The Graduate Training Course for Teachers of Writing

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Background

English 602 at the University of Louisville is required of new teaching assistants, is open to public and private secondary teachers who wish to re-tool in composition, usually while pursuing an M.A. or M.A.T. degree, and is one of the courses from which doctoral students in rhetoric and composition may choose to fulfill the requirements in rhetoric and pedagogy. Each of these

student constituencies demands different degrees of emphasis on composition theory and pedagogy. The students also usually need to have their consciousnesses raised concerning the complexities of learning to read and write, particularly in academic environments. This course, as a result, becomes the hub from which develop the spokes of more particular perspectives on rhetoric and composition; yet the wheel is not completed until specific classroom performance and practice adds rim and tire. Whether this wheel rolls or not depends on the teacher's ability to define and focus upon key issues in the field of composition, to organize the theory and practice of teaching a secondary and beginning college writing course on those issues, and--most importantly--to help students understand the relationships between theory and practice as they plan courses.

There are also attitudinal factors to consider in such a course. New teaching assistants are more prone than the more seasoned to expect much more skill than they will ever find in freshman English students. The majority of students will most decidedly not share their teacher's appetite for or skill with writing and reading. They will not enter freshman English loving literature, nor will they share their teacher's often iconoclastic responses to great writers and great literature. These new graduate student teachers, disillusioned and often desperate when faced with the realities of the composition classroom, want quick remedies to everything from comma splices to dichotomous reasoning, but they often wish, at the same time, to be reinforced in their beliefs that today's students--their students--really cannot be taught.

A second, usually smaller contingent of new graduate teaching assistants despises the attitudes of their elitest colleagues. They are teaching with a mission, to save the masses from illiteracy, to expose the unwashed to great literature and high culture, to reach the inner selves of individual students. Writing, for both these groups, is a means to very different ends. One understands writing as a skill that, once learned, serves as one of the marks of the educated man. The other understands writing as a measure of and means to personal growth. But both groups are characterized by ignorance of research and theory on rhetoric and writing--either traditional or current--and, in consequence, oversimplify the process of composing according to their own prejudices and limited academic backgrounds.

Secondary teachers present another kind of attitudinal problem. Many are convinced that composition theory has absolutely nothing to do with the practical needs of their classes. Every activity and reading must be practical, and preferably aimed with perfect accuracy at next Tuesday's class. They usually share in none of the TA's enthusiasm for literature or theory; they either find the TA's attitudes toward students extremely elitist or terribly romantic. They are sure that no college course, let alone a graduate course, can really reach down to the lowly depths of their writing classes to provide anything useful.

Finally, there are, at least in my institution, a few who are interested in theory, who know that freshmen would not need a writing course if they already knew how to write, who wish to perfect practical skills in line with theory, and who know that composition research has expanded enormously over the past few years. These students are candidates for the Ph.D. in rhetoric and composition. They would be a delight were it not for the problems that they create for the other students.

These three very different sub-groups present unique problems for the beginning graduate class on teaching writing. Too much composition theory frustrates the secondary teachers and bores the lovers of literature; too much practice, although it usually pleases the secondary teachers, often makes the graduate student literary elite at best patronizing and condecending

and at worst intellectually frustrated and angry. The entire group, despite these individual differences, join together on one issue: they are all ignorant of composition research and theory and they are, to a degree, rightfully angry because this complex subject has not been taught to them before, during their years as undergraduate English or Humanities majors. Often they compound these reasons for anger and frustration with a defensiveness concerning their own writing, which--often for the first time--they are subjecting to at least a bit of the same kind of criticism they level at their students in the writing classes that they teach.

There is a way to pull these disparate learners together, however. Focusing the beginning graduate course in composition on composing problems, which can subsequently be examined in the light of composition theory and discussed on a practical level in workshops can help students (1) combine theory and practice, (2) do practical work on writing skills, rhetorical principles, and teaching units that directly concerns their classrooms, and (3) put their own writing skills to work in practical situations. English 602 at Louisville is focussed on problems that current research and practice have defined.

Four Problems That Define English 602

Each problem is defined by a question. Each question is used to develop readings in theory and practice, to structure workshops and class discussions in which readings are applied to specific classroom strategies and materials (writing assignments, exercises, and the like), and to structure assignments that encourage the development of practical solutions, informed by theory, to each student's particular approach to the problem. As teacher of the course, I keep in mind the following six problem-solving steps:

1. Elaboration, restriction, and qualification of the problem-question itself.
2. An examination of the question from the perspectives of at least two or three major areas of composition research. This step helps fill in the field of inquiry that surrounds the question. Problems of pre-writing, for example, might result in examinations of syntactic theory as an approach to pre-writing (particularly through sentence-combining), in analyses of classical heuristics as closed-form approaches to planning, and in analysis of contemporary heuristics such as problem-solving and Burke's pentad as open-form approaches to planning.
3. An application of the problem-question and the research behind it to specific composition classroom contexts. A particular question and the research behind it might, for example, be applied to a particular unit on style in an English 101 class at Louisville.
4. The proposal, usually in workshop presentations to the whole class, of tentative solutions to the problem-question, referring to both theory and practice.
5. The evaluation of these tentative solutions by workshop groups that are intent on turning these solutions into more general classroom strategies. Sample freshman and secondary-student writings, representing both preliminary and final versions of assignments, become the focus of analysis here.
6. The discussion of the implications created by these evaluations.

These steps are used to treat four problems, as exemplified in these questions.

1. What do students need to do before they write?
2. What do students need to do as they write?
3. What do teachers need to do to assure full attention to their students' composing processes?
4. How should teachers evaluate student writing?

The remainder of this paper will specifically address each of these questions.

What Do Students Need To Do Before They Write?

The teacher should explain the two extreme answers to this question: the traditional view that, since writing is a result of clear, logical thinking, then a transitional stage in which thought is mapped on to a formal outline, is all that a good thinker need do in order to write well; in contrast, the more current view that thinking before actual writing must be based upon careful observation of actual experience, from active and analytical reading, critical rethinking, and a good deal of revision of notes, lists, and free-writings. Students should discover, during weeks one through four of English 602, a moderating balance between these extreme views. Activities that ask students to observe carefully, to record and examine the results of observation, to try out ideas in collaborative contexts, and to consider these activities as teaching strategies are combined with readings on invention and discovery of ideas in the Cooper and Odell collection and in Britton on the place of expressive discourse in learning to write. Activities are drawn from the required rhetoric text for English 101 at the University of Louisville and from the Koch and Brazil book on teaching strategies. Readings from the Shaughnessy book provide a professional and theoretical background for understanding why writing teachers must teach the process of finding ideas as well as expressing those ideas. Shaughnessy also introduces the problem of shifting codes, of how the rituals of academic discourse put a different stamp upon the writings of intellectuals and the eduational elite.

What Do Students Need To Do As They Write?

This section of the course should begin with a comparison of linear and recursive models of the writing process. Classical theory generally saw writing as proceeding from invention through arrangement and style, a linear model. Contemporary rhetoric, in contrast, tends to view invention, arrangement, and style as varying perspectives on the act of composing that are used and reused by writers as they write, a recursive model. The analysis and synthesis of these models is the subject of weeks four through nine of English 602. Using perspectives on syntax--particularly insights from work in applied linguistics (such as Christensen's, Winterowd's) and in sentence-combining--students develop, during weeks four and five, strategies for helping their students restrict and elaborate ideas by reworking and expanding words and phrases from lists, notes, and free-writings.

Weeks five and six focus on developing responses to student drafts. These drafts take the form of expressive writings that were produced in reaction to early versions of the first writing assignment--a personal narrative--in the University of Louisville's syllabus for English 101 classes. Britton's concept of the teacher-as-collaborator combines with Shaughnessy's syntactic and structural analyses of student writings to create a sense of how developing ideas can become complete narratives through, first, reworking of expressive responses and, second, through revision--deleting, rearranging, substituting of parts--of first drafts. Material on narrative forms, descriptive techniques, and elementary possibilities for syntactic manipulation are provided by reading and analysis of the rhetoric textbook used in English 101. Classroom strategies are again drawn from Koch and Brazil and Shaughnessy.

Weeks six through nine concentrate on later stages of revision of student essays (work on more abstract forms of narration), with more attention to using outside readings to supplement and expand upon earlier personal essays, and with more explicit attention to shaping these essays to specifically-defined contexts with particular audiences. Lectures on psycholinguistics and reader-response approaches to the reading process introduce these concepts; students then examine, usually in workshops, the professional and student essays that are included in the English 101 rhetoric-reader from these perspectives. Frank Smith's and Cooper and Petrosky's work on psycholinguistics and Louise Rosenblatt's work on reader-response literary theory make excellent background readings on these issues. Practical activities during these weeks include workshop sessions on developing specific directions to students on problems of revision for different audiences. Outside readings on the English 101 syllabus for this period are analyzed to help students in English 602 discover ways of using writing exercises to intervene in the students' reading processes.

Weeks four through nine also include a one-half hour session during each two and one-half hour weekly class period on developing, structuring, and overseeing editing workshops. I use Ken Bruffee's material on collaborative learning and my own (From Experience to Expression, Houghton Mifflin, 1980) to help students develop a cumulative approach to editing for correctness and appropriateness. Mina Shaughnessy's chapters on "Common Errors" and "Syntax" are also useful background readings for these sessions because they give new teachers a sense of why students make particular grammatical and mechanical errors. Unedited student papers become the texts for the sessions; groups of students are expected to devise categorical definitions of error-patterns, to construct systematic heuristics that student-writers can follow to detect and correct particular kinds of error, and to develop a schedule, stretched over a number of weeks, for reducing errors in their students' papers. The result should be a strategy for gradually reducing error by concentrating attention on systematic categorizing and correction of grammatical problems.

What Do Teachers Need To Do To Include Attention To Their Students' Composing Processes?

On a general level, the final six weeks of the course responds to this question in two ways. First, students read articles reporting on contemporary composition research in Cooper and Odell's Research on Composing. These articles provide the opportunity to apply contemporary theory to the student's earlier more practical work on invention and arrangement, and they create a base for applications of theory to more abstract forms of discourse, particularly in discourse with informative and persuasive aims.

Second, these final weeks focus on the practical problems of teaching style to beginning college writers. We define style as grammatical and rhetorical choice, and we use excerpts from the rhetoric-reader that is required in English 101 at Louisville to develop skill in recognizing how experienced writers alter word-choice, syntax, and overall form to create different effects. Contemporary work on style and composition theory by Walker Gibson, Richard Lanham, and Joseph Williams are brought in as time permits, and the earlier emphasis on sentence-combining and Christensen's cumulative sentence are re-addressed as means of revising the styles of student essays to meet the needs of more abstract subjects, aims, and audiences.

On a more specific level, the final six weeks of English 602 responds to the question of how to cover different perspectives on composing by concentrating on our fourth question:

How Should Teachers Evaluate Student Writiing?

Several important writing assignments in the sequence of writings in English 101 at Louisville form the basis for an answer to this question. In the process, these assignments undergo extensive revision and elaboration. Each element of the rhetorical triad--speaker, subject, and audience--is used to refine the student's understanding of each assignment; then, each workshop group is asked to develop primary traits, rating scales, and lists of characteristics for one of the assignments (Lloyd-Jones and Cooper in Evaluating Writing, as well as materials that have been developed for holistic grading in the composition program at Louisville, are used as background reading at this point). Graduate students are then asked to write the assignment themselves, to have two other members of the class score their efforts using the holistic scale, and to discuss the implications of holistic-primary trait evaluation in contrast to more traditional methods of evaluation--error lists, correction charts, and the like.

The holistic-primary trait approach to evaluation is primarily rhetorical--the writings are evaluated according to their overall effect on an intended or implied audience and according to an intention that was clearly implied in the original assignment. A second perspective on evaluation is given a subordinate but important place during these final six weeks of English 602--methods of measuring syntactic fluency and discussion of the degree of influence that measures of fluency should have on our overall evaluation of the quality of writing. A review of the basic research on sentence-combining--Mullen; O'Hare; Daiker, Moreberg, and Kerek (both their textbook and their anthology of professional articles on sentence-combining); Strong; and the pioneering work of Kellogg Hunt. The students read Kellogg Hunt and Christensen on the sentence. All this work on syntactic fluency culminates in a one-and-a half-hour workshop in which one of the student passages from Shaughnessy's book is analyzed for syntactic fluency, using the t-unit of measurement. This syntactic measurement is then compared to previously-elicited evaluations of the overall quality of the student passage from Shaughnessy's text.

Student Work Requirements

Work requirements in a course such as English 602 must synthesize theory and practice in ways that will affect the long-term pedagogical practices of the students in the class. In other words, these requirements help students pull together the different strands of reading and workshop activity. Students must:

(1) relate a reputable freshman college composition textbook to the teaching of a particular aspect of learning to write,
(2) complete mid-term and final examinations in which simulated learning situations are used as the basis for questions which encourage students to apply theory to particular classroom situations (see the appendix on course examinations),
(3) revise and comment upon a particular unit in a sample University of Louisville English 101 syllabus,
(4) write a five-to-seven page paper in which a central problem in teaching composition is defined and a solution, drawn from the reading and workshop activities in English 602, is proposed and explained. This problem should be considered in relation to the teaching situation in which the student is working.

The objective of all these projects is to have students respond to teaching situations as close to the real world of the classroom as possible. Each project asks students to relate some aspect of theory and practice to particular teaching situations. The practical needs of all three groups of students can be met by this structure without sacrificing at least minimal exposure to current theory and research in composing.

Appendix I: English 602 Syllabus

Syllabus, English 602, Fall, 1982

Required Texts:

Britton, et al, The Development of Writing Abilities: 11-18. London Schools Council, 1976.
Comprone, From Experience to Expression, 2nd. ed. Houghton Mifflin, 1980, (or the rhetoric text currently required in English 101 at the University of Louisville)
Cooper and Odell, eds. Research on Composing. NCTE, 1978.
Cooper and Odell, eds. Evaluating Writing. NCTE, 1977.
Koch and Brazil, eds. Strategies for Teaching the Composition Process. NCTE, 1978.
Ohmann and Douglas, English in America. Oxford, 1978.
Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations. Oxford, 1977.
Watkins, Dillingham, and Martin, Practical English Handbook. 5th ed., Houghton Mifflin, 1978, (or the handbook required in the Composition program at Louisville).

All the above are available in paperback from the University Bookstore.

Course Requirements:

1. 20%, report on outside book
2. 20%, midterm
3. 20%, final
4. 20%, revision and rationale of sample English 101 syllabus or a brief writing class unit and rationale (maximum of eight pages)
5. 20%, problem-solving paper, 5-7 pp.

Class Reading Schedule

Each class will be evenly divided between a lecture by the instructor on a particular area of composition theory and practice and a follow-up session of workshops in which groups composed of students in the class will practice activities that are consistent with the theory explored earlier in the class. A ten-minute break will intervene between lectures and workshops each week. When a section of From Experience is assigned, you should read the appropriate section in the Instructor's Manual along with it.

Week I: September 1: reading and discussion of Chapter 1 in From Experience--in class; discussion and workshop on the writer's journal, using the photograph on page 28 of From Experience. Readings for September 8: introduction and pages 1-63 in Koch and Brazil; Chapters 7 & 8 in Shaughnessy; Chapter 2 pf From Experience.

Week II: September 8: on perception, prewriting, and composing. Readings for September 15: pages 42-49 in FEE; pages 77-119 in PEH; chapter 4 in Shaughnessy.

Week III: September 15: on constructing editing workshops in a composition class. Readings for September 22: pages 65-82 in Koch and Brazil; Chapter 3, pages 62-72 in FEE, pages 49-61 in FEE.

Week IV: September 22: On Syntax, Invention, and Composing. Readings for September 29: Shaughnessy, Chapter 3; FEE Chapter 4, pages 84-101 on narration and description; section on "Sentence Error and Grammar" in PEH.

Week V: September 29: Syntax, Revision, and Composing. Readings for October 6: pages 102-149 in FEE; pages 83-102 in Koch and Brazil.

Week VI: October 6: Revision and Reading within the Composing Process. Readings for October 13: "Sentence Structure" in PEH; pages 153-216 in FEE; review of editing appendix and Instructor's Manual section on editing; review of Shaughnessy, Chapter 3.

Week VII: October 13: Editing, and More on Reading in the Composing Process. Readings for October 20: pages 217-269 in FEE; "Punctuation" reviewed in PEH.

Week VIII: October 20: From Reading to Writing within the Composition Process; Covering the More Abstract Forms of Writing. Readings for October 27: Kosinski, Freidan, and Schlesinger readings (pages 247, 292, 303) in FEE.

Week IX: October 27: mid-term (1 hr. 15 min.); workshops on analyzing essays in a writing class workshop (1 hr. 15 min.). Readings for November 3: pages 270-319 in FEE; the Murray and Schultz articles in Research on Composing.

Week X: November 3: On Revision and Writing. Readings for November 10: pages 322-362 in FEE; the Cooper, Lloyd-Jones, and Hunt articles in Evaluating Writing.

Week XI: November 10: Revising Sentences and Composing for Style and Audience. Writer's Options hand-out for workshop. Readings for November 17th: "Diction and Style" section of PEH; pages 363-465 in FEE.

Week XII: November 17: On Teaching Style in a Writing Class. Readings for November 24: Articles #1, 2, 3, 4, in Research on Composing.

Week XIII: November 24: A Review of the Composing Process. Readings for December 1: Odell and Beaven articles in Evaluating Writing; a review of Chapter 8 in Shaughnessy.

Week XIV: December 1: More Review of the Composing Process, with emphasis on evaluation. Sample 101 Syllabus or a description of a brief unit in a writing course due today. Discuss the Ohmann and Douglas book on the professional context surrounding composition programs in America.