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# Training the Workforce: An Overview of GTA Education Curricula

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Teacher-training programs for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) serve several important roles in rhetoric and composition studies. They hold historical significance because training workshops and pedagogy courses were often the only graduate-level composition courses offered in many English departments during the first 50 years of this century. Additionally, courses in teaching writing currently are required for graduate students who teach *any* course (regardless of their disciplinary specialization) in nearly all graduate programs in departments of English.<sup>1</sup> Thus, not only do these courses serve as an introduction or gateway to rhetoric and composition studies for most graduate students, but they are also the only site in a majority of graduate programs in English studies concerned with preparing teachers. Consequently, they play a significant part in preparing future scholars and teachers in rhetoric and composition and in preparing graduate students to assume the particular teaching tasks of an individual English department.

As a discipline we know very little about the general assumptions underlying GTA education programs. I, therefore, surveyed writing program directors to learn the kinds and range of writing pedagogy courses required for teaching assistants.<sup>2</sup> Scholars writing about WPA issues or about the history of teaching college writing often claim that the training of teaching assistants has vastly improved over the last 20 to 30 years (cf., Bridges, Donovan and McClelland, Gere, Hartzog). Corbett's description of his preparation for teaching writing illustrates how most people describe training in writing instruction before such improvements:

The English teachers of my generation were mainly, if not exclusively, trained to take over a literature class. . . . But for the teaching of writing, which supported their graduate studies, usually the only training they got was in a rather desultory practicum, which met once a week and which dealt chiefly with the nuts-and-bolts aspects of the writing course. (445)

Now, Corbett and others say, our GTA education programs are much improved. For instance, Paul Connolly and Teresa Vilardi, in their 1986 study of college writing programs, note that graduate teaching assistants "are more thoroughly trained and supervised than in the past, through courses, staff meetings, and classroom observation" (3). Certainly, they are right. Given the recent growth in rhetoric and composition graduate programs and the vitality of many teachers and scholars in this field, we can generally claim that GTA education programs are doing more and are doing a better job. What I sought to learn, however, is how we specifically approach GTA education: What

patterns, if any, can be discerned in the primary instructional goals of required pedagogy courses at different institutions. From this overview emerges a set of concerns or challenges that GTA educators and writing program administrators need to consider as our curriculum and sense of the discipline continue to evolve.

## Background

To examine how we commonly prepare GTAs as writing teachers, I solicited a number of documents from writing program administrators working in graduate programs that grant doctoral degrees in rhetoric and composition. In determining which programs to contact, I relied on the survey of the field published in the spring 1994 issue of *Rhetoric Review* titled "Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition: A Catalog of the Profession." This survey reports that, as of 1993, 72 doctoral programs in English studies offer a specialization in rhetoric and composition (Brown et al., 240). From these 72 programs, I requested the following information regarding their GTA education curricula:

- descriptions of courses that form the GTA education curriculum, including goal or purpose statements of the program;
- orientation and course materials (e.g., policy statements and syllabi) from required teaching practica or pedagogy courses;
- a copy of the TA handbook, if one existed.

In all, writing program administrators from 36 institutions provided some or all of the information I requested, which represents 50% of those programs included in Brown et al.'s "Catalog of the Profession" (see Table 1).

Importantly, my purpose in conducting this research was not to account for and describe every possible approach to preparing GTAs for teaching writing. Each program administrator inevitably develops practices and procedures unique to the specific needs and constraints of the composition curriculum existing in their institution. Rather, I was interested in broadly examining the kinds and range of approaches to GTA education that we are currently employing, and in identifying common perspectives on how we represent the activity of teaching writing to the newest members of the rhetoric and composition field—GTAs.

**Table 1**

Institutions of Faculty Responding to Survey  
(All Offer a Degree in Rhetoric and Composition)

Institution	Name of Ph.D. Offered
U Arizona	English, concent. in Rhetoric, Composition, & Teaching of Writing

*continued*

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Name of Ph.D. Offered</b>
Arizona SU	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition
Ball SU	English, concent. in Composition
Bowling Green SU	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Writing
U Cincinnati	English
U Connecticut	English
East Texas SU	Ed.D. in College Teaching of English
Florida SU	English
U Illinois, Chicago	English, spec. in Language, Literacy, & Rhetoric
Illinois SU	D.A. in English
U Kansas	English
Louisiana SU	English, option in Rhetoric, Composition, & Linguistics
U Louisville	Rhetoric & Composition
U Maryland, College Park	English
U Massachusetts, Amherst	English, emphasis in Writing & the Teaching of Writing
U Miami (Ohio)	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition
Michigan Tech U	Rhetoric & Technical Communication
U Minnesota, Twin Cities	English, spec. in Composition Studies
U Minnesota, Twin Cities	Rhetoric and Scientific & Technical Communication
U Nebraska, Lincoln	English, concent. in Composition Practice & Theory
New Mexico SU, Las Cruces	Rhetoric & Professional Communication
U North Carolina, Greensboro	English, spec. in Rhetoric & Composition
U Oregon	English
Pennsylvania SU, Univ Park	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition
U Southern California	Rhetoric & Composition
U Southern Mississippi	English, spec. in Rhetoric & Composition
Syracuse U	English, minor in Composition & Cultural Rhetoric
U Tennessee, Knoxville	English
U Texas, Arlington	Humanities, concent. in Rhetoric/Composition/Criticism
U Texas, Austin	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition
Texas A&M U	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition, Discourse Studies
U Utah	English (Communication or Educational Studies), emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition
U Washington	English, concent. in Language & Rhetoric
Washington SU	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition
U Waterloo (Canada)	Literature & Rhetoric
U Wisconsin, Milwaukee	English, concent. in Rhetoric & Composition

## An Overview of GTA Education Curricula

What is immediately noticeable about the descriptions of GTA education programs I received is their rough similarity given a wide range of programmatic possibilities. Of the 36 programs represented in this survey, 23 locate their teacher preparation program in a single course, which may or may not be repeated throughout each term of a GTA's initial year of teaching. Another seven programs have developed a combination of courses which fulfill their teacher preparation requirements, and two more have developed extensive mentoring programs in combination with a course requirement. Four programs offer some combination of apprenticeships and/or workshops in place of formal course offerings. Mentoring programs which involve experienced GTAs, part-time instructors, and/or full-time faculty in the professional development of first-year GTAs exist in varying degrees in all programs. Additionally, nearly all the programs (32) reported that they require a fall orientation for new GTAs: One program stated that it holds no orientation and three did not answer this question. Of the 32 programs requiring an orientation, half stated that it lasted five days or more—with two programs reporting that GTAs enroll in required writing pedagogy courses during the summer. Five programs operate a one-day orientation. Moreover, many of the courses comprising these GTA education programs evaluate GTAs on similar tasks and writing assignments—the most common of which is a teaching portfolio frequently required as a final project.

The following discussion concentrates on the course descriptions and rationales comprising the core of most GTA education programs. In order to examine the range of curricular approaches in these programs, I categorized courses according to their primary instructional goals. Although other ways of categorizing these courses exist, this approach allowed me to focus on common pedagogical methods and curricular strategies. Using this scheme, most courses fell along a continuum which, as it moves from left to right, becomes more theoretical and removed from the first-year writing classroom (see Figure 1).

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### Figure 1

Continuum of GTA Education Courses

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**Apprenticeships—Practica—Teaching Methods courses—Theory seminars**

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This continuum represents a general method of categorization. Clearly, discussion of writing theory does happen in many of the practica described, just as practical issues arise in theory seminars. However, generally speaking, the priority of a practicum is practical and immediate training in teaching strategies, and the priority of a theory seminar is to explore historical contexts and philo-

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sophical issues related to writing instruction. Also, many GTA education programs offered several courses and/or implement mentoring programs, thus developing their own continuums for dealing with complex issues of practice and theory within its GTA education programs.

Finally, I must stress that these course descriptions represent snapshots of how each program executed their GTA training in a particular term or year. Many writing program administrators willingly shared these materials so that we might glimpse the range of writing pedagogy existing in GTA education programs nationally. Their generosity provides us with an opportunity to freeze-frame an on-going, ever-evolving activity of the field.

## Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship, or preceptorship, programs vary based on a number of factors. Perhaps the most important factor shaping the design of such programs is how apprenticeships relate to, and are positioned within, a broader pedagogical curriculum. At the University of Oregon and the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (UTK), for instance, prospective teaching assistants, or teaching fellows as they are called at Oregon, participate in a year-long apprenticeship program prior to teaching their own classes. At both institutions, this apprenticeship program is integrated into a GTA education program that includes coursework in writing instruction. In both programs, new graduate students work individually with a teacher experienced in the program, spending a set amount of time observing the supervising teacher's class and meeting together outside of class, thereby gaining practical experience prior to teaching.

Other institutions use an apprenticeship program with GTAs who are teaching immediately in their first term—offering this experience as the primary source of pedagogical information. The writing program at the University of Arizona operates a preceptorship program in which first-year GTAs are assigned a Teaching Advisor with whom they meet in small groups and individually on a regular basis. The University of Massachusetts at Amherst similarly places Teaching Associates in instructional teams which are led by a Course Director who is a member of the writing program staff and/or a member of the English faculty. The program handbook from UMass Amherst states that during these meetings, “the team discusses various aspects of teaching as well as various issues that arise in class: for example, conducting peer-response sessions and student conferences, presenting the ‘documented essay,’ setting appropriate goals, and evaluating student writing.” At the University of Waterloo, graduate students are apprenticed in their first year of support to a faculty member who is teaching a large undergraduate writing course. The duties of the apprentice in this program commonly include “leading tutorials, responding to students’ writing, grading students’ writing, conferring with students, attending course lectures, and compiling final marks.”

Methods of evaluating the performance of GTAs in apprenticeship

programs are best exemplified by the following description provided by the GTA educator at the University of Arizona:

### **Preceptorship Requirements**

- A. Submit to your TEAD [Teaching Advisor]:
  - 1 syllabus and course policy
  - 2 assignment sheet for each essay
  - 3 copies of all class handouts
  - 4 two sets of graded papers (1 before midsemester, 1 after)
  - 5 midsemester self-evaluation of teaching
  - 6 semester grades
- B. Attend all preceptorship and colloquium meetings called by TEAD, Course Director, and Composition Director
- C. Respond promptly to all memos.

### **How Your TEAD Will Evaluate You**

- A. Visit 2 classes (announced);
- B. Review 2 sets of graded papers;
- C. Confer with you after each visit and paper review;
- D. Respond in writing to self-evaluation;
- E. Write semester evaluation.

The purpose of these apprenticeship programs is often stated in practical terms. Apprenticeships provide GTAs with a support person, someone experienced in the teaching of writing and knowledgeable about the particular institution and writing program. For example, the purpose of the apprenticeship program in the English department at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville is "to introduce the graduate assistants to the specific philosophy—and a variety of methods for teaching in—UTK's composition program, as well as give them first-hand experience working with UTK [first-year students]." Similarly, the composition teachers' handbook from the University of Oregon states that the goal of the apprenticeship is to provide "practical experience in every aspect of teaching." It adds that apprenticeships provide supervising teachers (themselves often also graduate teaching fellows) "the opportunity to discuss their class and teaching methods with an eager student and to receive constructive criticism." In addition, therefore, GTA educators stress that apprenticeships can be rewarding learning experiences, given their highly individual character. These programs smooth first-year GTAs' transition into a writing program and their role as teachers.

## **Practica**

Many titles are given to the type of course I categorize as a practicum. Workshop, proseminar, colloquium, and staff meeting are all descriptions used in GTA education materials. The primary instructional focus of these courses is to provide practical support for GTAs in their first term (and sometimes repeated through their first year) of teaching. Although within this grouping some courses are more practical than others, their common denominator is that a majority of time in these classes is spent dealing with the immediate questions and concerns

new GTAs have regarding their current teaching. Courses in this category constitute the largest group within the continuum of GTA education curricula. Although several programs combine a practicum with teaching methods courses or writing theory seminars (e.g., Illinois State, Florida State, and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln), many rely on a practicum as the primary source of pedagogical instruction for GTAs.

Within this category, courses range from those described as support groups and staff meetings to those in which GTAs are asked to develop teaching philosophies grounded in current writing pedagogy. In those programs where this course is offered in consecutive terms during GTAs' first year of teaching, the character of the course frequently changes during second and third terms to concentrate on rhetoric and composition theory (e.g., Michigan Tech, Penn State).

Because these courses range in their level of practicality, let me begin by describing those which specialize in providing GTAs with weekly practical assistance. One educator of such a course described it as a teacher community where GTAs can "trade stories as well as share problems, strategies, and plans." Not all first-year GTAs may be required to attend these practica, only those who have not taken a pedagogy course at another institution. As another GTA educator wrote, "Theory is not emphasized in these courses." These practica frequently focus on problem-solving and idea-sharing, as descriptions from GTA educators at Illinois State, the University of Kansas at Lawrence, and Syracuse University respectively illustrate:

- The proseminar meets "weekly for 50 minutes to answer questions, address problems, share strategies, and in general try to meet practical teaching needs."
- "This course . . . normally consists of weekly meetings, directed by a senior faculty member, at which relevant pedagogical matters—from disciplinary problems and grading standards to assignment topics and rhetorical theory—are discussed."
- "Teaching Practicum requires that you attend and participate in two-hour, small-group meetings each week throughout the semester. . . . You will be able to talk about what to do in the classroom, develop course plans, share ideas with other first-year and experienced teachers, and work out whatever problems or questions you might have on weekly basis."

Also, in this type of course, GTA educators may organize the practicum syllabus to follow the standard syllabus used by GTAs in their first-year writing classes, often keeping just ahead of it. Syllabi from two such courses state that together the GTAs and their instructor will prepare assignments, read students' drafts, grade papers, "practice techniques of evaluation and peer-editing," and discuss teaching problems when they occur. When time permits, more general issues of the teaching of writing are addressed. And, as a final activity, one program invites first-year students "into the seminar to tell us what we've done right or wrong."

Those courses that present introductions to rhetoric and composition studies, while still remaining primarily focused on providing GTAs with immediate practical assistance, close the gap along the continuum of curricula between the most practical practica and those courses which address teaching methods. The Composition Instructors' Workshop at Bowling Green State University, which addresses ways new instructors might "integrate current rhetoric and composition theory in the classroom," as well as courses at Texas A&M and the University of Louisville, exemplify versions of this kind of practica. While explaining that the course will discuss "some composition theory, but not much," course materials from Texas A&M state the following goals:

- (1) learn to teach English in a college environment;
- (2) understand issues that affect the teaching of English in college;
- (3) become a better writer yourself;
- (4) manage your teaching and your students so that you and your students benefit from your semester together.

Similarly, a course offered at the University of Louisville provides "a very brief overview of traditional and contemporary rhetoric and of current research in composition theory and pedagogy, all illustrated with reference to English 101 and 102 at the University of Louisville." This approach allows GTAs to address the practical issues of syllabus design, assignment writing, commenting on students' writing, and leading class discussions with some reference to broader theoretical contexts.

Methods of evaluating GTAs in these types of courses combine classroom observations, examining sets of graded papers, peer observations, participation, and teaching journals or notebooks. The following list of requirements is used for a course taught in the writing program at Michigan Tech:

- (1) **A teaching notebook** in which you not only record but reflect upon your teaching practice—this includes reflection on planning or on articles you have read or discussions you have had about practice or that somehow inform your teaching.
- (2) **A portfolio of your work this term**—including syllabus, assignment sheets, at least three student papers that represent a range of abilities and include your responses, and a final statement on your teaching for the quarter.
- (3) At least **two peer observations** and a follow-up conference with me.
- (4) **Participation** in the seminar in terms of leading discussions, being prepared for discussions, and bringing student writing (or other work) in as assigned.

## Teaching Methods Courses

Courses grouped into this category form a bridge between practica, which concentrate on immediate teaching questions and concerns, and theory

seminars, which concentrate on historical contexts and exploring rhetoric and composition theories. Teaching methods courses are full-credit courses (as opposed to one-credit or partial-credit practica) and often consciously mimic methods courses taught in education departments. The primary instructional goal of these courses is to immerse GTAs in the language and methods of a program's writing pedagogy. These courses seek to imbue GTAs with practical teaching strategies, pedagogical texts, and most of all, a language for talking about teaching. In a teaching methods course, new teachers approach teaching from a number of perspectives. They engage in a variety of writing activities designed to model practices they will use in their own classrooms. They read and discuss not only student papers but also the professional literature of composition theory and writing pedagogy, becoming familiar with a language of teaching and the contexts out of which it developed. They observe teachers—even apprentice to them—help grade papers, conference with students, and may teach a class session. They work in writing centers tutoring first-year students for a limited number of hours. They engage in teacher research and produce (often collaborative) final projects for the course.

The theory presented in these courses is specifically pedagogical in nature and supports programmatic imperatives. For example, a course taught at Washington State University titled "Seminar in the Teaching of Writing: The Methodology of Composition" is organized to help GTAs "study, evaluate, and practice methods currently used in the teaching of composition, methods such as conferencing, heuristics, collaboration, peer-group critique, writing across the curriculum, epistemics, free writing, and others." Another course, offered at Ball State University, lists the following goals:

Students will attempt to

- Become acquainted with the history and current aims of composition teaching;
- Become familiar with the special demands of the Ball State Writing Program; and
- Learn about problems in composition pedagogy and explore possible solutions.

Those also in the Teaching Preparation Program will

- Study course organization and assignments in detail;
- Become acquainted with methods of experienced teachers; and
- Learn design issues and procedures for a typical composition course.

Both of Florida State's required summer courses, Teaching English as a Guided Study and Teaching English in College, with their focus on helping GTA's develop both specific teaching practices and teaching philosophies grounded in current composition theory, demonstrate the immersion of GTAs in both hands-on training and pedagogical discussion that characterizes teaching methods courses. Course materials from Teaching English in College state that GTAs will examine composition theory, "especially cognitive, developmental,

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and process approaches within the dynamics of social and expressivist theories of language," in order to help them develop a statement of teaching philosophy as well as the course materials they will use to teach their first classes in the fall. In addition to seminar discussions and writing workshops, GTAs also intern with instructors who are teaching summer-term writing courses.

Materials from Teaching English as a Guided Study, the second required course at Florida State, describe a course that examines three issues in tutoring and teaching: response, revision, and evaluation/grading. The primary instructional goals of this course include helping GTAs "develop a theory-based set of response, revision, and evaluation practices;" providing GTAs with experience in a writing workshop classroom by "participating in activities similar to those experienced by first-year writing students;" and obtaining "practical tutoring experience by tutoring two hours a week in the FSU Reading/Writing Center."

## Theory Seminars

At the farthest right end of the continuum are those courses which most closely resemble a graduate seminar, asking GTAs to explore the reaches and possibilities of theory's influence on teaching philosophies and practices. In all cases, these courses represent the second in a series of required courses within a program's GTA education curriculum. These types of courses differ from practica in central ways: although practical issues may be addressed, they concentrate on theoretical debates and on broadly historicizing the teaching of composition.

Moreover, these types of courses differ from teaching methods courses: theory seminars do not provide many moments for practical application, instead inviting GTAs into dialogue with contrasting theoretical perspectives. These courses range broadly over rhetorical and composition theories which may not all be directly pedagogical in nature or directly applied to teaching practices in class discussion. Importantly, the theories discussed in these courses are not limited to composition or rhetorical theories. As courses offered at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, and Illinois State demonstrate, theory seminars frequently include reading from other traditions such as psychology, education, linguistics, philosophy, feminist theory, critical theory, and politics.

Some courses within this category bring local concerns into dialogue with broader issues in theory important to writing instruction. Such a course, taught at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, brings into dialogue local and national contexts of writing instruction: "This course serves two purposes. . . . The first purpose is to introduce you to the philosophy and practice of composition teaching at UNL. The other purpose is to provide an introduction and overview of the field of composition and rhetoric, to invite you into some of the debates that energize the field, and to explore connections between the teaching of writing and the discipline of English as a whole." Similarly, a course at the University of Connecticut also stresses a double emphasis on theory and practice:

On the one hand, the course is designed to provide a grounding in the day to day practice of teaching writing, and on the other hand, in order for such a practice to be meaningful and dynamic, the course requires critical reflection on teaching practice; in short, one assumption behind the course is that practice and theory are not dichotomous.

These courses typically ask GTAs to consider the following: (1) the ways in which writing teachers inflect their instruction with philosophical/theoretical biases; and (2) what consequences such biases have on the nature of learning in the classroom. One GTA educator explained that the goal of this course is to explore “what philosophies tacitly or overtly underlie certain teaching practices and what theories we can consciously use to strengthen our own teaching and writing.” Another GTA educator, from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, writes that “the goal of the course, quite simply, is to cultivate critical and reflective practice. To that end, the course addresses theoretical issues and questions—where did college composition come from? What is its mission?—as well as practical ones—How do we respond productively to student writing? How do we go about preparing students to work in peer response groups?” Yet another GTA educator writes even more strongly that

As teachers, I think, we always feel a centripetal pressure that centers our attention on the mechanics of the classroom. What should we assign today? . . . What should we ask our students to write about? By what objective standard should we grade our students’ work? But when we consider the context—institutional, disciplinary, social, and personal—of our students and ourselves, we feel a range of centrifugal pressures that complicate what at first glance seems to be the safely enclosed world of the classroom. Those centrifugal pressures make it impossible to see the classroom as a neutral site of learning where the key questions are about the effective presentation and objective evaluation of material. The classroom is not a safe haven; it is a contested site where learning results from an active process of questioning, dialogue, and negotiation.

This type of course presents a particular challenge to new writing teachers—asking them, as a GTA educator from East Texas State University puts it, “to make what is known about composition an integral part of their own approach to teaching writing.” Also, however, some of these courses extend beyond this concern, asking GTAs to consider the ways in which their practices are embedded in cultural contexts that texture the learning experiences of their students.

Not surprisingly, the methods of evaluating GTAs in these courses resemble evaluation methods commonly used in graduate seminars. Class presentations, short papers (often responses to or reflections on the assigned readings), and a single formal research paper comprise the most common methods of evaluating GTAs. Often, writing assignments are collected in teaching portfolios at the end of a term, and one of the most common types of writing assignments included in this portfolio is a statement of teaching philosophy.

## The Most Typical Curricular Requirements —and Three Concerns

While this continuum presents the range of course types that constitute GTA education programs across the country, it also illustrates that most programs (three fourths of those represented in this overview) rely on a practicum to prepare new teachers of writing. To summarize the common characteristics of a practicum, the following comprises a typical GTA education program in rhetoric and composition studies:

- One course that meets once a week, sometimes repeated each term of a GTA's first year of teaching but more often not, totaling an average of three credit-hours.
- Taught by the director of the writing program or another member of the writing program committee.
- Focuses on the immediate needs and concerns of GTAs who are teaching in the program for the first time. Provides new teachers with discussion-leading strategies, guidelines for writing assignments and responding to student writing, as well as space for problem-solving and idea-sharing.
- Presents a brief overview of composition and rhetorical theories.
- Requires very minimal reading, focusing instead on first-year writing course materials and samples of first-year students' writing.
- Requires attendance, and participation is graded.
- Requires GTAs to keep a journal or teacher's notebook in which they record and reflect on lesson plans, assignments, and their students' progress.
- Requires GTAs to be observed by the Practicum instructor, and possibly also to observe another instructor's class.
- Requires GTAs to turn in all teaching materials as well as sets of graded papers or a selective sample of graded papers for evaluation by the Practicum instructor.

Based on these characteristics, the primary approach to preparing new teachers of writing is to supply a structure within which they can productively operate. That structure typically provides new teachers with standardized teaching materials, supervised practice in responding to and evaluating student writing, and practical guidance in the day-to-day procedures of classroom instruction. Given the distress many graduate students experience when faced with their first teaching assignments, as well as the concomitant concerns of GTA educators/WPAs to maintain consistent standards in all writing classes, this approach to preparing GTAs is understandable and necessary.

In fact, such practical instruction has a number of advantages. First, it provides an immediate program of action for inexperienced teachers, a way of behaving as a teacher. Second, this kind of course helps GTA educators assert a

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defining influence over the instructional goals and pedagogical philosophy of a writing program. Third, practical training, a kind of “Here’s how I do it” approach, can lay the groundwork for incorporating coaching and learning by doing approaches in GTA education (see, for example, Donald Schön’s work on educating the reflective practitioner). Finally, given the multiple strains on the time and energy of both WPAs and GTAs, practical training appeals to both their needs to give and receive concrete guidance.

However, despite the usefulness of this approach to GTA education, it raises some important questions. The prevalence of this type of course may suggest that the rhetoric and composition field teaches teachers within a pedagogical model that relies on translation-based approaches to theory and writing instruction and on one-way modes of communication: GTA educator to GTAs, GTAs to first-year students. This presents at least three concerns.

First, by relying primarily on practica that are skills-based, we are encouraging a notion that writing courses are contentless and that teaching writing requires minimal expertise. If writing ‘happens’ and the most we can do is provide the best environment for it and the right kind of encouragement, then a skills-based curriculum for GTAs makes some sense. However, compositionists and literacy theorists have recently questioned the contentless argument, contending that it reinforces class divisions by privileging those students who are already familiar with the literate practices they are expected to acquire in these courses (cf. Faigley, Miller, Delpit, Shor). Moreover, there is a danger that these practica devolve writing pedagogy from a critical practice with an epistemological grounding to sets of lesson plans and activities disconnected from a teaching philosophy.

Second, this type of teacher preparation perpetuates traditional administrative power structures that may neutralize the discipline’s efforts to redefine teaching and administrative activities for tenure and promotion cases as well as for the professionalizing of the discipline. Several programs participating in the survey encourage the active involvement of tenured, tenure-track, and part-time professional faculty; however, most rely on a single writing program administrator to deal with GTAs. An assumption of such an approach may be that centralizing a writing program in one position helps departments designate an established resource for dealing with writing issues. However, Jeanne Gunner has suggested such WPA-centric models maintain “a troubling degree of division” between WPAs and the writing instructors and GTAs who constitute their writing programs (8). She argues that such an “anti-democratic” division of authority disconnects writing teachers from the curriculum they teach, undermining their skills and helping departments justify “using literature graduate students and faculty to do a composition job” (13). WPA-centric programs striate authority in a top-heavy fashion and fix communication channels as one-way: top-down. Although, as Gunner argues, one person cannot simply transmit knowledge to others “via a prescribed syllabus, a preselected textbook” (13) and a set of teaching strategies, these are prominent characteristics of GTA education curricula.

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Third, the emphasis on skills training in the majority of GTA education programs may encourage a perception compositionists have long battled: Teaching writing is not valued, even by the rhetoric and composition field. By dispensing "training" in one to two hour doses once a week for one (possibly two) terms, this model encourages the passing out of class activities and other quick-fixes—an inoculation method of GTA education. We need to examine the message we are sending GTAs and our other colleagues in English studies by maintaining such practices.

Countering these concerns will require GTA educators and WPAs to build pedagogy courses and education programs that are more balanced, nested in teaching communities, and extended beyond the participation of first-year GTAs and a single faculty member.

## Striking a Balance Between Practical and Theoretical Frameworks

GTA education curricula should strike a balance between providing GTAs with practical skills and advice and helping them understand the writing theory and pedagogy grounding those skills. It would be a serious mistake to completely discontinue providing first-year GTAs with concrete and practical advice for teaching writing. What we need, then, is to find ways to balance these "whats" with "whys": We need to contextualize that advice by providing GTAs with the theoretical frameworks shaping them. Certainly, one step toward producing this balance includes a re-consideration of the kinds of reading (or lack of it) we require for GTAs in these courses.

Balancing these needs is the difference between providing GTAs with a vocabulary of key words and teaching them a language. For instance, teaching GTAs how to help students work through different stages of writing as they draft a single essay gives GTAs a set of process-based practices and key words from which they can teach. It gives them a vocabulary they can use with their students and with each other. It's a useful starting place. In addition, however, pedagogy courses need to help GTAs develop a language for teaching writing, which means contextualizing these key words within the discussions in rhetoric and composition studies about the goals and purposes of writing process approaches to teaching, about the debates over what that means, and about the evolution of those concepts. Bringing this kind of context into pedagogy courses helps new teachers gain an understanding of the complexity of writing instruction. It will help many of them fight the urge to dismiss students (or their own abilities) when an assignment or a class activity goes awry. What's more, grounding the teaching strategies shared in a practicum in a broader theoretical framework gives GTAs more tools for thinking about what's happening in their classrooms and for arriving at their own solutions to problems.

Incorporating discussion of and reflection on writing theory and pedagogy essays or texts is an important step in preparing GTAs to become profes-

sional teachers. By engaging in dialogues with a body of literature and with other composition specialists, GTAs can begin to develop a language to articulate why they grade papers in a certain way or why they believe in certain kinds of assignments and not others. By promoting such dialogues, we prepare GTAs for the future when they will need to know how to find answers to concerns we can not predict during a practicum.

## Developing Teaching Communities

Those GTA education programs that seem most impressive introduce first-year teachers to their writing pedagogy from multiple perspectives. They combat the damaging notion that teaching is an isolated activity—a private act between students and teachers occurring behind closed doors—by promoting community-building activities among new GTAs, advanced GTAs, instructors, and tenure-track faculty. On a grand scale are those programs in which GTAs participate in apprenticeship programs, tutor in writing centers, and enroll in pedagogy courses. These programs cultivate teaching communities in which first-year GTAs are immersed in multiple forums and conversations about teaching. Although developing such an extensive GTA education curriculum may not be possible in many programs, it should be our goal to develop an atmosphere where teaching or pedagogy is not viewed as the lowly concern of one administrator or one group of brand-new teachers.

Writing programs can cultivate teaching communities, in part, by multiplying the places and the people GTAs interact with as they develop their own teaching practices and philosophies. Some programs pair new and advanced GTAs together, asking them to visit each other's classes for a term and meet to discuss them. Some programs require GTAs, at some point in their first year, to work in a writing center tutoring students. Some programs organize regular grading workshops for small groups of faculty, part-time instructors, and GTAs. Some programs use the fall orientation as a place to showcase experienced teachers' talents by encouraging them to develop workshops or lead discussion sessions. Some programs have developed task forces consisting of writing teachers of all levels to advise the GTA educator and/or WPA on particular curriculum issues. Some programs encourage first-year and advanced GTAs to develop research groups, team-teach, draft conference abstracts and presentations, develop and run colloquia, and participate formally in the writing program by sitting on committees or acting as assistants to the writing program administrator.

By introducing GTAs to writing pedagogy and practice from many avenues and many people's perspectives, they learn to view teaching as a vibrant, constantly evolving, and valued practice. Additionally, GTA education programs that are anchored in such communities promote on-going teacher education which extends well beyond a GTA's first term or year of teaching.

## Engaging More Teachers in Pedagogy and GTA Education

More than anything else, and before much else can happen, GTA education programs will need the support and active involvement of many more people than this overview indicates are involved in preparing graduate teaching assistants. Tenured faculty, advanced GTAs, writing center professionals, instructors, and undergraduate students are under-utilized resources in most GTA education programs. Moreover, current administrative structures which, in many cases, place too many administrative burdens on one person—the WPA—will need re-thinking. Some programs have split this position, creating a separate GTA educator position, having both positions held by tenured or tenure-track faculty. Some programs require all tenured or tenure-track faculty in rhetoric and composition studies to rotate writing program responsibilities—including teaching or team-teaching required writing pedagogy courses. Unless or until pedagogy is a part of the regular conversations of many people in a department, instead of only one WPA and one group of new GTAs, writing teachers will struggle to combat their isolation and education programs will continue to over-emphasize skills-based models of writing instruction.

Although current curricula for educating GTAs ranges from apprenticeships and practica to combinations of methods and theory courses, the majority of writing programs continue to rely on one course—the practicum—for preparing graduate students to teach writing. Maintaining this primarily skills-based approach to educating GTAs helps ensure that the first-year students in their classes receive similar writing instruction, meeting or at least approaching programmatic standards. However, such a curriculum raises concerns regarding the shape and direction of writing pedagogy in rhetoric and composition studies and the long-term preparation of GTAs as professional teachers. By offering this overview as well as these three challenge areas, I hope to promote on-going discussions about what we are and are not achieving in our efforts to prepare new writing teachers and to introduce graduate students to rhetoric and composition studies.<sup>3</sup>

## Notes

1. How many English departments require GTAs to complete courses in writing instruction? According to Carol Hartzog's 1986 study, 83% of schools responding to her study require such training programs and another 10% answered that courses in writing instruction were optional (Hartzog 48-49). More recently, in a 1994 study titled, "Doctoral Programs in Rhetoric and Composition: A Catalog of the Profession," 56% of the 72 programs listed a writing pedagogy course as a "core or required course"—this despite the authors' contention that they found little consistency in core requirements among the programs (Brown et al.).

2. This article is a condensed version of the second chapter of my dissertation, "The Politics of GTA Education in Rhetoric and Composition Studies." This larger project constructs a portrait of GTA education in rhetoric and composition studies and complicates common approaches to preparing GTAs by outlining a set of initiatives for broadening the field's writing pedagogy. The dissertation's

central argument is that GTA education programs are an important site of disciplinary formation and have much to tell the field about the processes through which writing pedagogies are produced. Methodologically, it relies on a variety of interpretative and qualitative approaches. Beyond Chapter Two which is represented here, Chapter Three examines commonplace narratives which emerge from a review of the professional discourse on GTA education. Chapter Four analyzes course materials, writing program materials, and in-depth interviews with four GTA educators and generates a series of principles and practices which constitute alternatives for preparing graduate students as writing teachers and as members of the rhetoric and composition field. Finally, Chapter Five articulates a number of programmatic challenges that remain constant for GTA educators.

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