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Training Graduate Assistants

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Post-Secondary

For this issue, we asked respondents the question, **Where and how did you learn what has best prepared you for the classroom?**

For Each Other; Training Graduate Assistants

Bryan Bardine

As both an M.A. candidate in English at the University of Dayton in the early 1990's and a doctoral candidate in Literacy and Curriculum and Instruction at Kent State University in the late 1990's, I was part of programs where the atmosphere was quite community-oriented. In both cases I became a better teacher and learner because of those atmospheres. I trusted faculty implicitly and became close to fellow graduate students who helped to shape the kind of teacher that I am today. My current job—working with graduate teaching assistants at the University of Dayton—is to give them an experience similar to the one that I had in graduate school. Ultimately, my goal is for my students to develop as graduate students, as teachers, and as learners during their time at the University of Dayton (UD). By creating a community of learners and teachers in our program, our students have a better chance of reaching those goals.

This fall I will be starting my 9th year as coordinator of the Teaching Assistants in the English M.A. program. UD's summer training program begins two weeks before the fall semester and typically runs about 6 hours a day for ten days. TAs spend a lot of time together and we do many group exercises, first, because I want them to get to know each other, and second, because more students get involved in large group discussion when they have had time to talk to others in small groups first. Once summer

training concludes, second-year TAs begin teaching the department's ENG 100 course while first-year TAs shadow a professor who is teaching ENG 100 and work in the Write Place—UD's writing center. During the school year all TAs take ENG 590, a course especially for them that continues the training begun in the summer.

Summer Training

Overall, the goals for summer training are threefold:

- TAs need to become familiar with each other
- TAs need to be knowledgeable about the material
- TAs should be somewhat at ease in a classroom environment:

Obviously, the final goal doesn't happen overnight, but by completing the first two the third will be reached by most students sooner rather than later.

During summer training we spend a great deal of time with the course texts, but just as important is the time we spend working on issues like classroom management, responding to student writing, addressing problem students in the classroom, developing assignments, lesson and unit plans, and getting to know each other. Because most of our TAs have little or no teaching experience I try to model best practice in my own teaching. I make both summer training and ENG 590 active learning experiences.

Most TAs are very nervous during summer training and during their first semester in the

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Post-Secondary *continued*

classroom, so one of my most important jobs is to try to make training and ENG 590 places to help them become as comfortable as possible in the classroom. For me, comfort in the classroom comes when several things have been done. First, TAs have to have a safe place where they can share their teaching experiences—whether positive or negative—without being embarrassed and free from negative criticism by their teacher or other TAs. In our program, this comes by getting to know each other and working closely together during summer training. For instance, throughout training the TAs are put into groups and assigned various chapters from the course texts to summarize for the rest of us, from which to brainstorm teaching approaches, and from which to develop at least 2 in-class writing assignments. With each exercise I put TAs in different groups, so they will get used to working with and will feel more comfortable with one another. Plus, they typically have great ideas concerning how they would approach various chapters in the texts. Once training is finished, they not only know each other pretty well but they also have a large store of options for approaching the first half of the semester. We cover the second half of the semester throughout the ENG 590 class.

Comfort also develops when we come together as a group outside of the general formality of training. Each year the department hosts a lunch for the TAs and their teaching advisors; this event has been successful in helping the TAs get to know their advisors prior to being observed by them. Also, my family and I host a cookout toward the end of training each year so that we can get away from campus and relax a bit before the stress of the semester begins the following week.

Why is comfort so important? In my experience both as a graduate student and a professor I have found that developing a sense of community and comfort with a particular place breeds confidence in other areas as well. For instance, it's clear that 2nd year TAs tend to do better in the classroom because they are more familiar with the material they are teaching and with their surroundings. As familiarity and comfort increase new teachers can spend more time focusing on their teaching as well as the courses they are taking in fulfillment of their master's degrees. Obviously, there are always going to be some TAs who struggle throughout their programs, but most

seem to do better as they gain more experience.

Toward the end of summer training TAs are given more freedom with the final two exercises—the teaching skits and the practice teaching lessons. TAs do skits on various issues that may occur during the semester, such as how to deal with an unruly student, how to address a student who has plagiarized, or how to handle a too quiet classroom, to name a few. The groups first act out their skits and show an incorrect response to the situation, then the audience discusses what went wrong. Finally, the group acts out an appropriate (one of many) way to address the situation. Often, the skits serve as comic relief as well because an incorrect way of dealing with a problem is often funny. But these are even funnier when we all realize that the not-so-productive situation just acted out was one a 2nd year TA stumbled in to the year before!

The last day of summer training is a “practice” day where each of the TAs teaches a lesson to the rest of us. Once finished, the lesson is critiqued and discussed among the group. Over the years this has been one of the most valuable tools I use because it gives the TAs a chance to try a lesson in a safe place with peers, not in front of students they don't know. This exercise would not work early in training for a few reasons. First, the TAs wouldn't know each other, so they wouldn't feel comfortable critiquing one another. Also, most of them would have no idea what to teach because so much of the material is initially unfamiliar to them. Finally, because they don't yet feel comfortable around each other and don't yet know as much as they eventually will, they would struggle—much more than they do when they practice-teach at the end of the semester. This is not to say that our TAs don't struggle in the classroom—it's normal for TAs to have a tough time with teaching—but the difference is that because of the training in the program they seem better able to address the struggles that arise, and, if they can't find appropriate responses, they know they can come to me or speak to the other TAs.

ENG 590: Teaching College Writing

Each semester that students are TAs in UD's Master's Degree program in English they are required to take ENG 590: Teaching College Writing. The course continues the instruction begun during summer training and addresses topics including, but not limited to, composition and pedagogical theory, practical approaches to teaching, conferencing, professional development exercises, and numerous other subjects important for new teachers. Just as in summer

training, building community and the comfort level of the students are important. Students are required to give a teaching presentation during the semester, the purpose of which is to provide their peers with an example of appropriate content to teach and a method of delivery as well. Doing this project, TAs get teaching experience, are able to learn from each other's demonstration, and can see different approaches to teaching that they may not have seen before.

An important aspect of both summer training and especially ENG 590 is that my door is always open, and the TAs know that they can contact me if they have any comments, questions, or concerns about their teaching or the graduate program. Some of my fondest memories of graduate school are talking about teaching with my professors. It meant a lot at the time that they would want to share their experiences in the classroom, and I recall those sessions as being some of the most important of my graduate experience. Furthermore, keeping an open door policy builds my relationship with my students, which tends to help the students feel more comfortable with me and the program.

Just as social gatherings are important during summer training, I use them in ENG 590 as well. At the end of each semester we have a party during ENG 590—though the main focus of the party is for me to gauge students' perceptions of the course during the semester and learn about what aspects of the course worked well and what information may need to be addressed in more detail in the future. Doing this gives me access to the TAs' experience of the course, and it gives them a voice in the design of the class. Their perceptions are important to how the course and training are developed, so giving them a stake in how both are created is important for me as the teacher and for them as the students. Also, in the past we have incorporated food into the ENG 590 course. Each TA and I are given a week (ENG 590 meets once a week throughout the school year) to bring snacks to class. This doesn't seem like much, but it helps the tone of the class, and the students look forward each week to the various snacks. While each of these things on their own doesn't seem all that important, in their own way they contribute to an overall environment which helps the TAs feel more a part of the department and more comfortable with each other, me, and the program.

Teaching observations are critical for new teachers. Our TAs need to get used to having someone watch them teach, and I need to see them in the classroom. I observe the TAs at least one time each

semester and soon after the observation we discuss the observed class. In those meetings I want to listen to them; I never start an observation meeting by telling them what I think—I want to know how they think the class went and I want them to explain to me the strengths and weaknesses they saw in the lesson that day. These meetings become very important because the TAs can discuss issues they are having with particular students or the positive aspects of teaching that they are seeing. It's also a place for me to talk about what I saw—what worked and what might need to be improved upon for the next time I visit their classroom. These meetings also serve as ways to build a relationship with the TAs. My job is not to embarrass them or make them feel bad about their teaching, but rather to help them improve. As an M.A. student I had a particularly negative experience with one teaching advisor and it really stuck with me. Once I became the coordinator of the TAs I decided I would never knowingly make one of my students feel the way that I did all those years ago.

Along with the formal instruction that takes place in ENG 590, this class also becomes a place where TAs talk about their teaching—what's working, but more importantly what isn't, and for myself and the other TAs to discuss other pedagogical approaches. The ENG 590 class is meant to help the students get to know each other through exercises like group work, in-class presentations, open-ended discussions, and situational responses. It also acts as a place for students to plan classes and units as well as discuss approaches to teaching upcoming sections of ENG 100. In essence, it is a place for students to rethink the curriculum together.

Conclusion

Ultimately, summer training and ENG 590 become places where TAs can develop as classroom teachers and effective colleagues for one another. By combining the techniques described above (along with many others) most TAs are able to move into their first teaching experience with relative ease. Though practical in approach, both summer training and ENG 590 incorporate theory and practice in order to initiate students into the classroom and to the field of Composition. My goal for my students is to have as positive an experience as I did during my graduate training, and by focusing on building a community of learners and trying to make the students feel comfortable in the program it can happen for most of them.