

CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
JOHN S. KNIGHT INSTITUTE FOR WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES  
101 MCGRAW HALL

## PEER COLLABORATION PROGRAMS

We hope you will be able to participate in one of the programs described below. The opportunity to exchange classes and observe alternative teaching techniques regularly draws enthusiastic response. While the teaching exchanges appeal to students as a break from the routine, they clearly provide a strong impetus for graduate students to reflect more extensively and concretely on their own presence and effectiveness in the classroom. Even those veteran TAs who have tended to be skeptical about teacher training programs and discussions of pedagogical technique have found their exchanges with colleagues to be thought-provoking and eye-opening. TAs have often found themselves paired with colleagues whose teaching styles differed markedly from their own. Although they have benefited to some degree from exposure to colleagues with similar teaching styles, the interaction of TAs with contrasting styles has produced the most interesting and dramatic results. Descriptions of the collaborations are impressive for their honesty and openness and demonstrate an admirable willingness to make appropriate use of collaborative exchanges to evaluate, critique, and improve teaching practices.

### **PEER COLLABORATION**

Each semester, the Knight Institute funds TAs who would like to participate in a collaborative activity such as team-teaching, team-grading, team-conferences, and team-observation (see the list of "opportunities for active exchange" below). To receive this stipend—\$125 per TA—each TA should engage in at least two collaborative activities (possibilities are described below in items 1–4).

TAs can receive funding for participation in only *one* peer collaboration project each semester.

*Formalities:* TAs should submit their proposals directly to their course leaders, who must in turn submit them with an accompanying letter of approval to the Knight Institute for consideration by Monday, September 8. Please see the sample proposal and report that follow.

### **TA MENTORSHIP**

Many graduate students seek the opportunity to work more closely with experienced teachers. In the TA Mentor program, the graduate student who is teaching a First-Year Writing Seminar for the first time asks a more experienced graduate student to serve as mentor (someone who has taught at least two seminars and has previously participated in the Peer Collaboration program). The graduate student will wish to visit the mentor's classes, and have the mentor visit his/her classes. Designing a syllabus, commenting on papers, creating writing assignments, and leading discussion might be major concerns. The mentee may have a special project in mind, such as developing an outstanding set of reading and writing assignments, or converting a writing seminar into an upper-level course proposal, or using the web as part of the course. TA mentors will receive \$200 for their work, mentees will receive \$125.

*Timing:* TAs can benefit from working with a mentor as they begin teaching a seminar for the first time, but TAs are also welcome to seek out a teaching mentor *before* they begin their first semester of teaching a First-Year Writing Seminar. They can use the semester's mentorship to develop plans for their own seminar with the assistance of the mentor and to observe the mentor's pedagogy.

*Formalities:* Only a limited number of mentors can be appointed each semester. TAs should submit their proposals directly to the course leader, who must in turn submit them to the Knight Institute for consideration by Monday, September 8. At the end of the semester, the graduate student and mentor must submit a joint report on their experience to the Knight Institute's Director of First-Year Writing Seminars.

### **Opportunities for active exchange of experience and teaching techniques include the following in the peer collaboration and TA mentorship programs:**

- 1) Participating in the classes of colleagues. Such participation might consist of observation of teaching skills, to be followed by discussion of differing techniques from which both participants might profit, *or* co-operative work among TAs in preparing classes, allowing both to share not only classroom activities but also the process of selection and treatment of materials by various colleagues. In one successful project TAs from differing disciplines had their classes (which met during the same hour) meet as one group.
- 2) Designing a sequence of writing assignments (essay topics and preparatory writing). An appropriate project for TAs who are teaching some of the same texts. This might well be combined with observing each other's classes and co-teaching or guest-teaching.
- 3) Exercises in comparative or collaborative grading. In order to enrich our ideas about different strategies for grading in courses offered across the department, colleagues might occasionally co-grade papers, discussing differences of

strategy and isolating particular points of concern in grading. TAs might also act as graders for each other's students, permitting the teacher of each class to function primarily as a coach who helps students to prepare portfolios of finished work which will be examined and graded by the other teacher. (See Katy Gottschalk for other details if this option intrigues you.)

4) Participating at least twice each semester in departmental workshops dealing with issues raised by TAs with the faculty course leader. Topics might, for example, include:

- Issues in the development of a syllabus.
- Designing a sequence of writing assignments.
- Strategies for integrating writing into the teaching of the discipline.
- How to integrate the services of the library, Writing Workshop, and other resources.
- How to encourage class participation.

*In order that exchanges be structured rather than sporadic, yet voluntary rather than mandatory, we offer the following procedural guidelines for peer collaboration and for TA mentorship:*

- 1) TAs should jointly approach their course leader with a concrete proposal they have developed together for collaborative exchange. (*See the attached sample proposal.*)
- 2) In approving these proposals, the course leader should suggest modifications and additions as needed. The course leader will then submit the proposal(s) to the Knight Institute.
- 3) During the semester and certainly at the end of the semester, the course leader will discuss the results of these projects with the participants in order to evaluate their effectiveness and productivity.
- 4) At the end of each semester, each TA will submit a 1–2 page report of his or her collaborative experience to the course leader.
- 5) The course leader will review the TAs' end-of-term reports and submit these to the Knight Institute along with a request for release of funds by Monday, December 9.

#### ***PIZZA AND PEDAGOGY: TEACHING SUPPORT GROUPS***

A teaching support group offers an informal opportunity for graduate students to meet regularly with their peers to share classroom experiences, exchange assignments, and brainstorm ways to improve their teaching practices. While relaxing over pizza and beverages funded by the Knight Institute, graduate students find it useful and supportive to discuss a range of topics, such as interacting with students, leading class discussions, setting up peer groups and writing workshops, designing and scheduling assignments, grading papers, and balancing teaching commitments with graduate coursework, exams, and dissertation writing.

*Formalities:* TAs interested in forming a teaching support group should nominate a group member to submit a proposal to the Knight Institute that describes the group's objectives and a list of the graduate students who plan to attend (proposal due Monday, September 8). At the end of the semester, a group member will submit a report about the experience to the Knight Institute (report due Monday, December 8).

*Remuneration:* All arrangements for pizza and beverages should be arranged with Donna O'Hora (dlo1) in the Knight Institute at least three days prior to each meeting. Funds for three meetings can be provided.

#### ***DEADLINES***

Please note the following deadlines for materials to be submitted to the Knight Institute:

*Monday, September 8:* TA Peer Collaboration Proposals and Mentorship proposals due from Course Leaders with an accompanying letter of approval.

*Monday, December 8:* TA Peer Collaboration descriptions and mentorship reports due from Course Leaders with an accompanying letter of approval. *Materials must be received from the course leader by Monday, December 8, for TAs to receive funding.*

***Questions?*** Please call (5-2280) or e-mail (df259@cornell.edu) David Faulkner, Director of First-Year Writing Seminars.

## SAMPLE PROPOSAL FOR PEER COLLABORATION

**Section 1** - *Ralph will observe Raquel; Raquel will observe Ralph. Discussion follows.*

This exchange enables the new TA to benefit from the advanced TA's year(s) of experience and allows the advanced TA the opportunity to learn from the new TA's fresh approach to his/her first First-Year Seminar(s).

The exchange also introduces the guest TA to the class and affords him/her an initial exposure to the seminar's course materials and the varying levels of competence of the seminar members.

**Section 2** - *Ralph will teach Raquel's class; Raquel will teach Ralph's.*

This exchange enables each of us to approach a class which has already gained confidence in writing but is not versed in the vocabulary and concepts taught in the TA's own classes.

Each of us will teach material assigned by the other in the scheduled course-work. This will encourage a critical approach to preparation of materials.

The host TA will attend class, as a guest TA teaches his/her class.

**Section 3** - *Discussion* Discussions will be based on the host TA's discussions with his/her class regarding the guest TA and on his/her direct observation of the guest TA.

**Section 4** - *Cross-grading* Each TA will assign a paper to the class he or she visits and grade those papers in cooperation with the host TA. Doing so will isolate issues of particular concern in paper-writing and techniques of grading.

**Section 5** - *Co-teach a class on paper-writing* After the papers have been graded, both TAs will use the material to co-prepare a class on writing techniques.

## SAMPLE REPORT

I would like to report the completion of the final sequence in Julia Hill's and my agenda of teaching and observing each other's first-year seminars. Yesterday the last of our scheduled class visits took place, and we finalized arrangements for completing our evaluations of student writing from each other's seminars. On the whole I believe our arrangements have succeeded quite well in broadening perspectives--both our students', exposed to our different approaches, and ours as teachers reflecting upon our methods of eliciting careful attention to writing and reading.

I visited Julia's seminar to lead discussions on literary texts and to review principles of revising prose. Focusing primarily on Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" and "The Birthmark," my literary-analysis sessions with Julia's class touched upon her seminar's "Utopia" theme in passing; yet it dwelt for the most part upon these stories' involvement with religious and secular themes of revelation and (mis)understanding--with some reflections on the peculiar notion of "facetime" developing among Cornell undergraduates. In reviewing principles of revising prose I concentrated first on Lanham's "paramedic method," demonstrating its usefulness by going over step-by-step a brief passage revised in *Revising Prose* as well as samples of revisions students have made in my seminar; next I discussed the rules-of-thumb for "sentences in context" Williams offers in his *Style: Ten Principles*, and underscored his advice regarding use of passive voice to switch around subjects and predicates (for the sake of improving transitions between sentences).

During my visits to her seminar I observed Julia's work through a challenging text, Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. Clarifying its relevance to her seminar's "Utopia" theme, and encouraging her students to analyze carefully the intricacies of "Nature," "Reason" (speculative vs. practical), etc. as Burke's critical notions, Julia offered a thought-provoking discussion of a text many students evidently found difficult to address enthusiastically. By having students read passages and comment on them she guided discussion toward several interesting theses about Burke, which she then proposed as the basis for essays they were scheduled to write the next week.

Visiting my seminar, Julia concentrated on two subjects: Chandler's highly admired style in novels such as *The Big Sleep*, and the fundamentals of classical and modern rhetoric. She addressed the first subject--relevant to an oral presentation about Chandler I had three of my students develop--very effectively; by leading students in close readings of passages that illustrate his distinctive prose style and favorite themes, Julia succeeded in demonstrating the rewards of analyzing Chandler's novels in detail. The subject of rhetoric she addressed summarily, offering general explanations of its taxonomy and providing incidental remarks about details of historical development that proved interesting; I expect that her summary may help students refine some of their work on a "Critiquing-the-Critics" research paper I have planned as the final writing assignment of the semester.