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## TRAINING TEACHING ASSISTANTS IN THE YEARLONG METHODS COURSE

IN her recent article "Leadership, Development, Therapy: The Course Head's Problems and Pleasures," Marlies Mueller emphasizes "the desirability and benefits to be derived from working with TAs as a group" not only for a brief preservice orientation or initial training session but throughout the academic year (32). She argues that if we restrict formal TA training to a preservice workshop and/or a methods course that, as Renate Schulz reports (2), is usually offered concurrently with the first teaching experience, we may be "killing the goose that is likely to lay a golden egg" (Mueller 32). To combat the isolation especially felt by new TAs and to foster enthusiasm and high morale throughout the school year, Mueller recommends carefully planned weekly staff meetings. While we of the University of California, Davis, German department fully endorse the concept of a yearlong systematic approach to TA supervision and training, we have gone a different route. We have extended the methods course from a two-quarter to a three-quarter sequence with excellent results for the TAs, for the language program, and for the department. I propose to describe the format and content of the expanded methods course and to highlight the benefits of this approach.

The TA training program in the UCD German department introduces incoming graduate students to the rudiments of effective teaching and makes them aware of the problems and concerns of the foreign language teaching profession. Before they arrive on campus TAs receive the departmental TA manual, which is a substantial supplement to the campuswide TA handbook (Henderson). Our manual explains policies and procedures that affect TAs in their roles as teachers. It provides instructional information about all phases of German language teaching from the first class session to the grading of final examinations, contains guidelines for grammar explanation and testing to ensure uniformity in multisectional language courses, specifies resources and training opportunities available in the German department, and lists evaluation criteria used for reappointing graduate students to teaching assistantships. The manual serves as a reference and resource booklet for the TAs throughout their tenure at UCD.

Once our TAs arrive on campus they must participate in a preteaching orientation program. This program is organized and presented in part by the Teaching Resources Center on campus, in part by the TA supervisor of the German department. The center conducts general orientation meetings as well as sessions geared specifically to foreign language TAs, while the TA supervisor concentrates on matters pertaining strictly to

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the German department and the teaching of German. Senior TAs who have been appointed course coordinators contribute to the departmental orientation meeting by providing and discussing course materials for the first week of language instruction. After the first week of classes, ongoing help is provided in the yearlong methods course, the major component of our training program.

The remaining components of our TA training program are continuing supervision and rotating teaching assignments. It is our belief that TA supervision and evaluation cannot cease halfway through the academic year if we want to ensure continually improved teaching. To monitor our TAs' progress in the classroom we rely on a combination of direct observation, videotapings, student interviews conducted midway through the quarter by personnel from the Teaching Resources Center, and student evaluations at the end of each quarter. Barring unforeseen problems that would require additional visits, each new TA can expect two visits by the TA supervisor during fall quarter, one visit each by the supervisor and another faculty member plus a videotaping during winter quarter, and a last visit by the supervisor plus the student interview during spring quarter. Each one of these activities is immediately followed by a conference with the TA supervisor. Student evaluations at the end of each quarter are discussed in detail as well. All TAs have the right to request additional visits or further documentation of their teaching, since the sequence just outlined represents only the mandatory minimum for all new TAs.

As a rule, first-year TAs as well as transfer graduate students unfamiliar with our textbook are assigned to teach German 1. Most of them will continue with German 2 and 3 in subsequent quarters and, eventually, with courses at the second-year level. Remaining behind because there are fewer sections of the more advanced German courses are those TAs who, in consultation with the supervisor, have chosen to repeat the class in order to refine their skills at that level as well as one TA for each course who is selected by the supervisor for superior performance and leadership skills to act as course coor-

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dinator. By observing a rotating system in teaching assignments we aim for a variety of teaching experiences at the first- and second-year levels. In addition, each TA has the opportunity to function as coordinator of a multisectional language course provided he or she meets the necessary qualifications.

The methods course itself consists of three one-unit classes in which all new TAs enroll during their first year of residency. German 390A, the initial phase of the methods course offered during fall quarters, is designed for first-year TAs who need to develop teaching skills and techniques in order to be effective teachers in the elementary German classes. Therefore the course emphasis is on everyday classroom situations, with a balance between the discussion of teaching concepts and the development of individual teaching strategies by means of participation and observation. Class discussion gives special attention to problems and objectives of the beginning language course, including preparation, course content, pacing, warm-ups, pattern drills, vocabulary development, pronunciation, error correction, teaching the four basic skills in a cultural context, testing, and using audiovisual equipment. The participation segment of German 390A provides an opportunity for microteaching, for adapting and refining learning activities, and for creating new learning and testing materials. Finally, the observation segment requires classroom visits to the master teacher, a senior TA, and a peer as well as self-evaluation based on specifically designed evaluation criteria.<sup>1</sup> Textbooks for the course include Allen and Valette, *Classroom Techniques*, and Valette, *Modern Language Testing*, supplemented by the *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines*.

German 390B, offered during winter quarters, is designed as a sequel to 390A. Following an introduction about the historical roots of foreign language teaching in the United States, the course concentrates on the major foreign language teaching methodologies and on the resources available to the foreign language teacher ranging from textbooks and foreign language publications to professional organizations and conferences. Course participants read Grittner's *Teaching Foreign Languages* and selected articles from foreign language journals and conference reports. The course format combines lectures, student presentations, discussions, and projects. In addition, the class attends at least one regional foreign language conference to gain insight into the professional activities of foreign language educators.<sup>2</sup>

German 390C, the last phase of our three-part methods course, is offered during spring quarters. Its major purpose is to familiarize TAs with problems and concerns of the foreign language teaching profession in the 1980s. A perusal of representative TA training programs across the United States as in Joseph Gibaldi and James V. Mirollo, eds., *The Teaching Apprentice Program in Language and Literature*, suggests that methods

courses do not allow for adequate preparation in this crucial area. As our graduates embark on their professional careers they will be called on by their departments to suggest new ways to make foreign language study attractive to larger segments of the student population. It is part of our responsibility to provide TAs with the background that will enable them to examine existing programs and curricula, to implement necessary changes and new approaches, and, last but not least, to educate a largely monolingual population about the importance of foreign language study.

Familiarity with current program offerings and new approaches develops from extensive reading and class discussions. Using "Why Should Americans Study a Foreign Language?" (Grittner 24-45) as a starting point, the class reads the introduction to *Strength through Wisdom*, and Lurie's "America . . . Globally Blind, Deaf and Dumb" and discusses selected essays from the 1980 *Proceedings of the National Conference on Professional Priorities*, Phillips's *The New Imperative: Expanding the Horizon of Foreign Language Education*, Geno's *Our Profession: Present Status and Future Directions*, Connor's *A Global Approach to Foreign Language Education*, Phillips's *New Cases for Foreign Language Study*, and recent volumes from the *ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series*. Reading selections are updated annually to reflect current issues and answers. The promotion of foreign language study, our second course objective in German 390C, is carried out through two public-relations projects, one a collective undertaking, the other a project of each student's own choice. In its present format this course, along with its two predecessors, provides the necessary background for our TAs to be effective and informed foreign language teachers.

What, then, does the expanded methods course accomplish? First and foremost, it provides far greater student involvement in departmental and professional matters.<sup>3</sup> During the year each new TA engages personally in more than ten different activities. It is hard to imagine that any methods course lasting less than a year could duplicate this variety of experiences. In German 390A each student presents a microlesson introducing either a technique or newly developed learning materials, drafts a chapter quiz and portions of the final examination, and gives a report on his or her classroom visits to fellow teachers. In German 390B required activities include a report on a major foreign language teaching methodology, a textbook evaluation, the submission of an abstract summarizing an article from a current foreign language journal for later publication in the newsletter of the AATG Northern California chapter the *California German Teacher*, and attendance at a foreign language conference.

The last two items deserve special mention because they are not standard features of methods courses. I consider it imperative that incoming TAs be directed toward our professional journals, that they understand the anat-

omy of an article, and that they learn to convey its major points in a clear and logical fashion. Writing an abstract provides necessary exercise, especially if the abstract appears in the regional AATG newsletter. Most of the articles we choose contain practical suggestions and innovative approaches to foreign language teaching and thus they are particularly helpful to colleagues at the secondary school level who may have limited access to the major foreign language journals. The response to our "Journal Watch" in the newsletter has been excellent, and our TAs gain necessary skills and can take pride in serving the profession.

The collective and individual attendance at foreign language conferences offers an invaluable supplement to our TA training program. Apart from their informational value, these meetings provide the necessary link to the professional community outside the department. We have been fortunate in having received instructional-improvement grants that, for example, permitted all TAs to attend a demonstration of the Dartmouth method by John Rassias and to send individual TAs to a foreign language conference of their choice. We will continue to explore funding opportunities for future conference and workshop participation.

In German 390C content and student assignments go well beyond traditional course offerings. In accordance with the emphasis on professional priorities for the 1980s each student reports on one pertinent article and submits it as an abstract for the newsletter. The first of the two public-relations projects involves all TAs and showcases the German department and its undergraduate program at a campuswide open house. TAs help with the planning of the program as well as with the actual event. Apart from gaining firsthand knowledge of organizational details they get a chance to present their students in a variety of skits, to demonstrate newly developed teaching aids such as culture units, to explain exhibits, including one of textbooks used in the undergraduate language program, and to meet with current and prospective students, their families, and friends. The choice of individual public-relations projects reflects a wide variety of interests that is limited only by each student's imagination. Our most recent 390C course produced the following projects:

- A list of German companies and firms in the northern California area (to be followed up by a survey establishing each company's foreign language needs as well as potential employment opportunities for German majors).
- A visit to the first grade of a local elementary school and the presentation of a German lesson.
- A series of radio spots promoting foreign language study on the UCD campus.
- A culture unit on Switzerland, including slides, text, and various follow-up activities.
- A weekend excursion with a Davis Senior High School German class.

- A presentation, "Foreign Languages and Careers," addressing all foreign language students at the Davis Senior High School.
- An introduction to the classical age of German cinema, including film showings as well as written and oral commentaries.
- Arrangements for the monthly showing of the newsreel *Deutschlandspiegel*.

In conclusion, let us look at the benefits derived from the expanded methods course. First, our TAs receive more training and better training because of the constant interaction of theory and practice, including yearlong feedback, more guidance, and the development of instructional materials and professional activities. Second, the expanded methods course promotes increasing awareness of the wide variety of resources available to foreign language teachers. Increased awareness, in turn, heightens interest in educational experimentation and strengthens involvement in course planning. Thanks to the additional information TAs are much better equipped to contribute suggestions and to try out new ideas within the framework of our language program. When TAs' own ideas are implemented and found successful their motivation soars and commitment to the program and the department increases.

Active participation in the department is complemented by participation in professional organizations. Mandatory attendance at one foreign language conference and the writing of two abstracts for the newsletter have indeed sparked additional professional activities and service. By the end of the most recent methods course nine students had taken out memberships in various foreign language organizations, three students had submitted papers to foreign language conferences that were subsequently delivered, three students were granted instructional-improvement funds to develop educational materials, eleven students received funding to attend the demonstration of the Dartmouth method, one student received a substantial travel grant to attend a foreign language conference in the Midwest, one student was invited to write a book review for one of our foreign language journals, and one student is currently serving as an officer in the regional AATG chapter. Professional experiences such as these will be a distinct asset when our graduates start exploring the job market. Since German 390C has also given them better insight into the current state of our profession we feel that our students are in a good position to have more realistic expectations not only regarding the future of the profession but also regarding the demands that it will place on its future members.

Turning to benefits enjoyed by the language program and the department, we find that the expanded methods course has an impact. Our group of better-trained and highly motivated TAs has helped reduce the attrition rate at key junctures in the program, that is, the end of the foreign language requirement and the beginning of the



upper-division program, and has helped increase the enrollments in language courses at the first- and second-year levels. We attribute this development to better teaching by our TAs and to their active involvement in educational public relations. Many of our TAs give generously of their time and talents beyond the required public-relations projects in the methods course. Again, it is the initial consciousness-raising in the methods course that makes them realize the crucial impact of all public-relations projects they undertake on behalf of the department.

Since our expanded methods course has produced tangible results we intend to retain the basic course format and content in years to come. At the same time we will supplement and update information to reflect current practices and emphases. Our highest priority at this time is to acquire microcomputers so that our discussion of CAI in the methods course can be coupled with actually training our TAs in basic computer literacy. We are confident that this direction will further enhance the performance of our graduate students.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a recent assessment of peer evaluation and its value in TA training, see Marva A. Barnett.

<sup>2</sup>See also Robert Di Donato: "A further step in the professional development of TAs is involvement in local, regional, and national foreign language conferences. Such activities will reinforce methods TAs have developed and will encourage them in their pedagogical pursuits" (35).

<sup>3</sup>See also Michael C. Flanigan's description of the Indiana University Department of English in *The Teaching Apprenticeship Program in Language and Literature* (Gibaldi and Mirollo, eds.): "Those in charge of the program must devise ways to involve TAs more . . ." (72).

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