

The "Teaching Composition" Course and the Writing Program

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The graduate-level "teaching composition" course is an important test of the coherence of a freshman writing program. Both the theoretical design and the methodology used in a composition program fall under scrutiny when they must be explained and defended to an audience of graduate students--many, if not most of them, in disciplines other than rhetoric. Neither the theoretical nor the practical side of teaching writing can be ignored in the training course.

An over-emphasis on theory will produce well-informed but insecure and sometimes incompetent writing instructors. Since many of the theoretical designs for writing programs are taxonomic, they tend to distinguish between and describe forms and modes of discourse, but they do not always suggest how such forms came into being or how they may be reproduced by students. Courses in teaching composition based on theoretical taxonomies tend to become fascinating but sterile exercises in defining modes, creating matrices, and exploring conceptual relationships; similarly, syllabi for freshman writing courses weighted heavily toward the theoretical are apt to be, like the gardens of Versailles, admired and avoided.

The purely practical course in teaching composition has attractions, focusing as it does on specific methods of course management, marking essays, making assignments, holding student conferences, establishing effective writing labs, teaching revision, and so on. Such concerns can easily consume a semester of course meetings and produce grateful instructors who are able classroom managers. Yet if such teachers are denied a theoretical framework, they can spend entire careers as technicians jumping from one pedagogical fad to another, from one course sequence to another without ever developing a principle of coherence or significant criteria of evaluation for what they do. Their classes become modish conglomerations of exercises rather than directed and mature college courses.

For almost a decade, the English Department's teacher training course at the University of Texas has followed a theoretically-oriented syllabus based on James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971). With its coherent relationship of discourse aims and modes, the syllabus has provided an intelligent starting point for new teachers of writing who, after reading Kinneavy's volume (or the far less formidable freshman English syllabus), go to their classrooms prepared to explain to their students why they are being asked to write self-expressively, informatively, and persuasively, using description, narration, classification, and evaluation. The structure of discourse outlined by Kinneavy even establishes points of reference for teachers who finally decide that they do not agree with his particular system. They at least begin their understanding of writing theory and pedagogy by encountering a rigorous attempt to bring order to the classification of writing and to the organization of English Departments. Thus, the "teaching composition" course at the University of Texas ordinarily includes an introduction to Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse.

But Kinneavy's theory and the various syllabi that have attempted to give it practical shape have until recently posed problems for teachers whose textbooks and instincts often ran counter to the theoretical approaches being offered to them. Consequently, the teacher training course at UT has been designed to help instructors find methods by which the theory could be brought successfully into the freshman classroom. Graduate students in the training course

have been regularly required to present to their colleagues suggestions for teaching one unit from the syllabus. In addition to explaining how to teach a given aim or mode, an instructor has also been expected to suggest appropriate readings, assignments, and exercises--the latter often drawn from textbooks not based on the Kinneavy model. The recent introduction of several textbooks and readers built on the Kinneavy model (my own Well-Bound Words: A Rhetoric, Janis Lauer's Four Worlds of Writing, Elizabeth Penfield's Purpose and Pattern) has simplified the transfer of theoretical matter to the classroom and confirmed the practicality of writing programs based on an aims/modes approach.

Yet the Kinneavy theory remains an anatomy of discourse, in some ways at odds with current and influential process-oriented pedagogies. Any teacher training course today must explain the importance of prewriting, invention, arrangement, coherence, revision, peer editing and collaborative writing; and both the principles and the techniques of a process approach must be incorporated into a syllabus, or that syllabus will be ignored. This process orientation must extend to training teachers to mark and evaluate essays in ways that replicate the practices of professional writers and editors. The Kinneavy-based textbooks have already suggested the means by which an aims/modes syllabus can be modified to incorporate interactive principles of writing instruction; our teacher training course has been presenting these approaches for a number of years. But, as yet, the theoretical design of the freshman program, the course syllabi themselves, and the teacher training course have not been effectively integrated, although the program is currently moving in that direction. Eventually instructors in the training program will be introduced to a fully-developed theory of discourse, will see how that theory has shaped a writing program, and how the best pedagogical approaches have been made consonant with it. If after taking the course, instructors choose to modify their approach to teaching composition, they will understand their responsibility to design an alternative at least as coherent as the program they decide to abandon.

To that end, our current teacher training course directs considerable time simply to introducing graduate students to the discipline of rhetoric and composition. In the recent past, students have been exposed (through anthologies such as Graves' Teaching Writing and Tate and Corbett's The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook and a variety of NCTE publications) to the kinds of work that have changed the field so dramatically in the last two decades. The course includes discussions of all major theoretical approaches. Students leaving the course are familiar with tagmemics, sentence combining, generative rhetoric, Rogerian argument, Toulmin logic, and aspects of classical rhetoric. They are familiar with the major journals of rhetoric, composition, and speech. They are provided with extensive bibliographies for future reference.

Because of the heavy responsibilities faced by novice instructors, the teacher training courses in the English Department do not ordinarily require extensive papers or examinations. We offer other graduate rhetoric courses for students who want to pursue particular historical, critical, or empirical interests more intensely. The training course is the introduction--we hope coherent, practical, and optimistic--to teaching writing. We expect teachers who emerge from the course to believe that writing can be taught and to know at least one way of doing it.