An Other Teacher’s Perspective: TAs in the WI Classroom

The Campus Writing Program’s TA/faculty workshops and this article, as well as several other essays, grew from “Sharing the Room,” the authors’ ethnographic project for a 1992 graduate seminar in the theory and practice of writing across-the-curriculum (WAC).

by Lisa Higgins and Virginia Muller

Together we have accumulated over ten years of university teaching experience, eight of those years at MU. We are not professors. We are, officially, Graduate Teaching Assistants—more commonly known as TAs or graders. However, none of these terms accurately describes what a TA is or does. As writing intensive (WI) TAs and university instructors, we carried out an ethnographic study of professor/TA teams at MU. We came to realize that negotiating the role of TA in the classroom is even more complex than we could have imagined. Historically and politically the TA’s place in the academy is marginalized; students, their parents, and the media often question the use of graduate students as university instructors. Perhaps the most important finding in our research was the discovery that the role of the TA is ambiguous for two reasons: (1) it is constantly being renegotiated, and (2) those negotiations are not always articulated.

It is not surprising that the role of the TA today remains ambiguous. Every professor/TA team consciously or unconsciously questions the traditional model. In doing so, they participate in a process of creating something different from the traditional or Socratic setting of the idealized past in which the Teacher imparted Knowledge, the Students received It, and a TA did not exist. In order to achieve less traditional and more effective classrooms, it is imperative that the professor and TA develop and articulate their goals for the course together, as a team.

WAC philosophy asserts that writing is a way of knowing. So is the communication that takes place as the professor/TA team explicitly articulate and consciously negotiate the meaning of an “assistant teacher.” An Italian Civilization TA tells an anecdote about her professor’s philosophy of writing that applies to this process of articulation. She says, “A lot of students will come in and say, ‘I’ve got the ideas, but I can’t write them down.’ And he’ll just say, ‘If you can’t write it, you haven’t really thought it. You don’t have the idea. It’s not yet yours.’” Similarly, if the TA and professor cannot articulate the design of their team, then neither can be sure that it is theirs or that it will work for them.

In order to facilitate writing in the academy, we need to be able to talk to each other about how the TA contributes to the process of student writing. If the professor expects the TA only to grade papers, that needs to be stated; if the TA wants to make more substantive contributions to the class, that needs to be discussed; if the students are unsure of how the authority is distributed in the class, that needs to be made clear.

Sharing the Room

In today’s classroom, we expect active learners, creative thinkers, and critical writers. We also see larger and larger enrollment caps as higher education becomes accessible to a higher number and a greater diversity of students. Incorporating writing into these classrooms is an overwhelming prospect. Well known writing-across-the-curriculum scholar Toby Fulwiler recognizes the need for

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Higgins and Muller, both Ph.D. students in English with an emphasis in folklore, are teaching English 185/Anthropology 184 and Anthropology 20/Linguistics 20, respectively—courses for which they were originally TAs. Other teaching experience includes English 3, 15, 20, 161, and Anthropology 154.

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help in courses where writing is a focus. He describes the resistance he faces when offering workshops to professors of large classes:

Professors who teach courses with enrollments larger than fifty or sixty, often several hundred, report major difficulties in including more writing in their classes, even though, in theory, there are ways to do this. I have stopped arguing with them. Large classes are lousy places in which to ask for voluntary help, unless well-trained graduate assistants or "readers" are available to help out (italics ours, 238-9).

"The best experience for everybody, TAs and faculty members, is a team approach to learning—someone leads, someone does cleanup. Now whether that can be practiced by everyone is uncertain. Each team will have different leaders and each leader will have a different character and that leader will set the tone for that team or the not-team—but, yes, I think that's an important part of the writing intensive program. It not only teaches students and TAs; it teaches faculty, too." —Dola Haessig, Campus Writing Board member and author of the CWP TA survey results

"Helping out" as writing intensive TAs may mean we attend class, attend committee meetings, confer about assignments, grade journals, grade exams, grade major drafts, grade major papers, grade shorter papers, confer about grades, grade research projects, hold office hours, teach labs, prepare exam materials, prepare class lectures/discussions, meet with students by appointment, lecture, proctor exams, set up labs, advise students, record grades. The WI TA's job description entails more than simply "grading" or "reading"—terms often used to describe (and unconsciously diminish) the role of the TA.

How widely that role is adapted became obvious as we served as TAs in five MU WI courses and conducted workshop discussions with dozens of TAs and professors. In fact, the role of TA varies from course to course, from class to class, and even within the confines of a single course. For example, in Introduction to Women's Literature, the professor and TA collaborated at each stage of the course, from writing the syllabus and assignments together to equally dividing essay evaluations. In Italian Civilization, a course in which the TA and professor have worked together for a number of years, the role of the TA has grown from a mere grader with little contact with students to a writing coach who holds frequent student conferences. In American Art and Architecture, three TAs designed and implemented their own discussion sections based on their teaching strengths. One TA even hosted his own version of "Jeopardy" rather than administering conventional pop quizzes.

According to Jo Ann Vogt, CWP Education and Social Sciences Liaison, the number of variations of WI teaching teams is equal to the number of WI courses offered each year. While universities do encourage professors to tailor courses to their levels of experience, personal goals, and the discourse and goals of their academic discipline, the tailoring of those courses often leaves out what has become as necessary as chalk and computers: the teaching assistant.

Generating Dialogue

"Models are powerful constructs. Unarticulated, they control the way we perceive our possibilities. Articulated, they can point up characteristic for our situations—those hitherto overlooked, and imagining new models can open possibilities for alternative arrangements" (Fitzgerald and Roach 1991:1). To facilitate the negotiation process, we offer the following generative questions which may help to open the dialogue between the professor and TAs:

• What are the specific tasks of the professor and TA in this class?
• How would you describe your expectations for this particular TA/professor relationship?
• What do you perceive the role of the TA to be in this course? Will that role change during the semester?
• What kind of relationship does the professor have with the students in the class?
• What kind of relationship does the TA have with the students in the class?
• How should students view the relationship between the TA and the professor?
• What is the role of writing in this course?
• How does the professor facilitate writing?
• How does the TA facilitate writing?
• How has the TA been trained for the role she plays in this class?
• Would the TA benefit from more training? What sort would you recommend?

Sharing the Benefits

Working as WI TAs has richly benefited our student and professional careers through acculturation into the academic community, collegial relationships with students and faculty, introductions to teaching in our chosen disciplines, and opportunities to develop and practice our own pedagogical theories with the help of faculty mentors. For faculty, one obvious benefit is that their workload becomes more manageable when responsibility is shared with a TA, allowing for more student writing in the classroom. Mentoring a WI TA also fulfills the professor’s and university’s obligation to train TAs to teach in their disciplines.

Perhaps WI students benefit most of all. As the professor/TA team facilitates writing-in-the-disciplines, students participate in the creation of discipline-specific knowledge. Through the active learning opportunities that a shared teaching arrangement provides, students can learn to think and write as economists, historians, sociologists.

The major portion of the Campus Writing Program’s budget is devoted to providing graduate TA support to faculty who teach WI courses. The graduate students who are selected as WI TAs should be the best the university has. Through the WI TA experience, TAs receive enhanced training unavailable anywhere else in the university. A major benefit of our work as WI TAs has been that we gained the experience and confidence to go on to teach the courses in which we originally assisted. We continue to model our courses after our professors’ and the CWP’s devotion to the writing process, collaborative learning, and critical thinking.

Fulwiler, Toby, and Art Young. 1986 Writing Across the Disciplines: Research into Practice. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

A Study in Case Studies

by Jo Ann Vogt

P.R. Lawrence, writing in K. Andrews' The Case Method of Teaching Human Relations and Administration, defines a case as a "vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor." What Lawrence means, I think, is that a good case—one that generates productive discussion—presents a realistic dilemma for which a single, correct solution does not exist. It includes enough specific detail to spark interest, but is focused enough that most readers will agree upon the pertinent issues. A good case, then, is a slice of reality carefully shaped to present readers with a problem they feel compelled to solve but which none can resolve perfectly.

Two primary types of cases are currently used at colleges and universities: cases that help students grapple with course content, like those analyzed in MU's Food Science and Human Nutrition 341 Case Studies and Research in Foodservice Management, and cases that help teachers and TAs reflect on their teaching practice and experience, like those offered for discussion in the Campus Writing Program's Case-In-Point series. The description below focuses on teachers and learners—or participants—but whether cases are tailored to help students think critically about course content or to encourage teachers and TAs to think and talk about their experiences, the benefits to participants are similar.

What Skills Can Participants Learn?

Participants can learn to:
- analyze data and solve problems
- listen to and understand a variety of points of view
- communicate effectively
- accept that some problems have no obvious solutions
- think independently and overcome bias
- recognize unstated assumptions
- apply theory to real-world problems
- think in ways particular to a given discipline

Teachers of writing intensive courses will note that those skills overlap CWP's traditional list of Abilities that WI Courses Foster. Another similarity between teaching with case studies and teaching a WI course is that both call upon instructors to relinquish some control over what takes place in the classroom.

What Role Does the Teacher Play?

Successful case discussion leaders:
- listen carefully and ask for clarification
- ask insightful, open-ended questions
- provide encouraging feedback
- draw links between individual comments
- draw attention to overlooked facts or principles
- encourage participants to listen to one another, even when viewpoints differ, and to pursue both short- and long-term solutions
- ask participants to evaluate proposed solutions and weigh their relative worth
- provide summaries as bridges between topics
- foreground learning as it happens
- help participants draw conclusions

Like any experiential-learning strategy, case studies call for careful planning well before discussion begins. Many teachers find it helpful to begin with case-related materials like problem sets or ethnographies before making the leap to writing and teaching their own cases. That kind of transition may be necessary to get learners accustomed to accepting responsibility for creating knowledge, and it can ease the tension that many teachers feel when they relinquish full control.

How Do Case Teachers Prepare?

Prior to discussion, most teachers:
- reread the case until every detail seems familiar
- list the facts of the case for easy reference
- list possible solutions
- list the costs and benefits of each solution
- list all the issues that may arise, highlighting the most salient

As any experienced case teacher will confirm, no amount of preparation will ensure that you anticipate every issue and every solution that the learners develop. If you could prepare that thoroughly, you would miss the joy of discovery with participants. Letting your learners know up front what general progression (perhaps facts, issues, then solutions) you hope the discussion will take can make them more aware of their learning process and more comfortable about speaking up. Allowing learners to work in pairs or groups to come up with facts, issues, or solutions can also encourage active participation from all members of the group. Finally, asking learners to evaluate their experience (preferably in writing) will give you valuable insight into what they learned, how they learned it, and what they would like to change next time.

How Can I Find Out More?

For more information about teaching with cases or help in developing cases to use in your classroom, contact CWP. We'll answer questions, brainstorm with you, and put you in touch with other teachers interested in and knowledgeable about case studies.

A Case Study

"Is There An Echo In Here?"

Written by Jo Ann Vogt, with MU Professor Joe Thorpe's permission. "Echo" describes a real teacher in a real class. Authentic material makes the best case study and allows participants to learn from experience.

Eager to see how his students had responded to the first assignment in his Ethical Issues in Psychology class, Joe Thorpe hurried back to his office and closed the door. He and the class had had five weeks to get to know one another, but this would be his first opportunity to see anything they'd written. All twenty were psychology majors, mostly juniors and seniors, and he'd found them willing and able to struggle with sensitive issues like privacy, confidentiality, and privilege. Bolstered by the quality of class discussions, Joe relaxed in his chair, fished a paper from the stack, and began to read. Before long he was hunched over his desk writing extensive comments, first on the paper itself and then—when his suggestions overflowed the margins—on a separate sheet. Joe was disappointed, either this student hadn't understood the assignment at all or she hadn't made an honest effort on this first draft. He'd noticed that Lisa, who sat in the back row, was somewhat reluctant to speak up in class, but until now he'd attributed her reticence to shyness. Now he wondered. Maybe she didn't talk much in class because she was completely baffled by the material.

More than half an hour later, Joe abandoned Lisa's paper and, his enthusiasm considerably diminished, reached for the next. He relaxed a little when he saw that the second paper was from the best student in the class, a returning student named Brad. Sitting back again in his chair, Joe anticipated a strong argument underpinned by telling details. He read the first paragraph, shrugged, and read it again. Frowning, he started on the second paragraph and was soon scribbling furiously in the margins. When most of the white space on Brad's paper was full, Joe continued his questions and suggestions on another sheet, sometimes rewriting whole sentences or offering a possible outline for a paragraph. This paper demonstrated more engagement with the topic, but it was clear that Brad had not taken the time to think through and develop his arguments. From the look of it, Joe wagered that Brad had hastily put his draft together just the night before.

Convinced by the first two papers that none of the students had taken this rough draft seriously, (continued on page 4)
Joe settled in for a long day of reading and commenting on the other papers. At 30 to 60 minutes per paper, he knew he'd be here deep into the evening. The prospect of spending the crisp fall day inside didn't please him, but he could think of no other way to get his students ready to tackle their revisions of this assignment. He took up the next paper and almost immediately began his written commentary.

At the next class meeting, Joe conducted class discussion as usual, saving ten minutes at the end to return the papers and make some general comments. He didn't try to mask his disappointment; in fact, he told the students that their papers had been universally sloppily and style. As he urged them to take their revisions seriously and conference with him before rewriting, he even reminded the class that although the first draft had not been graded, the second draft of this paper would score for 20% of the total course grade. As the students filled out they looked appropriately cowed.

Joe was surprised the following week to find that only four students made use of his office hours. Three of the four were Brad, Helena, and Sally, the students whose drafts had come closest to meeting the assignment. The fourth student, who showed up without an appointment, was Lisa. She was so depressed by her performance that she decided to drop the class. No amount of encouragement from Joe could change her mind. He signed her drop card and wished her well.

The rest of the students made no effort to schedule a time to talk about their papers, despite his repeated reminders in class about his office hours and phone numbers. They simply turned in their final drafts the following Friday. Eternally optimistic, he returned to his office with the stack of revisions and began to read.

After only a few minutes on the first paper, he tossed it aside and picked up another, read a few of the paragraphs and reached for a third. It, like the first two he'd read, sounded awfully familiar. Paragraph by paragraph, page by page, he heard his own prose coming back to him. Students had not only read his comments, they had built their revisions almost entirely from his suggestions and examples. The papers were certainly improved, but Joe was sure that for most of the students the revision process had been not so much a rethinking of their drafts as a cut-and-paste job merging his ideas, examples, and sometimes even his sentences with their own. Shaking his head, Joe considered how he might grade these final drafts of the first assignment and how he would respond to the rough draft of Assignment 2, due in only a week. He decided he needed help.

"Is There An Echo In Here?" will be presented October 18 at 2:45-4:00 and again November 2 at 11:45-1:00. If you would like to participate in a lively discussion prompted by Joe Thorpe's dilemma, join us in 325 GCB at one of those times.

Events to Note:

Case-In-Point: case study discussions
- "Who's The Boss?" Oct. 5, 11:45-1:00
- "Is There An Echo In Here?" Oct. 18, 2:45-4:00, or Nov. 2, 11:45-1:00, 325 GCB

Brownbags: lunch-hour conversations
- "Write what you think; say what you mean: The use of oral presentations in a W1 course" David Lehman, Agricultural Economics 11:45, Friday, Oct. 14, 325 GCB
- "A Newcomer's Triumphs and Tribulations" Jan Dauve, Agricultural Economics 11:45, Thursday, Nov. 10, 325 GCB

CWP Workshops:
- January 11-13: Winter Faculty Workshop
- January 21 (Sat.): Winter WI TA Workshop

WI Proposals Due:
- Oct. 10 • Nov. 18 • Jan. 3 • Feb. 6

Of Special Note to WI Teachers
- If computer-mediated writing would enhance your Winter 1995 WI course, you may wish to teach in an electronic classroom, GCB 222c or 222d. Call Carla Klein (882-6794) immediately to determine availability.

- Faculty who have taught the same WI course for at least three semesters may qualify for "simplified renewal." Although you will not need to submit a new proposal, you will need to notify CWP when you plan to teach the course, in order to keep Registration informed and to plan for TA funding. Subcommittees reserve the right to request new applications when necessary.

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