Cohorts, Grading, and Ethos: Listening to TAs Enhances Teacher Preparation[1]

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Abstract

After the "practicum" is over, graduate student teaching assistants (TAs)[2] know a lot about how the teacher preparation course helped and sometimes hindered their teaching, and they understand many of the pedagogical underpinnings of the course, but they rarely get to offer frank feedback to their instructors. Recognizing the valuable resource in TAs who have completed their programs' teacher preparation courses, the authors developed a survey, conducted at two institutions, of TAs instructed by prior WPAs. Our research adds to the existing discussion of how best to support new teachers of undergraduate writing. Our findings have led us to develop pedagogical responses that help mitigate TAs' primary concerns in three areas: building cohorts, grading and responding, and developing teacher ethos (classroom management).

It is clear that graduate students have become the "experiential experts" in the field of composition. We decided that it was time for the graduate-student voice to be recognized as authoritative and useful in the field of composition studies.

> —Tina LaVonne Good and Leanne B. Warshauer

A good program is one that, first, serves the needs of the students; second, prepares graduate students to teach both curriculum and individual students; and third, encourages the developing faculty member to reflect upon and learn from practice. It thus is a model that is itself theorized and that fosters the identity of the developing teacher. As important, it's a model of TA development that welcomes and socializes the TA without scripting him or her.

> —Kathleen Blake Yancey

When students are deeply committed to teaching and learning and are teachers themselves, shouldn't we take the opportunity to draw on their insights into our teaching?[3] In terms of new teacher preparation, present and former TAs have important perspectives to offer. While not experts in the field yet, they are experts of their learning experiences who can help us to see our preparation course sequences and materials from their viewpoint. Learner-centered education specialists (Angelo and Cross; Blumberg; Brookfield; Huba and Freed, among others) and many in writing studies believe we can learn much about our teaching and our students' learning from the learners themselves. As a discipline, we value using the wide array of classroom assessment techniques (CATs, e.g., minute papers, muddiest point, critical incident questionnaires) at our disposal to find out how our students are experiencing our courses. Therefore, it seems right to seek similar information from the students we teach at the graduate level, particularly those who will teach others, since the teacher preparation course models many of the teaching techniques we use to teach undergraduates.

Indeed, in texts such as *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing*, TAs themselves argue that they are developing experts who are able to contribute a great deal to the writing programs in which they teach. Compellingly, they note that they are the group teaching far more sections of first-year writing than the senior faculty in our field (Good and Warshauer x). They also suggest that those of us with more experience may sometimes be unable to bridge the experience-inexperience divide and might even cause graduate students dismay when they are unable to produce the same results we do in the classroom (Bettencourt 10-11). As a result, they often need to learn from one another, and we need to listen to them to understand where they stand intellectually, emotionally, and experientially in relation to teaching if we are to have any chance of effectively crossing that divide.

Our study arose during transition periods from one WPA to another at our respective institutions, which prompted us to think about where there might be knowledge about teacher professionalization that we could tap to best construct and develop teacher preparation under our supervision. Both WPAs inherited solid programs from supportive predecessors; therefore, we both wanted to maintain continuity while adding any needed improvements. We wanted to think about the form, function, and effectiveness of the course from more than one perspective. We both planned to consult with our predecessors, as many new WPAs do. But we saw an "opportunity space" to learn from other stakeholders (Guerra and Bawarshi 54), specifically the present and former TAs still in our programs or within email contact. We planned to correlate our knowledge of discipline, program,

previous directors' visions of the course, and graduate students' perceptions and values regarding the course. And we both believed we would benefit from conducting this kind of study consistently at both institutions, so we could see what kinds of issues might be contextual and which more broadly applicable, in the field, or even in teacher preparation in higher education.

One of our claims in this article, then, is that surveying experienced TAs trained in a writing program is valuable to shaping ongoing teacher preparation programs. It can be particularly productive when the program is in transition either from one director to another or from one paradigm to another (such as a shift from modes to genres as a programmatic focus). We also offer here a method for getting information quickly, efficiently, and anonymously from program stakeholders at these key moments of transition.

Further, this study addresses Kathleen Blake Yancey's suggestion that in composition studies we don't think enough about how to instruct TAs well, attending as we do so much to teaching undergraduates how to write (63). Proportionally in our field, much more time and intellectual energy is spent on discovering how undergraduates write and learn to write than on how graduate students teach and learn to teach. That is understandable, given how few in the field actually train those teachers; however, we'd like to suggest that that very scarcity places the burden on us to conduct these studies when we train TAs. Our impact is exponential, affecting the teachers and all of their students. In that spirit, then, our survey research adds to the existing discussion of how best to prepare new teachers of undergraduate writing. Our findings have led us to develop pedagogical responses that seem to help mitigate TAs' primary concerns in three areas: grading and responding, building cohorts, and developing teacher *ethos* (classroom management).

What Does the Existing Research Suggest About TA Preparation?

While interested in a wide range of issues regarding teacher preparation, we focused on TAs' responses to workshop and course content and day-to-day facilitation. The existing research informs our understanding of the nature of graduate-level teacher education and provides a range of models and practices against which to place the methods and models we studied.

One of the strands in the literature regards what we might term the course's identity crisis, centered mostly on a theory-practice debate but also on what type of orientation to offer: pre-semester workshops, a full-semester course prior to teaching, a course during the first semester of teaching, for-credit courses versus mentor teams, a workshop plus a course, a full

year of courses, a course plus a mentorship, etc. The teacher preparation course is often not treated as a serious class, and aspersions are cast on the notion that there might be a practical graduate-level course. Scholars warn that teacher preparation must involve theory and practice, lest we teach tips and tricks without pedagogical rationales (Dobrin; Payne and Enos; Stancliff and Goggin). Although we agree that theory and practice should come together, we did not put the theory-practice balance at the center of our study. We began with the assumption that some pedagogical and writing theory should inform practical instruction. At The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA), readings on the history of the field and debates within the field have been a core component of the summer TA preparation course. At North Dakota State University (NDSU), the course introduces genre theory since the program takes a genres approach, and adds pedagogical theory to underscore how teachers can think about structuring courses and addressing a range of learners. We also did not directly raise questions about the present overall structures of our training, though working together has led us to begin to think about the range of models for teacher preparation course sequences.

Other studies of TA preparation look at particular practices, such as journals (McKinney and Chiseri-Strater), mentoring (Ebest), and portfolios (Winslow) to consider the roles, best practices, and pitfalls of each of these course and program components. While we didn't enter this study looking to understand any single pedagogical practice, by listing existing and possible new practices for TAs to evaluate in our survey, we offer others insights into how generative each practice is in the eyes of the newly professionalized teacher (see Appendix).

A third strand of research explores concerns about teacher preparation courses as sites of "indoctrination" (Dobrin), focusing both on the implications of considering such courses as "undemocratic" (Latterell) and on ways to provide TAs with agency within the courses. This aspect of the scholarship has been particularly important to us as we try to balance the challenges inherent in helping TAs to master—and then move beyond—the pedagogical frameworks provided by our programs. Scholars who argue that teacher preparation courses create an "undemocratic" division of authority note that WPAs impart knowledge to TAs and TAs impart knowledge to students (Latterell 19). Dobrin maintains that recognizing teacher preparation courses as sites of indoctrination means also acknowledging the importance of such courses to the program and the field—as the places where knowledge about the field is disseminated to its practitioners, particularly those who may never take other courses in composition theory or pedagogy. Bellanger and Gruber work to unravel these "genera-

tive tensions" in the teacher preparation course by asking TAs to critique the course. Other WPAs also solicit TAs' input, feedback, or experiences during the course, for instance by enlisting experienced TAs to participate (Martin and Payne), asking new TAs to analyze the program's writing policies as they develop their own course policies (Stancliff and Goggin), and "authorizing" TAs' stories as important sources of knowledge within a TA preparation program (Boardman).

One of the articles most like our own is Irwin Weiser's 1990 "Surveying New Teaching Assistants: Who They Are, What They Know, and What They Want to Know." Like us, Weiser wanted to learn from the TAs as a population. Differently, however, he surveyed the TAs entering his course to find out more about the people he would orient. He was less focused on post-course feedback. Brian Bly's survey of other TAs in programs around the nation has the same set of questions as our study at its core: what do TAs value and not value in their preparation, and what can programs do better to support them as they transition into the classroom, often rather quickly? Indeed, as Bly's survey—and our own—indicate, many TAs feel that their experiences should be included in discussions of teacher preparation because they are in the trenches teaching the courses.

In balance, then, the field is concerned with practices, but often as they intersect theory. Teacher-scholars are also concerned with how this course and its related components represent and contribute to forming the field of composition studies, as it is often an entry point for newcomers to the field. Our study concerns itself with how TAs' experiences in our teacher preparation programs have shaped our revisions of those programs. As a result, the study errs on the side of practice and adds to the discussion of which pedagogical practices and materials are most valued by TAs, as well as the major issues that emerge from their sense of what helped them most and for what they were least prepared.

Methods

Our data collection was a two-part process: trying to understand the teacher's approach from his or her perspective and then determining the TAs' reception of that instruction and their perspectives on it. We began by gathering the former directors' materials and discussing extensively how these instructors structured their courses, which methods they used, and which resources were key to retain. Rupiper Taggart worked from Kevin Brooks's archived teaching folders, including electronic copies of the syllabus, schedule, assignments, readings, and even class preps. She also received a binder of printed teaching materials, including extra articles, plans, notes, and

other related documents but relied most heavily on the electronic files and conversations with Brooks for understanding the course. Lowry similarly worked from Audrey Wick's materials, which included readings, handouts, discussion questions, and assignments. More importantly, Lowry had seen the course in action and assisted with it, although she had not been its designer.[4] We both had the benefit of having seen parts of the teacher preparation process in action and heard conversations about it. Those who want to discover the practices of a former director no longer at their institution could simulate most of this process by accessing any materials posted to a program repository, requesting electronic materials via email, or, in the case of no access to previously used materials, by developing more generalized questions (see our "Implications for Transitioning"). This pre-process gathering of resources was key to developing a survey that asked about materials and activities rooted in the context.

The resulting survey was ten questions long (see Appendix), though a few of the questions involved responding to multiple items. Most of the questions were standard, used for both institutions, but given the contextual practices we were studying, we each adjusted a few of the most complex questions (8, 9, and 10) to get information specific to our programs.[5] Using SurveyMonkey—which allowed respondents to be anywhere, any time, and anonymous—we sent the link to teachers who had been instructed by the previous WPA. Many were still teaching at our respective institutions and were therefore accessible through departmental listservs, and some we contacted via email in their new locations. We asked questions about perceptions of practices and materials used in the previous preparation sequence, as well as their opinions about adding practices and materials as possibilities for a revised course. We both wanted to know how satisfied respondents were overall with the preparation they had received and which materials and methods best prepared them from their experiential perspective.

According to Fred Van Bennekom, there are four factors to consider when determining whether you have a large enough pool: "size of the population," whether you want to look at just a segment of that population, the "degree of variance in responses," and the researcher's "tolerance for error." Lowry received a strong response to the UTA survey. Of the 41 current and former TAs she queried, 24 (58.5%) completed the survey. Of those 24 respondents, 9 (37.5%) took the TA course from Audrey Wick and Nancy Wood, the previous team teachers, and 15 (62.5%) took the course when it was team-taught by Lowry and other instructors. The NDSU responses were in the low acceptable range, 9 out of 26 (34.6%). However, there was little variance in responses, which suggests that the data were relatively reliable. All respondents were trained by Kevin Brooks.

Results of the NDSU Study

The NDSU training sequence begins with a one-week, pre-semester intensive workshop. The content of this workshop has focused on general pedagogical principles (Merrill) combined with an introduction to the program focus on genres (Dean), the goals of the course, and the first unit. The workshop is followed by a three-credit fall course: Classroom Strategies for TAs. Despite its "strategies" title, which is residue of another era, the course is a blend of on-the-ground preparation for teaching and the principles that underlie the teaching of writing (Roen, et al.) and additional genre theory. The survey considered the workshop and the course as part of the teacher preparation.

Overall, the degree of satisfaction in the surveyed population was very high, with over 75% indicating they were satisfied or very satisfied; the responses to the usefulness of the pre-semester workshop were the same. The overall degree of satisfaction led Rupiper Taggart to conclude that using much of the framework and materials from the previous WPA would be effective.

Several trends emerged in the NDSU results that seemed to correlate with the UTA results, which is why we focus on them throughout this report. The NDSU TAs reported as most valuable not having to develop all of their own teaching materials, being offered materials to use and developing them collaboratively, as well as "casual discussions about class issues, problems, developments." The "casual discussions" point is important because it was the item from the entire survey that received the greatest percentage of "very useful" responses (77.8%), and, as you will see in the next section, the UTA TAs agreed. As we suspected going into the study, this emphasis on the practical and immediate emerges as a trend in the surveys. After these teaching materials, the TAs emphasized that others in their cohorts were most important in their development as teachers and as support. Valuing cohorts also emerged under the "assignment/resource usefulness category," as 33.3% claimed a question-and-answer session with experienced TAs was very useful, and 44.4% claimed it was useful.

In response to the kinds of challenges for which they felt most ill-prepared in the first year of teaching, the answers were overwhelmingly grading and responding, with teacher *ethos* issues coming in second. Grading breaks down into several issues for this group: "Grading and providing feedback to students" (Respondent 2); "time management" (Respondent 2); "How to balance the time between grading papers and my own school work" (Respondent 3); "grading" (Respondent 4); "Knowing strategies to use with students when they get upset about the grade they got" (Respon-

dent 6); and "Evaluation and feedback. Developing a rubric" (Respondent 9). The one piece of information that seems slightly counterintuitive is that TAs put end-of-semester assessment very low on the usefulness scale (44.4% "minimally useful"). In theory, assessment should help people to become more efficient respondents to student writing, because readers are exposed to a larger pool of student writing for comparison, and they engage with other teachers in discussing strengths and weaknesses in student work. However, in terms of preparing them to grade that first semester, end-of-semester assessment comes too late. In a future study, Rupiper Taggart plans to survey teachers in the program about how and whether assessment ultimately helps them to improve as grader/responders, even if it comes late for the first make-or-break semester.

Teacher *ethos* also breaks down into several issues in the NDSU results, as can be seen in a few individual responses: ". . . how to put my foot down on students who hassled me" (Respondent 1); "Knowing strategies to use with students when they get upset about the grade they got or try to bend policies pertaining to late work or attendance" (Respondent 6); and "How to deal with sexist students, who felt like they could take advantage of young, women TA's" (Respondent 7). In each of these situations listed by the surveyed graduate instructors, the issues center on gaining the power and control to hold a line or not be manipulated by students.

Results of the UTA Study

UTA's teacher preparation program differs in some respects from NDSU's program. At UTA, TAs take two three-hour graduate teacher preparation courses: the first, taken the summer before TAs teach their first course, prepares them to teach first-semester composition. That course is team-taught by two instructors, and, like the NDSU course, begins to ground students in composition theory while also addressing how the theory informs practical aspects of teaching. The course also addresses the specific goals of the program, including learning outcomes and the goals of all major assignments for the course. The second course, taken during the fall semester, prepares TAs to teach second-semester composition and focuses more specifically on argument theory. As during the summer course, TAs discuss the learning outcomes for the program and course. New TAs also attend a weekly one-hour practicum during their first year. The survey asked TAs for information about the three-hour summer course and the weekly practicum, not about the fall course because that one is taught by a different faculty member.

The UTA survey results were similar to the NDSU findings. First, the TAs reported that their peers are their most important resources. Respondent 7 wrote, "GTA summer 'bootcamp' is an important experience . . . because it helps forge bonds between new GTAs." Another wrote, "I rely on other, more experienced GTAs for help" (Respondent 4). Because faculty perceptions had been that UTA TAs were not a close group, Lowry was surprised at how highly the TAs reported valuing each other. The TAs reported that they forge strong relationships within their cohorts that often continue for the rest of their graduate work at UTA. After reviewing the survey data, Lowry felt strongly that the TA preparation should provide increased opportunities for TAs to get to know each other and to support each other as teachers and scholars.

Second, TAs wanted more preparation for the nuts-and-bolts work of teaching, including developing an assignment, creating lessons to help students complete the assignment, presenting those materials to students, and evaluating student work. Indeed, 92% of respondents said that casual discussions of teaching were "useful" or "very useful." As at NDSU, UTA TAs said that they were most ill-prepared for grading and responding to student papers. Scholarship in the field confirms that new TAs often want to focus on the practical, sometimes at the expense of theory, in order to allay their fears about entering the classroom for the first time as instructors (Bellanger and Gruber; Bly; Fischer; Latterell; Guerra and Bawarshi; Payne and Enos; Stancliff and Daly Goggin). Many of the UTA TAs expressed similar sentiments. One TA wrote, "Some of the reading for the class was too theoretical; I needed more practical advice and in-class interaction with veteran first-year English teachers" (Respondent 6). Another commented, "Although I enjoyed the theory, I thought it was too much at the expense of the hands-on activities and classroom practices" (Respondent 13).

After reflecting on the teacher preparation courses in which she had participated, Lowry felt that she and the other instructors had not been explicit enough about how the theoretical readings provided a foundation for the practical aspects of instructors' interactions with their students. She also found that the TAs' concerns about their preparation for practical issues directly related to their third main concern: they were not ready to assume the authority that comes with being a classroom teacher. As Bellanger and Gruber note, new TAs are often too overwhelmed by their new role to be able to find answers in composition theory. Indeed, one TA wrote, "Everything is overwhelming. I think just having people tell me that the students will learn something helped a great deal" (Respondent 20). Another wrote that she was most ill-prepared for "questions about authority, creating *ethos*, classroom management" (Respondent 8). The issue of instructor *ethos*

relates specifically to grading and classroom management because both require instructors to be explicit with students about their behavior and performance; inexperienced instructors are often scared to assume the authority of teacher and uncertain about the standards to which they should hold their students. And TAs, of course, can find help addressing both concerns from their peers and mentors.

Both Lowry and Rupiper Taggart relied heavily on survey data to revise their teacher preparation programs; the implications sections that follow discuss both how the survey findings correlate with scholarship in the field and how the findings informed revisions to our courses.

Implications for WPA Transitions

For both Lowry and Rupiper Taggart, the survey had intended and unintended positive consequences. Most obviously, it helped us identify and continue the best practices of the previous Directors' programs while being respectful of Brooks', Wick's, and Wood's visions for the courses and workshops and the TAs' experiences as students and instructors.

Since Lowry had team taught two TA courses, and because over 50% of the TAs surveyed provided responses, she found the feedback particularly valuable. The survey results allowed her to pinpoint particular aspects of the preparation that were working well or required immediate revision. She also clearly saw that that the gaps in the UTA courses she had participated in corresponded almost exactly with the places where the NDSU TAs—and other TAs in the field—reported that they struggled with the most: grading, classroom management, and developing a teacherly *ethos*.

An additional area of revision was to provide more scaffolding for TAs as they developed their syllabi and assignment sequences. Before the survey, TAs received sample essay prompts for all three major essays and process materials for one of the three. Since the survey, Lowry has worked each year with a curriculum committee of experienced TAs to develop course materials for the first-semester composition course, and each year instructors note that they appreciate the support and would like to receive even more comprehensive teaching materials.[6] For 2010-2011, the curriculum committee created all three major essay prompts, along with process materials for each assignment. They also selected readings and developed response journal and discussion questions.

Another positive insight for Lowry was that although reviews of the course in which she had participated were not as glowing as reviews of her predecessors' course (TAs taking the course in 2005 or before were more likely to say that they were "very satisfied" with their preparation, while

TAs in the course in 2006 or 2007 were more likely to say that they were "satisfied"), the overall feedback was more positive than she had anticipated. Lowry, who had worried that it would be nearly impossible to fill her predecessor's shoes, felt affirmed by the knowledge that the new TAs reported that many aspects of their preparation were beneficial. Thus, the survey can help manage a director's perceptions the way good formative assessment tools often do: If we don't ask the learners in our varied classes how things are going, we may overreact to the problems we perceive to exist.

Rupiper Taggart, too, found the whole process deeply informative. The combination of receiving rich materials from the former WPA, her own experience and involvement in the program broadly, and the specific feedback of the survey respondents—NDSU's and UTA's—offered her a few specific focal points for change and emphasis in the first year. Being able to keep much of the previous professional development program in place and supplement with support for specific areas (in this case, grading and classroom management/teacher *ethos*) was far more manageable than creating an entire curriculum for the new teachers. It also left more time and energy to write a strong version of the first-year course the TAs would teach in tandem with her, including an additional multimodal assignment that others have also since adopted.[7]

The final primary benefit was seeing how strongly the TAs valued building course materials together. Rupiper Taggart's tendency as a teacher is to try to plan a class almost completely before the semester begins. This survey helped put that tendency in check and ensure that there was some room for discussing class decisions together. In the spirit of pedagogical scaffolding (Hammond; Hogan and Pressley), Rupiper Taggart developed the first unit completely, the second unit partially, and, although they still used the already written final assignment, the TAs largely developed their own class plans for the final unit.

Deepening Rupiper Taggart's understanding of the data is feedback acquired from all instructors teaching in the first-year writing program (including long-term, benefitted lecturers and faculty members) during the assessment session at the end of each semester. During that session, in addition to scoring portfolios, Rupiper Taggart surveys all instructors about their experience of the program and solicits suggestions for future professional development (e.g., "What's one thing you still struggle to teach well in 120 that the First-year English Committee can help you develop through a future workshop?"). The assessment survey is different from the survey instrument used for this study, evolving each semester to address programmatic issues. Interestingly, in 2009-2010, one or two new teachers indicated in the assessment survey that they still would like even more experi-

ence building teaching materials in their first semester, so Rupiper Taggart has a sense that she may need to pull the scaffold back a little bit further (Rupiper Taggart). She will do this by pushing the date forward when she asks the new teachers to develop class plans for the immediate semester and present them for feedback to the cohort.

Upon reflection, we also see ways that all WPAs can prepare for transitions so that teacher preparation and other program dimensions are seamless in positive ways while also productively transformative. All of us can think about building material repositories held not on our hard drives or in our privately owned spaces. Program wikis, shared course management sites, and departmental files of materials are a beginning for long-term shared knowledge. Additionally, we can consider how to maintain contact with alumni of our programs for post-assessments and surveys.

Implications for Building Cohorts

TAs from both UTA and NDSU reported that their peers' feedback was invaluable, and best practices in the field confirm the importance of community building among TAs. In "Training the Workforce: An Overview of GTA Education Curricula," Catherine Latterell argues for the importance of "multiplying the places and the people TAs interact with as they develop their own teaching practices and philosophies"(21). As a result, both Lowry and Rupiper Taggart worked both to strengthen and maintain camaraderie and contact among TAs.

One way to foster cohorts is through class observations. Cohort observations knit graduate instructor communities, as Cooper and Kehl suggest in their 1991 discussion of peer coaching. Since the surveyed NDSU TAs valued peer classroom observation (55.6% of TAs found it very useful while 44.4% found it useful), Rupiper Taggart maintained the classroom observations her predecessor had assigned as part of the teacher preparation course. Students in the class observed each other and one person outside the class (usually another, more advanced graduate student). The UTA TAs felt just as strongly about the importance of peer classroom observation (41.7% found it very useful, and 41.7% found it useful), so Lowry also began requiring new TAs to observe experienced TAs' summer composition classes. The new TAs found the observation to be particularly beneficial because it gave them the opportunity to observe a peer's teacherly presence and pedagogy, as well as students' responses to the instructor and class activities. Finally, observing another teacher often leads to assignment sharing.

Additionally, getting more advanced TAs involved in the new teacher preparation program deepens and strengthens cohorts. At the suggestion of one of the UTA TAs, Lowry asked experienced TAs to lead workshops during the summer training on topics such as developing syllabi; creating and teaching mini-lessons; addressing the needs of ESL, ELL and generation 1.5 students; and integrating technology into composition courses. Rupiper Taggart also added a panel of experienced TAs to the pre-semester workshop and invited experienced TAs who had particular expertise to present at the program-wide workshop (a practice her predecessor also used but Rupiper Taggart hadn't maximized in her first year) on topics such as online annotation programs. She had another experienced TA run the technology set-up session.

Both Lowry and Rupiper Taggart are also able to involve advanced TAs in program administration. At UTA, an experienced graduate student is selected biennially to serve a two-year term as the program's Assistant Director; in recent years, Lowry has also hired additional Assistant Directors for one-semester terms. The UTA TAs indicated in the survey that they wanted more mentoring from experienced TAs (83.3% were very or somewhat interested in attending workshops led by experienced TAs, and 95.9% were very or somewhat interested in formal mentorship relationships among new and experienced TAs). The Assistant Directors help fulfill that need by leading program workshops on best practices, working with fellow TAs to select winners of undergraduate essay contests, serving on a curriculum development committee with Lowry and other TAs, and talking informally with their peers about teaching challenges and successes.

For fall 2010, Rupiper Taggart also developed a field experience opportunity for an advanced graduate student to serve as an assistant WPA to the first-year program. When two people applied, she proposed they both work with the writing program, one semester each with the first-year and upper-division portions of the program. The field experience has real implications for cohort building because the students in these positions lead portions of the pre-semester workshop, conduct observations of their peers each semester (providing in many cases lengthier feedback than Rupiper Taggart has had time to do), and develop and lead brown bag sessions on topics in their strength and interest areas. The Assistant Directors also invite others to present at the brown bags, as they see innovative and best practices when they visit classes. The Assistant Directors' activities at UTA and NDSU bolster connections among teachers, increase the visibility of advanced TAs, and build a broader cohort beyond a single year of entering students.

In future semesters, we might structure some of the observations even more like Cooper and Kehl's peer coaching, to include attention to a partic-

ular teaching method just taught in the course. This method pushes observations beyond the more casual reflective learning in the present model. However, we believe the non-evaluative and reflective nature of our present model balances learning and cohort building with the constraints of our students' workloads, and we would be hesitant to take on the entire system of Cooper and Kehl's peer coaching, as a result.

Implications for Grading

The surveys clearly indicated that our TAs felt they needed more hands-on, practical support in terms of responding to and grading students' writing. Both Lowry and Rupiper Taggart instituted regular workshops in which new TAs discussed grading criteria, responded to and graded sample student documents, and then discussed the comments they would make and the grades they would assign.[8] The workshops allowed instructors to discuss the pros and cons of various writing prompts or assignments and different methods for responding to documents and provided a shared sense of the "norm" for grades in our FYC programs. In addition, both WPAs began reviewing new TAs' graded work, looking at their feedback and grades to make sure that instructors were "on the right track" in terms of grading and responding. The TAs seemed to appreciate the support, and we found that reviewing sets or instances of graded writing allowed us to identify TAs who were struggling to develop grading practices that were internally consistent and that made sense to students. Equally importantly, it allowed us to emphasize and refine the teaching that happens through response, identifying overly strident responses as well as overly generous ones.

We also found that our support for instructors' grading practices has become an important part of our ongoing professional support for instructors. Lowry required all instructors to attend at least two grading workshops during spring 2009. During the workshops, instructors discussed the goals for the assignment and grading criteria; then they responded to student writing, assigned a grade, and discussed their findings with the group. Rupiper Taggart, too, expanded the professional development opportunities she offers to include more focus on responding and grading, making grading the focus of her fall 2009 workshop for all writing instructors, and responding the focus in 2010. In 2009, she provided a sample rhetorical analysis and had small groups do holistic grading, rubric grading, and grading with rubrics with number values. The entire group then discussed the merits of the various grading approaches and normed their grading on the rhetorical analysis. In 2010, though she planned to have everyone grade and respond to a common document, conversation emerged so quickly and

energetically that the group never got to the activity, suggesting how much people have to say and how much they have thought about responding. The workshops in both programs provided productive forums for discussion about program norms and best practices for responding and grading.

Implications for Developing Teacherly *Ethos*

Probably one of the most difficult things about supporting new composition instructors can be helping them "feel" like instructors. Lowry and Rupiper Taggart found this issue to be the most amorphous, in part because instructors' gender, race, age, and sexual orientation, as well as their personalities and past professional experiences, affect their teacherly *ethos* as much as particular aspects of their teacher education. Indeed, much scholarship in composition studies and in the academy focuses on how instructors' subject positions affect students' reception of them (see Freedman and Holmes; the "Position" section of Vandenberg, et al.)

In order to address this issue, Rupiper Taggart asked TAs to write weekly, ungraded reflections on their experiences as teachers. As McKinney and Chiseri-Strater argue, TA reflection journals are positive tools for helping TAs explore the relationship between theory and practice and to define their personas in the classroom. Rupiper Taggart's prompts often asked TAs how the course readings informed their responses to the issues that arose in the classroom, and she and the TAs discussed the responses in class. The discussions gave Rupiper Taggart the opportunity to see how TAs were dealing with *ethos* and to help the TAs support each other as they addressed problems that arose. In addition, the second time she taught the course, based in part on this need for classroom management and *ethos* development and inspired by cases she worked on at the WPA Workshop,[9] Rupiper Taggart developed case study problems regarding classroom management and responding to disruptive students for the TAs to solve.

Lowry knew that UTA TAs' concerns about lack of guidance in terms of classroom management issues were valid, and she worked to provide more support for instructors. During the summer course, TAs read articles by other TAs about embodiment in the classroom (Eichhorn, et al.), and they reflected on and discussed the kind of teaching personas they wanted to present in the classroom. Experienced TAs spoke about their own classroom personalities, including a nuts-and-bolts discussion about how each instructor's course policies and calendar support her classroom *ethos*. The preparation course also included a section that focused entirely on classroom management, including a presentation from the Director of Student Conduct about university policies for addressing issues such as plagiarism

and disruptive conduct. Finally, Lowry included regular discussions of classroom management as part of the fall weekly practicum for new TAs. As a result, TAs were provided with much more comprehensive support, both for thinking through their own identities as teachers and for addressing the inevitable problems that arise in any classroom.

In sum, Lowry and Rupiper Taggart used the survey data to identify and fill gaps in their respective teacher preparation programs. Our specific programmatic changes included:

- fostering cohorts by involving experienced TAs in the teacher preparation program; requiring TAs to conduct peer observations in which they observe each others' teaching and provide feedback, and even instituting an Assistant Director Field Experience option;
- supporting grading practices by instituting regular grade norming sessions and workshops (both for new TAs and all instructors) and by reviewing and commenting on essays graded by new TAs; and
- helping each new TA develop a strong classroom *ethos* by asking them to reflect regularly on their classroom personas and providing additional support regarding issues relative to classroom management, plagiarism, and disruptive students. This support includes case studies, role-playing, and explicit instructions regarding department and university procedures for addressing problems in the classroom.

We also continue to use surveys to gather information from TAs and adjuncts during large and small programmatic transitions, as well as part of program assessment efforts, and we learn a great deal from them. We have not, however, given the same end-of-course surveys to the TAs in the two cohorts that have followed since the initial survey. The cohorts in both UTA's and NDSU's programs are relatively small (between five and eleven new TAs per year), and we felt that TAs might be concerned that their responses would not be truly "anonymous" because of the small cohort size if we repeated the survey too soon. We do, however, continue to conduct informal interviews with new and experienced TAs to determine whether parts or all of the teacher preparation programs are working, and we plan to survey our three newest cohorts after completion of the 2010-2011 academic year.

Future Directions

The teacher preparation course is a singular challenge because the list of things that should/could/must be accomplished seems limitless, and time

is often a fundamental constraint. These teachers aren't preparing for some distant moment but for next semester or next week. And yet there's perhaps no more generative time to define the scope of such a course than during a period of transition.

Our collaboration reveals several valuable lessons. The first is just how useful a survey of instructors can be. It is vital that, as much as possible, all major stakeholders be included in these surveys so that their input is solicited and their voices are heard. The second is our determination that teacher preparation should emphasize community building among instructors and should help instructors feel comfortable with grading and responding to student essays, classroom management, and developing a teacher's *ethos*, though any practical advice should be grounded in theory. Finally, we are reminded that cross-program collaboration provides an invaluable outsider's perspective on this process.

Beyond the specific tactics and suggestions we devised for our programs, many of which seemed applicable in both of our locations so are likely to be useful more broadly, we see other non-pedagogical implications of our study. As Bellanger and Gruber note, the composition teacher preparation course serves as an important reflection of the goals, strengths, and weaknesses of the program as a whole. Administrators must revisit those goals, strengths, and weaknesses each year as they guide each class of new teachers through the program's syllabi, assignment sequences, grading and responding practices, etc.

As well, each new cohort's contributions shape administrators' ideas about the program. Bellanger and Gruber suggest that one goal of the teacher preparation course should be for TAs to develop the skills to critique first-year composition courses, the teacher preparation course itself, and program goals. Even as we acculturate TAs into our programs, we also invite their critiques of the preparation course—and, by implication, the program as a whole—when we ask them to provide feedback on their experiences of the teacher preparation course. Because this course may serve as the intellectual heart of the writing program, any changes in the program have to be reflected in the course, and changing the course has reverberations for the program, the department, and the field.

There are important future directions for this research, and we are excited to know that others are addressing the gap. For instance, Shelley Reid at George Mason University is studying graduate teaching assistants' attitudes about teaching composition, and her studies include both surveys and interviews with respondents. Her research, completed in collaboration with WPAs from other institutions, will help us better understand how

novice and expert teachers' processes differ and how effective reflective practitioners develop their skills and knowledge over time.

With the job market in a 30-year slump, graduate students must be strong instructors to land jobs. The quality of their professional development matters for them, the students in their classes, and the status of our graduate programs. These compelling reasons suggest that teacher preparation should not end when the course is over; rather, TAs' professional development as teachers continues until they graduate. Similarly, we should not stop rethinking teacher education and professional development.

NOTES

1. This survey study was deemed exempt by the IRB Office at NDSU for both sites (Protocol #HS08220, April 2008).

2. We are sensitive to this problematic term, which suggests that these teachers assist someone, when they really assist only in the sense that they help departments teach hundreds of sections of writing each year for very little pay. However, we recognize that TA is the commonly used moniker for graduate students who teach. Therefore, we retain the term so others might easily find our discussion of TA teacher preparation.

3. Thanks to *WPA* editorial board members and reviewers for their helpful suggestions for revision.

4. Lowry also had the invaluable opportunity to collaborate with Tim Morris, her team teacher, when developing the survey, reviewing the survey results, and revising the teacher development course.

5. For any future use of the surveys, the primary question that we would alter was Question #9, working for increased specificity. Question 9 read, "For the following assignments or resources, please indicate the degree of usefulness to your teacher training on a scale from 1 to 5. The question was then followed by a list of pedagogical resources and practices. This question complicated the data. Many of the TAs had not experienced some of the items in the question (because the former courses were not static from semester to semester) but might have been able to suggest the potential usefulness of each strategy. It may be useful to combine questions 9 and 10 dealing with the actual and potential usefulness of TA course content. One possibility would be to build a branching question that starts by asking the respondent to identify whether or not she or he experienced that approach or resource, e.g., "Did you participate in the assessment session?" If yes, the branching would lead to a question about the degree to which that approach or resource was useful. If no, the branching question would ask whether he or she sees potential usefulness in the approach or resource.

6. Because UTA's common reading text is taught in first-semester composition, instructors must revise their courses each year to accommodate a new

text. New TAs are required to use or adapt the provided materials; adjuncts and experienced TAs are given the materials but provided much more latitude when developing their courses.

7. A playlist profile assignment was inspired by a talk given by John Logie at the Social Media Conference at NDSU in 2008. In that presentation, Logie suggested we should consider crafting playlist assignments to tap into students' experiences of web authoring and media convergence. Rupiper Taggart had taught leadership profile assignments in the past and blended the two for a first-year writing course featuring music as a central theme.

8. Thanks to Kelly Kinney at SUNY Binghamton for providing the idea for these workshops.

9. Thanks to Chris Anson and Carol Rutz, who developed the materials and ran this workshop.

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Appendix: TA Survey Questions with Results

1. Please indicate the year you were trained.

2. To what degree were you satisfied with your teacher training at this institution?

> 1 very satisfied
>
> 2 satisfied
>
> 3 neutral
>
> 4 not very satisfied
>
> 5 not at all satisfied

3. What were the most valuable aspects of the training, the things we should absolutely keep?

4. What were the least valuable aspects of the training?

5. For what kinds of challenges did you feel most ill-prepared in the first year of training?

6. Which resources have you used the most from your TA training (workshops or course)?

7. Were there particular pieces of knowledge that should have come earlier in the training or later to meet your needs in a more timely fashion? If so, which?

8. [NDSU-specific question] To what degree did you find the joint pre-semester workshop with all teachers of 110/120 useful?

> 1 very useful
>
> 2 useful
>
> 3 minimally useful
>
> 4 not at all useful
>
> 5 N/A

8. [UTA-specific question] If you have been trained to teach in another program before this one, what was your experience going through training a second time? What advice do you have for us about how we can make the transition from one program to another a smooth one?

9. [NDSU-specific question] For the following assignments and resources, please indicate the degree of usefulness to your teacher training on a scale of 1 (most useful) to 5 (not applicable).

	1 very useful	2 useful	3 minimally useful	4 not at all useful	5 N/A
Completing all of the student writing assignments	0.0%	33.3%	22.2%	0.0%	44.4%
Learning portfolio	0.0%	22.2%	33.3%	11.1%	33.3%
Pre-professional portfolio	11.1%	55.6%	0.0%	11.1%	22.2%
K-log	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%	88.9%
Deep vs. surface web handout	22.2%	22.2%	33.3%	0.0%	22.2%
NDSU campus resources training (media carts, library databases, instrumented classrooms, cluster reservations)	22.2%	44.4%	11.1%	11.1%	11.1%
Strategies book	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%	0.0%	11.1%
Misunderstanding the Assignment book	0.0%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%	88.9%
How to connect course goals and assignments	33.3%	33.3%	11.1%	11.1%	11.1%
PowerPoint video training	0.0%	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%	55.6%
Readings on new literacy	11.1%	44.4%	33.3%	0.0%	11.1%
Casual discussion of ongoing classroom challenges	77.8%	11.1%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Observing each others' classes	55.6%	44.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Instruction on how to use textual models to teach genres	33.3%	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%	22.2%

	1 very useful	2 useful	3 minimally useful	4 not at all useful	5 N/A
Grading norming session (reading and grading samples as a group)	55.6%	11.1%	22.2%	0.0%	11.1%
End of semester assessment sessions	0.0%	22.2%	44.4%	22.2%	11.1%
Reports in pre-semester workshop of assessment results from spring	0.0%	33.3%	33.3%	22.2%	11.1%
Other (write in item)					

#9 [UTA-specific question] For the following assignments and resources, please indicate the degree of usefulness to your teacher training on a scale of 1 (most useful) to 5 (not applicable).

	1 very useful	2 useful	3 minimally useful	4 not at all useful	5 N/A
UTA campus resources tour and training (Smart Classroom, library workshops, Writing Center tour)	25.0%	29.2%	20.8%	12.5%	12.5%
Teacher's Guide to First-Year English	41.7%	41.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Readings on composition theory and pedagogy	39.1%	30.4%	21.7%	8.7%	0.0%
Completing a student paper assignment	37.5%	29.2%	20.8%	12.5%	0.0%
Class discussion	47.8%	39.1%	8.7%	4.3%	0.0%
Teaching a reading mini-lesson to fellow TAs and receiving feedback	65.2%	17.4%	13%	4.2%	0.0%
Teaching a writing mini-lesson to fellow TAs and receiving feedback	70.8%	20.8%	4.2%	4.2%	0.0%
Addressing the needs of ESL students lesson	16.7%	20.8%	33.3%	20.8%	8.3%

	1 very useful	2 useful	3 minimally useful	4 not at all useful	5 N/A
Using blogs in the composition classroom lesson	8.3%	37.5%	16.7%	16.7%	20.8%
Handling disruptive students lesson	16.7%	33.3%	20.8%	16.7%	20.5%
Grading norming session (reading and grading samples as group)	45.8%	37.5%	8.3%	8.3%	0.0%
Teaching the OneBook (common reading text) lesson	41.7%	16.7%	16.7%	4.2%	20.8%
Resource notebook	16.7%	16.7%	45.8%	16.7%	4.2%
Question and answer session with experienced TAs	25.0%	45.8%	16.7%	8.3%	4.2%
Casual discussion of ongoing teaching challenges	45.8%	45.8%	8.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Handling plagiarism lesson	12.5%	54.2%	20.8%	4.2%	8.3%
Teaching portfolio	12.5%	37.5%	25%	8.3%	16.7%
Observing a peer's class	41.7%	41.7%	16.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Responding and grading lesson	37.5%	37.5%	16.7%	4.2%	4.2%
Facilitating peer review lesson	26.1%	47.8%	17.4%	0%	8.7%
Developing 1302 syllabus lesson	41.7%	33.3%	8.3%	4.2%	12.5%
Creating and evaluating essay exams lesson	33.3%	25.0%	20.8%	4.2%	16.7%
Feedback on set of graded essays	25.0%	54.2%	4.2%	8.3%	8.3%
Dealing with disruptive students lesson	16.7%	20.8%	37.5%	8.3%	16.7%

10. [NDSU-specific question] How useful would the following resources be, if used in the teacher training, from 1 (most) to 5 (least?)

	1 most potentially useful	2 potentially useful	3 neutral	4 minimally useful	5 not useful
Teach a segment to classmates/fellow TAs and get feedback	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%	11.1%	0.0%
Handling plagiarism lesson	55.6%	44.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Efficient grading and responding lesson	55.6%	22.2%	22.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Conference modeling	11.1%	55.6%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Conference lesson	22.2%	33.3%	33.3%	11.1%	0.0%
Managing collaboration lesson	33.3%	55.6%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Grading collaboration lesson	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%
How to develop a unit	75.0%	12.5%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Scaffolding assignments	44.4%	44.4%	11.1%	0.0%	0.0%
What is formative assessment and how to use it (minute papers, unit reflections, etc.)	44.4%	33.3%	22.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Addressing the needs of ESL students lesson	22.2%	66.7%	0.0%	11.1%	0.0%
Handling disruptive students lesson	44.4%	33.3%	11.1%	11.1%	0.0%
Using blogs in the composition classroom lesson	0.0%	55.6%	11.1%	33.3%	0.0%
Question and answer session with experienced GTAs	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%	11.1%	0.0%

10. [UTA-specific question] How useful would the following resources be, if used in the teacher training, from 1 (most) to 5 (not applicable)?

	1 very useful	2 useful	3 minimally useful	4 not at all useful	5 N/A
Teach a segment to classmates/ fellow TAs and get feedback	69.6%	21.7%	8.7%	0.0%	0.0%
Efficient grading and responding lesson	62.5%	37.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Conference modeling	8.3%	54.2%	29.2%	0.0%	8.3%
Conference lesson	4.2%	62.5%	25.0%	0.0%	8.3%
Managing collaboration lesson	16.7%	45.8%	25.0%	4.2%	8.3%
Grading collaboration lesson	13.0%	47.8%	30.4%	0.0%	8.7%
How to develop a unit	43.5%	43.5%	8.7%	0.0%	4.3%
Sequencing assignments	37.5%	50.0%	12.5%	0.0%	0.0%
What is formative assessment and how to use it (minute papers, unit reflections, etc.)	25.0%	62.5%	8.3%	0.0%	4.2%
Classroom management	41.7%	37.5%	12.5%	4.2%	4.2%
Workshops led by experienced TAs	54.2%	29.2%	12.5%	0.0%	4.2%
Formal mentorship relationship between new and experienced TAs	66.7%	29.2%	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%

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