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Disciplines

Faculty Development With English Departments: Composition Resources

FRED GILLIARD

OVERVIEW:

College English departments generally teach classes in literature, composition, and language. The latter two have suffered because of preoccupation with the former, but have recently been more heavily emphasized in classrooms. Supposed declines in the communication skills of students earned notoriety through press releases about low SAT scores in the mid-1970's, raising a popular consciousness about basic skills; since the appearance of *Newsweek's* "Why Johnny Can't Write" in 1976, English teachers in the public schools and their teachers in the universities have—along with television, elective courses, a permissive society, etc.—been held accountable for the "communication crises." Unresolved debate continues about SAT data and inferences drawn from it. However, a tangible result of the furor has been increased attention by English professors to the processes of teaching and learning composition. It is the purpose of this article to survey briefly current resources on composition for POD personnel working with English faculties.

ORGANIZATIONS:

Two major organizations encouraging improvement of the teaching of composition are the Modern Language Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. The MLA's Division of the Teaching of Writing attracts new and experienced composition teachers from across the country for a yearly sharing of ideas and practices. Regional MLA associations also promote annual meet-

ings that include sessions on composition. MLA is located at 62 5th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011. The NCTE's membership is broader-based than the MLA's in that the former invites elementary and secondary teachers as well as college professors into its ranks. It, too, sponsors a major meeting with a variety of separate strands, many devoted to consideration of strategies for teaching composition. NCTE affiliates throughout the country carry out on a regional basis the missions of the national office, though affiliates tend to be dominated by public school teachers. The NCTE address is 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801. Both the MLA and the NCTE publish directories, but whereas the MLA's directory lists all members from two and four year institutions, the NCTE's directory mainly reports the names of officers, committees, affiliate publications, etc.

JOURNALS:

There are a multitude of journals that serve the discipline of English, though most of them feature pieces on literature. *College Composition and Communication,* however, specializes in articles about writing; it is a vital publication for any English department's library, and is developed under the auspices of the Conference on College Composition and Communications. *College English* often carries descriptions of composition activities in higher education institutions; its issues focus on specific topics such as that in the April, 1978—"Writing: Basics and Human Beings." *The ADE Bulletin,* a journal published by the Association of Departments of English, frequently has an administrative slant to its pieces that add to the perspectives on composition provided by teaching faculty. *Research In the Teaching of English,* newly edited by Roy O'Donnell of the Department of Language Education, University of Georgia, offers selections about directions in research in English overall, with ample space given to composition studies.

SOME PUBLICATIONS:

During the mid-1970's a number of publications have appeared that POD personnel might be aware of. Gary Tate's *Teaching Composition: Ten Bibliographical Essays* (Texas Christian Un. Press,

1976), is a primary source that offers extremely helpful information to anyone approaching composition teaching for the first time and to others as well. Richard Larson's "Resources for the Veteran Teacher, New to Composition" (*ADE Bulletin,* Sept. 1978), contains approximately fifty titles that will stimulate senior professors returning to the teaching of composition. A promising new work, *Research on Composing: Points of Departure* (NCTE, 1978), encourages an organic understanding of the process of writing; this book points out the limitations of past and contemporary efforts at teaching composition—limitations that all might be aware of before embarking, whether new or experienced, on the teaching of composition. The writings of Walker Gibson, Wayne Booth, Frank D'Angelo, Janet Emig, Kenneth Burke, Ross Winterowd, Francis Christensen, Ken Macrorie, and Paul Diederich continue to maintain the respect of teachers of composition in colleges and universities.

TRAINING PROGRAMS:

Popular and professional interest in teaching composition has promoted the development of summer seminars on composition for college professors. While not numerous, such seminars are increasing in numbers. The excellent one at the University of Iowa is directed by Carl Klaus and receives financial support from the National Endowment for the Humanities; only directors of composition programs are admitted to it, however. Some fellow-in-residence programs also exist—one at the University of Michigan is led by Richard Young and has earned praise—whereby faculty can work for a year in distinguished programs with distinguished scholars/teachers of composition. Yet national seminars and fellow-in-residence programs only assist few of the many directors and teachers of composition. Consequently, some English departments have established in-house training programs, though far too often these essentially involve training for teaching assistants instead of regular faculty. Indiana University's English Department has designed comprehensive training that accommodates the needs of assistants as well as faculty, though; the program includes small and large workshops, individualized assistance, and use of a series of tapes, "Strategies in College Teaching," which has a section on how

to lead class discussions. These tapes are available from: Edgar Richardson, Audio Visual Center, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47401.

REFLECTIONS:

Faculty development programs in composition are generally as recent an occurrence within the discipline of English as is the current interest in the process of writing itself. That such programs and interest has been so long coming for people teaching, very often uninspiring, required courses is surprising. Nevertheless, the time, wrought by circumstances still clouded with uncertain data and ambiguous inferences, is ripe for imaginative efforts at renewal. Something more than a one-on-one tactic will be necessary to bring about change of consequence; something more than professors sitting in on teaching assistants' classes occasionally will have to be done. Indeed, the most logical and expeditious approach to bring about change in the teaching of composition may be through work with an entire department; John Sharpham's presentation on working with departments at the last POD national conference may contain pertinent suggestions. (John Sharpham, Illinois State Un., Normal, IL 61761). Whatever the approach or approaches may be, vast opportunities exist now to promote change in a discipline whose work affects students across entire campuses.