CHANGES IN THE TRAINING OF WRITING TEACHERS

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English departments are once again confronted with charges in the popular media that the illiteracy of the American people generally, and of recent high school graduates in particular, constitutes a disturbing or perhaps even a dangerous state which we should regard as having reached "crisis" proportions. In the past, this public concern has been directed primarily at reading ability, but in its present form, it focuses on writing skill. Not surprisingly, much of the commentary has been directed at elementary and secondary school teachers. *Time* emblazoned the news that "Teachers Can't Teach" across the cover of its June 16, 1980, issue, then devoted several pages to a critical analysis of the shortcomings in modern American education. The authors of that article estimated that up to twenty percent of certified teachers have not mastered the "basic skills" that they are supposed to teach.¹ If this estimate is accurate—and most Americans believe, intuitively at least, that it is—then we must recognize that not only are teachers unskilled in areas outside their expertise, but also, more frightening, they are incompetent within areas in which they ostensibly are trained. And since, as Charles Moran and J. T. Skerrett recently pointed out, two of the three traditional R's of basic education are within the province of the English teachers, we must be particularly sensitive to the criticism presently being leveled at teacher inability.²

All of us are familiar with the litany of woes affecting the ability of even competent secondary English teachers to do their job well: class size and paperwork, unsympathetic administrators, indifferent or hostile students and parents. But putting these factors into perspective, which means not allowing them to become rationalizations for poor performance, it remains nonetheless true that teachers can do well what they are employed to do only if they are well-trained initially to do so.

We in college English departments are the last formal academic trainers of teachers before they enter the on-the-job phase of their learning experience. Do we, therefore, have a stake in the quality of secondary English instruction, especially in writing skill? The answer is self-evident, not only because we are—or certainly should be—committed in principle to literacy for its own sake, but also, more personally and practically, since

the products of that instruction face us in freshman composition sections three months after high school graduation. More than anything else, this firsthand experience with our country’s literacy problems should both give us pause and spur us into action.

Clearly, factors outside of our control have contributed to the diminished writing skills which we see in our students. Like our secondary school counterparts, we must not excuse ourselves from responsibility by arguing that broader admissions standards or television or any of the other convenient scapegoats are solely to blame for this state of affairs. We taught and ultimately approved the language competency of our high school English teachers, so we do share a part—perhaps a substantial part—of the burden both for creating the present inadequacies and for alleviating them.

The *Time* article states further that “Today’s teaching incompetence reflects the lax standards in many of the education programs at the 1150 colleges around the country that train teachers.” At this point, then, we might be tempted to point an accusing finger at a clearly-identified culprit: the already much vilified schools and departments of education. But we must read on: “It also reflects on colleges generally, since teachers take more than half their courses in traditional departments like English, history, and mathematics.”

We need hardly note than an English teacher has had a somewhat higher amount of his or her course work in these areas. We do, in fact, teach teachers *how* to teach as well as *what* to teach, so we must be willing to admit some culpability if they are unable to perform well in their profession.

Stimulated by such negative and provocative statements, especially since they appeared in a widely-read and, I think, influential periodical, I conducted a survey of English department chairpersons in public and private colleges and universities representing all geographical regions of the country; the survey contained a series of questions contrasting present (fall, 1980) practices in English teacher education with those being employed in 1975. The purpose of the survey was to determine the form and extent, if any, to which college English departments had responded to “literacy pressures” by revising their teacher education curricula or course requirements in an effort to train prospective writing teachers more adequately. I assumed—correctly, I believe, although without formal verification—that most English majors are being prepared to teach as most of us were, i.e., almost exclusively in literature rather than in
composition or areas related to it such as grammar and linguistics. I chose 1975 as the focal year, since even the most methodical response to educational or societal pressures should have been planned, even if not actually implemented, within five years. It seemed to be a reasonable period of time for assessing specific changes. I mailed approximately 150 surveys and received almost one hundred responses, divided just about evenly between chairpersons in public and private institutions. Thus, I was working with a sample that represented slightly less than ten percent of schools having English certification programs in the United States. Overall, I found few geographic differences in my data, although I should note that survey returns were fewer from schools in the West and Northwest than from other regions. However, there were differences in some respects between public and private schools, which I will detail in the summary of my findings. The remainder of this article, then, consists of what I judge to be the most interesting, significant, or disturbing information revealed by this survey, together with several recommendations for the training of writing teachers which seem deducible from the results.

First, there is a substantial difference between public and private schools with respect to those members of the faculty charged with the preparation of English teachers, at least insofar as pedagogical matters are concerned. In just over half (fifty-one percent) of the public institutions, this task is performed in the English department; however, in nearly two-thirds (sixty-three percent) of the private schools surveyed, this function is performed in the college or department of education. Overall, the division nationally for methods instruction is forty-four percent in English departments and fifty-six percent in education. These figures become meaningful, however, only when we notice that the teaching of writing is included in this methods training in ninety-five percent of the public schools but in only seventy-two percent of the private ones. It appears, therefore, that a prospective English teacher is more likely to be trained formally in writing pedagogy if he or she attends a state university and, further, that such training in a public institution is more likely to take place where we would expect to find composition and rhetoric specialists: the English department. More disturbing than the previous figures, however, is the additional finding that in nearly one-fifth (seventeen percent) of the colleges and universities in this country, students are being certified to teach English without any formal training in writing in the primary methods course. Nearly a third (thirty-one percent) of the schools surveyed indicate that they now are requiring more general English
methods than in 1975, although not necessarily in the teaching of writing.

The remaining survey questions dealt with specific course or curricular requirements within English departments which are, I believe, generally assumed in our profession to be a part of one's preparation to teach writing. Perhaps the most revealing finding, at least in illustrating our inertia in teacher training, is that the national average number of advanced writing courses required of prospective English teachers is slightly more than one—about the same number as twenty years ago when I entered college and no one was worried about literacy or teacher competency. Small as this average is, my data indicate that it actually represents a small increase in the last five years, since twenty percent of the departments surveyed claim to have added advanced writing requirements within that time. One of the most unsettling of my findings is the revelation that in fifteen percent of the schools nationally (twenty-two percent of private schools), English majors are certified to teach without having taken a single advanced writing course. This information seemed to me, intuitively, surely so exaggerated that I contacted faculty members in a number of private schools to verify it; what I found is that the data are accurate, insofar as any non-empirical survey is accurate, and, further, that most of the schools in which this condition exists are in New England and the Northeast, although some are found in other parts of the country as well. Since these schools have no advanced composition requirement, it is evident that their state certification agencies do not believe that such preparation is necessary for successful secondary English teaching, either. These states and schools apparently assume that a year of freshman writing is adequate work in this area.

In areas of study other than composition itself that are traditionally thought to bear on one's language skills, survey results were comparable to those previously summarized. For example, most schools now require approximately one linguistics course—usually history of the English language—for certification; however, this requirement has been added or increased since 1975 in only sixteen percent of the schools, and thirteen percent still require no academic work in this area, although this figure is lower than that for advanced composition; in other words, more schools require linguistics than writing.

Nearly a third (thirty-one percent) of English departments require somewhat greater advanced study of grammar than in the past, but the national average for number of courses remains below one. Public
schools, in particular, have increased the amount of traditional grammar study that they require, but neither public nor private institutions have increased significantly the study of transformational/generative grammar for prospective teachers. Again, however, more than a fifth (twenty-two percent) of all schools have no requirement for certification in this area, and the percentage among private schools is almost a third (thirty-one percent).

Finally, with respect to course work, the survey revealed that the majority of departments have not reduced the emphasis on literature in their requirements to any substantial extent, even if they have slightly increased study in composition, grammar, or linguistics. Nationally, thirteen percent of the departments surveyed have reduced the number of hours or courses in literature, with the average reduction being by approximately six to eight credit hours or two courses. Thus, a "typical" English certification program still is about three-quarters fulfilled in literature rather than in composition and related studies.

At a broader level, only slightly more than a tenth (twelve percent) of the departments require that a prospective English teacher pass any form of comprehensive examination in addition to courses in order to qualify for certification, and, as is the case with several of the previously mentioned requirements, such an exam usually is required of all English majors, regardless of their career fields. There is a discernible trend toward instituting such exams, however, since a third of the departments now having this requirement have added it since 1975. Twelve states now test teacher competency for certification—with failure rates sometimes running as high as eighty percent—and the number of states doing so will reach twenty-five within the next year or two, so whatever our subjective feelings may be about the inherent fairness or validity of such testing, we are going to have to accommodate ourselves to an increasing amount of it in the future. In addition, the results undoubtedly will be interpreted by some people, both inside and outside of higher education, as a measure of how well we in the colleges prepare teachers.

The minimal changes that have been made recently in the training of English teachers demonstrate a very slight response to criticism of our role as educators of future writing teachers. Further, the survey revealed that approximately half of the schools or departments that have revised their certification requirements since 1975 have done so as the result of state mandate, not necessarily because of a felt need on the part of English
department faculty members.

Certainly, we must not assume a simplistic causal relationship between increased academic work in the area and better teaching, but, clearly, new teachers cannot successfully contribute to increased literacy unless they are well-prepared academically to do so. Some—perhaps much—of the failure of secondary school writing instruction is attributable to the fact that high school teachers have not themselves been rigorously trained in writing, writing theory, and pedagogy and are, as a result, both reluctant to teach writing and unskilled in its methodology.

This survey was informal, but I believe that because of the breadth and distribution of the responses, its results represent a generally accurate view of the present state of English teacher education as it pertains to writing. Based on my findings, therefore, I offer the following recommendations:

1) Wherever it is possible to do so, given the constraints imposed by budgets and staffing, the training of English teachers should be done in English departments. This recommendation does not imply criticism of education programs; rather, it reflects the realization that the preparation of writing teachers should be in the hands of writing specialists, and that a "general methods" approach applicable to prospective teachers in a variety of disciplines is inadequate for the specialized skills involved in teaching composition.

2) The amount of training that prospective English teachers receive in composition and its related areas that I have identified previously in this paper should be increased substantially, even if doing so necessitates further reduction in students' literature study. Literature constitutes only a part—perhaps a diminishing part—of what a secondary teacher must know and be prepared to teach, and both the methods and the subject matter courses taken by prospective teachers should reflect this fundamental reality. New teachers must be as realistically prepared for the actual conditions of their employment as it is possible for those of us in the colleges to make them. How much better it would be to send them into the field with adequate teaching skills than to attempt to retrain them later.

3) English departments should institute comprehensive examinations for all certification-seeking majors, so that they can truly and confidently verify, within the parameters of measuring capabilities, that
new English teachers will, in fact, be qualified to do all that education and society expect of them, including especially to teach writing skillfully.

4) English professors must convey to their students a feeling that the teaching of writing is an exciting and challenging part of the modern English teacher's work, and that it is almost surely the most important professional role that he or she fills today. New teachers must not be encouraged to believe that composition is the drudge work that they must do in order to be rewarded with literature assignments. After all, the humanistic experience which makes reading worthwhile is meaningless to students who can neither read nor express their responses to that reading.

College English departments must overcome their inertia and create curricula which will realistically respond to the demands and expectations which are placed on secondary English teachers. Many large corporations now have their own programs to teach writing to management employees, perhaps in part because they do not trust us or our former students who are now teaching to do it well enough. A recent article by Beverly T. Watkins in The Chronicle of Higher Education reported on plans now being formulated by colleges of education to increase requirements, toughen standards, and revise curricula in an effort both to improve teacher quality and to narrow the gap between education and actual classroom experience. Many of the proposed changes are in response to pressure from such educational bodies as the Council of Chief State School Officers, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, as well as from state legislatures and the United States Congress. If colleges of education are responding to deficiencies in teacher preparation, can we in English do less? We cannot and must not remain aloof from the national concern for literacy which is intensifying around us; we know that problems exist in writing instruction in American secondary schools—every set of freshman themes that we read tells us so. How much preferable it will be if we take the initiative and institute the appropriate changes that will improve the preparation of new English teachers as writing instructors, rather than waiting for these reforms to be imposed on us by agencies and pressure groups outside of, and sometimes hostile to, higher education. The only ones really capable of putting our house in order are we who live in it.

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