

## Point of View

By Randy Malamud

*Teaching Freshmen: a Rite of Passage in Academe*

**I**N THE FALL OF 1984 I began my appointment as a teaching assistant in Columbia University's School of General Studies. I was responsible for teaching three sections of introductory composition, part of the English department's required core curriculum. My mission was to lead a handful of students through the fundamentals of grammar, style, argumentation, and research. I had been chosen from among a crowd of equally literate graduate students, at least partly because I had had a good deal of experience in writing. I had been an editor of my college daily newspaper and had worked as an intern at the *Pittsburgh Press* and as a stringer for the *Philadelphia Bulletin* before its untimely death. I felt I knew how to write clearly and sensibly, and could teach others to conform to the desired standards; and I was, if nothing else, a keen editor.

There is a difference, though, between a good editor and a good teacher. It wouldn't help my students if I rewrote their essays. They wouldn't learn how to write by seeing how I had reworked their papers—they would have to learn how to do it themselves. It was this realization in the first weeks of September that led me to conclude that, confident as I might be that I knew the subject matter at hand, I did not know exactly what a college instructor was supposed to be.

Since I hoped to teach at a university for about 80 more semesters, my first task as a teacher clearly had to be to learn: what is necessary to succeed in the profession, what makes a good teacher, and what aspects of my past experience—in journalism, in graduate school, and elsewhere—would help me in the classroom. As I proceeded, it became clear that this "first task" would not be completed before the midterm in October, or before I began to plan my second semester during winter break. I decided that, if I was lucky, I might have it under my belt by the time I finished my three-year apprenticeship.

Last year I spent approximately 40 hours a week, and certainly most of my mental energy and physical stamina, working on my classes. It was the most challenging and important experience I had ever encountered. Yet it was, at the same time, a fairly standard and rigidly prescribed rite of passage. We don't diagram sentences anymore, but paragraphs are still paragraphs and a freshman still has to be taught how to construct a good, sharp thesis sentence.

Every English professor has taught this course at some time, and an almost spiritual bond is established between the eager young teaching assistant and the august senior faculty member, who is prone to reminisce, in a comforting and understanding tone, about the trials of his or her own first year of teaching. Yet it is an apprenticeship only in the loosest sense, for, as each T.A. realizes as soon as he or she stands in front of the classroom on the first September afternoon, one is almost completely on one's own. The feeling I most clearly confronted during my first year of teaching was one of overwhelming independence, almost isolation.

It is important to add that the isolation was not the result of benign neglect on the part of the department or of the faculty members responsible for overseeing the composition program. In fact, little more could have been done to get us over the hurdle of the first semester of teaching. The preparation we received was exhaus-



ILLUSTRATION FOR THE CHRONICLE BY DENNIS SIMON

ive. A symposium is held for Columbia's entire composition staff every May, covering a wide assortment of topics: course organization, grading papers, plagiarism, politics in the classroom, student conferences, theories of composition, and tutoring outside the classroom. During the fall semester, the department held Friday staff meetings for first-year teachers to discuss and share experiences. All teachers placed their syllabi, handouts, and assignments on file, so we could exchange ideas. Several dozen texts on teaching theories were put on reserve at the library. Throughout the year, the director of composition made herself available for advice and guidance, and a steady flow of memos insured that we were aware of all deadlines and bureaucratic requirements. Informally, we learned from one another. We all had cubicles in a large, open office, not unlike the newsrooms in which I had formerly worked, and we listened as one or another of us dealt with students who thought that commas "cramp my style," or that sentence fragments were more communicative than standard subject-verb constructions. In that office, much more clearly than in the classroom, we began to discover what was really going on in the minds of our students.

But in spite of all the advice I had been given, it was impossible to realize fully what it meant to lead a class without having done it. There is no way to prepare for the anxiety that comes before each class—will the lesson fill up an hour and a quarter? Will I remember everything I want to say? What will the students not understand? Will I be able to explain it? Am I comfortable enough with the material myself? If it takes me several hours before class to master the rules of subjective, objective, and possessive cases and usage, how can I convey that information to the students in one session, when they are equally busy trying to figure out the differential calculus they've been taught in their last class and the theories of sociology they're learning in the next one? And then, having condensed and planned the material, what do I do about the four students who fail to show up—resign myself to the fact that they will never learn how to use cases correctly? What should I plan for the days when a big assignment is due and half the class fails to show up?

Even now, it is not clear that such doubts will abate

in the near future; perhaps it is best to nurture them and learn from them, to avoid becoming complacent. Recognizing and confronting those issues were the most useful ways I found to continue to improve my performance, as I reminded myself that I still needed to spend a great deal of time learning how to teach. I was at least somewhat heartened to find that my anxiety did not carry over into the classroom—I found I was fairly relaxed and comfortable with my lesson by the time I started teaching.

My task during that first year was to cope with the myriad problems and challenges that confronted me every Tuesday and Thursday. The teaching assistantship is an apprenticeship in the profession specifically for this reason: By the time I finish, if I have been successful, I will be able to cope with most of the problems. I will know how to convey to my students in 13 weeks the knowledge about writing (and then literature) that I will have accumulated through years of specialized training, and how to overcome the roadblocks that arise between student and teacher—such as a student's philosophically grounded antipathy to commas—so that each student will finish the course having met the lofty ideals embodied in my syllabus, and so that future ranks of students and I will be able to cope with each other in a way that we all find educational and productive.

**T**HERE ARE POSITIVE ASPECTS to the feelings of structurelessness that graduate teaching assistants experience. In the vaguely defined interlude between my college years and the tenure track, I still remember my undergraduate perceptions of English teachers and writing classes, yet I look forward to landing a "real" teaching position; I run with a notebook from my graduate seminars—having given up hope of finishing any papers—to sit on the other side of the desk, from which I solemnly discuss the grave importance of meeting all deadlines.

Last year I was in the easiest stage of the profession, so I was impressed by the innovative techniques used in my graduate classes, and I had the opportunity to try them out myself the same day. My ego was bolstered by eager students who insisted on calling me Professor Malamud, which made up for those times when my graduate professors forgot my name entirely.

It was the constant uncertainty, combined with my intense desire to succeed as a teacher (and to escape, intact, from graduate school) that made me do my best to be a good teacher. In spite of all I didn't know about what I was supposed to be doing, one thing I did know was that my students would learn more from the course the more I agonized over how to get them to develop an appreciation of the material. When the year ended, I felt that I had been pretty effective in identifying my own inadequacies, and in figuring out how to resolve them so as to (dare I say?) inspire my students. I felt successful to the degree that I succeeded in doing that, and to the degree that I was able to return the benefits of my graduate education to my crop of freshmen. Maybe that's the kind of person a college teacher is supposed to be.

Randy Malamud is a second-year teaching assistant in the School of General Studies at Columbia University.