

Freshmen, Teaching, and Tenure: Why Do We Call It the Trenches, Anyway?

Ann-Marie Lopez

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann-Marie Lopez is a professor of English at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas. She received her Ph.D. in English (Written Discourse: Theory and Practice) from Texas A&M University—Commerce in 2013. A few of her research interests include: basic writing pedagogy; composition and student-athletes; literacy studies; rhetoric of young mothers/parents; and disability and embodied rhetoric.

I am a professor at a small, private liberal arts institution, and every semester I hear the same sentiment from my colleagues: “Three sections of freshmen writing?! I feel for you being in the *trenches* like that.”

Trenches. The word sticks with me, and I wonder when this term—one that carries with it such negative connotations—became a euphemism for teaching first year students. A “trench,” according to most dictionaries, is a ditch dug by soldiers seeking refuge from enemy attack. So, is teaching first year classes akin to being in the dirt, hiding from gunfire, scared to death? The metaphor is, I think, a bit problematic. Did the moniker emerge because of the work involved with teaching those classes (resulting in less time for scholarship/upper level courses)? Or, is it about the students *in* the courses (likely non-majors or students in developmental education courses)? Perhaps it is a combination, but a common view is that professors, particularly tenured ones, should avoid the trenches to ensure their own academic safety by teaching upper-level classes. Tenured or not, however, academic safety is invariably tied to institutional safety, right? And don’t we as teachers need students in order to do what we as teachers do?

Although I wouldn’t refer to gatekeeper and/or developmental courses as the *trenches*, students may perceive these classes as such. To be sure, these classes may be places where first-year and/or non-traditional students may have to fight to learn, particularly if labeled *developmental*. Many of my students never wrote an essay or cracked a book in high school. Most were told at least once in their years of schooling that they “can’t write.” Tenured faculty often lament these details, poring over the many ways in which these students are unprepared for college. But, what’s wrong with tenured faculty teaching these classes, hoping to make a difference in not only retention but also students’ overall classroom experience? Idealistic? Perhaps.

Here’s the thing: We openly discuss retention and emphasize university-wide endeavors to keep students, but the one idea we usually don’t consider is how tenured or full-time faculty teaching first-year courses could be a simple solution. The first year is, no doubt, the most crucial in regard to retention, and we know that less-experienced instructors—especially adjunct instructors whose connection to the institution can be fleeting, tenuous, and contingent—very often are relegated to teach introductory, foundational, developmental, and gateway courses. (Supiano, 2018). If this is the case, then aside from financial factors such as institutional budgets and full-time salaries, why are these courses often taught by part-time faculty with little to no support from or ties to the institution?

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Research indicates (Supiano, 2018; Jenkins, 2015; Umbach, 2007) that adjuncts are typically not as engaged in the institution or provided with the necessary tools to effectively support students in their classes. I am not suggesting these instructors are not qualified or shouldn’t teach; however, I *am* suggesting that, given what we as professionals in higher education know about adjuncts teaching these courses—foundational, gateway ones—why do we continue to delegate them thusly? This, too, can be problematic considering that the quality of students’ classroom experience seems to be congruent with their consequent persistence and success (Jenkins, 2015).

That said, if encouraging tenured faculty to teach these classes could make a difference in retaining at least one more student, then perhaps we should all be more proactive in such an endeavor. If more full-time faculty and administrators were, then maybe we wouldn’t need to be concerned about anyone being in *or* out of the trenches. And, to the tenured

faculty still on the fence, I offer this: If the fear is that students won't perform to your standards, remember that, typically, "Students will float to the mark you set" (Rose, 2005, p. 26). Set it high and meet them on the summit to address the challenges they may encounter rather than lament about or wallow in the *trenches*.

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