

Final Report

MLA AD HOC COMMITTEE ON TEACHING

Teaching matters. It matters especially at this moment, when higher education is under pressure to document departments' work with students in terms of educational outcomes. It matters when a new emphasis on immediate vocational utility puts in question the central place of the humanities and the value of liberal education. It matters when the concept of the teacher-scholar is undermined by budgetary constraints that restrict the number of full-time tenure-track faculty members in modern languages. Teaching has always mattered to the MLA and its constituency. However, as we confront the future, we must strengthen that commitment.

The conditions for teaching are felt differently at different institutions, whether in a two-year college, a baccalaureate college, a comprehensive university, or a doctorate-granting research university. Thus, the term *teaching* itself is regarded differently by different members of our community. As delineated in the context framing this report, we propose an overarching view of and reflective stance toward the teaching of language, literature, and culture, one that includes:

- curriculum
- classroom practices
- research on teaching
- theories of teaching
- relations between teaching and scholarship

The MLA Executive Council appointed the Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching in 1998. We were charged with making recommendations about the ways the MLA can provide additional support for the improvement of teaching in a variety of institutional settings and contribute to what is

known about effective teaching in the field. The committee had its first meeting in September 1998 and met again in February and November 1999 and September 2000. It held open hearings at the MLA conventions in San Francisco in 1998 and Chicago in 1999, where members were invited to contribute to the committee's discussions and share their views about the MLA's relation to teaching.

The MLA Executive Council was prompted to form this ad hoc committee by a strongly felt need for a wider concern with teaching. The committee has worked to represent this concern, to urge that the MLA take a much more active role in promoting excellent teaching at all levels and in all the media it has at its disposal. This report is presented in the hope that it will stir public and private discussions based on the recommendations articulated here.

THE CONTEXT

The climate of higher education in the United States has changed. Pressures for public accountability have led to an emphasis on superior teaching, an emphasis reflected in the relatively recent importance of documentation on teaching in tenure files and the increasing recognition and number of substantial awards for teaching excellence. These forces have led to a rethinking of working relations with high schools, consortium institutions, and across colleges and departments within institutions. Of necessity, the same technologies that have contributed to the changed climate of learning and afforded new options for the pragmatic learning that society demands (e.g., distance learning) may well provide the means for this cooperative curriculum planning.

In a society that has moved from an industrial and agricultural base to an economy relying heavily on the international marketplace and a commodity-driven service industry, the ability to respond quickly and imaginatively to changing business and social needs has placed language and literature teaching in a new position. That the likelihood of a single lifetime job has been replaced by the likelihood of two or even three different careers in a lifetime necessitates the retraining of returning students whose needs can be met only by programs that address the changing marketplace of academia. Combined, these developments have led to new goals for the teaching of English and foreign languages based on a revised concept of literacy—the literacy of critical thinking combined with discourse skills that result in effective communication in multiple social and technological contexts.

TEACHING AND THE REWARD SYSTEM

With increasing urgency, the need to secure a more prominent place for teaching in the profession's systems of reward has been the subject of national attention. Given this public focus, if teaching is to matter in our profession, it must figure substantively and visibly in those systems. For the purposes of this report, the committee understands a reward system to mean the structures undergirding job security (tenure or long-term contracts vital for continuity of and commitment to program development and promotion) as well as other sorts of systemic rewards, such as book prizes, publishing contracts, sabbaticals, and grants.

The problem of making teaching matter is inextricably linked to what our committee has identified as the need to foreground teaching in our profession. That need stems from institutional and cultural practices and holds significant, public ramifications for the profession. To matter, teaching must be concretely, emphatically valued by tenure and promotion committees; by those who make part-time and adjunct appointments; and by those who award prizes, publishing contracts, sabbaticals, and grants.

TEACHING AND SCHOLARSHIP

A major lacuna in professional discussions about teaching is the absence of direct links to the scholarly communities to which all of us as teachers belong. Committed as this committee is to the improvement of teaching, we affirm the relation between scholarship and teaching at all levels of higher education. We view scholarship as a prerequisite and a corequisite for good teaching, because teachers' scholarship legitimizes their expertise, informs their classroom practice, and provides their students with models for intellectual inquiry. Consequently, this committee's report concurs with the "ADE Statement of Good Practice: Teaching, Evaluation, and Scholarship" that "teaching and scholarly activity are mutually reinforcing, [and] departments and institutions should create conditions that encourage all faculty members to engage in intellectual inquiry." While recognizing the range and different missions of institutions, from two-year college to research university, we agree that all

faculty members need to engage in scholarly projects that sustain and renew their intellectual lives. Especially in institutions like two-year colleges, where teaching has long dominated the mission and the reward system, faculty members need support that affirms the ways in which scholarship vitalizes teaching. [. . .] Scholarship, broadly defined, is essential to effective teaching and to a satisfying professional life in the humanities. (41)

The committee understands scholarly renewal as a continuing dialogue. The scholarship-teaching connection we envision benefits not only the scholar but also that scholar's students, institution, and professional associations.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

To create meaningful discourse between scholarship and the classroom, the committee believes *reflective practice* is the operative term that best describes the attitude and activities that make teaching matter. As defined by Donald Schon, a reflective practitioner "turns thought back on action and on the knowing which is implicit in action." While trying to make sense of an action, a reflective practitioner "reflects on the understandings which have been explicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action" (50). If teaching matters, then reflection about the practice of teaching is crucial, not only as represented by the formal research of the scholarship of teaching but also in every faculty member's classroom, in every graduate program, and in the relations that exist among subject matter disciplines, teacher education programs, and future teachers.

The Scholarship of Teaching

Historically, *PMLA* has privileged literary scholarship both in English and foreign languages. Research, by and large, has focused on textual study from various theoretical perspectives. With few exceptions, neither the MLA nor individual scholars have concerned themselves with how such knowledge reaches students.

In part, any delay between the discovery and the communication of scholarly knowledge is related to the inevitable delay in the way ideas circulate in communities. But with respect to teaching as a topic of professional discussion, the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching posits a more fundamental cause: we find that the MLA as an organization has not granted scholarship on teaching the same status it has granted textual scholarship.

We urge, then, that scholarship applied in the classroom needs to be afforded pride of place in our professional organizations and our scholarly journals. This plea for integration of teaching and scholarship extends beyond a token representation on convention programs and special journal sections. We urge that teaching in all its problematics (from classroom ethnographics to the sociolinguistics of textbook selection to the politics of teacher preparation at the graduate school level) be an intrinsic part of dialogues at the national convention and in scholarly publications.

To point to some options for introducing such dialogues, we offer, first, the following orienting set of questions: What is teaching? How do we understand what we do in our classrooms? What can we learn from making our acts of teaching more visible to ourselves, one another, and the profession at large? How is such an effort a scholarly activity? In what ways can the MLA foster activities to support such inquiry? What might be the potential benefits? What, if any, are the drawbacks? To what extent can administrators be profitably involved in these discussions?

A major step has already been taken by the MLA in integrating the teaching of literature, language, and rhetoric into the MLA bibliography. That step recognizes that professional disciplines about the teaching of language and rhetoric have grown and diversified significantly in recent years. Their innovative classroom research, using methods such as ethnographies and case studies of classroom life, speak to modern language teachers of all kinds. Their special contribution deserves attention in deliberating about standards, common goals, and the relation between teaching and scholarship.

Graduate Education

The committee in the strongest possible terms points to the urgent need to develop graduate programs whose scholarly emphases are explicitly linked to teaching concerns in a range of instructional settings as well as in applications outside academia. Increased attention to pedagogy in higher education has tended to focus on the undergraduate level. We urge greater attention to exploring how graduate courses can be designed to include professional and pedagogical issues as well as subject matter. The MLA can and should articulate the case for systematic, progressive faculty development in language and literature departments.¹

Effective pedagogy at the graduate level must include mentoring students at every stage of their graduate careers. This mentoring should involve career consultation, experience with and feedback on course development by graduate students that is linked to their graduate work, support through the examination and dissertation process, and assistance with the job-search process.

The committee recognizes that the dynamics of many graduate programs is shifting under a number of external institutional pressures. Traditionally at the bottom of the academic ladder, graduate students often begin their careers as teachers under taxing and demanding conditions, hampered by low wages, lack of benefits, and the heavy classroom duties common in introductory classes. Many graduate student teachers live in a state of unremitting ambivalence about whether to shortchange their students, their class work, or their dissertation. As undergraduate ranks swell and budgets for hiring new full-time professors shrink, graduate students are taking on a substantial share

of undergraduate teaching,² and many are likely to be teaching throughout their years completing course, exam, and dissertation requirements.

Playing the double role of student and teacher at the same time presents many challenges. Learning to be both student and teacher is crucial to professional success, but this process can be destructive when the teacher role threatens to overwhelm the student role. Graduate students may lack power and authority in their graduate classes but be invested with great power and authority in the classes they teach, often without sufficient training and support during those important first years of teaching. In addition, reliance on graduate students to staff burgeoning service courses for low wages and few or no benefits puts inordinate stress on these students and must be considered in any examination of graduate education. The committee affirms support for graduate students in their dual role as teacher-scholars.

The paucity of jobs forces a good number of graduate students to remain for many years at their graduate institutions, teaching part-time while pursuing full-time employment. Thus, the traditional view of the graduate student as apprentice teacher, learning the craft of teaching under the tutelage of seasoned pedagogues, can be inaccurate and patronizing when applied to many who are often as energetic, dedicated, and in touch with undergraduates as are our profession's best graduate faculty members.

Teacher Education

In conjunction with its recommendation that explicit teaching components be built into graduate programs, the committee urges that all programs in English and foreign languages identify and encourage students who may be potential teachers for elementary and secondary schools. Increasingly, teacher-scholars are beginning to recognize, in James Marshall's words, that "all teaching is about teaching—just as all writing is about writing—and [. . .] every class that enrolls prospective teachers is a class in teacher preparation" (380–81). This recognition forms an important part of this committee's charge and holds significant implications for the role of the MLA's constituent disciplines in the preparation of secondary school teachers. To increase the visibility of teaching in our fields, we must also increase the visibility of a section of our student population too often allowed to slip through the cracks—students who are planning a teaching career at the elementary or secondary level.³

The committee feels that the preparation of future teachers is central to the work that we do in our disciplines and of crucial importance for the future of our fields.⁴ Award systems, particularly those sponsored by the MLA, will articulate and enhance the role of teaching both inside and outside the academic community.

WORKING CONDITIONS

The committee cautions that our profession must assume more responsibility for assessing the quality of teaching or be forfeit to outside forces that will set teaching standards for us. More and more, decisions about higher education are being made by legislators who do not understand the contexts in which we work. “Institutions are expected to perform, to document performance, and to be accountable for producing returns on taxpayer and student investment” (Boggs 4). Not being fully aware of what actually takes place in the halls of the academy, legislators often believe that colleges and universities spend too much money on research and not enough on teaching. They act on their beliefs most often by applying quantifiable measures to assess teaching and learning. These measures include statewide testing, which in some instances may even determine what institutions of higher education are allowed to offer entering students. For example, in Wisconsin “the goals of the State Faculty Education Workload Policy include seeing that the regents are provided with ‘regular managerial information regarding educational workload’” (“Politics” 48). In Tennessee, some funding for education is controlled by a performance-based formula that ties the money received by an institution to the test scores earned by students and to other quantitative measures.

The AAUP recognizes there is a need for reform in higher education (“Work” 35). Likewise, administrators and faculty members generally agree that reform is necessary, but they cannot condone reform instituted by those government agencies that use quantity rather than quality as a criterion. To curtail outside intervention in how the teaching environment is managed and to enable teachers to teach well, those in the academy must come together and redefine faculty workload. This new definition must include research, instruction, testing, and environment. The definition of faculty workload presented by the AAUP in its 1994 report addresses a broader view of teaching:

Since teaching—in its full meaning, going beyond classroom lecturing and discussion—is based on and strengthened by scholarship [in the sense expressed earlier in this report], a course load that makes scholarship possible is essential to teaching of high quality. Conversely, scholarship and research are often enhanced when tested in the classroom [. . .], by implication or demonstration before students. (“Work” 44)

For these reasons, the committee report endorses the guidelines issued by the ADE (“ADE Guidelines”) and the ADFL (“ADFL Guidelines”) for teaching loads and class size and believes that only by adherence to these guidelines will the type of teacher-scholar we envision be possible.

A CALL TO ACTION: THE COMMITTEE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

We urge a renewed commitment by the MLA to excellence in teaching. It is a commitment worth making, one that will speak for our association to our many academic constituencies and to the larger public, which places a high premium on the instruction of our students.

Because the MLA believes teaching matters, it must expand the ways in which scholars can explore pedagogies, examine classroom practice, and find support for their efforts to develop programs in modern languages that are appropriate to the twenty-first century. By providing occasions for members to discuss their teaching outside their departments, the MLA fosters communication and community building, both inside and beyond the academy.

As the largest national organization devoted to teaching and scholarship in higher education for all the modern languages, the MLA can also foster the type of dialogue so needed today, a dialogue involving faculty members and students at all levels in modern language departments and between those departments and their wider constituencies in their institutions and in their communities. This committee affirms the MLA's mission to support and to influence the ways in which teaching is understood, valued, and rewarded.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE MLA

A Standing Committee on Teaching

Our strongest recommendation is for the establishment of a standing committee on teaching so that the MLA can better address the issues that we believe to be most critical at this time in our profession, regardless of institutional setting. By establishing a standing committee on teaching, the MLA will demonstrate that teaching as a scholarly and professional endeavor remains a central concern of our organization. Further we believe that the issues identified below constitute a rationale for the establishment of a standing committee and may serve as a guide for the development of an agenda for action. We suggest that this agenda be developed in consultation with the divisional committees on teaching, with the various publication committees, and with the membership as a whole.

Accordingly, we recommend

that the MLA establish a standing committee on teaching to provide a place for ongoing attention to questions related to teaching

The issues we identified as important for this standing committee to address follow. We formulate them as guidelines for the committee to conduct its work and as questions that the broader MLA membership may take back to their home institutions for further discussion.

Publications

Debates about the state of the canon and definitions of cultural literacy occur in popular media and conference presentations and are addressed in important policy journals such as the *ADFL Bulletin* and *ADE Bulletin*. However, no broader-based, prestigious publication exists in the MLA for constructive dialogue about teaching.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that the MLA publication program continue to seek out new and varied examinations of teaching, including new understandings of classroom practice and classroom life
- that the MLA publish a second issue annually of *Profession* that focuses on teaching issues
- that at regular intervals *PMLA* devote a special section to teaching
- that the MLA sponsor a member-moderated electronic discussion list in which MLA members explore the values and assumptions they bring to the act of teaching

Collaboration between the MLA and Other Organizations

The committee recognizes the need for information sharing among all members of the profession. We assert the value of collaborative activities devoted to the teaching of and research on culture, language, literature, and writing. To that end, the committee supports the MLA's initiative in sharing sponsorship of and collaborating on proposals for funding to support internships, institutes, publications, and other activities.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that the MLA actively explore means of facilitating collaboration on teaching with other organizations in the field of modern languages

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE PROFESSION AT LARGE

The Reward System

If teaching matters, it must figure substantively and visibly in our profession's reward system: job security (tenure or long-term contracts), promotion, and other sorts of systemic rewards, such as book prizes, publishing contracts, sabbaticals, and grants.

Aware of teaching's complex implications in local politics, state budget crunches, individual institutions' ambitions, and the politics of the diverse fields the MLA represents, the committee nevertheless tenders the following recommendations as steps both flexible enough to be adapted to local situations and concrete enough to feature teaching more prominently in the reward systems of our profession and of the MLA itself.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that institutions and departments develop clear statements about the place of teaching in tenure and promotion
- that institutions and departments design mechanisms to evaluate teaching
- that institutions and departments design mechanisms and provide necessary support for continuing education and materials to improve teaching

The Scholarship of Teaching

This committee strongly supports the idea that research on classroom practice is a valid and important aspect of our professional lives. Paying attention to and documenting what happens in college classrooms brings visibility to teaching and learning. It focuses on how students learn and the methods by which we teach them. It asks questions about processes as well as products. And it takes the life of the classroom as its central focus.

A commitment to documenting and studying classroom life will require many changes both inside and outside the academy. In institutions of higher learning, it will mean substantial changes in curricula, graduate programs, teacher training, and tenure decisions. Outside our institutions, such scholarship will enlarge public understanding of what is entailed in educating students.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that institutions and departments value the scholarship of teaching—of the methods, assessment procedures, and ways to improve teaching—as equivalent to traditional forms of scholarship, when it is subjected to equivalent scrutiny by the rest of the profession
- that institutions and departments create interdisciplinary seminars and hold colloquia regarding language development and literacy issues
- that English and foreign language departments build bridges to scholars in education schools and departments
- that English and foreign language departments develop seminars on qualitative and quantitative research methods
- that institutions and departments encourage collaboration among and within departments

Teacher Education

The committee believes that the preparation of future teachers is central to the work that we do in our disciplines and of crucial importance for the future of our fields. Research on the contributions of content-area course work to teacher performance and future development has many potential benefits. Further, there is great potential for collaboration in research between collegiate and precollegiate teachers. Solid work on the contributions of our disciplines to teacher preparation could address public misconceptions and doubts about the commitment of higher education to teacher reform. The matter of teacher education speaks profoundly to making the value of our disciplines—of our scholarship and our teaching—known.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that faculty members make the rationales behind their pedagogical choices visible in their classrooms
- that faculty members clarify to students why our fields matter in the academy and in society at large
- that institutions and departments keep track of majors throughout their careers
- that institutions and departments provide formal structures for liaisons between academic disciplines and secondary school teachers
- that institutions and departments support and reward those faculty members involved in the training of teaching assistants and teacher education
- that institutions and departments encourage research contributing to learning and curriculum

Graduate Education

Graduate education provides the institutional setting for the development of the teacher-scholar. As such, the committee believes that graduate education should demonstrate that teaching matters by offering courses in pedagogy, preparing students for a range of teaching situations, mentoring students, providing models of reflective practice, and helping students with the job-search process.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that graduate programs give higher priority to and strengthen programs in the teaching of language, literature, linguistics, writing, and culture that will orient and train new faculty members in the art and science of teaching and learning

- that graduate programs follow the recommendations of the Committee on Professional Employment (*Final Report*) relating to the expansion of the graduate curriculum to include courses in pedagogy that will prepare students for a range of teaching situations and familiarize them with the complex system of postsecondary education in the United States and Canada
- that graduate programs provide students with mentoring and collaborative activities for professional development at every stage of their graduate careers
- that graduate programs provide consultation and supervisory support through every stage of the program, from candidacy exam through dissertation
- that graduate programs provide early discussion of career options as well as direct assistance with the job-search process

Working Conditions

While recognizing the differences in institutional conditions that exist in higher education, the committee strongly believes that teaching—in its full meaning, going beyond classroom lecturing and discussion—is based on and strengthened by the scholarship of both subject-matter content and pedagogy. Thus, a course load and class sizes that make scholarship possible are as essential to teaching of high quality as fair labor and contract practices.

Accordingly, we recommend

- that institutions and departments, by assigning reasonable teaching loads and limiting class sizes, create conditions conducive to enabling the effective teacher-scholar we envision
- that institutions and departments provide professional recognition, appropriate contractual arrangements, and pro rata compensation for part-time faculty members
- that institutions and departments provide professional recognition, appropriate contractual arrangements, and appropriate compensation for non-tenure-track faculty members

Our committee completes its report to the association with a sense of gratitude to the Executive Council for being chosen for such a formidable task and an equally strong sense of satisfaction and pride that we have worked hard in our research, in our many discussions, and in the formulation of our final recommendations.

We are a varied group of MLA colleagues, older and younger, from different kinds of institutions of higher learning, and with both research and

teaching interests. We have often disagreed on priorities, strategies, and the most effective ways of articulating our recommendations, but out of strong dialogue a consensus has emerged.

What has made us a confident and collegial committee is our deep commitment to the centrality of excellence in teaching—whether done by a tenure-track, adjunct, or graduate student instructor—in the life of college and university. At a time of uncertainty and challenge in our culture, such teaching, properly attended to and strongly supported, will shape the good student and the good citizen. The Modern Language Association should be in the forefront of this venture, lending its prestige, its strong voice, and its active support.

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NOTES

¹This comment is not unique to this ad hoc committee. The American Association of State Colleges and Universities recently stated in its report *Facing Change: Building the Faculty of the Future*, “Higher education has failed to effectively articulate the case for systematic, progressive faculty development” (20). The report goes on to assert, “Higher education faculty are not regularly trained in teaching, learning, advising, or the overall teaching and learning enterprise. New priority must be given to strengthening training programs for the next generation of teachers and to developing programs that will orient and train new faculty in the art and science of teaching and learning” (21).

²The ADE Ad Hoc Committee on Staffing did a sample survey in 1996–97 of staffing in representative departments. In PhD departments responding, TAs taught 61% of the first-year writing sections, 30% of the lower-division literature courses, and 3% of the upper-division literature sections (“Report”).

³Donald Gray has argued that our profession has tended historically to believe that teacher education is the responsibility of a select few, people in other departments (4). The potential benefits of taking the responsibility of teacher preparation as an integral

part of our work are, however, enormous. As Kathryn T. Flannery et al. note, “Perhaps more than any other group of students in English, not excluding PhDs, preservice English teachers are a continuing responsibility, to the university, to their teachers, and to themselves. No other group has a greater impact on the hardest question of all: How will the knowledge, abilities, and canons of judgment that make up what we call English exist and do their work in the culture and politics of our country?” (61).

⁴Phyllis Franklin recently argued that teacher preparation is one of the most publicly influential things we do: “For almost a decade MLA members have insisted on the need for the field to reach an audience outside the academy in order to promote a better public understanding of how the humanities and especially the study of language and literature contribute to society, prepare students for careers, and enrich people’s lives. I cannot imagine a more effective way of reaching this audience than to participate in the effort to strengthen the quality of schooling in the United States. Each knowledgeable, intellectually lively teacher we educate will affect the lives of thousands of young people and affirm the value of the subjects we teach” (5).

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