

George Miller

In the fall of 1976 I became Director, Lower-Division Programs in English-- a title which euphemistically concealed part of the real truth: I was the Director of Freshman Composition. Nothing I had done before qualified me for the job. In those days, before the coming of composition specialists, most directors were simply impressed from the ranks. The biggest shock of the job was the sudden realization that I was now responsible not just for my own sections of Freshman English but for everyone's. I had to take my own syllabus and methods and make them public! That first year I made a desperate attempt to educate myself in all things that graduate school had never prepared me for. I also realized that our graduate assistants needed some sort of formal guidance in the teaching of composition--something more than the handouts that I gave them and the weekly one-hour meeting when we met to hold hands and commiserate. And so, "Teaching Composition" was born. As the course's title indicates, I relied completely on Gary Tate's new collection Teaching Composition (TCU, 1976). Without that book to guide me, there would have been no course.

From the first E688 had its problems. Although the department thought, in general, that it was a good idea and so required all new graduate assistants to take it, E688 did not originally count for graduate credit. It was not until several years later that "Teaching Composition" was finally thought of as a respectable graduate offering. Further, the course has always drawn a diversified audience. In the beginning it enrolled just our own graduate assistants; then gradually public and private school teachers began turning up. Their presence has always added a nice dimension to discussions but it is often difficult to pitch the class in such a way as to be of value to middle-school teachers and freshman English instructors at the same time. The teachers want to discuss only effective classroom strategies; the graduate students, only the most abstract theories. This year a new clientele emerged: the course is now required of all our undergraduate secondary education English majors. The larger audience has meant a larger class. E688 began as a seminar; this year it enrolled 30 students.

The course can tolerate such a diverse audience since it is not tied directly to our Freshman English program. E688 is only part of a training program for new teaching assistants which includes weekly non-credit meetings devoted to specific problems and suggestions.

Texts

- Donovan, Timothy and Ben McClelland, eds. Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition. Urbana: NCTE, 1980.
- Elbow, Peter. Writing Without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Kinneavy, James L. A Theory of Discourse. New York: Norton, 1980.
- Shaughnessy, Mina. Errors and Expectations. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Tate, Gary, ed. Teaching Composition. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976.
- Tate, Gary and Edward P. J. Corbett, eds. The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

In addition, a number of monographs and articles are placed on reserve in our Freshman English office.

Requirements

Over the years the requirements have varied rather widely. Currently I require a take-home mid-term and a final. I started this two years ago when I found that many of the students only read a part of the assigned readings. Class discussions were sluggish and often pointless and I was increasingly forced to summarize material in lectures. Graduate students are required to write a paper or produce a project, generally an in-house document which is of use to our writing staff. Over the years about a dozen of my students have published papers which grew out of the class.

Readings and Writings

The class begins by writing a diagnostic essay on one of the topics being used in the freshman course. The essays that they produce become part of the next week's topic--the evaluation of writing. For that period the students read Charles R. Cooper's "Holistic Evaluation of Writing" and Richard Lloyd-Jones's "Primary Trait Scoring," both in Evaluating Writing (NCTE, 1977). In addition we grade a number of sample paragraphs and essays and discuss some criteria by which we could evaluate their own diagnostic essays.

The third week examines theories of discourse. The students read Frank D'Angelo's "The Search for Intelligible Structure in the Teaching of Composition," Caroline Eckhardt and David Stewart's "Towards a Functional Taxonomy of Composition," both reprinted in The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook (WTS), James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse, and D'Angelo's bibliographical essay on the "Modes of Discourse" in Tate's Teaching Composition (TC). We approach the problem in part through an examination of typical writing texts--does a theory of discourse underlie the text? How is it implemented? The students are asked to examine several books which are on reserve.

Composing is the topic for the next week. The assigned readings are Janet Emig's The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders (NCTE, 1971); Robert Zoellner's "Talk-Write: A Behavioral Pedagogy for Composition," CE, 30 (1969), 267-320; Donald Murray's "Write Before Writing," reprinted in WTS; and Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers. Again we write: this time an essay on our own composing processes. Again we look at the advice about composing which is offered in a range of high school and college texts.

The next two weeks are devoted to invention strategies. The students read the two bibliographical essays: Richard Young's in TC and David Harrington et al,

"A Critical Survey of Resources for Teaching Rhetorical Invention," in WTS. Theoretical statements are then paired with textbook treatments. We look at the classical "topics" and then at Edward P. J. Corbett's Classical Rhetoric For the Modern Student, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1971); several selections from Kenneth Burke and William Irmscher's adaptation in The Holt Guide to English, 3rd ed. (Holt, 1981); Richard Young and Alton Becker's "Toward a Modern Theory of Rhetoric: A Tagmemic Contribution," reprinted in WTS, and Young, Becker and Kenneth Pike's Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (Harcourt, 1970). In addition, the students read Richard Larson's "Discovery through Questioning," CE, 30 (1968), 126-134, and D. Gordon Rohman's "Pre-Writing: The Stage of Discovery in the Writing Process," CCC, 16 (1965), 106-112. A number of other texts are also examined including Ken Macrorie's Telling Writing, 2nd ed. (Hayden, 1976); William Coles's Composing: Writing as a Self-Creating Process (Hayden, N.J., 1974), and Linda Flower's Problem-Solving Strategies for Writing (Harcourt, 1981). The students then use two of the heuristics they have studied to develop a topic for a writing.

After pausing for a take-home mid-term examination, we come back to Timothy R. Donovan and Ben W. McClelland's Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition (NCTE, 1981), a collection which everyone seems to find particularly interesting. The other half of this period is devoted to an orientation session to PLATO conducted by a staff member from our Office of Computer-Based Instruction. We've been trying to increase our use of PLATO in the freshman composition course and I've found that only by mandating involvement can I get some of our assistants even to consider touching a terminal.

The next two periods center around the sentence and the paragraph. We examine sentence-combining first using John C. Mellon's Transformational Sentence-Combining (NCTE, 1969) and several textbooks devoted to sentence combining. We also read Francis Christensen's "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," reprinted in WTS and then work with materials drawn from The Christensen Method (Harper & Row, 1979). For the paragraph we read Paul Rodgers' two articles "Alexander Bain and the Rise of the Organic Paragraph," QJS, 51 (1965), 399-408 and "A Discourse-Centered Rhetoric of the Paragraph," CCC, 17 (1966), 2-11, and Richard Braddock's "The Frequency and Placement of Topic Sentences in Expository Prose," reprinted in WTS. Each student is given an essay in which to analyze paragraph structure and development.

One week is spent on problems of style. Assigned readings include Corbett's "Approaches to the Study of Style" in TC, Louis Milic's "Theories of Style and Their Implications for the Teaching of Composition," CCC, 16 (1965), 66-69, 126, and Winston Weathers's, "Grammars of Style," FEN, 4 No. 3 (1976), 1-4, 12-18. Several textbooks are studied including Joseph William's Style (Scott, Foresman, 1981) and Richard Lanham's Revising Prose (Scribner's, 1979). In addition the students complete several different types of stylistic exercises, including imitation and modeling.

The final class is devoted to basic writing and error analysis. The primary text is Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations supplemented with Muriel Harris's "Individualized Diagnosis: Teaching for Causes, Not Symptoms, of Writing Deficiencies," CE, 40 (1978), 318-323, and three essays reprinted in WTS: Sarah D'Eloia's "The Uses--and Limits--of Grammar," Isabella Halsted's "Putting Error in Its Place," and Andrea Lunsford's "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer." The written assignment is an error analysis exercise in which the students analyze the pattern of error in a student's composition.

Ambitious as the course now seems, at one point it included even more. I abandoned a section on dialects, for example, because I felt the subject was simply too involved for the amount of time I had available. For the same reason, I took out a unit on linguistics and composition. Both are now treated in separate courses in our graduate linguistic program.

Afterword

The course attempts to combine theory and practice--not always classroom practice but at least an individual involvement with the topics at hand. The principles of invention or sentence generation or error analysis or any of the topics are best taught, I think, by doing. So we "do" a lot. If there is a frustration for some students, it's the lack of answers and the collision of so many different ideas and approaches. On the other hand, that's part of the virtue of such a course. What I want students and teachers to come away with is not a single way in which to teach composition but an awareness of how complex the process of teaching writing is and an awareness of the resources available to writing teachers.

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