson 28 objective: "Students understand that critical thinking is an active, collaborative process that results from a communal dialogue of ideas.") The notes provided the barest outline of suggestions for classroom activities and no guidance that might help new instructors like Captains Smith and Jones to put the unit into the overall context of the course.

Classroom visits

Captain Jones's frustration with Lesson 25 (Students learn to read critically) was evident when I visited his classroom on his second teaching of the lesson. Cadets were to have come prepared to share answers to assigned questions on their reading. Many, perhaps as many as half, of the cadets in the classroom had not completed the assignment. Unable to generate any discussion because his students were unprepared, he moved to another portion of the lesson and randomly broke cadets into groups to discuss another of the assigned readings. He did not put the purpose or thrust of the discussion into clear context for them, nor did he limit them in the amount of time they should spend on each section of the discussion. I circulated through the classroom and found that the members of at least one group were working independently of each other, not as a team—though, given the loose nature of the assignment, that was not unexpected.

Ultimately, the section spun its wheels and, when CPT Jones and I talked about the class as we walked back to our Lincoln Hall offices, we considered alternatives to his lesson plan,

ideas he might use in the final two classes on this lesson. First, I asked him to articulate to the class his purpose for the group exercise. While he understood what it was he was asking them to accomplish, I suggested that he shouldn't keep that purpose secret from them. He needed to set clear goals for their activity and establish time constraints, I told him. He agreed to put these and several other suggestions I made to use during the final two iterations of the lesson.

When we talked later, CPT Jones told me that using my recommendations had helped him feel more in control, not of the class, but of himself. The suggestions had helped him get more focused and, with more personal focus, he was better able to guide the class and to meet the lesson's objectives.

The hour before my visit with Captain Jones, I sat in on Captain Smith's first presentation of Lesson 25. Captain Smith's classroom presence is more confident than Captain Jones's and he leads the class more forcefully. He is more explicit about what he expects group work to accomplish, and he is better at setting time constraints. As a result, his cadets both came to class with the assignment completed and stayed on task during group discussion. Captain Smith had felt that the final block of instruction, at least as outlined in the provided lesson notes, would not help his cadets succeed at term's end. He had, therefore, spent a good deal of time constructing what, for him, seemed a better approach. He managed, I believe, to maintain the spirit of the course and to accomplish its goals. Still, he expressed frustration at having to put so much time and effort into preparing for the class; he felt that the lesson notes provided to the instructors should have been more helpful.

Lesson 26 (Students learn to recognize Irony and Satire) was even more stressful for Captain Jones than Lesson 25 had been. This time I sat in on the very first iteration of the lesson. CPT Jones began with a quiz on terms from their reading (prejudice, opinion, assertion,

argument, evidence, expert opinion, fact), but never revealed the purpose of the quiz to the cadets and, rather than review it immediately, took it up to grade later. Ultimately, the quiz proved to be time wasted. He moved into a full-group discussion of "stock explanations," a concept from their reading, in which only three cadets were fully involved. Again, the majority of his cadets were not prepared for class and his lack of assertiveness in the classroom did not inspire them to change. Captain Jones ran out of things to do with the class about ten minutes before the end of the period. He dismissed them.

This time, while trying not to be too directive, I suggested several changes to Captain Jones that he could easily make before teaching the next three iterations of Lesson 26: 1) either skip the quiz completely or correct it in class and put it immediately in the context of the lesson; 2) call on non-participants—pay closer attention to who's involved in the discussion and who's not; 3) reinforce those responses that are on the mark—clearly explain why the responses are good ones; 4) have them write for a specific period of time in response to a clear prompt built from class discussion—don't throw away ten minutes of class time. Captain Jones will eventually become more effective as a classroom manager, but the growing pains are very difficult to watch.

In their own words

By the end of Block 4, both Captains Smith and Jones had made substantive revisions in the syllabus, changing the course to fit their understanding of the preparation cadets would need to finish EN101 successfully. As something of a valedictory exercise, I asked each of them to think over his aims for the final block of instruction and evaluate his achievement of those aims. I'll let their own words speak for them.

Captain Smith:

> What I have learned through my research is how many different approaches exist that detail how to teach composition. I suggest the department adopt one and adapt it to our needs and integrate it across the board. I do not think this will unnecessarily stifle initiative, but I do think it will ensure a uniform approach that is fair to the cadets. Failing this, I suggest the implementation of EN 101 unit reviews that actually serve a purpose. I think they should consist of a review of the previous unit and the layout of the unit to come. The process could be rotated among the different instructors with an emphasis on sharing experiences and insights. I firmly believe that participation in the form of preparation must be open to first year instructors as well.

Captain Jones:

> In retrospect, I think that I put too much on their plates. I think I should have had them use the evaluative framework earlier in other writing exercises until they could fully articulate each element. Once this was achieved, then I could have more effectively taken them step by step through the process of writing an argument. Along with teaching critical reading and other forms of analysis, I see this as a semester long process.
>
> Another area that I will focus on in the future will be classroom management. I think that in focusing on the material alone, that I forgot the human element. As the semester progressed and the cadets became more accustomed to the environment, they began to discover ways to "beat the system" and "get over." In the future I will incorporate events that will keep them accountable for their work.

My thoughts on the matter

One of my aims in working with these two new instructors was to get them to think, in Captain Smith's terms, "outside the box." I wanted them to go beyond accepting the syllabus as given and funneling it to cadets, to actively think of themselves as involved teachers. I wanted them to start on the path toward becoming truly reflective teachers, teachers with "both technical skills and the professional judgment needed to adapt or modify those skills in response to student

needs and the curriculum goals."[2] At course end, they were able to make the sorts of observations and reflections that I hope all of our instructors will be able to make someday.

VI. Looking Ahead

As the long-running and very public debate between David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow has shown, there is no complete agreement about what constitutes "academic writing." Even at West Point—insular and homogeneous West Point—we cannot all agree. Our strength, though, is that we have a self-renewing faculty, most of whose members have come from and will return to the larger community into which our students will enter upon graduation. That community experience gives us insight into the types of writing our students can reasonably expect to do during their first years of military service. That community experience, if put to good use and combined with an understanding of how people learn to write, can serve us well as we continue working to improve the teaching of writing at the Academy.

At West Point, the teaching of writing remains solely in the realm of the Department of English. We have discovered that here—perhaps more than at many civilian schools—we must have basic agreement on the goals and the means of teaching writing in order to serve our students well. For that reason, we must renew our commitment to transforming soldiers into writing teachers. Much of that responsibility rests with me. I welcome any suggestions that you might have to help make that transformation a successful one.

Thank you.

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[2] "Reflection and the Acquisition of Technical Teaching Skills." H. Jerome Freiberg and Hersholt C. Waxman. In *Encouraging Reflective Practice in Education: An Analysis of Issues and Programs*. Ed., Renee T. Clift, W. Robert Houston, Marleen C. Pugach. Teachers College Press, New York. 1990. 119-138. 124.

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Organization/Address: D/English USMA, West Point NY 10996	Telephone: 914-938-3659 FAX: 914-938-2562
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