

English 509: Internship in College Composition
at Temple University

Stephen Zelnick

Teaching assistants must enroll in English 509 to complete the Certificate in Composition track in the English graduate program. Typically, a student entering English 509 has already spent three semesters teaching a pre-college level writing course, has been trained in a four-day workshop to teach this course, has taken English 507 (an internship geared to this earlier course), and has passed English 508 (an introduction to practical linguistics): very often, TA's enrolling in English 509 have also had experience tutoring in our writing clinic and evaluating placement tests. English 509 is the internship that accompanies our TA's first experience with college-level composition, but it is also the capstone to the Certificate track and, as such, points to a more general involvement with composition than teaching a specific course.

In the week preceding the start of the semester, TA's participate in a four-day workshop for College Composition. The workshop, rather than being a mere description of the course they will teach, guides new instructors through the writing process to allow them to experience directly

what they will soon be asking their students to do: they discover, they invent, they pre-write and write, undergo peer-group critique, revise, conference and revise again, grade and receive grades, revise once more, and finally publish on dittoes for the whole group to read. Along the way, we explore the theoretical dimensions of these stages and steps; and participants read articles that highlight moments in the process--articles on Burke's pentad, Donald Murray on process, Emig on cognition, Arbur on conferencing, Kelly on response groups, and so on. Workshop participants--which includes new faculty, faculty being retrained, and new part-time instructors, along with TA's--also do group grading of model essays at different levels to gain confidence in assigning grades, and they explore various strategies of marginal and terminal comments. In addition, the workshop presents the administrative requirements and introduces new instructors to administrative, supervisory, and clerical co-workers. In all, the workshop activities are designed to emphasize process and a developmental outlook; to stress encouragement, advice, and multiple revision opportunities; to enhance sympathetic communication from instructor to student; but, finally, to assert rigorous product standards. I do my best to trace the dialectic that connects sympathetic awareness with rigorous judgment. New teachers experience this logic from the position of student/writers before they are permitted to act as teacher/editor/judge.

English 509 meets two hours each week of a 14-week semester. Although TA's do have extensive experience with pre-college level instruction, most of that background is tutorial and small-group work and is directed to fluency exercises, grammar and usage problems, and only rudimentary formats (often the 5-paragraph essay). In College Composition TA's have their first experience in full classroom instruction and in developing complex discourse formats and topics geared to sophisticated readings. Much of English 509 is, therefore, devoted to such topics as course management, classroom manner, the techniques of guiding discussion (especially techniques that spark student participation), and complex essay formats to insure greater depth in student writing.

I begin the course, however, at quite a different point. Most TA's are aware that the profession is in sad shape and that jobs in the traditional literary fields are and will be scarce; but they are not aware of the opportunities (limited though they surely are) in composition. Not surprisingly, none of the TA's are well informed about the present job market and near-future prospects (though they are full of irony and pity). I begin, then, with this discussion, aided by some reading (William Schaefer's "Curioser and Curioser" in MLA's Profession 81 is useful). My aim is to stress not only that most of their teaching will be in composition, but that if they hope to secure a job, they will very likely need to be able to present themselves as composition specialists.

This premise leads me also to use English 509 to introduce TA's to the field of Composition theory, to research on questions of writing process and pedagogy, and to the current state of conference and publication opportunities. TA's read Donovan and McClelland, Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition; Donald Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing; and most of the selections in Tate and Corbett, The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook. They are also each responsible for a critical review of one other text in the field (last semester students reported on the following: James Britton, The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18; Kenneth Bruffee, A Short Course in Writing; Peter Elbow, Writing with Power; Richard Gebhardt, Composition and its Teaching; James

Kinneavy, A Theory of Discourse; Koch and Brazil, Strategies for Teaching the Composing Process; Richard Ohmann, Ideas for English 101; and Harvey Wiener, The Writing Room). At least a third of the course discussion focusses on this material, and this leads to a final assignment to design a research project in composition (the research is not actually carried out, only designed; projects mostly concern practical pedagogy but have also included a new design for a program in computer-aided instruction and a study of sentence types in the context of various styles of assignments).

The other emphasis in English 509 is the more traditional internship guidance and supervision, which includes the following: (1) reviewing paper grading and commentary, in which I try to emphasize grading and marking as a strategy of encouragement and as a sign of the teacher/reader's engagement (I have each TA xerox three marked essays--one excellent, one fair, and one wretched; the group then discusses the underlying grading strategy and makes suggestions); (2) class visitations, three a semester, two by me (one early and one late in the term) and one by a TA peer; (3) post-visit conferences, usually an hour or more, where I report my observations, the TA discusses her/his class-management problems, and together we try to devise solutions; (4) problem-solving sessions, where I define common problems for the whole group and attempt to teach TA's to analyze problems precisely and locate appropriate remedies; (5) general problem posing, where TA's bring their frustrations back to the group, and we all do our best to analyze and solve them; and (6) role-playing, where I model their classroom approach, have them play-act their own students, and then ask them to describe and analyze what they see and hear.

I find that TA's make one simple error which makes teaching much more difficult than it needs to be. In their panic to fill 50 minutes and/or "cover" extensive material, new teachers tend to talk too much, answer all their own questions, and do all the class work. Meanwhile, they are unaware that their students are--quite understandably--passive, unengaged, and bored. I suppose that most new instructors are so apologetic about claiming to be teachers that they refuse to pressure their students to perform. Yet the demand for performance is the only way to arouse and focus student energies--especially in a writing class. Therefore, borrowing a tip from Donald Murray, I argue that the best teacher works least. In a 50-minute class, students should be working 40 minutes, engaged in some way to insure their busyness and attention; they should also be given home assignments that will lead to performance (the more public the performance, the better). It is difficult for new teachers to command other people's activities with a sure hand and without apology, but TA's must be eased over this confidence barrier. It is similarly difficult for new instructors to understand that with 20 minutes of planning (explicitly, on paper, a program of activities and integrating comments), they can avoid 50 minutes of painful fumbling.

A related problem is the new teacher's desire to offer a performance. We all of us want to be loved and admired for our sonorous wisdom, or our wit, or our ethical intensity, or....And TA's fall into the performance trap very easily. I do my best to remind TA's that the learning happens in each student's activity and not in his/her admiration for their qualities. This key lesson for all contemporary teaching is best taught to teachers in the setting of composition, where student performance happens early and often, and where skills and progress can be specified, measured, and monitored.

Finally, a semester is not enough (even a semester built upon the foundation of three previous semesters of teaching); so I try to teach my

TA's to be alert ever after to what went on in each class they teach, with the expectation that usually many things will have gone wrong. I want them to think that teaching is a lot like other practical skills (carpentry, cooking, gardening, etc.). There will always be problems, but problems can be identified, analyzed, and at least in some makeshift way solved. New teachers should not feel adrift in the strange and engulfing mysteries of charisma or the heart-throbbing myth of concern; in learning to teach, they need to experience an increasing mastery over what is essentially a craft.

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