

Jeffrey Smitten

My qualifications for writing even a short description of our teacher training course are dubious. I will teach it for the first time this fall. I have neither a background in rhetoric and composition nor a long term stake in the field, since I am the interim director of a writing program (with two months remaining), who was pressed into service at the last minute just a year ago. Nonetheless, I accepted this invitation because I am excited by what I have discovered during the past year about composition and by the changes that are occurring in our program. What I describe--tentative and incomplete though it is--may be useful to other English departments that are in the process of moving composition from the periphery to the center of their intellectual concerns.

English 532 prepares new teaching assistants to instruct students in the first semester of freshman composition. It is our only graduate course in rhetoric and composition, though we plan to add one in history and theory in the fall 1983. Since all the new assistants are teaching freshman composition concurrently with taking 532, the course of necessity concentrates on teaching exposition. For many years, 532 has been influenced by the department's favored approach to composition: emphasis on the finished product together with heavy reliance on handbooks. New teaching assistants were trained to mark errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, as well as to comment on organization and development. But very little was done with such matters as invention, revision and the writing process. As the needs of freshman students changed during the 1970s, our dissatisfaction with the traditional approach increased. We are now beginning the expansion and development of our writing program, and the first step is the reorganization of English 532. What follows is a description of the course as it will be taught in the fall 1982.

Throughout the semester many hours in 532 will be spent going over

the coming week's material so the inexperienced teacher can anticipate problems. What I would like to describe here, however, is not the daily routine of the course but its goals. The course has three general aims: to encourage a particular style of teaching composition, to familiarize the new teacher with various approaches used in composition textbooks, and to sharpen the teacher's own writing skills so he can be a model for the students. All 532 students must follow a common syllabus in their composition classes during their first semester; thereafter, they may develop their own within certain guidelines. Thus, in addition to presenting one particular approach, the course must also prepare students to go beyond it. The texts for 532 include Beth Neman's Teaching Students to Write, Joyce Steward and Mary Croft's The Writing Laboratory, and Gary Tate and Edward P. J. Corbett's The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. The syllabus requires that the students use as texts in their composition classes Joseph Trimmer and Maxine Hairston's The Riverside Reader and Dean Memering and Frank O'Hare's The Writer's Work. For their own reference, the new teachers are furnished with a copy of The Little, Brown Handbook.

The teaching style we will encourage is based on one-to-one interaction in the classroom or what Newman calls the "methodology of personalization." At the heart of this style lie the techniques of the writing laboratory. All new teaching assistants will be trained in our writing laboratory at the very beginning of the semester. We hope that as a result of their lab training they will teach writing as a process, use evaluation during the writing process, and become skilled in handling commentary both in conference and in annotation. The required syllabus incorporates activities that give many opportunities for teacher-student interaction, including discussion, in-class revision work, in-class exercises, and peer editing days. The teachers' reading in the texts for 532 will certainly reinforce these ideas. To monitor the teachers' progress we will use, in addition to classroom observations, the teaching evaluation form developed by Stephen P. Witte and his colleagues at the University of Texas. This form is especially good for identifying the way a teacher interacts with the class.

The first half of the semester will concentrate on the style of teaching; the second will shift to textbooks. Here we will familiarize new teachers with some of the current textbook applications of rhetorical theory so they can be informed judges of what to use when they are on their own. We will consider the three traditional areas of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, and style. Under the first, we will look briefly at Richard Young, Alton Becker, and Kenneth Pike's particle-wave-field theory, which underlies The Writer's Work; Gregory and Elizabeth Cowan's use of freewriting in invention; and the role of invention in such widely adopted rhetorics as Maxine Hairston's A Contemporary Rhetoric and W. Ross Winterowd's The Contemporary Writer. Under arrangement, we will look at Frank D'Angelo's theory of paradigms and James Kinneavy's theory of aims and modes, though, again, we will be concerned not with the theories themselves but with how they are applied in composition texts. Finally, under style, we will glance at the advantages and disadvantages of sentence combining (with which the teachers have been working all semester in the required syllabus), generative rhetoric, imitation, and traditional handbooks. The books by Neman and Tate and Corbett touch many of the issues occupying this part of the course, and the various rhetorics and workbooks under consideration will be placed on reserve.

Essential to the graduate student's success as a teacher under this system is his confidence in his own writing. We assume that teachers who write little or nothing themselves will not be effective in teaching the process of composition to others. Therefore, 532 students (and the teacher) are required to complete all the writing assignments given to the freshman students. These will be discussed in the 532 seminar along with freshman papers in connection with such topics as writing assignments and evaluation. We hope that by writing these papers the 532 students will see exactly what their assignments demand and will have an increased appreciation for the difficulties and successes the students have. The teachers will also be encouraged (though not required) to share their papers with their freshman students, especially during the peer editing sessions. For the one-to-one interaction model to be completely effective, the teacher ought to be seen as a writer, i.e., as someone who, though more experienced than the rest of the class, must struggle, make mistakes, and even endure criticism from time to time.

No one can be sure that this version of 532 will yield better results--for this particular department--than did the previous one. In teaching composition a great deal depends on cultural conditioning and ingrained habits of thought. But if it is successful, it may lead to a rejuvenated and expanded composition program at Texas Tech.