

What's Theorizing Got to Do With It? Teaching Theory as Resourceful Conflict and Reflection in TA Preparation

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We are all disciplined by ideologies of which we can at best be only partly conscious. And we all at one time or another intentionally and unintentionally contribute to the disciplining of others. (170)

—Lisa Ede

In what ways might a program for preparing new teaching assistants fruitfully draw on the competing and dynamic ideologies by which they—and we as TA mentors—are disciplined? How can teacher-trainers and mentors best identify and foster sites of ideological conflict and disagreement as a way to model a pedagogical practice of critical reflection? These questions motivate this essay, pushing at the fluid edges of the messy, complex endeavor that is variously but most often called TA preparation or TA training. We take as a given that teaching (and naturally then, teaching our teachers) is always a local and situated practice. We offer our perspective, materially grounded in our experience as mentors of TAs as a limited but, we hope, provocative contribution to the crucial challenge of preparing graduate students to assume positions as educators. And so, we offer *a* way of thinking through the process of teacher preparation, not *the* way to do it. We also take as a given that teaching is a form of theorizing. Although the term “theory,” as Lisa Ede points out, “is an over-determined term, one whose meaning and consequences vary for different persons and in different situations” (129), we find it a useful heuristic for thinking through what it means to teach and what it means to teach teachers how to teach. As Charles Bazerman eloquently argues,

Theories at their best help us manage the manifold and inchoate realities we move among. They give shape to our experiences and desires; they allow us to project our actions into to a universe to which we have attributed some order. They allow us to make our actions reflective rather than reliant only on the impulses of spontaneity, habit, and the unconscious. They also allow us to recognize and give proper influence to the processes of spontaneity, habit, and the unconscious, which we otherwise might wish to deny or obliterate with narrowly rational choices or hyperconscious mechanisms that make the simple difficult. (103)

Theories, then, serve as guides for action in indeterminate situations such as the classroom.

In this essay, we describe our approach to preparing TAs as one that acknowledges our own ideologies and that makes a space for competing ideologies that TAs negotiate. We begin by situating our approach within a larger pedagogical context of TA training, and then we review our general approach of setting up the conditions, through our course design, readings, assignments and collaborative exercises, for new teachers to draw on their own theoretical paradigms in working towards departmental goals and the articulation of their own teaching philosophies. Designing curricula according to principles of what we call *reflective conflict* helped us negotiate long-standing and much discussed challenges in the training of writing teachers.

First, encouraging teachers-in-training to draw on their own conceptual resources and experiences and to write curricula that engages those often wide-ranging differences models the learner-centered principles that so many of us want new teachers to take with them into their own undergraduate classrooms. Second, allowing teaching assistants the opportunity to make their own theoretical links between composition theory and their home fields (likely *not* to be composition studies in most training situations) broadens our service to these new teachers, in many cases addressing more directly the teaching ambitions of those outside composition studies. Third, building this theoretical dialogue into our training curricula presents composition studies as a viable field of inquiry and thus inspires the graduate-student teachers to commit intellectually to the work of teaching writing. Finally, this pedagogy encourages the kind of teaching habits that can sustain careers, offering not formulae but conceptual resources for approaching the complexity of bridging intellectual paradigms, always the situation of teaching.¹

SITUATING TEACHING ASSISTANT PREPARATION

TA preparation is a hotly contested intellectual arena of diverse practices and philosophical positions. Duane Roen, Maureen Daly Goggin, and Jennifer Clary-Lemon categorize the dizzying array of competing models of TA preparation into four classes: functional, organic, conversion, and multiphilosophical.² A *functional approach* focuses almost exclusively on the nuts and bolts of teaching—a “what-to-do-on Monday morning” endeavor. This approach has been challenged from many different quarters, especially since the appearance of Tori Haring-Smith’s 1985 landmark essay, “The Importance of Theory in the Training of Teaching Assistants,” which ignited the debate over the role of theory in TA preparation—a dispute that continues unabated today. Although the functional school of thought has been on the wane over the past twenty years, it is by no means moribund. Catherine Larterell’s survey of TA education curricula found that while substantive preparation for TAs is delivered at a good number of schools, many post-secondary institutions still offer only a practice-oriented experience. Readers of this journal understand well enough the pressures to deliver such curricula (and the teachers to administer those curricula), and certainly many graduate-student teachers arrive with a burning desire for the practical advice they will need as writing teachers. The question is, to what degree, if any, do acontextualized nuts-and-bolts suggestions serve the TAs or the programs in which they teach. Indeed, of the various approaches, a functionalist approach is most likely to “take the form of ‘policing’ the teaching of TAs rather than developing it” (Reynolds 202).

The *organic approach* favors an existential or experiential model for TA preparation. In *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Donald Murray exemplifies one strand of this school of thought when he states “your students will teach you how to teach” (248). From this perspective, learning to teach happens “on one’s feet” and emerges from interacting with students. Others with a more Deweyian pragmatist view of learning (that is, learning by doing) advocate role-playing, team-teaching with a mentor, and learning on the job (for example, see Smith and Smith; Hansen, Snyder, Davenport and Stafford; Hayes). The collection of programs that might be classified as organic are by no means uniform; they are grounded in very different philosophies of pedagogy and writing. However, what they typically share is an aversion to explicit engagement in theorizing and in metatreatments of teaching strategies. The informing theoretical paradigms of the graduate faculty and those of the graduate-student teachers remain tacit.³

A *conversion approach* typically holds that TAs need to learn, and teach by, the theory and philosophy upon which the particular writing program in their home institution is built. To whatever theoretical orientation such

programs adhere—writing across the curriculum, a cultural studies model, a modes approach, expressive pedagogy, a thoroughgoing current traditionalism, whatever—the orientation is nonnegotiable, and training instruction is intended to fix a pedagogical horizon toward which graduate student teachers move (or are pushed). Sally Barr Ebest’s theorizing, in 2002, of TA resistance in teaching preparation programs offers a good example of this school of thought. For Ebest, TA preparation involves a conceptual change on the part of many graduate students. Those who resist the change—a change that is in line with the departmental or writing program philosophy of learning and writing—are either unwilling or unable to see that, in her words, “their conceptions are erroneous” (31). She argues that such TAs need to be motivated “to understand new ways of thinking” (31). Unlike functionalist and organic approaches, the conversion school of thought’s cornerstone is theory.

Finally, a *multiphilosophical approach*, which has been gaining steam over the past five years or so, advocates building teacher-training curriculum around the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions graduate student teachers bring to a program. That is, the diverse theoretical premises and philosophical assumptions with which TAs enter teacher preparation programs become the linchpin around which new teachers learn to construct their own courses. McKinney and Chiseri-Strater’s description of their TA preparation program offers a good example of the multiphilosophical attitude: “Our seminar was not 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 her or his own previous training and disciplinary interests” (12).

Of course, the reality of TA preparation is far messier and more complex than these four categories suggest, and it is likely that those readers who participate in graduate-student teacher training will identify their own practices within these spectrum choices. Although we are tempted to characterize our own efforts at developing a TA preparation program as a multiphilosophical approach, to be sure, we have found that we were and are not pure practitioners of that model. Over the course of our year-long program, we found ourselves operating in each of the modes listed above. Some “policing” is arguably inevitable, as when we reviewed the implications of copyright law and human subjects’ policy⁴ with the graduate students. Our own penchant for “modeling” teaching practices falls easily under the “organic” model, as when we assigned an exercise with little guidance in order to inspire the kind of frustration, anxiety, and confusion that undergraduates most certainly feel when instruction is vague and the rationale for instruction remains unclear.

And while we would like to avoid the will-to-power implications of the “conversion” model, we did not hide our own pedagogical priorities. We made a strong case, as often as possible, for grounding instruction in rhetorical theory and multiliteracy pedagogies. As teacher-rhetors, however, we accepted the inevitability of our failures to persuade, despite our decided institutional advantage. Persuasive or not, we were committed to dramatizing the rhetorical space of the classroom so that the new teachers would think more carefully about their own positions as teacher-rhetors in the first-year writing classroom. We were committed, that is, to initiating the reflective habits of theoretical self-consciousness in these new teachers. We took as our starting point the theoretical and pedagogical differences that always exist among new teachers in any cohort, and we understood these as the most important ground of teaching and learning and not, as it so often is, as unruly or “resistant” reasoning in need of discipline.

As we planned the orientation and the seminar for the new TAs, we found that common principles informed our first-year pedagogies, principles arrived at by different disciplinary routes but similarly informed theoretically. One of us had been trained in classical and contemporary rhetoric and one of us in cultural and literary studies, and we were both committed to a cultural studies-based and invention-centered model of rhetorical instruction that recognizes and celebrates diverse literate practices. When we found our practices to be divergent, productive discussion ensued, the kind of productive argument that bodes well for collaborative work. It was this productive practice of conflict and negotiation that we hoped to encourage in our TAs, for it was here that we found better ways to articulate (in both senses of that term—speaking and connecting) our pedagogies.

In designing our TA-preparation curriculum, we kept in mind Wilhoit’s observation that “[y]ou cannot adopt an ‘atheoretical’ or ‘nonphilosophical’ approach to a course, as every act of teaching arises from some set of assumptions about what teachers should teach and how students learn” (31). We also struggled with our own observations of TAs that led us to understand that although many new graduate-student teachers of composition enter their first class with good intentions, grace, and a desire to do well by their first-year students, it is perhaps as often, understandably, the case that inexperience leads to rigidity and pedagogical “frame-lock,” to redirect Erving Goffman’s phrase. Further, we were aware that even the most seasoned of faculty—the mentors of new faculty, in fact—are just as susceptible to rigidity and frame-lock. Questions piled up: How may rhetoric and composition faculty negotiate the responsibilities of teacher training within a composition program that sets forth a particular philosophical agenda that may not

accord with graduate-student teachers' theoretical training and pedagogical philosophy? If we generally agree that embracing diverse literate practices in the context of undergraduate writing instruction is sound and ethical pedagogy, what might this pedagogy teach us about the possibilities of a diverse field of new graduate-student teachers' practices and theories? What might this pedagogy that takes as its central principle "clashing theories" teach new graduate students about the importance of allowing and even encouraging their first-year composition students to access home literacies? Furthermore, could an overworked and stressed group of new teachers get on board with the rigorous process of conflict and reflection?

ORIENTING AND DISORIENTING: GRADUATE STUDENTS ARRIVE TO FACE HEAT STRESS

As context, Arizona State University is one of the largest universities in the country. A sprawling urban institution in the Southwest, it enrolls over 60,000 students in three campuses. Each semester, our department offers first-year and upper-division writing classes to about 9,000 undergraduates. Nearly one hundred TAs teach about 30% of our writing courses (the remaining courses are taught by professors, lecturers, instructors, and adjunct faculty). Each year, we admit about twenty-five or thirty new TAs, who are enrolled in seven graduate programs in five disciplines: rhetoric, composition, linguistics, English education, creative writing, and literature. Our TA-preparation program consists of three parts. The first is a three-week intensive orientation that meets daily for the equivalent of a semester's worth of student contact hours before fall classes begin. The second is a three-credit graduate seminar that meets during the fall semester; and the third is a weekly practicum that meets during the spring semester.

However well prepared the new teachers are (or believe they are), our department's TA orientations tend toward an immersion theory of teaching. Upon arriving, the graduate students confront the complex set of procedures and expectations that make up any large writing program. This is to say nothing, of course, of the other processes of disorientation the graduate students typically deal with—moving, relocating or moving away from families, finding grocery stores, shifting work schedules, and acclimating to the metro-Phoenix desert's August heat. To bend the learning curve even more dramatically, we posed a serious challenge in our orientation syllabus, announcing our inquiry into the ways "philosophies and theories both permit and constrain teaching practices." Following Wilhoit, we asserted:

Whether you realize it or not, you and your students come into a writing class with assumptions about what it means to write, what counts as writing, how it best can be learned (or even whether it can be learned), and how it can best be taught. Often these assumptions are tacit, and always they are strong. We hope to challenge in fruitful ways the assumptions we all hold to help us all continue to learn as reflective teachers. (TA Orientation Description)

To begin the process of making tacit composition theory and pedagogical assumptions explicit, we had to achieve two often competing goals: we had to establish our own pedagogical positions and defend them as we encouraged critical dialogue that could open a space for the competing and thoroughly embedded assumptions our graduate students held. In our orientation materials, we presented them with a dizzying array of goals for the orientation:

- to introduce you to our writing programs (missions, goals, and policies)
- to introduce you to available services for faculty and students
- to introduce you to professional issues that surround being a college teacher
- to introduce you to classroom management and record keeping
- to provide an overview of rhetorically- and culturally-based writing instruction
- to familiarize you with the 101 textbook (George and Trimbur's *Reading Culture*)
- to help you to begin to develop an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice in teaching writing
- to help you develop four units that will lead to your developing your own syllabus for the ENG 101 course
- to help you reflect on your own goals for the TA orientation and for teaching writing
- to establish a community of teachers who will support one another. (TA Orientation Description)

The optimism here expressed for the potential outcomes of teacher training was undercut somewhat by our own institutional authority, of course, and by our insistence on rhetoric as the best foundation for writing instruction. As

a way of introducing students to an array of possible pedagogies (and to help them begin to make explicit their own pedagogical and rhetorical assumptions), we read James Berlin's classic defense of "social epistemic rhetoric" in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class." Berlin's classification scheme of composition pedagogies offered a useful heuristic for considering the range of composition theories we would survey during the fall semester in the theory seminar, and it offered a starting point for TAs to write a rationale for their own writing classes. We also asked students to analyze our writing program's course policies and teacher resources to help them develop their own policies. We offered our 101 syllabi and course descriptions as well as those of others who teach in the composition program as models to borrow, adapt, or refuse, insisting that they were free to design their own writing course as long as they could defend their design. Like Lisa Ede, we believed and advocated that "the existence of multiple approaches to and understandings of both writing and the teaching of writing represents a strength to be taken advantage of" (191).

Our intention to bestow freedom of pedagogy may have struck the new teachers initially as disingenuous, and we agree that in practice it might be quite problematic. Even short of a formal endorsement, our syllabi and assignments became *de facto* recommended curriculum. Graduate students with no teaching experience may feel compelled to choose the clear option (our way) as a life-raft position; a couple of the graduate students were very explicit about their sense of being restrained. But as more people dissented vocally from our rhetorical-cultural studies model and articulated their own thinking about teaching and about writing, it became clear that reflective pedagogical conflict was underway. In the end, many challenged and adapted our theoretical model. Some rejected it all together. Even before reviewing such criticisms in the fall, several graduate students took issue with Berlin's pedagogy as an inappropriate politicizing of writing instruction. Among the new teachers, the opinion that we were in earnest about power-sharing was evident as they submitted their first ENG 101 syllabi, most of which looked little or nothing like our own, and we approved every one of these for ENG 101 that fall. We carefully reviewed each syllabus, for as Ede notes, "there is no pedagogy that cannot be perverted" (204). Most of the syllabi required little tweaking, since they had been subjected to several peer reviews and our own informal reviews over the course of the orientation. As the fall semester began, these new teachers were armed with "tentative" syllabi, the beginnings of a teaching portfolio, and experience responding to student papers. Then first time instructors confronted the challenge all teachers face, whether they admit it or not—the testing of their pedagogical designs in the classroom.

FALL SEMESTER: GOING LIVE

As an epigraph for our theory-seminar syllabus in the fall, we offered Alton Becker's critical turn of the original of Coleridge's well-worn 19th-century phrase in recommending a "willing suspension of belief." In our course description, we unpacked the idea as one consistent with the aims of resourceful conflict:

DESCRIPTION: English 594 is a rigorous introduction to the competing pedagogies and theories of discourse that make up the field of composition studies. Entering a field as dynamically interdisciplinary as this one requires intellectual daring and flexibility, and so we will keep Alton Becker's phrase as our collective mantra. This semester we will engage in a number of research, writing and collaborative activities designed to help us put theory into practice and to think through our inclinations, actions and reactions in the classroom carefully. We will also spend significant time working through the challenges and opportunities that arise in our English 101 courses.

Our goals for the seminar were specified in our course description as follows:

- to engage a broad range of pedagogical positions in composition studies and thus give you a strong introduction to the field
- to help you establish reflective teaching practices within this dynamic and contentious critical conversation
- to help you develop an understanding of the relationship between theory and practice and between theory and pedagogical choices
- to extend and maintain a community of teachers and scholars who will support one another
- to professionalize you as academics in general and as teachers of writing specifically, and
- to provide a space for collaborative problem solving as you go through your first semester of teaching writing. (TA Seminar Description)

Because we are a diverse group working from different disciplines and intellectual traditions, we should expect considerable disagreement over both the theoretical and practical issues

we address. We should all welcome such disagreement and hope to learn from one another as we proceed. (TA Seminar Description)

By announcing in this way the possibility of “considerable disagreement” or conflict as our route towards course outcomes, we set off on our general introduction to composition theory. The whole of the semester gave us an opportunity to test our curricular designs in the classroom. We experienced our share, that semester, of what is a common complaint among new TAs in the theory seminar—that the theory isn’t helpful in the classroom and that time would be better spent on nuts and bolts of teaching (e.g., distributing specific classroom activities, offering a clear-cut rubric and fool-proof method for grading essays, and providing a definitive way to organize classroom time) and on troubleshooting individual teacher’s classroom issues (e.g., dealing with the belligerent student, or with sleepy students in a 7:40 a.m. class). We assume that many of our readers are familiar with such complaints. We wanted the TAs to recognize the complexities of these pedagogical aspects and to understand that pedagogical decisions are always mediated by the theoretical assumptions a teacher holds.

We wanted to present a dialogic version of composition theory that acknowledged the (rich) lack of consensus on what might seem basic premises of writing, reading, teaching, and learning. We accomplished this from the readings we selected *and* from a major assignment, a scholar’s log (which will be explained shortly). From among the useful texts organized to survey the diversity of thought in composition studies, we chose the recently published Tate, Rupiper, and Schick’s *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Morahan and Johnson’s *Teaching Composition: Background Readings*, and Heilker and Vandenberg’s *Keywords in Composition Studies*. We supplemented these texts with a course pack that further accentuated the multiphilosophical grounding of the field. We then carefully assigned readings in groups that spoke with and against each other—that is, readings that drew on, challenged, extended, and downright dismantled each other. We worked to set up situations of conflict in which reflection upon our theoretical differences could be a collaborative effort. Our entire curriculum was designed to enable as many ways of reading as possible, on the assumption that, in creating an understanding among instructors that many “right answers” can exist, our dialogic approach would ultimately allow for more widespread engagement with the theoretical texts and that the variously frame-locked notions of “reading” among the new teachers needed to be problematized as they were beginning to encounter their own students’ reading strategies.

The scholar's log served and still serves as a rich site for various readings, as it asked students to respond to the course readings on a weekly basis. The assignment to our TAs read as follows:

Scholar's Log: Your scholar's log provides a space for you to respond to each reading (an average of a page per reading, though some readings may give rise to more than a page and others to less); make observations on readings and class discussions; draw connections among assigned readings and your experience teaching; pose questions, explore issues, and ponder theoretically informed teaching practices. Thus, your log will serve as a valuable resource for grappling with both the readings and with your teaching. **Bring your scholar's log to each class;** you will be reflecting on your responses in class, and we will use these at times as a jumping-off point for discussions and activities. You will turn in your weekly log entries every Thursday. (TA Seminar Description)

We collected and responded to these logs every week. Our running dialogues in the margins and at the end of each log offered yet other kinds of ways of thinking through the pedagogical implications and possibilities of the theories we were reading.

In addition to the logs, TAs were required to conduct a group presentation and to write a book review. Like the log, our group presentation assignment asked the graduate teachers to engage theoretical difference as readers and as classroom practitioners. Small groups were made responsible for teaching the theories represented in the readings for class on a specific day. In the assignment description, we clearly linked the rationale of the presentation to the process of engaging theoretical differences. To explain our rationale (and highlight our own theoretical perspective), we wrote: "Distributing the responsibility for facilitating discussion during these weeks is important so that no single perspective (i.e., that of the instructors) edits these competing theories into a synthetic whole. Better, we believe, to keep contentiousness and multiplicity alive" (TA Seminar Assignments). The first requirement of the assignment was to "highlight and interrogate the primary assertions and assumptions of the texts" (TA Seminar Assignments) Though it may seem a small point, our description of the theoretical texts as rhetorical was an important part of our approach, for we hoped to level the theo-

retical authority of the texts. We wanted our students to understand that they were encountering arguments—"assertions and assumptions"—and not a series of paradigms to assimilate in some seamless, totalized form.

This assignment yielded a variety of results, as student presentations usually do. One group did, in fact, detour the assignment into an extended discussion of gut reactions to teaching, nuts-and-bolts questions, and, from the perspective of the graduate students, the pointlessness of theoretical inquiry in the face of live first-year writers. Much more often than not, however, the presentations were engaging and creative in their manner of reviewing and interrogating "assertions and assumptions." For example, during a week in which we were reading key texts of expressivist theory, one presentation group devised a performative means of letting central expressivist tenets play out interactively among the seminar members. (It should be noted that all of this presentation group's members were students in our creative writing MFA program and had already claimed an affinity with expressivist pedagogy in response to our earlier reading of Berlin.)

The readings for the week included standards in the expressivist canon, such as Peter Elbow's "Closing My Eyes as I Speak," Robert Brooke's "Underlife and Writing Instruction," and Christopher Burnham's "Expressivist Rhetoric," a history of and defense of expressivist pedagogy. The series of collaborative exercises the group devised was intended to exaggerate theoretical claims and assumptions, and it did so brilliantly. Challenging what they understood to be naïve assumptions about subjectivity and "self-expression," the group randomly paired the rest of us in the classroom and asked us to write a "love or hate" letter to our partners. The pairs, consisting of an assortment of faculty-student, student-student, and faculty-faculty, across the board came up with performative satires of the pretense of authentic expression and the awkwardness, anxiety, and confusion provoked by any classroom mandate to share essentialized "feelings." Expressivist pedagogy arguably suffers in many of its articulations from unexamined assumptions about emotional experience. To dramatize Elbow's warning about the inhibitions of audience-focused drafting, the group directed us to turn our desks to the wall as we discussed Elbow's text, a posture that did indeed accentuate some of Elbow's primary assertions, among them, that thinking about audience often stifles writers' thinking. The group was also struck by Brooke's theorization of "underlife" as a valid form of student resistance to the imposition of institutional roles. In response, they enacted all manner of distracting behavior throughout the meeting, including graffiti writing on the blackboard and singing the "Gummi Bear Song." All told, the graduate

students tested expressive tenets while beautifully demonstrating the experimentation and playfulness that expressive pedagogy brings to composition studies.

Following the collaborative exercises, the group led a more traditional discussion of the texts. Underscoring Burnham's argument, the group turned again to the expressivist-social-epistemic split, arguing that only a "straw man" version of expressivist pedagogy could allow social-epistemic theory to define itself by contrast (33). Certainly Burnham's account of expressivist pedagogy, claiming critical pedagogues bell hooks and Ira Shor as exemplars, didn't square with Berlin's account of the abiding individualist ideology informing expressivist rhetoric. This experience indicates a further benefit of engaging a theoretical differences model—putting theoretical approaches into dialogue (or conflict) highlights the fact that ostensibly similar or identical "theories" are always more complicated (and perhaps contradictory) than proponents or critics acknowledge.

While the class presentation assignment was meant to highlight and foster a way of engaging theoretical differences in pedagogy for classroom practice, our book review assignment challenged the graduate-student teachers to integrate their disciplinary research and writing with composition studies; it challenged them, in other words, to take up composition theory as a necessarily hybrid practice. We compiled a bibliography meant to indicate the theoretical diversity of the field and to provide options for graduate-student teachers trying to make an intellectual link between their home fields and composition studies. Many of our creative writing MFA students chose to review Wendy Bishop and David Starkey's *In Praise of Pedagogy: Poetry, Flash Fiction and Essays on Composing*. One of our Education PhD candidates took up Denise Clark Pope's *Doing School: How We are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*. A graduate student pursuing research in American literature and culture and cultural theory chose to review Thomas R. West's *Signs of Struggle: The Rhetorical Politics of Cultural Difference*. The choice of texts (i.e., route of theoretical access) was not confined to disciplinary affiliation but at times crossed over to personal and professional affiliations, as when one graduate-student teacher who was a singer chose to review Brock Dethier's *From Dylan to Donne: Bridging English and Music*.

A second and no less important goal for the book review assignment was to provide an opportunity to engage in a genre common to the profession and to experience publishing in the genre. To that end, we developed a Web site to create an environment in which to publish the reviews, and we placed a notice on the WPA listserv that the reviews were available (*Rhetoric and Composition Book Reviews*). Realizing that some graduate stu-

dents might have serious misgivings about publishing mandatory writing, we did not require publication on our site, but in the end, more than 50% of the TAs (fourteen of twenty-seven) chose to publish their reviews.⁵ We were glad to provide an opportunity for practicing and publishing a professional genre, but our project of theoretical reflection was more our point for this assignment. We surveyed responses to the assignment, and many of the TAs reported that the reviewing process had helped them to “bridge the gap” between their own disciplines and composition studies. Asked to what extent the assignment had helped them understand their own “theoretical and philosophical position on teaching in general and on the teaching of writing in general” (TA Assignments), reviewer responses varied. Some reported useful reflection on their own theoretical proclivities. For instance, one TA who reviewed Jeffrey T. Grabill’s *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change* acknowledged reading “from [his] own theoretical position” and criticizing the text based on assumptions about “community” and individuality “inherently tied up in my own teaching philosophy” (TA “A,” Reflection). Others questioned the possibility of such reflection in the pressure-packed context of an academic semester. Still others reported that the assignment brought them to terms with the fact that they still didn’t, as one reviewer put it, “consciously abide by any theory of writing” (TA “B,” Reflection). While individual responses varied greatly concerning how successful the assignment was for helping them better understand their own theoretical positioning, nearly all TAs found it useful for professionalization, since this genre is rarely assigned in graduate courses and yet is often among the first kinds of writing that people new to the profession undertake.

CONCLUSION

As a teacher, I have learned to live with questions and with doubts, knowing that the moment I think I know for certain how to teach this or that course is the moment when I am most dangerously close to shutting down as a teacher.

—Lisa Ede, *Situating Composition* (215)

We want to qualify our argument carefully for the pedagogical importance of engaging theoretical difference. We recognize the danger here of misrecognizing intractable differences as an easy exchange of viewpoints. To be sure, the pedagogy of engaging difference is implicitly and fundamentally a pedagogy of conflict, albeit reflective conflict, that leads inevitably toward an experience of dislocation. There is no overstating two important considerations, first, trying to create a trusting and open environment in which

such conflict and exchange can happen usefully and, second, acknowledging the likelihood that some students will experience resourceful conflict as alienation. New teachers are already stressed with new challenges, at the very least, of graduate course work and the many challenges of any new teaching position—challenges that cling to the teaching experience, regardless of how experienced a teacher may be. Conflict does not always involve a process of reflection and of accessing new conceptual resources, as anyone in any hierarchical situation of social difference might attest. The intellectual stress inevitable while any conflict-based pedagogy is enacted is likely to be considerable. We found our own positions challenged in all kinds of ways, something we expected, but which was alternately difficult and inspiring nonetheless. We both had—and wanted our students to confront without panic or quailing—the questions and doubts that, as Lisa Ede so eloquently suggests, make for effective teaching. If our students were to learn just one lesson, it was that questioning and reflecting are integral to strong teaching.

As we have said, this approach worked well at our home institution, a Research I university housing a large English department in which our writing programs coexist with doctoral and master's degree programs across disciplines. This mix provided the rich conditions for the dialogue we ultimately sustained in the seminar; it may be the case that the outcomes of smaller departments with fewer degree programs might not be as positive. We should also note that our WPA encouraged us to experiment and to let the new graduate-student teachers do the same. Hence, greater administrative or curricular constraints for teacher trainers could certainly pose problematic challenge for this model.

We hope our defense of a reflective, resourceful conflict pedagogy will not be mistaken for an “anything goes” approach. Our approach is, in fact, grounded in the communicative principles of rhetorical theory. What is the classroom if not a complex and high-stakes rhetorical situation, driven by a diversity of goals and purposes and constrained by a broad range of determinants in which knowledge is adjudicated by the group? As one of our new teachers pointed out, departments ascribing to the *WPA Outcomes Statement*⁶ might consider to good end the relevance of “rhetorical knowledge” and “critical thinking” (which are difficult to separate in the final analysis) not only for their first-year students but for their teachers-in-training as well. As, we trust, is by now clear, our goal is to provide new teachers with habits to sustain careers, and we believe that *rhetorical* and *theoretical* habits of mind fit this bill.

NOTES

1 The syllabi and assignments for our TA orientation and TA seminars may be viewed at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~mdg42/taorientation.html>, <http://www.public.asu.edu/~mdg42/taseminarsyll.html>, and at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~mdg42/taassign.html>.

2 Cf. Haring-Smith, who places TA programs into three categories: 1) a basic training approach; 2) an observation and apprenticeship approach, and 3) an advanced writing-seminar approach.

3 By tacit, we mean deeply ingrained beliefs that are not typically available for reflection.

4 Every federally funded institution has to have a review board—Institutional Review Board (IRB)—that maintains a treatment of human subjects policy and reviews projects concerning human subjects. Since TAs may study their students, they need to be aware of the human subjects’ policy and the IRB at their institution.

5 The sense of “risk” that a number of TAs reported when explaining their decision of whether or not to publish suggests a further benefit of this assignment. As Douglas Hesse notes, the feeling of the dislocation that graduate students experience in teacher training can help them find a pedagogically useful empathy with their first-year students (226). The published reviews can be viewed at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~mdg42/bookreviews.html>.

6 A version of the *WPA Outcomes Statement* appeared in the fall/winter 1999 issue of *WPA*.

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