

On Being an Instructor

I've had an unusual and lucky academic life; I've been an instructor on and off for half a century; that length is unusual in itself. For me it's been a very satisfactory experience despite the limitations to the position of instructor. Instructors are not considered professors in the college pecking order. Professors are Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, or Full Professor. Usually, instructors are not eligible for tenure and therefore receive appointments of less than seven years. I have experienced many interpretations of the role of instructor, starting at Southern Methodist University.

1946 was a time when all the colleges and universities in the country were flooded by returning servicemen taking advantage of the GI Bill of Rights. SMU grew overnight from an enrollment of some two thousand students to more than nine thousand. When I was accepted as a graduate student in the English Department, I was made a teaching assistant (known as a TA), along with a number of other new teachers. None of us had any teacher training but we were all well grounded in our subjects of grammar, composition, and literature and each of us had the desire to teach. In order to help the new teachers, the senior faculty of the English Department took on the supervision of this inexperienced corps. The new instructors had numerous departmental meetings with one or more of our mentors to help us get started. We all used a popular standard textbook of the era, *Form and Style*, which covered grammar, usage, and syntax, along with the basics of good organization and style. Each of our three or more classes met three times a week and in each class we assigned a weekly composition. We each marked our own papers, without a grade, and turned the set over to one of the senior staff, who would judge the thoroughness of our marking and assign a grade for each paper.

Near the end of the semester, all the novice teachers met with our mentors to compose a departmental final examination to be given simultaneously to all students in the freshman English classes. Again, the instructors marked the papers and, this time, assigned a provisional grade to each paper. One of the supervising professors would then evaluate the paper and assign the *official* grade. In the interest of uniformity, we had a list of penalties for certain grievous errors: a letter grade deducted for ten misspelled words, for each sentence fragment, for each sentence splice (also known as a comma fault), and for four dangling modifiers. The idea was that such penalties would provide a strong incentive for students to learn the fundamentals, but a hapless student could be down to a minus grade after only a few lines, leaving no latitude for evaluating thought content or organization and often resulting in discouragement and the feeling that to improve was impossible. Our standards were high! And we TAs hated the standards, even though we had a natural love for good spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure. I learned more about good teaching from my fellow apprentices and from the actual practice of being in the classroom than I did from the strict enforcement of the departmental grading chart, which cast me in the role of an unimaginative traffic policeman. Surprisingly, I found the senior faculty with whom I studied English and American Literature to be excellent teachers and delightfully human; I can only suppose that they were pushed beyond endurance by their work load in supervising us beginners and consequently developed this mechanical, unwise, unworkable system.

After two years of "TA" teaching, I received my Master of Arts degree, and Paul and I moved to Chapel Hill, where he began his doctoral studies in Mathematical Statistics and continued as a teaching assistant in the Department of Mathematics. I noted that neither the SMU nor the UNC Mathematics Department nor the UNC English Department had training programs for TAs at all similar to mine in English. I had an appointment in the UNC Department of English and thus began a new phase of being an instructor. Before the quarter began, I was invited to an English departmental meeting, where I was duly introduced but could not vote on any business which came before the faculty. I was assigned a desk in a giant bullpen in Murphy Hall. My colleagues there were three other women, one an assistant professor, and seven male assistant professors.

Let me add proudly that the four of us women were among the first women faculty at the University but not so proudly that the assistant professor was a noted eighteenth-century scholar who asked for a token promotion to Associate Professor, without a pay raise, in order to keep her credibility, was refused and resigned. All of the male assistant professors from that room went on to distinguished careers at UNC or elsewhere. One of them, Hugh Holman, later became Chancellor of the University.

The atmosphere in 119 Murphy Hall was relaxed and collegial. I learned a great deal about teaching in informal conversations with my office mates but was not invited to any of the faculty meetings. I had enough to do preparing my composition and literature classes and marking the endless succession of papers during my four years at Carolina and didn't miss the meetings.

My next experience as an instructor came several years later, back at SMU, where I served a year as a part-time instructor in the English Department. This time, there was no close supervision of my grading, although the department did maintain the uniform department-wide final examination for freshman composition classes, without the senior supervision.

After we came to Richmond, I found a good opportunity to refresh my rusty teaching skills, first as an instructor in the then new Open High School where I determined what courses and what students I would teach. I had never taught in high school before but found in these students a great way to put into practice some of the many ideas I'd had over the years. At SMU and UNC, I had not been content with my teaching and spent much of the time before coming to Richmond considering what I wanted to accomplish in the classroom and possible ways of doing it as I read about the explosion of ideas in teaching that resulted from the new blood in the classrooms following the war.

Next, I had an appointment as Adjunct Instructor in the new J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, working with delightful chairpeople on both campuses as well as with dedicated teachers. Although adjuncts are even lower on the academic totem pole than instructors since they are part time, I was at Reynolds during an exciting growth period during which I was asked to be a member of several committees in the Humanities Division. I felt that I was a part of the English faculty in that I attended departmental meetings as well as school-wide convocations.

Then I obtained an appointment as an Instructor in the English Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. To my surprise, I gradually discovered that I was considered a *member* of the department in full standing even though as an instructor I could serve only four years. I found I was expected to attend University convocations and departmental meetings, and even to

participate in graduation exercises. At the first departmental meeting, for instance, there was a vote in which I assumed automatically I was not eligible to participate. Tom Inge, the chairman, called me by name and insisted that I vote as a *bond fide* member of the department. After that, I made sure that I voted in the orthodox manner so that my vote retained a certain anonymity.

My colleagues were delightful and extremely supportive. Instead of having an office in a goldfish bowl, I shared an office with another instructor. We not only had separate desks and our own four-drawer file cabinet, but our own telephone. Before long I found myself on several departmental committees and eventually on the departmental executive committee representing all the instructors - true, I had to leave the room when professor-level votes were taken, a requirement which seemed to embarrass the professors more than it did me.

I was asked to direct the Writing Center, a service facility which the department provided for the entire University. I had the pleasure of designing the remodeling of a classroom for the Center. That position also gave me graduate students to train and supervise as tutors in the Center (instructors generally never teach graduate students). I began a training program to help the new tutors learn to work one-on-one with students and faculty from both the Academic and Medical campuses. My original four-year stay grew to ten years. During those years, I attended regional and national meetings of academic organizations related to English, such as the Modern Language Association and a national folklore society, giving me professional experience beyond the usual humble instructor level. I had satisfaction and fun during those years, enjoying the teaching, the association with a lively group of educators, and the experience of being part of a vital university, as well as being able to look back over the various interpretations I had experienced of the post of instructor.