

SOUTHEAST MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE ASSISTANT TRAINING PROGRAM English Department

The English Graduate Teaching experience involves a comprehensive program to enable all teaching assistants to reach their potential as instructors within the classroom and as students themselves of composition and rhetoric.

To prepare for this approach to the teaching of composition, the teaching assistants participate in a three-part program during their first year:

- (1) Two-week orientation prior to the fall term
- (2) One-hour seminar during the fall term
- (3) Two-hour seminar during the spring term

In addition, a regular program of supervision is followed throughout the four terms of the typical assistant's tenure.

Orientation (EN600)

In this session, the new assistants are introduced to the theories of composition that form the foundation of the teaching practices, with emphasis upon the cognitive development of the composition students' thought processes as manifested in their writing. With this emphasis forming the foundation of their own course plans, the teaching assistants are able to formulate a comprehensive approach to composition in which they are given much latitude and responsibility within their own classrooms. In understanding the theory, the teaching assistants can unify all elements of instruction: course planning, daily lesson plans, classroom presentations and workshops, assignments, responses to essays, conference techniques, and evaluation of essays.

Introduction to the theory is followed by application in classroom practices. The first-year composition textbook is examined to emphasize its cognitive organization and its emphasis on the recursive writing process. Teaching Assistants also use an anthology of our students' essays (*Beyond the Blank Page*), which is published and marketed by Hayden-McNeil.

The manual for teaching assistants, "Dr. Staff," complements the review of theory and pedagogy and is discussed in detail. This manual provides guidelines for professional conduct and classroom management, samples of both functional and dysfunctional essays, and various documents relating to teaching practices and campus resources and university policies.

At the end of the orientation, each teaching assistant produces a syllabus and a course outline based on the departmental syllabus, the FYC textbook, and the theories and applications presented during the orientation. The supervisor emphasizes that this course outline is a guide and not a rigid instrument. Thus, each assistant is encouraged to be responsive to the emerging needs manifested in each class.

The First Term Seminar (EN651)

The first semester seminar allows a deeper examination of the pedagogical issues touched upon in the orientation. Thus, the EN651 seminar introduces the assistants to the professional literature regarding some of the basic concerns of teaching, such as making assignments, setting up and conducting peer workshops, conferencing, and evaluating essays. Specific activities involve

- (1) Group forums on topics relevant to the teaching of composition.
- (2) An analysis of practices when responding to students' writing.
- (3) Discussions of immediate issues arising from the assistants' experiences within their classrooms.

The Second Term Seminar (EN652)

The second semester seminar provides a view beyond the immediate classroom, examining the history of the teaching of composition. Knowing the historical background, the teaching assistants understand why the practices that they utilize in the classroom exist, and that understanding will allow them to justify the theory and pedagogy emphases that they apply. In addition, theories in practice are examined to acquaint the teaching assistants with varying approaches to teaching composition. Specific activities consist of

- (1) Individual presentations on composition theorists.
- (2) An analysis of the application of various theories in responding to student writing.
- (3) A teaching philosophy that reflects the teaching assistant's beliefs about composition theory and pedagogy.
- (4) Discussions of issues arising from the teaching assistants' experiences in their classrooms.

Supervisory Activities

Beyond the seminar activities, each teaching assistant meets with the supervisor throughout each term to discuss various activities and map strategies for improvement of instruction. These meetings involve

- (1) Conferring with supervisor to examine student evaluations and grade assignment profiles from the previous term.
- (2) Conferring with supervisor for discussion of self-analysis of a videotaped class session.
- (3) Arranging a classroom observation.
- (4) Conferring with supervisor for a post-observation discussion.
- (5) Providing supervisor with graded papers for two conferences (one early in the term and one later) on responses and grading techniques.
- (6) Conferring with supervisor, providing a self-analysis of teaching performance at the end of the term.
- (7) Conferring with supervisor to discuss the summative evaluation to be sent to all appropriate administrators.

Each session with the supervisor produces documents that the teaching assistant can place in the Teaching Portfolio. This portfolio is a valuable record that the assistant can use in gaining admission into graduate school or full-time employment.

ADDITIONAL ASSISTANTSHIP ASSIGNMENTS

Writing Lab Tutors

Teaching assistants have the opportunity to tutor in the Writing Lab, which averages 7300 tutorials each year, both face-to-face and online. Students receive assistance as walk-ins or in weekly conferences with the same tutor for an extended period. The clientele is diverse. Approximately half of all walk-in students seek assistance with writing in courses other than English composition, and approximately half are upperclassmen, with juniors and seniors well represented. International students represent approximately 31% of the face-to-face clientele. Thus, tutoring in the Writing Lab, TAs will apply relevant principles they have learned in the seminars to a wide range of writing situations.

In addition to being valuable job experience, tutoring in the Writing Lab provides the TAs with greater insight into the students' perspective than may be gained by conferring with students in their own courses. Training sessions conducted by the coordinator of the Writing Lab focus on topics of practical interest to tutors, for example, conferencing technique, writing across the disciplines, ways of addressing concerns about correctness, and the special needs of international students and students with learning disabilities.

Since 1997, students may submit a draft online to the Writing Lab and receive a tutor's response within 24 hours. Writing Lab staff replied to over 2200 online submissions during the past year. Finally, TAs in the Writing Lab will gain valuable knowledge from observing and possibly working in the Writing Assessment Program, which conducts EN-140 exit testing, administers the Writing Proficiency Exam (required of all students after 75 credit hours), and assists students in pursuing various options (e.g., the portfolio) for satisfying the writing proficiency requirement.

Research Assistants In The Faulkner Center

Teaching Assistants who are concentrating in literature have the opportunity of serving as a research assistant for at least one semester in the Faulkner Center. The Center was established to serve the Louis Brodsky, Jr., Faulkner Collection, one of the three major collections of Faulkner materials in the world. RAs have "hands-on" experience with the original materials, first editions, and correspondence received and created by Faulkner. Recently, RAs participated in creation of the Faulkner Encyclopedia. Thus, our RAs have a rare opportunity to work with a major collection of a world-class member of belles-lettres. They also have an active role in the planning and organization of the bi-annual Faulkner Conference.

Research Assistants In The University Press

Teaching Assistants who are concentrating in writing and publishing have the opportunity of serving as a research assistant for at least one semester in the Southeast Missouri State University Press. The prerequisite is either prior experience in literary publishing or a 3 hour Independent Studies in Small-

press Publishing prior to the assistantship. The RA has the opportunity to work with our award-winning literary journal *Big Muddy*, with the production and marketing of full-length book manuscripts, and with writing professional book reviews for publication.

The Teaching Assistant Experience At Southeast

Through this record of achievement, our teaching assistants have been quite successful in their pursuits beyond the master's program at Southeast Missouri State University, whether seeking assistantships for doctoral studies, seeking admission into law school, or attaining a teaching position at the college or secondary level. As a former assistant commented in the postscript of the TA training manual, "The assistantship was the heart of my graduate learning."

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