

Inventing a Teacherly Self: Positioning Journals in the TA Seminar

Jackie Grutsch McKinney and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater

In departments with teaching assistants, WPAs will often face one of the most difficult classes to teach: the teaching seminar for new TAs. The challenge is training one of the most vulnerable and powerless populations in the university—graduate students—to teach another vulnerable and powerless group—first-year students. A teaching journal is commonly assigned in such classes to support the struggle of new TAs and to enable a dialogue between the WPA and the new TAs concerning new practices being tried out in the classroom and new theories being read and considered in the practicum. The TA journal allows the WPA a window into how the new teacher's identity is initially being composed and performed within the TA's classroom. As such, teaching journals provide a discursive space for inventing a teacherly identity. In "Teaching Against the Teaching Against Pedagogy," Lad Tobin discusses the importance of such a space. Tobin writes:

New teachers must compose teacherly identities through invention, performance, integration, revision, trial-and-error. In order to make purposeful decisions about specific, concrete issues (e.g., how to arrange desks in the room, what to wear when they teach, what texts to assign, what grading system to use, and so on), graduate students must first recognize, develop, and invent themselves as teachers (71).

In the TA seminar we recently taught together, we required a weekly journal where TAs reflected both on the required readings and on the activities and questions raised about their own classrooms. At some points we posed specific questions to the entire class for their weekly journal writing (e.g., report on one student whose classroom behavior disturbs or intrigues you), but most often we allowed the weekly assigned readings and their ongoing classroom experiences to shape the journal entries. As co-instructors

(one tenured faculty WPA and one experienced graduate student), we both responded to these journals—writing in the margins, asking questions, and offering resources and advice—and at least once we had the TAs respond to each other’s journals. As the course progressed, we realized that what the TAs decided to write about and how they presented themselves to us was a point of high interest since, in some ways, it reflected what the TAs were getting out of our seminar by showing which theories and practices they were trying out and validating in their own classrooms.

Although our decision to teach the seminar together was planned in advance of the course, (for Elizabeth it was a conscious attempt to equalize the power differential between her and the new TAs by having Jackie, whose position is as a fellow TA, serve as a co-instructor), deciding to research the class came later. The idea slowly developed out of our conversations that preceded and followed the three-hour seminar. After finding many of our conversations returning to the TA journals, we knew we had to collect and reread these journals in their entirety. At the end of the course, every TA in the course granted us permission to reread, photocopy, and use their writing as data. In the semester following the course, we did just that. Working as co-instructors for this course prompted us to carry out a year-long conversation about our teaching practices, something we did not do when teaching solo. As such, we discovered more about one of our prized teaching pedagogies, the journal, than we would have without such conversations.

As we found ourselves drawn to discussing the TA journals and what we felt they were telling us, we noticed patterns in them: stories, self-descriptions, and questions that reappeared. While at first it was the journal narratives that attracted our attention, as we placed all our data within the context of the whole course, we were able to get a fuller sense of our TAs’ strengths and vulnerabilities. It is our intention to share our analysis of the journal narratives and then contextualize them within the whole seminar to argue how valuable the journals are for what Tobin suggests—*inventing, performing, integrating, and revising the emerging teacher identity and for documenting the TAs’ self presentations in their classrooms.* At the same time we see our own reading of the teaching journals as a cautionary tale—for the journal does not always provide the whole story of how well new teachers are negotiating the territory of their writing classrooms and student interactions. In short, WPAs ought to be aware when assigning, reading, and responding to TA journals that there may be certain tropes, narratives, or performed identities in play because of the very rhetorical situation of the journal: the audience, the purpose, and the invented teacherly self.

It is useful to be aware more specifically that while the WPA is the primary audience for the journal and that to some extent the rhetorical purpose for writing the journal is for the TAs to persuade the WPA that they are doing a credible job, the TAs are also dialoging with themselves. In their journals they are trying on different roles and identities to see which one fits best. Through journaling, the new teacher retrofits various idealized masks to match their emerging teaching selves. Primarily, our analysis was shaped by the work of Erving Goffman and Thomas Newkirk. Goffman helped us understand the TA journal as a kind of “performance.” We were reminded by Goffman that “the representation of an activity will vary in some degree from the activity itself and therefore inevitably misrepresent it” (65). This helped us (eventually) to see the TAs’ accounts of their teaching as only representations. Newkirk, who applies Goffman in his work, *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*, shows how students’ personal essays follow certain tropes which do not necessarily reveal *the self*, but often student essays are performances which reveal *a construction of a self* that the student thinks will please the instructor. Additionally, we found useful the wide range of work on reflexivity borrowed from theorists Donald Schon (*The Reflexive Practitioner*), Donna Qualley (*Turns of Thought*), and Kathleen Blake Yancey (*Reflection in the Writing Classroom*). Yancey, in particular, reminded us that teaching, like writing, is “recursive and generative” (24). The value of the journal as a piece of reflective practice for TAs is evident: TAs are able to describe, explain, and even argue with WPAs about their teaching while also explaining themselves to their selves.

JOURNAL NARRATIVES

What follows are five narrative strands that we discovered recurring over and over in the journals of our new TAs, strands which reveal their struggle to compose and present a coherent teacherly identity both for us and for themselves. As we analyzed the thirteen teaching journals, we were interested in how TAs described themselves as writing teachers, what types of classroom interactions they foregrounded as well as what types of pedagogical practices they discussed and how those did or did not link to the theories we had read in our seminar. We considered what “gets said” in this journal discourse and what goes unsaid and why. Our consideration of the teaching journal helped us determine what type of support the writing teachers might need, signaling us to suggest further readings or resources that might be helpful and overall giving us ways of understanding the different self presentations that our TAs were constructing as new teachers.

In categorizing the narrative strands contained within the TA journals, we mainly see the TAs struggle to present a coherent *narrative*. While Nancy Welch in “Resisting the Faith” writes about the narrative of conversion encouraged by one composition program, we noticed a much broader range of narratives. Our seminar was not, in fact, set up for conversions but for each new instructor to create a teaching philosophy consistent with his or her practice and beliefs about teaching and which drew upon the strengths each brought to the program from his or her own previous training and disciplinary interests. Although we do not see this list as all-inclusive or exhaustive of the narratives TAs write, we do think that embedded in these journal entries are the types of appeals which are useful and instructive for those supervising, teaching, and responding to new composition instructors.

Confessions: I Made a Mistake

A common rhetorical stance in the journals was the confession. TAs wrote unabashedly about the mistakes they made in teaching. These narratives are different from the others because the TAs know what they did goes against the theories and practices discussed in our seminar. Telling this type of story is probably part cathartic, yet still part tragic hero tale. It tells the readers, us, “I get what’s going on in our seminar, and I’m getting better as a teacher but I’ve goofed. Please forgive me.” In these both small and larger confessions, the TA was seeking absolution or forgiveness for the error of his or her ways. In our responses to these confessions, we generally granted our absolution as this sort of narrative calls for it.

Throughout the semester, we saw many confessions which seem aimed directly towards Elizabeth in her role as “Director of Composition,” as the Boss. For instance, Laura admits to oversleeping and missing her class. Lisa cuts short her class one day because her personal life is spinning out from underneath her. And, Carl, sick as can be, still holds his class one day, but ends it early in flu-saturated defeat. These cancellations or abbreviation of classes are things a boss would be concerned with. Even though these graduate students had to negotiate their own solutions to these dilemmas, they still seemed to run them past Elizabeth to make sure they were still functioning as—or still were—good employees. Writing about their mistakes in their journals allows them to admit their mistakes without having Elizabeth hear about them from another source and also allows Elizabeth to offer her suggestions, such as the importance of being well and not trying to teach while sick.

Offerings: Am I Right? Or, See, I’m Doing Fine

The next pattern that we both recognized frequently in the journals we have named “offerings.” In this narrative, students would either write success stories or ask for help. The religious connotation is no accident here; we saw

these stories to some degree, as true offerings in the form of thanksgiving for abundance (or success stories) or a plea for help. Our response to these offerings was to accept them, to reaffirm what was going well in someone's classroom and to suggest solutions for TAs who invited us to give advice.

The success stories, like the confessions, reveal what the TA thinks is expected of him or her. Whereas in the confessions, the TAs know they have made a mistake and frequently showed how to amend it, in the success story offerings, TAs instead show how they have done a good job. For instance, David writes about his second week of class: "When I walked into the dark classroom Thursday morning, the sacred semi-circle of desks had already been drawn, just as instructed. This, for me, is a wonderful sign." He's constructed himself as an effective teacher here. His students have already followed his directions about the classroom set-up.

The second type of offerings, pleas for help, we asked for. By the third week we noticed that only one or two TAs were looking at specific students or issues in their classes. So we asked students to explore these things, and they did. This can be seen in an example from Kari's journal. Kari writes about two students who monopolize conversation and her other students who have begun to make fun of the two monopolizers. Kari writes, "I don't know how to approach the other students who make fun of them. . . . Sometimes I think I should speak to them privately and ask them to keep their comments to themselves. What do y'all think? Have y'all ever had that problem?"

What is interesting about these narratives is that the plea for help does not show that the TA knows how to fix the problem or assess the situation. It is not a confession because the TA is not writing that he or she has made a mistake, and at the same time, it is not a success story because the TA is not assessing it as one. Kari, for example, offers a possible solution, but then calls on us to tell her what to do. She does not try to amend the situation first nor does she refer back to the theories or practices we have discussed in class. At the same time, she does not ask, "What should I do?" She asks, specifically, "What do y'all *think*?" The positioning here is complex. She is asking for help in a very indirect way that does not undercut her own authority in the classroom but invites us to help her solve a problem.

Aversions: I Just Want to Know How to Do This

The novice TA's aversion to theory is well known (see Flannery; Tobin; Salvatori and Kameen; Seitz; Wilhoit), so it is no surprise that we found this narrative in the journals, too. This negative response to course readings is probably the most resistant of the patterns we investigated since what we find in these journals is an objection to the entire field of composition stud-

ies, which is new to most of them. Even the most ardent admirer of contemporary literary theories can reject readings about composition and rhetoric wholesale because they do not give them what they feel they need most: practical advice. Aversions are difficult to respond to since they tread heavily on our own professional identities. They reminded us how to see composition through the beginner's eyes.

Most times this objection is voiced because TAs do not know what to *do* with the theory. This can be seen in Rod's journal where he writes, "I'm beginning to feel like all of my journal entries begin the same way: I appreciate what is being said by the author, but I fail to see the practical application. Or Chris, who approaches the seminar reading with dread: "I didn't look forward to these assignments. I'm not eager to read what I perceive to be dull pedagogical texts," although in the same sentence he admits that "I am eager to become a better teacher," and he goes on to discuss two situations where he actually applied collaborative theory read in our seminar to his work as a graduate student.

Other times, this aversion seemed to be annoyance or anger at the genre of composition theory. Matt wrote in response to one reading, "If Mrs. [author's name] would rise from her knees, where she's been blinding worshipping theory, she might be able to see that teaching is not just the potential to be inscribed into a baroque, multi-tiered network of power relations." (Later, in his teaching portfolio, Matt does apologize for his "vitriolic attacks on theory" and thanked us for our "tolerance" toward his ranting.)

Conscientious Objections: Sorry, But It Doesn't Work

The next narrative that we discovered in these journals was objections. TAs writing objections did not reject theory as they did in the aversions. In fact, they leaned on the theories and/or practices we discussed in class. But they write in these objection tales about the theory/practices that do not work for them, so they will not use them any longer. These narratives, in shorthand, go like this: "You told me to try this. I tried it, but it doesn't work. Thus, I'm not going to do it anymore.

Matt, for one, writes about how he is dealing with the issue of lecturing so much in his composition class—a topic we breached in our journal comments to him and in our whole class discussion. Matt tells us that he has discussed it with his class, and they want him to lecture more. He says, "Although we've reached the predictable conclusion that sustained dialogue (give and take) is preferable, we've also decided that I do have information that they want and they want more of it. I, of course, am glad to hear this because I want to give it." Doing so, Matt appeals to a higher authority: the

customer is always right. In becoming a conscientious objector, Matt risks offending us, who have told him otherwise, that to us discussions are more important than lectures.

That none of the methods introduced in our seminar will work for everyone is a disconcerting point for the beginning teacher. Matt shows that he is concerned with his students and with his teaching and that is the aim of the seminar, to make students and learning the focus of the course, and to put those decisions about how to best achieve that into the hands of the new writing teachers. Out of all the narratives, we were most concerned initially with the teachers who wove these tales since our fear was that they were composing a teacherly self that resisted or misinterpreted every theory or practice we had shared with them in our seminar.

Transformations: See How I Have Changed

Transformations or tales of change about what teachers have come to understand over the course of their first semester of teaching are the closest match to the type of conversion narratives Welch discusses. Many of these stories about changed perceptions or insights appear in the final journal reflections where TAs are asked to reread their teaching journal and reflect on what they see as valuable learning from them. As discussions of theory and successful practices begin to leak into the journals over the course of the semester, new teachers share how these ideas begin to serve their goals in the classroom, resulting not so much in conversions but a relieved sense that what they have been studying does really make sense in the long haul, resulting in a kind of transformed teacher.

Here J. T., a creative writer, admits that he has always “hated the word journal because it implies no one will ever read it and that the writing is for me and not other people.” J. T. compares this concern with audience to his inability to watch movies on video because he cannot “believe that anyone else in the world is watching that particular movie at that particular time, and therefore I feel I am not part of anything.” Given this rejection of journaling, J. T.’s changed attitude toward their potential usefulness comes as the result of observing Elan’s class, where he shares that “observing Elan’s class inspired me to build in journals and informal writings” in the following semester. His reasoning is that in journal writing he will “eventually see this informal writing in a revised form, and since I will see it, the audience, small as it may be, does exist.” In spite of the course readings and exhortations about the value of informal writing, J. T. resists the practice until he observes its potential power in a colleague’s classroom. The tales of trans-

formation most often occurred at the end of the semester, as expected. This kind of narrative inspires pride in the heart of seminar leaders. Look, we exclaim, they finally got it!

Categorizing the types of narratives recorded in TA journals helped us see how hard TAs work toward constructing a teaching self that holds together. As Mary Rose O'Reilley reminds us, "We settle on a story we can live with, not only because it's hard to be honest but also because our minds keep trying to create order" (10). Teaching is a chaotic activity because there are so many things to juggle and so much to attend to; no wonder the new TA struggles towards a coherent self-presentation. We found TAs seemed to create a particular persona and maintained that persona in their journals throughout the duration of the course, not just in individual entries. Consequently, if a TA presents, say, a confident teaching self sprinkled with a few confessions, as readers we begin to equate the presentation with the actual teaching. Because of this, by halfway through the course we had created a list of "high-priority TAs"—ones who we were most worried about. Yet, once we started to observe these TAs in action and see other assignments, our "priorities" changed. Our own need as seminar leaders to create an orderly perception of our teaching assistants was disrupted by the larger tales that their work had to tell by placing it in the context of the entire seminar's writing and discussions.

At first then, we misread the TAs' self-presentations or teaching narratives as the *only* or as the *true* narrative of their teaching experiences, but upon rereading the journal in context with the other assignments and the multiple data points of the course, we came to see that the teaching reflections and self-presentations were not the only useful barometers for the TA's classroom. Just as Newkirk notices in his undergraduate essays that students create personas or perform a self in their writing, he also shows the limitation of this self-construction when he asserts, "The key feature of these presentations is their selectivity; every act of self-presentation involves the withholding of information that might undermine the idealized impression the performer wants to convey" (3). All details that may contradict or offer another story are usually hidden or suppressed, but eventually the narrative tears, leaks, or ruptures.

There are always "faultlines" within teacher stories, as Richard Haswell reminds us in *Comp Tales*. There, Haswell discusses the importance of looking closely at the stories we tell as teachers for the leaks: Comp tales will seem lightweight if we do not try to extend their meaning in ways native to their genre. That genre is always narrative, but it is also personal and vernacular and oral and social. Two ways of extending comp tales are by looking for moral directive (always there) and for embedded tales (always there)"

(186). In our second section, then, we look at the embedded tales, the fault-lines, ruptures, or disjunctures as revealed through multiple data sources from our seminar. Whereas the journals usually offered us nearly seamless narratives, other seminar assignments showed teacherly selves which were not so neat. The assigned ethnography, student analysis paper, conference analysis, peer classroom observations, and portfolios allowed us to juxtapose many different types of data against the ongoing narrative of the teaching journal. Now we sharpen our focus and look closely at three of the students in the seminar whose journal narratives led us to believe their teaching was going well, and we show the moments of disjuncture which allowed us a larger understanding of the TAs' struggles. As we locate these moments of tension, we find that there is another story to read that is not captured by the smoother narrative TAs compose for their journals.

THREE STUDENTS, THREE CONTEXTS

David

David was the only TA in our seminar of thirteen TAs who was a rhetoric and composition major. David acknowledged his allegiance to his chosen major by sharing with us in his final course reflection that he sensed a “them and us” feeling to the seminar since so many of his fellow colleagues initially resisted composition theory. In the seminar, David presented himself as very laid back and casual, often waiting to speak last about a topic but commanding a real sense of respect from his peers because he had read some of the material before and already formulated an opinion about it. There was an evenness and thoughtfulness to David's self presentation in our seminar and in his journal entries. He approached the seminar with confidence and dedication: He loved theory. He loved rhetoric. And he loved teaching because of the reflective stance it encouraged for him: “We have to step back and reflect, analyze, and criticize in order to see the sometimes hidden theory that informs our teaching practices,” he wrote.

While in David's seminar journal we read the narrative of “everything's swell,” he actually had more not-so-swell issues in his class (or was at least the most honest about his problems) than any other new teaching assistant. In his first semester of teaching English 101 at our institution, David encountered and wrote about these issues: his problems with leading whole class discussions (he did teach at 8 AM), admitting that only five students out of twenty-two spoke in any given class period; his struggle with group work and student resistance to it; his questions about students falling asleep in his class and how to handle this; and, finally, the “big P” of plagiarism.

David's rupture in this smooth presentation of himself came at the end of the semester when he faced three very different plagiarism cases. When he reported this situation to Elizabeth, he had read all the institutional policies on plagiarism and wanted mainly to talk over his understanding of how to handle working it through. He seemed unflustered by what had happened, although he was clearly more sympathetic to one of the three students. Elizabeth left the ultimate resolution up to David but cautioned that the students needed to understand the seriousness of their infractions, whether intentional or not. David accepts the full blame for the plagiarism problems, which he ultimately attributed to the generic research assignment he had given. As well, he reflected on the way he had organized his response to the first drafts of the research papers suggesting that their wholesale copying came into play because he had relied too heavily on peer review of the initial drafts. Only one of the three students downloaded the entire paper and of this student David is clear about his course of action; "I plan to punish the student to the fullest extent possible according to the university handbook. He will receive an F in the course." The other two students, he writes "worked much harder to make it look like a "real" paper by gluing together texts from various websites. But of the three, only one had a good attendance and participation record. At first David felt that he might give this person "a second chance, asking her to rewrite the paper and reflect on what she's learned in order to pass the class."

David's journal narrative of trying to find a fair approach was read that week by another TA. Chip, his colleague, writes a thoughtful and supportive response:

I know too that that third case was a harder one to fail. Because you sometimes see these as big mistakes, you like to accommodate that other human gift—compassion. Had you done that, I think it would have been okay. Yet, then the gate becomes a flexible unsurity and we lose ourselves in trying to establish the new rules and all the "what if" cases that came our way. . . . Part of our job is to manage that gate. It's best then for you—now and in the future—to be fixed as to what opens and closes it. So, plagiarism closes it—always.

And for David, plagiarism did close it; he failed all three students.

This tension over the plagiarism cases was important for David and for us since we all had to revise his self-presentation. Even though he was confident about his teaching as a rhetoric and composition major, he found his own assignment and response sequencing partly to blame for the plagiarism cases. This moment made us reflect on our work with David. We realized

that because of his allegiances and abilities to write about composition theories and practices in his journals, we had read him as “swell” too. While we might have gone looking for trouble in the journal narratives of our literature and creative writing TAs, we assumed David was doing fine. In our rereading, we realized many other occasions we missed recognizing the other stories in his text because we liked the narrative that David was telling us. We glossed over the fact that he had assigned over fifty-five readings for his students, clearly not appropriate for a writing course. We did not critique his research assignment paper closely enough. Because of his past training and his confident self-presentation, we ignored the ruptures outside of his journal, in his syllabus and writing assignments because he was, after all, telling our story—composition is important and I love it.

Joyce

Joyce came to our seminar with an MA in literature already completed in our department, a year of teaching experience at a local community college, and a previous work history of twenty years at IBM. Joyce was most professional in her self-presentation in our seminar as well as in her journals and papers written for the course. Joyce planned her first-year composition course carefully and entered into the seminar discussions and work just as she might enter the workplace, as a fully engaged learner ready to tackle a new challenge while drawing on a rich well of resources from her previous corporate and ongoing graduate student experiences. In one word, Joyce is responsible; she takes care of things. In our seminar, she was always looking ahead and asking about future readings and assignments. Occasionally, she also followed-up these in class questions with emails, seeking clarification, which demonstrated that in spite of her background and experience, Joyce was not overly confident. This “checking-in” presented us with an interesting persona—one we were both comfortable and uncomfortable with. We saw Joyce as overly eager to “get it right,” yet we didn’t expect any unfortunate surprises from Joyce.

In working with Joyce we found it was important to recognize that she was a literature major, that she embraced specific ideas about the authority of texts as well as theories about reading that might be counter to theories of teaching beginning composition. In her journals Joyce had presented herself as a willing and open reader of every theorist assigned, drawing out the good points in each thinker. Because of this, we read Joyce as a teacher who was trying out the new theories in her class. Instead of having aversion to composition theory, as many of her classmates, Joyce thought through how she might apply them in her journals.

But then she read Robert Schwegler's article, "The Politics of Reading Student Papers," and led the seminar discussion on it. Joyce admitted that Schwegler's ideas about a teacher disclosing her political/personal ideologies in reading student papers "scared her" because she felt that she was so "far to the left politically that I don't even discuss politics with my acquaintances here in the South." Here, in her journal, and in a later class discussion where she asserts that teachers should not bring up race in discussions but deal with it if it surfaces, Joyce writes herself as a teacher who will leave her politics outside of class. She wants to be detached and objective.

Joyce's inner debate over finding political/ideological meanings in student texts in the way she had been trained to locate such meanings in literary texts was explored in one of the assignments for the seminar that required her to analyze how she went about reading and responding to a student paper from her own class. For this assignment Joyce wrote about a paper that clearly displayed conflicted values on the part of the student writer, who adds a sentimental conclusion to her portrait of her deceased grandfather even though he is clearly a heavy drinker and has little regard for the environment. Rather than ignore the conflicting values that Joyce finds in the paper as well as the difference in values between herself and the writer, she addresses them with the student writer both in a conference and in her commentary. In her analysis paper Joyce writes that

I've come to understand that it's not only permissible to voice my own opinions on the cultural, social, and political content of the papers I'm reading [but] a natural and beneficial part of the writing process. I must remind myself, however, this knowledge doesn't give the teacher license to run roughshod over the students' papers or insist that they conform to her ideology.

This moment of disjuncture for Joyce was not fully resolved but mixed around a bit as she began to see that she would need to develop a theory for reading student papers just as she had for reading literary texts. Joyce told us the following semester that she has, in fact, given herself permission to enter into discussions with students on controversial topics and that she feels much more comfortable doing this. While it is not unusual for a doctoral student in literature to view student writing as vastly different from literary texts, it is often a disconcerting experience for them to learn that compositionists read student writing through a political, ideological lens. Once the similarity between reading published and student writing is established (and accepted), the TA with a literature background may become a strong reader

and responder of student texts. Joyce's journal gave us no clues to her conflicted approach to student writing until she had to apply the ideas in our readings to a writing assignment for our seminar.

Jenny

Jenny's past, present, and future is in writing. She had already earned her master's degree in creative writing before coming to our program to work on her MFA in fiction. She was one of the few students in the seminar who had no previous teaching experience. Despite this, or because of this, Jenny immersed herself into her teaching and into the learning of how to teach. She frequently asked questions and shared her missteps in our seminar; she wanted advice from her peers and us. She wrote long journals outlining her teaching and responses to our readings—and even the very early entries show her confidence in her undertaking. She knows what good teachers do, and she knows she wants to be a good teacher.

If there were one word to describe Jenny's developing teaching style, it would be *responsive*. Her journal entries are full of how she's adjusted her course plans to account for new needs or to adapt to new theories. Jenny, for example, scrapped her second essay topic to let students research and reflect on the events of 9/11 instead. In another particular telling example, Jenny confronts a student, asking him why he habitually comes late to class. He tells her that things don't really "get started" until five or ten minutes into class, so he doesn't show up until then. Jenny thinks for a second, and then agrees with the student—she *does* wait to get started until everyone is there. She makes a deal with the student to start on time if he shows up on time. He consents, and by her accounts, he keeps the deal. These kinds of moments are frequent in Jenny's journal. Her self-presentation typically reads: I had a problem, I fixed it, and now everything is fine—showing herself to be aware, successful, and flexible.

Jenny shows herself as a critical reader of her own teaching in her Conference Analysis paper. She tapes a conference with a "shy" student named Tavius. In her paper, she writes about being frustrated that the conference had gotten off track. She tries to bring it back around but does so by saying things that may not actually be "true" in order to bolster his self-esteem and sees that she perhaps has not even answered the one question the student has about "Hills Like White Elephants." She writes, "In the future, I would like my conferences to address the specific concerns of the students more, so I will ask for a written list of questions at the beginning of the session." For Jenny, this conference is not so much about collaborating *with* the student. It is about giving something useful *to* the student. Undoubtedly, as a creative writer, Jenny has worked side-by-side with a number of mentors. They gave

her something. And, Jenny as a writer feels that she can give something to her students. This is evident in how she was disappointed that she was not giving enough and not saying it well enough for her own standards. But, like many of her narratives, the problem is solved and things are fine by the end. Tavius, she tells us, shows change by his next draft, understanding after all what she was talking about with the Hemingway story, and he starts to come out of his shell and take part in class more.

The most interesting part of this assignment for us was the story Jenny did not tell. In the transcripts of the conference, we see that Jenny speaks in long paragraphs, while Tavius replies in words. Jenny does not mention a concern for this in her paper. In fact, she is more concerned with the language she uses; she is disappointed with the number of filler words she sees in her transcripts. This was an important moment for us to read the transcripts and see once again how retellings can simplify something that is much more complex in real life. In our responses to Jenny's analysis, neither one of us paid much attention to what has bothered Jenny in her reading of the conference—the "ums." Instead, Elizabeth gives a different reading of the conference based on the transcript. She notes inconsistencies between what Jenny has narrated and what the transcriptions show about her interactions with Tavius. Jackie also pushes the dominance of Jenny's talk in her comments on the paper by saying, "You have worked hard in this conference." Later, she asks Jenny, "How are you going to deal with [student] silences?" Thus, both of us pick up on different stories that complicate the original narrative that Jenny presents us. Still, at the same time, both of us at the end of our comments confirm the narrative she has written, too. Elizabeth says, "Don't deprecate yourself for building Tavius's self-esteem." And Jackie writes, "It sounds like you've made some progress with Tavius. Good for you—you've got him." This moment of rupture allowed us to step in and ask questions about the way Jenny had narrated her experience with Tavius and to offer some further tools of analysis about speech and silence in conferences to make her future conferences more productive.

CONCLUSIONS

These three teaching assistants provided us with data for placing the body of their work within our TA seminar into a more contextualized reading of the ways they were constructing their teacherly identities. Neither the teaching journal, seminar papers, class discussions, peer or supervisor observations stand alone: they all inform one another. We noticed a broad range of stories emerge in our TA journals, tales in which TAs constructed an array of stances and appeals as they were trying out their new teacherly selves. In

this way our program is not perhaps much different than many others that also struggle with allowing new TAs to find their way in their first-year writing courses. In “Recent Trends in TA Instruction,” Stephen Willhoit writes, “Today, TA in-service programs must balance three related needs: to educate TAs in composition theory and pedagogy, to maintain a theoretically coherent writing program, and to respect TAs’ own theories of writing” (18). In fact, programs like the one Nancy Welch attended may not be as successful as they think in converting teachers to a party line. Margaret Baker Graham and Carol David report in their two year study of TA training that teachers in their program do not all teach under the same philosophy they have trained them in, and in the end it is not necessary that they should. What seems far more important is for TAs to have an opportunity to invent, try out and perform their new identities as writing teachers on the pages of their journals and course work for the seminar. For in spite of the limitations we found in the TA journals, they did provide us with the concerns of new TAs, which were often different from our own agendas. Listening and responding to the journals led us to changes in readings and assignments, as well as provided us with issues to clarify, conferences to be arranged and observation priorities. But the journal, as we hope we have pointed out here, does not tell the whole tale. No single slice of data from the teaching seminar does. In our situation it was the combination of writings, observations, and class dialogue that helped us see and understand the struggle that new TAs face in constructing themselves as teachers.

We have learned from this course and our collaboration in teaching and researching that TA journals are complicated rhetorical situations. When students composed successful teaching selves, we found ourselves persuaded by the presentation. Alternatively, when students composed their teaching as disastrous, we worried. Because the TAs understood the journals differently, they wrote different stories. Some felt they had to show they were doing fine—others confessed that they were having troubles. Some saw the journals as a space to interrogate the readings, and others imagined we wanted to see their teaching selves transform in the course. As we have said, they constructed their teaching selves in the journals, but their narratives also told us they were constructing the assignment and us in particular ways. Therefore, it is particularly important for all WPAs to ask themselves: What stories do my TAs tell or not tell? What selves do they present or hide from me? And, what seams do I unravel and what seams do I leave alone?

The real value of looking at both the ways new teachers represent themselves in their journals—as well as the leakage and faultlines of their teacher narratives within the rest of the course assignments—was not in helping

them toward a more coherent presentation of self as a teacher. Rather, this kind of inquiry shows the extent to which the art of teaching is a reflexive practice that is always fractured and disruptive; it is these disruptions that lead to insight.

WORKS CITED

- Flannery, Kathryn. "What Does Theory Have to Do with Me?' Reading Literacy Theory in a Teacher Preparation Program." *Reader 33/34* (1995): 11-37.
- Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1959.
- Graham, Margaret Baker, and Carol David. "What's Up on Monday Morning? TA Training and Freshmen English." *Writing on the Edge 7.2* (1996): 59-72.
- Haswell, Richard. "Taking in Comp Tales." *Comp Tales*. Ed. Richard Haswell and Min-Zhan Lu. New York: Longman, 2000. 183-94.
- Newkirk, Thomas. *The Performance of Self in Student Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1997.
- Salvatori, Mariolina and Paul Kameen. "The Teaching of Teaching: Theoretical Reflections." *Reader 33/34* (1995): 103-24.
- Schwegler, Robert. "The Politics of Reading Student Papers." *The Politics of Writing Instruction*, Ed. Richard Bullock and John Trimbur. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1991. 203-25.
- Seitz, David. "English 780: Teaching Research Writing." *Composition Studies 29.1* (2001): 95-122.
- Tobin, Lad. "Teaching Against the Teaching Against Pedagogy: Reading Our Classrooms, Writing Our Selves." *Reader 33/34* (1995): 68-84.
- Welch, Nancy. "Resisting the Faith: Conversion, Resistance, and the Training of Teachers." *College English 55.4* (1993): 387-401.
- Wilhoit, Stephen. "Recent Trends in TA Instruction: A Bibliographic Essay." *Preparing College Teachers of Writing: Histories, Theories, Programs, Practices*. Ed. Betty P. Pytlík and Sarah Liggett. New York: Oxford UP, 2002. 17-27.
- Yancey, Kathleen Blake. *Reflection in the Writing Class*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 1998.

