



Response to Criticism

Nadine Weidman
Harvard University

Should non-composition graduate students be teaching freshman writing and writing-intensive courses? Or should the job be reserved for experienced, full-time professors of composition?

The most obvious answer to this question is that of course experienced comp professors make better teachers of writing than non-comp graduate students, and so clearly the task should belong to them. Wouldn't it be difficult to argue otherwise? Well—yes and no. I think that the obvious answer conceals a host of issues that should also be brought into consideration.

First of all, it is simply not enough to require undergraduates to take one or two semesters of freshman composition and leave it at that. No one learns to write that way; the Harvard seniors who show up in my classes and who routinely have trouble putting together a paragraph, never mind an essay, attest to that fact. Given this situation, every teacher, whether a composition professor or not, must be a teacher of writing, and every course must be a writing-intensive course. Inasmuch, then, as graduate students are teachers in training, they must be trained to teach writing, which should involve actually teaching it. For this reason, I think Cornell's John S. Knight Program is a step in the right direction. It may be flawed, and it may try to do too much in too little time, but it was the only consistent teacher training of any kind that I received in six years of graduate school. More programs like it are definitely needed.

Secondly, the structure of American universities is not conducive to the small, professor-led classes that are necessary if teaching writing is to be a priority. Increasingly, the bulk of the teaching in large universities is done by adjuncts and graduate students—a trend that the MLA lamented in a recent report. Most universities are top-heavy with administrators and named-chair professors, who do little or no teaching, while the number of full-time assistant professorships dwindle. The teaching slack is taken up by a growing underclass, people without Ph.D.s or regular appointments, who are hired to teach one or two courses on a part-time basis. Professors are rewarded with reduced teaching loads; they might

teach one lecture course of 300 students and employ a raft of TAs to do the grading.

This system is a tremendous cost-saving measure for the universities; the teaching of writing is its major casualty. At the three large universities I have been associated with, Cornell, MIT and Harvard, I did not see (and have yet to see) a single professor interested in teaching a writing-intensive course—and who can blame them? How can you teach a class of 300 students to write? It's impossible; and so, inevitably, the teaching of writing again gets left up to the TAs who actually read the undergraduates' papers.

I think the battle we are fighting between comps and non-comps over who should teach writing is a hopeless one, and a self-destructive one. We all have to be teachers of writing, and we have to fight not each other but a university administration that is making it as difficult as possible for us. Graduate students must get more and better training. Classes must be smaller, and there must be more of them. More assistant professor lines must be opened up, so that some of those adjuncts can be hired on a full-time basis to teach those smaller classes. Universities must re-allocate funding, away from the Byzantine administrative structure that many of them have developed, and toward creating more positions for full-time faculty. (This would also help alleviate the current unemployment crisis among recent Ph.D.s.)

As a non-comp graduate student teaching 13 freshmen how to write, I was not the problem. I was only a symptom of the problem, the roots of which go much deeper, into the organization and reward structure of American universities.