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ABSTRACT

Becoming a better teacher through active reflection is at best encouraged in graduate school, however Teaching Assistant (TA) training often focuses so intently on the "how" of teaching writing that it never reaches the "why" of teaching; TAs are left with an eclectic grab-bag of activities that they know "work," although the nature and purpose of that work may be unknown. To encourage and nurture this reflective quality in new teaching assistants, there are steps a program can take. At Eastern Washington University, a smaller university, a program provides a ready-made syllabus (allowing the TAs to focus on teaching) and incorporates reflective writing (reading and writing about the teaching process.) Incorporating the Eastern (small university) model into a much larger setting at the University of Arizona requires some adjustments to the program. A program assigning new TAs with veteran TAs (Teaching Advisors) to monitor and mentor the new TAs is a viable option for a larger university. Teaching Advisors in a larger university setting should encourage new TAs to reflect intelligently on the work they are doing. Small groups of new TAs meeting under a Teaching Advisor can discuss their teaching, and read and discuss articles, exploring the "whys" more than the "hows" of teaching. By providing an advisor and encouraging quality of reflection, a composition program is far more likely to produce great teachers in a subject that is hard to understand. (SC)

First-Year Training for First-Year Composition: TA Training from the Inside

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First-Year Training for First-Year Composition: TA Training from the Inside

In his 1929 "National Survey of Conditions in Freshman English" Warner Taylor wrote that "The graduate-student teacher has apparently come to stay" (qtd. in Brereton 562). Before I focus on TA training as I have known it, I would like to tell a brief story about a fellow Montanan. Specifically, I want to tell you the story of Norman Maclean and the only formal advice he was ever given about teaching.

When Maclean began teaching at the University of Chicago in 1928, a master professor was sent to observe his literature class. The man entered the classroom on the appointed day exactly when class began, and he left immediately after class. The professor took no notes during Maclean's lecture, and he did not speak to the young graduate-teacher either before or after class. Maclean waited, nervously, for the professor to call, to comment in some way on his teaching. Days passed.

Finally, when he could wait no longer, Maclean made an appointment to see the man who had sat-in on his class. When Maclean asked, "What did you think of my class?" the professor responded "It was fine." When Maclean asked "What advice can you give me about teaching?" the professor responded "Wear a different suit every day of the week." When Maclean said he was too poor for this to be a viable option, the professor amended his advice: If you can't wear a different suit, "Well, then wear a different necktie" every day. That was all of the formal advice Norman Maclean was given about teaching (Maclean 57-59).

Maclean's story is amusing, but it is also a warning. Metaphorically, TAs are sometimes told the equivalent of "wear a different tie every day of the week." TA training often focuses so intently on the "how" of teaching writing that it never reaches the "why" of teaching. Rather than being encouraged to think of various activities according to the "why" of doing them, TAs are left with an eclectic grab-bag of activities that they know "work," although the nature and purpose of that work may be unknown.

The implication in Maclean's writing is that he became a better teacher through active reflection, that it is only through reflection on our work that we can truly come to know it. As I speak today, I would like you to keep this idea in mind: At its best, TA training encourages active reflection. For Maclean, reflection on his teaching made him a better teacher even when advice and training eluded him, and I know that reflection on my teaching over the last seven years has made me a better teacher. But reflection requires time, quiet time in which to think things over, and the first year of graduate school, the year in which most TAs receive their training, rarely contains many quiet moments.

There are steps a program can take, however, to encourage and to nurture this reflective quality in new teaching assistants, and it is on these steps that I would like to focus today.

TA Training at EWU: Providing Time

The TA training I received at Eastern Washington University is fairly standard in composition programs, and I would like to briefly outline its features to establish a baseline for our discussion. At Eastern TAs begin their training during the week prior to

Fall quarter; this training lasts four days and serves to introduce new graduate students to the university and the field of composition. During the first year, TAs attend a weekly two-hour class (taught by either the Director of Composition or the Assistant Director). So this is the baseline for TA training: several days of training prior to the first term coupled with weekly meetings throughout the first year.

Before I focus on TA training at larger institutions, I would like to explore the positive aspects of Eastern Washington's program. These positive aspects fall naturally into two separate categories that I think of as Reflective Writing and Provided by the Program.

Provided by the Program

During the pre-Fall orientation, TAs are given a day-by-day syllabus that covers the first unit of English 101 Writing American. The syllabus covers the daily activities for the first few weeks of the term and contains master copies of all of the handouts that are needed, including the prompt for the first major essay. The syllabus also explains such things as the grading scale and attendance policy in ways that are both understandable and accessible to the TAs and their students.

Initially I resisted this ready-made syllabus. I felt that it was giving me far too little credit, that my abilities to teach writing were being questioned. But I was in the minority at the time, and my views have changed. By providing the syllabus for the first unit and all of the supporting materials, Eastern's training program allowed me to focus more on my teaching, although I didn't realize it then. I was new to the teaching of college-level writing, and the day-by-day syllabus took some of the workload off of my

shoulders—for a brief period, anyway. By the time the syllabus expired, I had a handle on teaching writing, and I was ready to manage my class on my own. Because I did not have to concern myself with the overall planning of the first unit, I was able to focus on—and reflect on—the act of teaching itself. Later, after that first term, I was no longer required to use the Department's syllabus, and I no longer needed to. By providing me with the syllabus and the accompanying materials, Eastern's program gave me something I needed even more as a new TA: time to reflect.

Reflective Writing

I have always said that most of what I know about teaching I learned from my office mates, and there is some truth in that statement, but I have also learned a lot about teaching from writing: Specifically, I have learned from writing reflectively about both my own teaching and about the articles I have read on teaching. This practice was also encouraged at Eastern Washington University.

For each of the weekly two-hour meetings that all new TAs were required to attend, each of us had to write a short, two page paper in which we discussed either our own teaching or some journal article about teaching. We shared these papers with each other, and we gave them to the Director of Composition, who taught the course, for his feedback. (Because there were only approximately twelve of us who were in the class this was possible.) We were encouraged to think about the things we read and to try them in our own classes—and then, of course, we would reflect on that as well.

I don't remember any specific activities I took directly from the literature of our profession and dropped into my classroom, but I know that the ideas I was exposed to in

those first-year readings suffused my teaching, as they still do. I learned to think of classroom activities not in terms of "burning time," a phrase I often hear TAs employ, but in terms of purpose. To this day, as I plan my lessons, I always ask myself first "What will the students get from this?" rather than "How much class time can I use up with this?" I learned this question from reading and writing about teaching, and it seems, to me, to be invaluable.

Eastern Washington University's TA training program is effective because it provides new graduate students with time to reflect—through providing a syllabus for the first unit of the term. And during that time, TAs begin the written, reflective process that focuses them on their own teaching practices.

The Eastern model, as I have come to think of it, works well for a school its size—approximately 8000 students. For the remainder of my time today I would like to discuss larger TA training programs, such as that at the University of Arizona, and explore ways in which the positive aspects of Eastern Washington's model can be implemented in a much larger program. Before we get to the details, though, allow me to paint a picture of TA training at the U of A in fairly broad strokes.

TA Training at UA: Enter the TEADs

In some general ways, TA Training at the University of Arizona is similar to the training at Eastern. New TAs spend two weeks in training prior to the Fall semester. During the year TAs meet for two hours each week—in both large and small groups—to discuss teaching, share syllabi and prompts, etc. But while Eastern has a dozen new TAs each year, the University of Arizona has more than forty. Thus by sheer force of

numbers the two programs run on different paths. At Eastern the Director of Composition can give each new TA a moderate amount of hands-on attention; the Director can serve as something of a mentor. In a larger program this amount of attention is simply unmanageable for one person to provide to 40 or more new TAs. Fortunately, at the University of Arizona there are the TEADs.

The TEADs—Teaching Advisors—are full-time adjuncts who work with a group of five or six new TAs each term and approximately a dozen veteran TAs. Each TEAD spends one hour each week meeting with his or her group of new TAs. In addition to the weekly meetings, the TEADs visit the classroom of each new TA, read batches of student papers which the TA has graded, and examine each new TA's syllabus and assignment sheets. In these ways, the TEADs serve as master teachers, mentors for the TAs under their care.

Essentially, the Teaching Advisors at the University of Arizona play the role that the Director of Composition often does in smaller programs such as that at Eastern Washington University. The TEADs are able to provide one-on-one attention. They guide new TAs through their first year—and support them in later years—in ways that would be difficult for a large program to otherwise manage. But employing full-time adjuncts to work with small groups of TAs is not always possible, and in the time I have left I would like to talk about the TEAD model in general terms and focus on how it can benefit both teaching assistants and the programs in which they work.

An Alternative to the TEADs

In a small program a formal teaching advisor may not be necessary, especially when new TAs meet with an experienced teacher such as the Director of Composition regularly. In a larger program, though, such a person is invaluable to new TAs, whether they are called teaching advisors, master teachers, mentors, veteran TAs, or whatever. In a larger program, it is a teaching advisor, and I am now using the term in a more general sense, who can encourage new TAs to reflect intelligently on the work they are doing.

When possible, the best teaching advisors are those TAs who have taught in the program for several years. They know the ropes. They have had problems with students and seen them solved in ways appropriate to their program. They have negotiated the balance between coursework and teaching that nearly all graduate students struggle with during their first year. In short, the teaching advisors can do all of the things that people try to do for first-year undergraduates and then often forget to do for first-year graduate students. And perhaps no one is more ideally suited for such a role than another graduate student-teacher.

In the small groups that such TA teaching advisors lead, writing can take place, something difficult to manage in large groups. TAs can compile teaching portfolios, for example, or share drafts of syllabi and assignment sheets. In these small groups new TAs can discuss their own teaching, but they can also read and discuss articles on teaching. Under the guidance of an advisor, the members of each small group can, together, reflect on their teaching. They can take the time to discuss the "why" of various activities rather than focusing only on the "how" of a given classroom activity. They can reflect on their profession in a way and at a depth that is unworkable in a large group. Small groups of

TAs working with experienced advisors can explore teaching at a level that can rarely—maybe never—be reached by large groups of TAs with only a single advisor.

Final Words on TA Training and Neckties

The vast majority of undergraduate composition courses are taught by teaching assistants, and most TAs go through some form of training during their first year of teaching. Under the guidance of an advisor, either a more experienced TA, a faculty member, or whomever, new TAs can be encouraged to reflect on not only on the "how" of teaching but also on the "why." Without this guidance, the most useful piece of advice a new TA may be given is wear a different tie every day of the week.

Having mentioned Norman Maclean, indirectly, I would like to conclude by sharing one more piece of the story with which I opened. When asked to define a great teacher, Maclean stated that "a great teacher is a tough [person] who cares deeply about something that is hard to understand" (61). I think this definition is especially appropriate for those of us who teach in a subject that is often said to have no subject. To understand this profession, a new TA needs to reflect often on what he or she does, and reflection requires time, and time does not come easy when there is no advisor to guide the new TAs through their first year. By providing that advisor and encouraging that quality of reflection, a composition program is far more likely to produce great teachers in a subject that is hard to understand, teachers who may or may not wear a different tie every day of the week.

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