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### Context

Teaching College Composition is one part of a multi-faceted apprenticeship program for freshman English teachers at Virginia Tech. The course itself is taught seminar-style for three hours, one afternoon a week during the fall quarter. It offers three graduate credits toward the M.A. in English and is required of all new Graduate Teaching Assistants. New and old faculty are invited to attend the seminar presentations, since virtually every faculty member in our department teaches composition.

The GTAs who enroll in the course do not come to it cold. They first attend a two-week conference before the beginning of the Fall Quarter, during which we introduce all the new GTAs (together with new faculty) to certain concepts and techniques that will help them plan their courses and work through the first few weeks of classes. This non-credit, two-week orientation is meant as a prelude to the course in Teaching College Composition, and it covers the following topics:

Writing as a Process

The Communications Triangle: Relationships Among Writer,  
Audience, and Text

Responding to Student Writing: Coaching, Evaluating, Grading

Some Tried and True Methods of Teaching Invention

Some Tried and True Methods of Teaching Composing

Some Tried and True Methods of Teaching Revision

Creating Good Writing Assignments

Relating Reading and Writing: Using Essay-Readers in the Classroom

Designing a Workable Syllabus

Tours of Library, Counseling Center, Learning Resources Center,  
and Computing Center

During this pre-quarter orientation, we do not focus much on theory or research in composition, although we draw the topics for the orientation from what we have learned about composition theory and research. Rather, we are concerned with getting new teachers prepared to teach a new course, all of them for the first time and many of them having never before taught anything. We spend time participating in mock classes, discussing alternative ways of approaching the teaching of composition, and practicing evaluation and grading of essays. Students come to the fall quarter course in Teaching College Composition, then, with a fair amount of practical knowledge but no requisite background in theory; some of them have taught composition before, either at the high school or college level, but some of them are fresh out of their undergraduate programs; some of them are primarily interested in earning money to finance their graduate education in English literature; and some have a commitment to a professional career in composition and rhetoric. They are, then, a diverse group when they begin the course, with the two-week orientation their only common experience.

### Description of the Course

Teaching College Composition is a general introduction to the theory and practice of teaching composition in college. During the course, we focus on three matters, working toward three goals:

1. competing theories of teaching composition (to help new teachers develop a theoretical base for classroom practices that is consistent with their own teaching style and with current research);
2. classroom techniques that work well (to help new teachers learn from the experience of others, and to give them a repertoire of possibilities that suit different classroom needs and different students' learning styles);
3. practical problems of teaching writing at Virginia Tech (so they can plan their courses and classroom strategies in the context of specific constraints local to our university and student body).

The format of the classes is both conference and discussion. The first hour of the three-hour seminar period is given over to a conference-type presentation by a panel or individual, focussing on theory and techniques of teaching the various topics in our freshman English sequence. Experienced faculty and GTAs are asked to serve as presenters, and all faculty are invited to these open presentations.

The second two hours of the class are for the new GTAs who are officially enrolled in the course. During that time, we talk informally about common issues and problems that occur in the day-to-day teaching of their classes; discuss the reading assigned for the day, along with applications to their own future classes; and work in peer editing groups to critique drafts of each others' essays. All class members are required to write the essays they assign in their freshman classes, so this peer-group evaluation gives them a chance to see the kinds of problems their students encounter, as well as to critique the value of each assignment.

In the last two class meetings of the quarter, the two-hour block is devoted to oral reviews each GTA does of a book in composition theory, practice, or research. The review is written up as the final project for the course.

In addition to writing essays along with their freshmen and doing the reviews, all GTAs enrolled in Teaching College Composition must keep a teaching journal throughout the quarter. The purpose of the journal is to help new teachers analyze and evaluate what is going on in the freshman classes they are teaching and to play around with ideas gleaned from their reading and the seminar presentations and discussions, especially trying to apply what they are learning about theory to their own classes. The journals are graded on the following criteria, as I address them to the GTAs:

1. The acuteness and thoroughness of your perceptions of what is going on, both in 5060 and in your own freshman classes: you should be able to perceive differences in teaching styles, differences in attitudes and approaches of textbook writers, and differences in your own attitudes and teaching styles from day to day and situation to situation.
2. Your ability to discriminate and evaluate: what is strongest and weakest about a given class presentation--yours or someone else's? (New GTAs, as part of their apprenticeship, observe experienced faculty members' freshman classes an average of once a week.) Where could it have been improved? What is the secret of one teacher's success as compared to another's? or one technique as compared to another? Putting yourself in the role of a freshman, what about a given class makes you anxious? secure? feel like you've learned something? not learned anything?
3. Your ability to apply what you learn from one situation to another: how does what you learn in one class (or one set of papers, or one set of student conferences) have some influence on others?
4. The clarity and conciseness of your writing. (This implies using the standard English code for the most part, but not worrying about it too much. Use sentence fragments, for example, as you wish--as long as your ideas come through clearly.)

### Textbooks

The following texts are required reading for the course:

Donovan, Timothy R., and Ben W. McClelland. Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1980.

Garrison, Roger. How a Writer Works. New York: Harper and Row, 1981.

[The Instructor's Manual, One-to-One: Making Writing Instruction Effective, is distributed free in class.]

Lindemann, Erika. A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

In addition, the following books are recommended resources for the required review:

- Coles, William. The Plural I: The Teaching of Writing. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978.
- Elbow, Peter. Writing With Power. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press 1973.
- Gebhardt, Richard C. Composition and its Teaching. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio Council of Teachers of English Language Arts, 1979.
- Graves, Richard. Rhetoric and Composition: A Sourcebook for Teachers. Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1976.
- Judy, Stephen N., and Susan J. Judy. The Teaching of Writing. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1981.
- Macrorie, Ken. Uptaught. Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden, 1970.
- Ohmann, Richard, and W. B. Coley. Ideas for English 101. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1975.
- Stanford, Gene, ed. How to Handle the Paper Load. [Classroom Practices in Teaching English 1979-1980.] Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.
- Tate, Gary, and Edward P. J. Corbett. The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

### Afterword

One of the primary aims of Teaching College Composition is to give our apprentice teachers a repertoire of approaches to teaching composition. Just as we stress in the course that students have different "cognitive styles," with consequently different writing techniques, so teachers have different teaching styles and must be free to develop their own techniques. The only thing we insist on is that they should master a variety of methods--a repertoire of possibilities for helping different students cope with different writing problems.

In order to develop further the knowledge and flexibility of our GTAs and new faculty, the apprenticeship program continues past the required three-credit course. In the winter quarter, all new GTAs are required to attend a weekly workshop, focussing on techniques for teaching the second-quarter composition course and on suggestions for planning the third quarter. This series of workshops, like the two-week orientation that precedes Fall Quarter, is not for credit, but GTAs are compensated for all the apprenticeship work by being released, during the fall and winter quarters, from one course of the two-course load normally assigned to GTAs. In addition, GTAs have an opportunity to take other courses in composition theory, composition research, and rhetoric; and they participate in an internship during their second year that exposes them to some special field of composition--community college teaching, tutoring in the Writing Center, working with ESL students, working in technical writing, or working in publishing and editing. Throughout the standard two-year assistantship at Virginia Tech, our GTAs are supported in their teaching by faculty members who serve as advisors and mentors. We hope that with the course in Teaching College Composition as a nucleus, our students leave us not only with an M.A. in English but with a sound grounding in the theory and practice of teaching composition, prepared to teach a variety of students in a variety of institutions.