11
BUILDING YOUR FUTURE

There are some real advantages in not being cocksure, from the moment one goes to college, declares an English major, or even gets his or her Ph.D., about what one is going to do.

Donald C. Stewart

Immersed in a semester of teaching composition, you’ll find it almost impossible to think about the future, especially a future beyond turning in your last grades of the semester. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing. I’m not going to urge you to raise your periscope every few days, look at the Big Picture, and adjust your daily activities. In this chapter, I want to get you to see how you are building your future just by doing your job. Teaching composition may seem like a professional dead end, but as you do it, you learn a wide variety of skills that can prepare you for professions from librarian to corporate manager to, well, English professor. I will list some of those skills that you’re practicing as you teach, then encourage you to tear down the barriers that separate teaching from the rest of your life.

BECOME CONSCIOUS OF THE SKILLS YOU’RE PERFECTING

It’s never too early to start collecting materials for a teaching portfolio. (See Chapter 12, “Constructing a Teaching Portfolio,” in Roen.)

Writing

You probably thought of yourself as a pretty good writer before you ever dreamed of teaching writing, but I can almost guarantee you that your writing will improve as you teach. All writers need to hone the ability to see their own writing, read what’s really there, not what they had in mind when they wrote it. As you read hundreds of pages of students’ writing, you get better and better at spotting passive verbs, redundancies, strong verbs hidden in nominalizations, the real emphasis in a passage, and you carry those skills over to your own writing.

The same holds true for a myriad of other writing skills—if you help your students focus, organize, edit, proofread, format, you can use the
same approaches on your own writing. It doesn’t happen automatically—
many of us have to apologize to our students, “Do as I say, not as I do.” But
at least we have the tools, and it shouldn’t be too great a leap to apply to
our own writing what you’ve helped student writers apply to theirs.

You don’t think about this as you’re hurriedly scanning a student
paper trying to find something to praise, working to trim the endless pos-
sible criticisms to one “thing to work on,” but each of the writing skills
you’re practicing is a profession in itself. In the outside world, you can
make a living performing just one of the many functions you now take
on each day.

You could become a writing coach who encourages other writers, helps
them find ideas and get started, suggests ways they can organize and
focus their writing. Some newspapers hire such coaches to work with their
staffs. Rich and/or desperate grad students find coaches to help them
over a writing block and finish dissertations. Any university has a vast
and largely untapped market for writing coach services, and I’ve often
thought if I got tired of teaching I would hang out a shingle as someone
who would help professors and grad students write the proposal that
would bring them the big grant or finish the paper that would be the
ticket to a better job. Think of the advantages of being such a coach, work-
ing with motivated writers—you’re unlikely to run into a grad student or
fledgling reporter who’s as reactionary, uninterested, and unmotivated
as some comp students. It’s fun to work with people who appreciate your
expertise and want your help.

You’re also busily practicing the skills needed by the many different
kinds of editors. Acquisition editors read proposals and manuscripts to
find those that have the most promise. Development editors nurse a proj-
et (and a writer) along from initial idea to completed draft. Copy editors
mark up manuscripts and suggest changes, deletions, and additions; they
find and fix the tiniest things that writers have overlooked. Production
editors oversee the steps from disk to marketable published product.
Specialized indexers and proofreaders complete the final steps. Writers
with computer expertise create and update websites. And all such editors
work not just in publishing houses but in almost any institution large
enough to have a website or an in-house newsletter. Some of your more
experienced colleagues no doubt already work as editors. It’s a good day
job for those of us who like to teach.

You may already be conscious of trying not to do student writers’ work
for them, not taking over their papers. Yet unless you’re a completely
hands-off teacher, you’re getting valuable practice in being a ghost writer or technical writer—you’re helping to shape someone else’s ideas and words into the best, most readable form. And if that interests you, if puzzling over an awkward phrase and finding a way to make it short and sweet intrigues you, you may be able to earn good money if you decide to give up the academic world. Contrary to some expectations, the computer revolution made the ability to convey technical information in clear English more, not less, crucial. And anyone who has read a computer manual or looked for assistance in a help file knows that there’s plenty of room for improvement in writing digital-age texts. So while spending ten minutes trying to get a student’s paragraph to make sense may seem like a frustrating, pointless exercise, if you get a little burst of satisfaction when you finally succeed, you may have the makings of a technical writer. And all the practice you get writing handouts, memos, and exercises doesn’t hurt.

Depending on the content of your courses, you may also be picking up skills in specialized varieties of business writing. Some people make a living writing, or helping others to write, business letters, resumés, proposals, business plans, annual reports, CEO speeches. Many people who teach composition think of business as the dark (and perhaps evil) side of the moon, but if you can teach a good freshman comp class, you can teach business writing, as I discovered when, without any prior training, I taught Advanced Business Writing for MBA students early in my career. If you understand and apply basic principles like purpose and audience and get a book that tells you a little about specialized business formats, you’re all set. And you might be amazed at how well businesses will pay you to teach the same kinds of skills that you now teach essentially for free in freshman comp. I taught “Effective Writing” for years to small groups in an insurance company, making roughly twenty times as much per hour as the university paid me.

Managing

As my last example illustrates, teaching isn’t just for schools any more. In fact, as the gap grows between what employers need and the skills employees possess, non-educational institutions spend more and more on in-house training. While employers may be impressed by the specific, “Englishy” aspects of your teaching experience, they may be more intrigued by the nonspecific aspects of your training and experience—your ability to plan and organize your own work and that of a large
A number of other people, to manage meetings, lead productive discussions, solve problems, create effective small groups, praise and criticize in one breath, plan and evaluate, read and write. You can even build teams and help disparate factions reach a consensus—skills for which companies pay management consultants big bucks. Businesses pay well, too, for teachers of time management, listening, and public speaking.

Do you meet deadlines? Get a lot of writing or reading done in a short period of time? Many teachers, and even serious undergraduates, would answer “Of course!,” believing that’s what “professional” means. Yet because non-procrastinators constitute a small minority in our culture, businesses prize employees who can turn out good work on time. I was a top freelancer in a major publisher’s “stable” for years partly because they liked my writing but I think more because they knew they could give me an assignment with an absurdly short deadline and I would get it done.

Even your experience doing the parts of your job you may hate most looks good on a resumé. Can you negotiate the minefield of departmental politics, make peace between warring factions, find common ground? A career in administration may be calling. Do you have a knack for dealing with red tape, getting what you want from bureaucracies set up to deny your every request? You might consider working as an academic advisor or ombudsperson. You may be young and feel that you’re relatively untested, but how many people your age are responsible for twenty-five or fifty or a hundred college students? Taking on that responsibility is no mean feat.

When I worked as a ghost writer for a business management guru, I was impressed by how similar the “new, revolutionary, Japanese” management techniques were to the process approach to teaching writing. (See my “The Other Process Revolution.”) Without realizing it, you’ve probably been “studying the causes,” “focusing on the system,” and working for “continuous improvement”—all management buzzwords explained in high-priced seminars to which companies send their managers. You know that “workers are the experts” and you focus on “value-added work.” To succeed in the corporate world, just don a dress-for-success outfit and work up the chutzpah to say, “I can do that.”

**Working Collaboratively**

Americans are supposed to learn to work together on sports teams or in Scouts, but I became a team player largely by teaching comp as part of a large staff trying to enjoy endless underpaid effort. The urge to support
and share came almost automatically. We were close enough so that I could see most people’s weaknesses, but that didn’t get in the way of my developing an abiding respect for them.

It may never have occurred to you how unusual it is to be one of ten, thirty, or fifty people working independently but collaboratively, setting their own goals but also pursuing goals set by the writing program, the department, the college, and the university. As English department chair and writing program administrator Roger Gilles puts it, teachers “who know how to work with and contribute to programmatic—rather than simply personal—teaching goals are invaluable to any department (and department chair)” (9). “I might . . . suggest to job-seeking graduates that they include a description on the c.v. of their program-related experiences and contributions” (10). Your administrators probably appreciate your team-player ability, as will business leaders if you should ever stray from the teaching fold. Your finesse in dealing with the mixture of autonomy and cooperation, innovation and tradition, individual and group identities is a skill that will serve you well wherever you go.

**Reading and Researching**

You’ve spent your academic life with books, in libraries, and on the Internet, so you may have to emerge from the academic bubble to realize that non-academics value those skills too. People who start out with degrees in English often end up in libraries, or doing government or corporate research, working for museums or historical preservation groups, teaching speed reading or running adult literacy programs, writing book reviews or summarizing books for people too busy to read them, developing questions and finding answers for trivia games and quiz shows. You may laugh cynically about having degrees in English, but don’t assume prospective employers will laugh with you.

**Working One-to-One**

Even if you don’t hold regular conferences, you work with students in office hours and in the intense mini-meetings before and after class, you read and respond to students’ sometimes very personal writing, and in every interaction you strike a balance between supportive and critical, personal and professional.

Many “helping” professions, particularly therapies, require such ability to handle intimate circumstances in a professional way. I’m sure I’m not the only writing teacher who has fantasized getting a counseling degree
and becoming a writing therapist. When you deal with divorce, alcohol-
ism, sexual abuse daily in students’ papers, it’s only logical to think that
instead of always bringing the focus back to the writing, to the paper,
perhaps you could help the writer deal with the subject of the paper. At
the University of New Hampshire, where the writing program revolves
around conferences, the counseling service comes to writing program
staff meetings every year, knowing that comp teachers learn more about
students’ lives than anyone else on campus and hoping to use that inti-
macy to identify and help students at risk.

So if you’ve had the desire to help the student rather than the paper,
know that you already have experience on which you could build a career
as a psychotherapist, a school counselor, an academic advisor, a personnel
manager.

Knowing Young People

If you teach three or four sections of college composition each year, and
you sometimes let your students write on their own interests, you qualify
as one of the country’s experts on the tastes and interests of nineteen-
year-olds. You read several hundred essays each year, hear the chatter
before and after class, see the stickers on their notebooks and the graffiti
they leave on desks. You know which rock bands are hot, which actresses
the boys yearn for, the latest styles in footwear and makeup. I knew about
the Rainbow gatherings, windsurfing, and aerobics years before my peers
did, simply because students would bring their new passions to their
essays. Yet we have enough distance to be able to put their current desires
into perspective and see how they resemble our own tastes at that age,
how they fit with the national adult mood. So in some ways we know them
better than they know themselves.

So what? When TV commentators make sweeping generalizations
about the current college generation, you can yell “bullshit” at the screen,
but what other advantage do you gain from your vast knowledge of a par-
ticular demographic group? You have to think in marketing terms. The
group you know so well may not rival baby-boomers in terms of demo-
graphic bulge, but think of the kinds of companies to whom the tastes of
current nineteen-year-olds matter—designers, record companies, credit
card companies, media companies, advertisers of all kinds.

Such knowledge led to one of the great breakthroughs of my career. A
publisher’s rep came to our journalism program, wanting to hire a jour-
nalism class to write a Time-style glossy magazine to be given away as an
ancillary lure with undergraduate business texts. Don Murray persuaded them that having twenty-five different authors was not a good idea; what they needed was someone who had his fingers on the nineteen-year-old pulse and the energy to write fifty stories in six weeks. Me. The relationship I started that summer with the publisher lasted almost ten years and allowed me to support my teaching habit in style.

I can’t say with certainty that such knowledge has helped anyone else land a job, but I know that American businesses need to be able to “think young,” and with our unique, long-term exposure to young people, we know what that means. So don’t sell that kind of knowledge short.

Computer Skills

The degree to which current composition courses rely on computers and other technology varies tremendously. Some courses are taught very much as they were in the 1970s, except that the copy machine has almost universally replaced the ditto machine. I’m old fashioned enough to think that the basics of writing training haven’t changed much, and I am not advocating that you start teaching online or in a computer lab just to get more high-tech experience. But if you do have that experience, you can do a lot with it.

I have seen a number of English department people—writing teachers with a side interest in some form of technology—build slowly on their technological side until it became their career. At the moment, there seem to be plenty of programmers and focused computer people in the country, but never enough people straddle the line between worlds, between the online environment and the blackboard. Anyone who can follow a conversation among computer gurus and then explain it to people in the humanities might consider going into instructional technology (the hottest educational field at the moment) or administration in computer services. The need for technology experts has been less consistent than the need for writing teachers, but having a foot in both worlds allows you to go with the latest wave and not worry about changes in demographics or technology patterns.

Survival Skills

Touting the skills you develop by working an underpaid, underappreciated job may sound like a coal miner bragging about the ability to bend over. But if you’re going to do something degrading and repetitive, you might as well make use of any benefits it offers.
After teaching for a while, you become comfortable with a teaching persona and realize that you could develop other personas. I like the teacherly me, just as I liked my father when he was teaching. I hope that the at-home me has learned some lessons—in tolerance, acceptance, patience—from the teacher. I’m not consciously different in class than outside of it; I don’t create two identities as much as I stretch the one I have to accommodate the sides of myself that appear in class.

You may also become comfortable with new aspects of your life, even some that you wish you could change—like commuting long distances between jobs and not getting any sleep. I can’t see any silver lining to commuting, unless you view it as a boost to the American economy. I don’t advocate sleeplessness, but I liked discovering that I could get by with significantly less sleep than I had always thought necessary. (I learned that lesson from caring for babies rather than from holding down three part-time jobs, but the principle applies.)

You learn how much you can get done if you really need to. Some graduate students have so many balls in the air they can’t even remember them all, much less keep track of them. After being jobless the semester after graduate school, I ended up with six courses for a short time the following semester. I suppose each of us has a different way of realizing “I can cope” when we get to adult life. Teaching a lot of writing taught me.

Teaching composition as many do—different classes in different schools with different rules—we inevitably learn to be flexible, put on different hats, develop different emphases, to meet the different needs of our schedule. Such variety can keep things interesting, and it dispels forever the idea that there’s only one thing we can do, one way; it prepares us for the huge variety of job possibilities that open before us.

**BRING YOUR REAL LIFE INTO THE CLASSROOM**

We tend to separate our professional lives from our “real” lives and miss some of the ways they can and should build on each other. I’ve written most of my professional composition work on subjects that come from outside the composition classroom—music, poetry, business, comp survivalists hiding out in the Idaho mountains.

And I don’t think I’m alone. Much good writing and good teaching springs from the intersection of a variety of interests. (See Chapter 4.) So as you’re building your career, trying to pick from the scores of directions you might go, or just trying to resist the slurping rotation that seems to be carrying you in one particular direction, keep examining the things you
do in your “off” time and how you might bring them into your classrooms and your career.

**USE YOUR FAVORITE METAPHORS**

Bruce Ballenger, author of the “Curious” writing book series, used to build writing classes around the camera and its metaphors. I’ve made a small personal industry out of playing music in my classes, which I started doing almost solely for enjoyment. Many other people use film or TV clips or art to get themselves and their students thinking.

No matter what your outside-the-classroom hobby or obsession—from dance to cooking to martial arts—you can productively bring it into the classroom. It’s a process with a product, right? Do the maxims of your hobby apply to writing? Can you introduce writing topics by demonstrating the martial arts equivalent of a free write?

Bronwyn Williams’s book on TV, like mine on music, can help you use non-text media in your classes. William DeGenaro’s chapter about using film in a basic writing course might give you a good starting point if you’re a movie buff. But my point is not to promote those resources or try to convince you to bring anyone else’s hobby into your classroom. I want you to look at your life and at the things that try to sneak their way into your classroom, and ask yourself how you could integrate them in your classes in a pedagogically productive way. If you’re clever enough, like my colleague, folklorist Jeannie Thomas, you can teach about Barbies.

**LEARN FROM OTHER GENRES, OTHER GROUPS**

Many of us spend a significant amount of (as yet) uncompensated time doing other kinds of writing and talking about writing with various voluntary groups. Why not bring that writing and those conversations into your classes? Nothing revitalizes your own teaching of writing better than to take up a new genre yourself and see what it feels like to be a novice. (See my “Becoming a Beginner Again.”) Do you know something about screenplays, haiku, grant proposals? Almost certainly that knowledge is relevant to your work in composition, and an interest can easily develop into an expertise, which is only one break away from a job. If you end up talking with your students about screenplays once a week, before you know it you may be writing one.

Any writing group you belong to—friends, colleagues, strangers—also provides endless insight into the peer groups that have become the heart of most composition classes. We develop our sense of what works in small
groups by being in our own small groups and experiencing different kinds of feedback, different mixtures of support and critique. And you can really study small writing groups, as my group-mate Andrea Luna did in her dissertation. Early in your career, you don’t need to be thinking about doing teacher research on a subject that interests you, but at least record it as an interest. If an itch like that grows for a few years, you’ll find some productive way to scratch it.

**VIEW YOUR DAY JOB AS MATERIAL**

I’ve almost always made my living with words; my non-teaching jobs have overlapped with composition work more than have many comp teachers’ day jobs. But the day I wrote the first draft of this chapter, I was also working on a poem about the one seven-month period between college and grad school when I worked an eight-to-five job cutting brush and holding plumb bobs. For a writer, every experience offers potential material; a lead might prove to be a dead end or might become a focus for years of investigation.

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By highlighting the skills you’re gaining and suggesting ways that the world beyond composition might value them, I don’t mean to imply that success and happiness lie only outside the walls of the composition classroom. I’ve done most of the jobs I’ve mentioned in this chapter, yet here I am, thirty years after teaching my first writing class, eagerly awaiting the next one. To appreciate what we do, we must not feel that we’re trapped in it; composition isn’t a dead end but a path that can lead to a thousand places, including more composition. If you see some of these future possibilities, you’re likely to be happier now in what you do and perhaps to make teaching decisions that will broaden your career possibilities. I’m not at all saying “leave this profession.” I’m saying, “Think big. And build on what you already know how to do.”