English 537: Teaching Basic Writing

Michael J. Hogan

The training course for Teaching Assistants at the University of New Mexico, English 537: Teaching Basic Writing, has had a single form for the past five years. But, before I describe the course, I must say something about the conditions that have shaped it. Indeed, what I have to share of my experiences in our course training graduate students to teach composition is, I suspect, essentially an illustration of how local circumstances can affect curriculum. The local conditions I refer to are produced by the nature of our staff, our composition program, and our student body.

Each year for the past five years we have welcomed about twenty new graduate student TAs. Typically, a few of these people have had experience

teaching composition; most have not. In fact, many have had no teaching experience at all. Thus, 537 is a requirement for all new TAs.

We have three composition courses in our freshman sequence, the first--English 100--a developmental course called Writing Standard English, the other two traditional offerings in writing college essays. Our practice has been to assign beginning TAs to the first course, English 100, during their first semester and then ask them to teach the other two courses in subsequent semesters. The rationale for this has been that, though starting at the developmental level imposes a special challenge on inexperienced teachers, our TAs will acquire an overview of our program and its standards by moving sequentially through its three courses. Another important characteristic of our program is a product of the pressures under which we work to account for what we do. Some of this pressure, I am sure, is the same as that which all composition programs feel: other departments complain when their students cannot write well; our department asks local high schools to teach writing energetically and employ solid standards when grading writing, so we ourselves must do these things.

Additionally, we are largely a commuter school, which has meant that many of our students return home each day to parents keenly interested in the details of their sons' and daughters' progress in courses, go home to parents who do not hesitate to storm into a dean's office or call a state legislator at the first hint of unfairness or impropriety on a teacher's part. There is some history here. In what is locally known as "The 'Love-Lust' Episode," the state legislature once in the early 70s penalized UNM a million dollars (at least that is the most oft-cited figure) because, it was discovered, a graduate student TA in a freshman English course invited students to read "pornographic" poetry instead of instructing them in writing. This event left a mark on the program: we have standard texts, common syllabi, and a battery of proficiency exams all students must take in freshman composition classes. I am suggesting, then, that our composition program has been forced more than most to make sure its staff uses consistent, defensible grading standards and be mature professional teachers of writing in the classroom.

Finally, UNM has a de facto open-admission policy. As a consequence, almost half of our entering freshman class each year (as many as 2000 students) have been required to take our English 100 developmental course. Included in this large group of under-prepared students is a significant number of New Mexicans for whom English is a second language, who are truly bilingual, or for whom writing standard English is made difficult by the interference of one or another dialect. Since a new TA immediately faces a roomful of these students, the 537 course has contained material aimed at helping the TA address the problems of poorly-prepared students with language problems.

This long preliminary should explain the major parts of the 537 course:

A. A review of the conventions of Standard Written English. It is not unusual to discover that some beginning TAs are not as confident as they need to be about such basic matters as fragments, splices, agreement, parallelism, and the like. This review, conducted with the handbook or workbook assigned in the English 100 course they are teaching, has taken from a week to four weeks, depending on the background of the students.

B. Frequent discussion of day-to-day problems or issues involved in teaching. The syllabus for 537 does not contain a block of time devoted to these practical matters; rather, students in the course are invited to raise questions as the need arises. Often questions arise out of our examining sample student papers. From the first day to the last, then, a 537 class meeting is likely to include ten minutes or thirty minutes of discussion on how to handle a student who

dominates a class, how to communicate efficiently and clearly when writing comments on students' papers, how to distinguish a C essay from a D essay, how to construct fair topic questions for writing assignments. Most important, these discussions present regular opportunities to confront the language problems of our students, and from these discussions I expect 537 students to learn to recognize errors that result from dialect and to learn that some errors are less important than others.

C. Evaluation of the 537 students' teaching. I visit each TA's class twice in a semester, once during the first third of a term and once during the last few weeks of a term. After the first visit, I confer with the TA about what I saw.

D. Writing exercises. Several times in 537 students are asked to compose a 500-word essay on a topic contained in the text for the English 100 class they teach. These essays are usually written during one of our class periods. Thus the 537 students complete an assignment that parallels what they regularly ask their students to do. Because it lets them experience the struggle with an assigned topic and the pressures to write an essay in an hour and because it gives them a model paper to share with their students when they assign that topic from our text, this has been a most successful portion of 537.

E. The activities I have listed so far generally form about half of the course. The other half consists of reading in the theory or pedagogy of composition. The major work here for many years has been Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations. This book is particularly well-suited to help our new teachers, faced as they have been with teaching developmental writing to college-age students. We typically have spent a month reading, discussing, and attempting to adapt Shaughnessy's principles and insights to our situation at New Mexico. Additionally, individual reports or critiques or other major or pertinent works in composition have been a part of the course. Among the most popular and helpful reports were those from students who had read Kinneavy in A Theory of Discourse on the conventions of representational writing, Donald Murray in his A Writer Teaches Writing on revision techniques, Kellogg Hunt on the indices of syntactic maturity, and from students critiquing textual materials appropriate for developmental students (e.g., Strong's Sentence Combining or Sullivan's Paragraph Practice). In recent years, we have spent the final several weeks of the course examining--and accepting or qualifying--the conventional wisdom on college essays as contained in a typical rhetoric text (I selected Brooks and Warren's Modern Rhetoric, which served nicely). This addition to the syllabus came about because students requested that the course, as well as helping them survive their first semester teaching basic writing, give them some background for their next assignment, one of our courses focusing on the college essay.

That, then, describes the structure our training course has had. Next year's version will show certain significant differences. Because of several organizational improvements (we received a slight increase in funding, and English 100 will be shifted from our department to a new college which will handle all remedial courses), our beginning TAs as of next year will be assigned to one of our college-level composition courses instead of English 100. Thus 537 will be revised, with two changes in particular. First, I plan to double the amount of time given to the examination of the conventional rhetoric text. Second, I plan to require a substantial amount of reading from Tate and Corbett's The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. And incidentally, the title for the course, which has been Teaching Basic Writing, will become Teaching College Composition.

University of New Mexico