First Time Up

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Outside the Classroom

At first, most novice teachers focus on their hours in the classroom; they’re the newest, most intense aspect of teaching, the part that may resemble nothing else in the young teacher’s life. But as the teacher gains experience and the hours in the classroom become more routine, life outside the classroom becomes more important until, for long-term veterans and tenure-track faculty, the classroom comes to feel like a sanctuary from endless meetings, conferences, and non-teaching paperwork.

You won’t spend much time outside the classroom soon, but decisions made and habits formed early in a teaching career may set a pattern for years to come, so make informed choices from the start.

Committees

Committee work, the gold plating on the balloon of academic status, shows you’re moving up in the world, but also brings people down. A cartoon on my door sums up my feelings about committees: one of the participants in a round-table meeting wears a sign saying “I’d rather be grading papers,” and the caption is “Higgins was not a committee kind of guy.”

But as I’ve warned my own busy staff members who couldn’t find the time to come to staff meetings, committees may not accomplish much, but they can make or break careers. You get nothing for participating in the university-wide committee on writing improvement except the aggravation of having to listen to bozos from sociology and political science proclaim that anyone can teach writing. Yet during one of those interminable meetings, you may exchange rolled eyeballs with the person next to you who turns out to be chair of the Internal Grants committee currently considering your proposal. Writing assessment reports may be the most unpleasant work you’ve ever done, but because everyone hates it so, the chair takes note of those who make the sacrifice and gives them a break in the next round of assignments.

Being on committees also gives you a peephole into the way your institution works, and that kind of insight can help ensure that the institution
works for you. At some schools, the whole department votes on hiring and promotion decisions, making it imperative for every candidate to know a little about even the most arcane, musty corner of the department and the people who work there. In my current school, a stable committee monitors my tenure progress and makes the crucial vote, so the only person I need to impress who’s not on the committee is the department chair.

My colleague, Writing Director Lynn Meeks, asks each new group of graduate instructors for volunteers to staff committees that make decisions about such things as textbooks, social functions, and curricula. Participation is voluntary, but the assistant directors that Lynn hires for the following year have always done their time in such committees.

That said, you have every right and reason to follow your instincts and avoid committee participation whenever possible. Unless you’re in an unusual situation, you probably won’t get any pay or official credit for serving on committees, and “service” probably isn’t a key category in your work evaluation. In the worst situations, administrators may pressure you to do the department’s work, knowing you’re “free” and not likely to feel powerful enough to turn the department down. So you should always have your exploitation sensors on when someone asks you to join a committee. And hope that the committee miraculously has some intrinsic value.

**Default:** Do your homework on committee makeup and accept a committee position only if the group includes people you need to impress. Always ask for time to think over a committee invitation, then ask a veteran or supervisor for advice.

**STAFF MEETINGS**

Staff meetings are, I suppose, a special kind of committee meeting, but I think they should be approached very differently. Staff meetings have their drawbacks—doing a grade calibration exercise can be really disturbing—but I always used to judge the quality of a staff meeting by how depressed it made me, how much I felt, “Gee, I should be doing that.” So if you leave a staff meeting feeling that way, it’s a good thing. Or at least it tells you that the meeting had substance, though it may take you weeks to get over the self-criticism and make use of the ideas from the meeting.

Although staff meetings may not be the highlight of your day, you’d be crazy not to go, unless whoever runs the staff meetings uses them to browbeat the already overworked staff. A good staff meeting is the best place to learn about teaching comp in general and how your school does it in particular. Perhaps more importantly, it is where people make
decisions, form alliances, exchange gossip. Talking to people in staff meetings is the first step in networking, something you need to do if you have any thought of moving up and out of your current position. Staff meetings provide the opportunity to hear that others, too, have had trouble keeping their classes awake this week, to connect with staff members who don’t have offices in your hall, to ask veterans what classrooms to avoid.

    Default: Go if you can.

WORKING AT THE WRITING CENTER

You’ll rarely run into a veteran composition teacher who has not worked in a writing center or writing lab. The short, intensive sessions helping student writers in a lab setting prepare teachers for the work they need to do in their own writing courses. Muriel Harris quotes from a fistful of others who praise the teaching preparation they received as tutors, and she lists the main benefits for the tutor as learning about “writing processes,” “individual differences among writers,” “response to student writing,” “difficulties with assignments,” and “instructional strategies” (197-201).

Your program may well insist that you work in the writing center, or it may reserve that honor for veterans. But if working in the center is an option, take it seriously. The kind of experience you have will depend to a large degree on the philosophy of the center, its administrators, how it is perceived in the program and the institution in general, and especially students’ attitudes and expectations. Unless they’ve been well prepared and coached about what to expect from a writing tutor, some students will come wanting you to “fix” their papers, or proofread, or give them an idea or sources. It’s often tempting in such situations just to be a good editor instead of a good teacher.

    Default: If department gossip says the writing center is well run, sign up. You’ll learn—probably better than you could in a class you teach—what students think about their writing courses, what kinds of problems they have with assignments, what they think they need help with (often more superficial issues than you might want to focus on), and how grateful they can be when, after fifteen minutes, they leave with a better sense of how they can improve their paper. As Irene Lurkis Clark says, working in a writing center “provides opportunities to learn through firsthand observation how the writing process actually works” (347). It can be a gratifying experience, it will almost certainly teach you important things about your craft, and it might even earn you a dollar or two.
PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES

If you’re lucky, a faculty mentor has already gotten you hooked on the conference habit. Conferences give the people you know a chance to introduce you to the people you need to know. You can meet people at conferences who will mentor you long distance, give you feedback on your ideas, inspire you to send out your poetry or finish your Ph.D. People build careers out of the connections they make at conferences, and the ideas, approaches, and techniques they pick up in conference sessions revitalize their teaching. It’s hard not to learn something at a place where thousands of people who share your interests talk nonstop for days. And if you fantasize about a stranger recognizing your brilliance and rescuing you from oblivion, conferences provide the dream setting.

Although few conferences accept all proposals and some are quite competitive, they’re not usually as selective as journals, and they generally require only a summary of one good idea, not brilliance fleshed out in stellar prose. So you have a better chance of breaking into the comp world in a conference than with a publication.

Since most colleges consider conference attendance an important way for professors to stay on top of their subjects, some departments’ travel funds send professors around the world, as long as the professor presents a paper at the conference. But few schools provide travel support for graduate students and instructors, so before you get your heart set on going to CCCC, check your department’s policies and see whether your school will help pay for trips for people of your status. If your department won’t send you, maybe the humanities program or the women’s studies office or the faculty retention task force has some money. And don’t give up if you can’t afford to go to CCCC or NCTE, the big national conferences held in expensive hotels far from your campus. Much smaller, friendlier, and less competitive state and regional conferences offer many of the same benefits as the biggies, and they’re not as likely to leave you feeling lost and small.

I must confess that while I believe what I just wrote, I don’t like going to conferences. I get nervous months before my presentation, and those butterflies keep me from appreciating everything the conference has to offer. I’m living proof that you don’t need to go to conferences: I hope to be getting tenure the year this book is published, having presented at only one national conference. But most people who want to climb the tenure ladder would prefer to do it in less than the twenty-five years it has taken me.
Default: Try to go to at least one conference per year, and be as gregarious as possible.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Every composition teacher should join the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and its subgroup, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). They’re the premier organizations representing your views on a national level. They fight for small classes, for recognition of students’ own voices, for nonsexist language. NCTE, one of the most consistent and prolific publishers of books about composition, also produces newsletters, both paper and electronic, and publishes journals for “the college scholar-teacher” (College English), and for instructors in college composition (College Composition and Composition), in two-year colleges (Teaching English in the Two-Year College), in high school (English Journal), and on down the line. Conferences, publications, networking, job lists, political representation . . . NCTE and allied organizations do it all. So why not join, and at least start building a collection of CCCs that you might read some day? NCTE’s electronic newsletter, Inbox, may be the single best way to keep up with the field. It appears weekly via email with summaries and links to news items and scholarly articles.

Keeping abreast of a professional association lets you know what topics are hot, whose work you should read, what the job situation is, what subjects researchers are just beginning to probe. It can make you feel at home, part of a larger whole.

Default: If you have no desire to make even a short-term career out of teaching composition, skim the library’s copies of the NCTE publications a few times each year to see if anyone has addressed your most pressing teaching problems. But if you think it’s possible that your future will include teaching writing, join as soon as you can afford it.

DOING YOUR OWN WRITING

Although most composition jobs, even “part-time” ones, keep us working long into the nights, weekends, and “vacations,” many comp teachers persist in pursuing goals that usually predated their teaching experience. They want to write something besides class handouts, notes to students, and required papers. We cling to such writing—or at least the possibility of it—as our hope for recognition, the focus for our creativity and expression, the reason we have this teaching “day job” in the first place. We want
to write. We want to be writers. We want to tell the world our story or our opinions.

Yet it seems that every word we write, every minute we spend on a poem or essay or story of our own, we have to steal from our students, from our class preparation, or from the courses we’re taking, and the theft makes us feel conflicted and guilty. Teachers who clearly put students second to their own work make students feel uncomfortable. It’s an unpleasant feeling; anything you ask of the teacher is an interruption, an imposition. We never want to make our own students feel that way.

I solve this competition for my time and attention by doing what can be loosely defined as “teacher research”—I write about my teaching, so anything interesting I’m doing in my classes may also wind up in a book or article. I’m certainly not the only teacher to mix day job with writing avocation—we can use our teaching to write essays, poems, op-ed pieces, creative nonfiction, conference presentations, screenplays and teleplays, as well as scholarly articles and books. I suppose only a finite number of books like this one can be written largely about teaching experiences, and I should defend my territory and not even mention that, after a quarter-century of experience, you too could write this book. But I think experience—our own and others’—is our best teacher, so I’m not concerned about being edged out of the market.

Even if your teaching doesn’t provide the material for your writing, it is possible to teach well and keep your writing aspirations alive—thousands of people do it. They learn to use every eight-minute bus ride. They store ideas during the school year and then write like crazy in the summer. They get by with less and less sleep.

Having your ability to write curtailed by endless time constraints can teach you an important lesson about yourself and your own motivation. Many people who once imagined themselves the next Toni Morrison or John Updike never quite find the time. “Next weekend” never comes. Lord knows it’s enough to “just” be a teacher, and being a great teacher may well be more important than being a great poet. But always having too much to do will reveal to you what’s really important, what corners you can cut, and what you’re willing to stay up late doing.

If you’re really lucky or talented, you might find someone willing to fund your writing habit. Ironically, the less you need money in academia, the easier it is to get—you probably won’t qualify for nearly as many research, travel, and teaching improvement grants as a professor would. But ask around and visit websites. You might be surprised at the number
of awards, fellowships, grants, and prizes that target people in precisely your position.

People who really want to write find a way to do it on top of their grad student responsibilities or full-time job . . . or they feel so frustrated at the lack of time for writing that they find ways to cut back or change their day job.

*Default:* Do the writing that keeps you sane, and keep track of some of the momentous changes you’re undergoing. But don’t worry about trying to get the next chapter written this semester.

**IN THE COMMUNITY**

The movement to extend writing instruction, students, and teachers into the community beyond the university is, to my mind, one of the healthiest and most exciting trends in composition. If your school has a community outreach program, or one of your colleagues has developed the necessary contacts, teaching in a community program, or having your composition classes work in the community, may be an easy and accepted part of your role. Lucky you! The rest of us, though, need to remember that our schools are not likely to reward us for work done in the community and may even be skeptical of our desire to send students off campus as part of their coursework. Work in the community because it makes you sane, because it may be your future, because it’s a good thing to do . . . not because it’s likely to get approbation from your institution. But if you’re interested, start doing some reading—try an article like Hildy Miller’s “Writing beyond the Academy: Using Service-Learning for Professional Preparation” or Laura Julier’s, “Community-Service Pedagogy.”

*Default:* Go with the flow. Unless many others are involved in their communities, wait a semester or two before you take the initiative.