

"Reflections of a Composition Specialist" or "What to Do When You are 35 with an ABD in American Literature."

Margot Soven

There I was, an ABD in American Literature, with four years of high school teaching experience acquired in the remote past, and ten years of motherhood behind me. What next?

This was my dilemma in 1975 when I began to think about my dubious professional future. What was I to do in the next thirty years, before retirement? Several events, quite unplanned (let's call them "fortuitous") helped me decide to become a composition specialist, though at the time, I believe, the title had not yet been invented (even rhetoricians were a relatively new breed).

Event No. 1

To make the transition from the kitchen to the "Academy" I began teaching part-time at Drexel University. With some trepidation I agreed to teach freshman composition. Though I had taught a similarly titled course as a graduate assistant at Rutgers University ten years before, I couldn't recall actually teaching writing. I dimly remembered a course which dealt with writing about Biblical literature in which I spent a great deal of time discussing literature. I also recalled, even more feebly, teaching high school English, where I spent gobs of class time on literature and only occasionally devoted a lesson to writing (I mean grammar, of course.)

However, my resume revealed the same preparation (or lack of) for teaching writing as most college instructors--so I was hired.

Teaching at Drexel (not to be overly sentimental) was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, I was now sure I knew remarkably little about teaching composition; on the other hand, I found out that some people did.

It was my good fortune to return to teaching writing in a Department that had been "touched" by new theories of teaching composition. Bill Coles, author of Composing, one of the first process-approach composition textbooks, had recently taught at Drexel and left his mark. Some instructors were using Peter Elbow's Writing Without Teachers, and others were experimenting with Macrorie's Telling Writing. These texts seemed to hold some of the answers, though by no means all of them, to my questions about how to teach a subject that students didn't seem to like learning and teachers weren't very fond of teaching.

But it was time to get serious. There's more to life than pondering the teaching of writing, believe it or not. I surveyed the territory--college teaching that is--and concluded that job security was not to be mine if I continued to be an adjunct instructor--and anyway it wasn't fun to be on the fringe. My new goal: a full-time permanent job.

Nothing to do but return to school, take a course to meet Pennsylvania certification requirements for high school teachers

(too late to finish the dissertation on Theodore Dreiser) and look towards permanent employment as a high school English teacher, by no means an unappealing prospect--just that I still wanted answers to those questions about teaching writing--not to mention the under-utilized ABD. As my kids would say, What a Pain!

Event No. 2

Little did I suspect when I enrolled in "Methods of Teaching English" at the University of Pennsylvania, intending to take just the one course, that I would stay for eleven more. Allan Glatthorn, on the Penn faculty, assured me that there was "something new under the sun." It was an understatement. A veritable revolution in language arts pedagogy was going on--and writing was included. I couldn't stop now. This was getting interesting. Maybe I could combine my rather new interest in teaching writing with my strong background in literature in a new program of study (yes, you guessed it) towards a doctorate degree.

Event No. 3

I was asked to participate on a panel at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. At the Conference, I heard about graduate programs in the teaching of writing. Such programs seemed to be just what I was looking for: only one rather formidable problem--the "ideal" programs were in places like the University of Iowa, the University of Virginia and the University of Southern California, and I happened to live in Philadelphia--with no chance of moving. I returned home from Denver with the germ of an idea.

Event No. 4

I met with Dr. Norma Kahn, a faculty advisor at the Graduate School of Education at Penn. She responded enthusiastically to my idea. Why not start a program in the teaching of writing at Penn? The Graduate School of Education, while not able to boast a scholar in composition theory on its faculty, included faculty whose research interests were related to teaching writing. Because of the school's interdisciplinary orientation, the faculty is composed of linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists as well as specialists in reading, curriculum and administration. Having just read Carl Klaus's article, "Public Opinion and Professional Belief" in which Klaus argues for an interdisciplinary approach to developing writing pedagogy, I guessed that Penn was an ideal setting for a new doctoral program.

It was decided that I would enter the Language in Education Department as a Special Major, a category reserved for students who wish to pursue a program related to, but not identical with, one of the prescribed programs of study. I would design a special program's with Dr. Kahn's help, in which I would attempt to relate the content of my courses to the teaching of composition and arrange for independent studies to "fill in the gaps." At the same time, Dr. Kahn and I would develop a proposal for a new major for submission to the GSE faculty.

Ambitious? We thought so. Possible? Neither of us really knew. We began this two-part effort, designing a program for me

and writing the proposal, like good academicians. We did some research. The obvious step was to examine existing doctoral programs. This phase of our work turned out to be less fruitful than we had imagined. Established programs, for the most part, were not very useful as prototypes for the Kahn-Soven model of training composition specialists (derived from the Klaus article). At that time, virtually all of these programs were conducted by the English Departments, and did not offer interdisciplinary study. Most included literature courses, perhaps one methods course, and a course in the history of rhetoric, but did not require courses in psychology, sociology, etc. While we did profit somewhat from corresponding with their directors (E.D. Hirsch, University of Virginia, and Ross Winterowd, University of Southern California, Richard Lloyd Jones, University of Iowa, and others), we returned to theory for direction.

The proposal and my program evolved simultaneously. I was the guinea pig, so to speak. If I found a course to be very useful, then we were more apt to include it in the proposed program plans.

There is a happy ending to this story. With Dr. Kahn's help, and the cooperation of the faculty, I completed a series of courses that were more appropriate for the preparation of a composition specialist than even we had guessed. At Penn, faculty work within what is called the "interactive adaptive mode," which in layperson's terms means adapting programs to suit students' special needs and interests. Not only did my instructors permit me to use required papers for relating course work to the teaching of composition, but they were also most generous in offering suggestions.

As a result, in a linguistics course I wrote on sentence combining. For a course in language analysis, I clarified the meaning of "evaluation" in the context of writing instruction (a tough paper, by the way). In "Ethnography of Speaking," taught by Dell Hymes, a linguistic anthropologist, I studied the student-teacher writing conference as a speech event and wrote another paper on the value of an ethnographic approach to teaching writing. Dr. Kahn's course, "Teaching Reading in College" provided the opportunity for studying the relationship between reading and writing, and so it went.

Event No. 5

Discovering the connections between various disciplines and the teaching of writing was exciting, but I was beginning to wish that I could "talk to" the experts in composition theory. That didn't seem possible. The generosity of the Graduate School of Education extends just so far. They were not going to bring these scholars to Penn just for me!

As luck would have it, Elaine Maimon (Beaver College) who had just received an NEH grant for writing across the curriculum faculty development, invited me to participate in the Beaver Summer Workshop. Faculty for the workshop included the "big names": James Kinneavy, Edward P.J. Corbett, E.D. Hirsch, and others. I had hit pay dirt. My discussions at Beaver helped me, one, to further synthesize the studies I had completed independently

and, two, to confirm my hunch that we were on the right track at Penn, having decided that nothing short of an interdisciplinary approach would suffice to prepare students for scholarship in writing pedagogy.

Conclusion

The rest is history, as the saying goes. The dissertation went as smoothly as most dissertations--not smoothly at all. I had to fill in yet more gaps in my "education." Because I had decided to design a freshman composition curriculum for my research (as my subject of study), Allan Glatthorn urged me to study curriculum change theory, another area of inquiry important to the composition specialist. Furthermore, there were few model dissertations to consult. Many existing dissertations on teaching writing were based on a formal experimental design using statistical measures. I was doing "action research," descriptive and qualitative by its nature. It seemed as if there was no end to being a pioneer!

Epilogue

Well, the dissertation was accepted (hooray) and the proposal for a new major in the teaching of writing was approved by the Penn faculty. Penn got its program, and I got a job (Assistant Professor in the English and Communication Arts Department at La Salle University). Two faculty members have since been hired at Penn to teach in the writing program and special courses in composition theory are now being offered.

With a tinge of envy, I read the Course Bulletin, thinking how much I would have welcomed the opportunity to enroll in courses on the composing process, the basic writer, or modern theories of rhetoric. But on second thought, although no doubt I would have gained much from these courses, I benefitted greatly from having to forge my own program. No aspect of composition theory was prepackaged for me. The independent search for the structure as well as the substance of this new discipline was not only tremendous fun (though frustrating at times) but made me realize, perhaps even more so than if I had had a conventional program that Carl Klaus is right. "If you conceive of it [writing] as a complex mental activity which brings together, through language, a writer, the universe of experience, and an audience, then you will find the requirement [teaching writing] to be complex and demanding,"² and, calling for an interdisciplinary approach.

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NOTES

1. Carl Klaus, "Public Opinion and Professional Belief," College Composition and Communication, 27 (December 1976), 335-40.

2. Klaus, p. 337.

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