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PREPARING VOLUNTEERS FROM DISCIPLINES OF CURRENTLY DIMINISHED STUDENT INTEREST TO TEACH BASIC WRITING

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LET me ask you first to visualize three of your colleagues from other departments—say, professors of music, art, and biology—waiting outside your office door. They expect you to prepare them to teach writing. What would you do?

Perhaps in a rush of professional empathy you would try to defuse the threat against these volunteers who stand at a crossroads in our academic community; they are leaving what once was their City of God to make their way in a murky district. You might suggest that they sit in on a weekly seminar for graduate students. Then, if they stick that out, they could attend a class or two of a colleague who has a knack for dealing with incompetent writers. Perhaps you would name a handbook and a reader, offer someone's syllabus (often, a list of writing assignments and readings), shake hands, and drive away, shivering off a pernicious awareness of how the screw turns, suddenly abridging our lives. You might even smile involuntarily at the thought of these colleagues facing their first weekend at home, unpacking the inevitable suitcases from the land of English 01. But your concern is a good deal more humane than a glacial letter from the dean telling them on Friday that on Monday they are to appear in the English department to teach basic writing. The truth is that you learned to teach writing by yourself, and probably there is little one can do to help.

The CUNY Faculty Development Program rejects that idea. In the fall of 1981, Mary Rothlein, University Dean for Faculty Affairs of the City University of New York, proposed a faculty development program to meet the needs of a university with changing student interest.

With a few colleagues from the faculty and the administration, she outlined a program that would retrain volunteers among tenured faculty in departments of currently diminished enrollment to teach in one of two areas of increasing student demand: computer studies and basic writing. From the outset, Rothlein recognized that if the institution was to invite faculty to move, it had to help.

She circulated a description of the program throughout the eighteen campuses of the university to presidents, provosts, and department chairs, followed by an announcement to all faculty members. This appeal for applicants included the essential qualification—that candidates have tenure or a certificate of continuing employment—and granted a reduction in load of one course to faculty who would participate in the retraining effort. Of the two designated areas, computer studies drew a far greater response: this surprised no one. Candidates in basic writing, though fewer than a dozen, were especially prized but were nonetheless carefully screened. These faculty members submitted recommendations by the chairperson of their own department as well as by the provost of dean of faculty on their home campus, a statement about their own writing habits and publications, and a paragraph or two on their expectations in redirecting a portion of their professional interest to teaching writing.

During the first year basic writing had six participants, from art education, biology, music, elementary education, nursing, and counseling.[1] Rothlein left it to her newly named "master teachers" to determine just what to do and how to do it. The first agreement my colleague, Jerome Megna of Brooklyn College, and I reached was to reverse the expected procedure: we would emphasize practice first, theory second. We agreed that our participants would take a writing course and work first on their own writing. We identified enough common

principles in our respective methods to formulate what we hoped was a plausible program.

Four years earlier I had been a director of a FIPSE-funded articulation project, called the Queens English Project, which attempted to bridge instruction between Queens College and our feeder high schools. The liveliest nerve of this project was a teacher seminar in which college and high school faculty together took a course similar to the one they would soon be giving their students. The recurring litany among the otherwise enthusiastic participants was, "We can do these assignments, but our students can't write like this. Our students can't think like this." Remembering, I set about to eliminate doubts like these by adjusting the setting of this new project. The faculty participants at CUNY would take the very course the freshmen took, sitting side by side not with other faculty or graduate students in a colloquium but with freshmen, and underprepared freshmen at that. And since they could take only one course at a time, three would take Megna's course at Brooklyn and three mine at Queens. They would discover for themselves what students could and could not do and, not entirely incidentally, what teachers of basic writing could and could not do. Meanwhile, Jerry and I had identical symptoms of terror.

I was not unnerved by having three unknown faculty members invade the sanctuary of my classroom. It is more personal than that. Teaching basic writing is a little like eating breakfast with your kids. You pick up strange but effective habits that startle outsiders. I wondered whether these faculty would recognize amid the rough-and-tumble training the structured seriousness of the undertaking. And what about the basic writers who had randomly enrolled in O1MK2? I asked to meet my class on the first day without the faculty participants present. I wanted to assure these students—already in a kind of no-man's-land after their assessment-test failure—that my first responsibility was to them, that these experienced peers

could only enrich our class, and that I would in no way slight the students' efforts to learn to write. Silence was their response. Had they understood the potential of this experiment? I doubted it. The class had been scheduled during prime time, however, and no one left.

I worked at keeping my promises. I never interrupted the 01 class for asides to the faculty. Each person in the room was a student-writer. I also never doubted that if the experiment faltered I would discontinue it, regroup, and continue with the student members of O1MK2. Well, the faculty members traveled to Queens, wrote every assignment, kept a daily free-writing commonplace book, read their papers aloud, listened to and made observations on the essays of their peers. They slipped into place in this mixed urban group of foreign and native, young and old students. Their attendance was my first tonic. They participated faithfully; they were scholars, longing to learn, serious against the assault of a new discipline. They wrote and rewrote sentences; they worried about sentences. I asked them to keep a log of daily events and a running evaluation of what went on each day. I advised them that at the end of this semester in 01, they would submit a syllabus to the chancellor's office describing a course they might teach in the fall, and I suggested that they see their syllabus as I always see mine: overorganized and under attack. We met for a daylong postmortem after the semester ended. They made informal plans to be in touch during the summer as they mulled over their syllabi.

Of course, what happened during that semester was expected: they had become the students so completely that they had to jog themselves into their role as evaluators; it was more natural for the right hand to write "A Turning Point in My Life" than for the left to maintain the log and commentary for the chancellor's office.

Surprises came every day. I noticed that the structure of my course—starting with the

whole essay and working back to sentences and grammatical forms—struck them. I noticed that the degree to which I used the class as a repertory of ideas interested them. Over and over they pointed to the intelligence and goodwill of these basic-writing students, a discovery that quietly elevated everyone's self-esteem at the same time that it enlarged the social context of 01. I noticed that using the class as a deep spring of ideas exhibited each of our faculty participants as a model—willy-nilly—to the younger students, who listened attentively to these unaccustomed classmates. My students confronted in them the processes of thought for the first time, observed what one went through to expatiate an idea, observed how a person behaves who is in pursuit of an idea; they saw at firsthand Coleridge's transit of an idea, which he discusses in the "Essays on Method." In a round of definitions of the word "handicap," for example, my young students formulated their own definitions, focusing on disability—on not being able to walk or see or hear. One faculty member's definition of "handicap" as a "limitation" took them by surprise and became a heuristic for discovering the elements of a more thoughtful essay. At the end of the semester, an 01 student wrote, "When I first started to comment on an essay, I usually summarized it, but after listening to the professors discuss an essay I realized that my approach only scratched the surface."

For most of these professors, the writing class exposed people and revealed depths of feeling in a way their home disciplines had not prepared them for. Developing writing abilities requires letting others be heard and responding to what others say and think before you present what you say and think. A basic-writing teacher does not impart a body of knowledge. The student's writing is the body under lights. The faculty participants were surprised at how we worked on that body in every class. At the same time, reciprocal exposure reduced threat and

wiped away, for a while at least, the professional pressures that lay in wait.

The daily work drew on the participants' professional abilities: to listen, to observe, to abstract—both in a sudden and in generalizing way—to respond spontaneously. But they also had to write on demand and be scrutinized on demand. And they were superb on their feet, leaning on logic and intuition as they had all their professional lives. They studied the comments I made on their papers. They saw immediately what bombed in class. They analyzed what was effective so that it could be repeated. And they learned to see beyond their own great divide, relying on the training of their own discipline as the principal backdrop for the new. They were becoming strong, expressive writers, and, for a while, we all discovered we were having fun.

And yet, like the man in Edgar Allan Poe's poem, as the semester went on they could laugh but they could no longer smile. Because they were veterans, they were a bit cynical, not easily reassured by my telling them that their skills as teachers, writers, and scholars were transferable to this new assignment. All too soon, apprehension overtook novelty: Will I be able to recognize agreement problems? explain why a modifier is said to dangle? Will I prepare my students for the CUNY assessment test, passage of which is required to complete the basic writing course? And how will I cope with the classes of thirty-five students we get in the Bronx, with the Bronx dropouts as I try to develop a writing community? And, anyway, what does my chair really think of my defection to teach writing?

Let me take a step backward, then, to tell you why I recommend this model. Projects such as the Bay Area Writing Project and the Queens English Project have shown that anyone expecting to teach writing does best to write and look first at his or her own writing. The added requirement in this model is to participate in a class of freshmen and undergo the ruptures and

exposures of basic-writing students. Faculty volunteers need to undergo a change in world view, gradually and methodically. They need to become habituated to the ambition and dedication of unconventional students whose intelligence rises above their flattened verbal landscape. They need to study the writing teacher who works daily to open social opportunities that increase motivation, to see the repetitions, the exhilaration, the shrewd confrontations, the never-ending encouragement, the submerging of strategies, so that students discover writing for themselves; and especially our faculty volunteers need to see for themselves that, although a teacher does the best teaching possible, the writing of many hard-working, serious students will not improve enough in one semester to meet institutional standards. The expectation at the end of a semester of basic writing is perforce different from the expectations at the end of an art education class or a biology class.

I recommend this model for another reason. It puts a faculty-across-the-disciplines into a writing curriculum. My students heard, among others, an artist with her rich visual memory and a biologist with his precise use of language and stock of knowledge regularly complete the same assignments they had to complete. And conversely, I see this model as a reminder to colleagues than language has a place in every class, with confidence and prestige, especially when we locate the root of the word in the same illusion that exists in "prestidigitation" (as recognized by Bate 49). Learning a subject well has the illusion of dealing with content when in fact the study is of language and of how language elicits and expresses patterns of relations.

Finally, the model does not evade theory. Megna and I met with our participants in a weekly seminar during the 01 semester to consider work in composition theory. I met with mine the following semester as they began to teach their own classes. Four of the six voluntarily

enrolled in a weekly graduate colloquium I taught last semester on the teaching of writing; they read Moffett and Shaughnessy as well as Aristotle and Coleridge. Still, for a while I had new doubts, not about the model but about my place in it. I was afraid my dependent faculty-students were regarding me as a kind of Mommie Dearest. Now, however, depend on it: we have taught each other, and my master students are teaching their own classes their own way. What were established, comfortable systems of thought are accommodating a new, often uncomfortable, identity. But, and I speak now as a former director of a large composition program, I recognize that they are professionals competent to teach writing and I welcome them as colleagues.

WORK CITED

Bate, W. Jackson. "The Crisis in English Studies." *Harvard Magazine* Sept.-Oct. 1982, 46-53.

[1] Of the six, four were assigned a basic writing section of their own on their home campus in the semester following training and one taught writing to graduate nursing students; the sixth expects a class in writing after her current emergency assignment on another campus.