

# Disciplinary Participation and Genre Acquisition of Graduate Teaching Assistants in Composition

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### ABSTRACT

This project focuses on the way that new graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in English develop both their professional identity as teachers and their view of Composition as a field. Drawing on social theories of disciplines (Prior, 1998; Hyland, 2004; Carter, 2007), disciplinary enculturation (Hasrati, 2005; Bazerman and Prior, 2005; Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006), and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998), this dissertation examines the transition that composition GTAs undergo during their first year of graduate school. Many of these GTAs move from little or no knowledge of Composition as a discipline to teaching their own writing courses. I focus on GTAs from MA and MFA programs at a large research university in their first year of teaching composition. Using multiple types of data, including in-depth interviews, observations of practicum and mentoring sessions, and teaching genres written by the GTAs, I construct a narrative that shows the role that teaching composition plays in the overall identity construction of graduate students as professionals. This wide data set has allowed me to see the various ways (and various genres) in which Composition is constructed in the lives of new GTAs. Teacher preparation programs offer a variety of assistance, including experience shadowing current teachers, practicum courses and individual or group mentoring. I study the ways these activities help GTAs in one first-year writing program move toward a fuller understanding of and participation in Composition, and how these experiences relate to the overall graduate student experience. Each of these experiences helps move GTAs toward participation as composition teachers. However, the degree to which these GTAs participate in Composition as a discipline has to do with their relationships with mentors and the connections they make between the multiple communities of practice that they must continually navigate.

## **Dedication**

To **Katrina Powell**, who embodies so much of what I talk about in this dissertation. I couldn't have asked for a better advisor. She recognized how mentoring is a two-way street and valued my ideas.

To the first cohort of the Virginia Tech PhD Program in Rhetoric and Writing: **Brian Gogan, Megan O'Neill, Dan Lawson, Amy Reed Patterson, Ashley Patriarcia, and Grete Scott**. Together we constructed what it meant to be a PhD student in Composition at Virginia Tech.

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## Introduction

When I was 24, I began my first teaching position at a Catholic high school just outside Chicago. I was assigned three sections of ninth-grade English, a Journalism class, and a section of a twelfth-grade course called “College Writing.” Although I was excited to teach writing, I knew little about it. Even with a B.S. in English Education, a teaching preparation program, and a teaching license, I was unprepared. As an undergraduate, I never had a writing class. Like many young capable English majors, I had passed out of Freshman Composition. In fact, I technically had double credit because my institution counted both the portfolio I had submitted and the score I received on the AP Literature exam for composition credit. Being proficient in literary analysis was all I needed for my school to see me as proficient in composition. And so there I was, as recently as 2001, teaching writing in the modes—informative, persuasive, how-to—with no clue that anyone taught writing differently, with no clue that an entire field (dare I say a “discipline”) had formed around the teaching of writing.

For me, therein lies the crux of our field. Historically we have fought the view that anyone who can write can teach writing, that writing teachers are the same as (or less than) literature scholars, that we do not need special training, that we do not have expertise, and that we are not our own discipline. We have proposed such solutions as creating our own departments (Hairston, 1982), our own undergraduate majors, and more recently teaching our first-year course as a course in the discipline of Composition/Writing Studies (Downs and Wardle, 2007). Yet those of us who work with new teachers, particularly graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) beginning master’s programs, are continually faced with the reality that nearly all of our teachers begin with

little or no conception of Composition as a field or as a discipline.<sup>1</sup> If we are lucky, we get one semester to both introduce these new graduate students to the discipline of Composition Studies and prepare them to teach their own first-year writing course. This process involves fighting the perception that anyone can teach writing while also instilling confidence in these new writing teachers. It is a difficult task, but not a new one for writing program administrators (WPAs). These issues are familiar because they are the product of a long history of disciplinary politics, some of which I lay out below. WPAs are used to managing both GTAs and faculty members who originally entered graduate school with dreams of teaching literature or creative writing, but who, because of the higher demand for composition teachers, were given assignments in first-year writing programs. The 2009 Modern Language Association (MLA) report on their Job Information List for English indicates that rhetoric and composition jobs have held steady through the last nine years at approximately 30% of the postings, while creative writing has offered only 14% of openings despite a far greater number of degree programs in that area. In addition, at least 20% of the jobs listed have been non-tenure track positions, and this number does not include the many adjunct faculty jobs that may not be listed through MLA. Many of those GTAs initially resistant to teaching composition will end up teaching in first-year writing programs if they go on in academia.

The very tangible reality is that many who teach our composition courses are not our composition scholars. And I am not entirely convinced that reality is negative. Yet I am led to ask—what does this mean for the way that newcomers participate in our

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<sup>1</sup> There has been much discussion about whether or not Composition is a discipline; however, when we replace the view of disciplines as static entities to a view of disciplinarity as a social construction, then this question becomes moot. I discuss this concept in more depth in Chapter 2. However, throughout the

discipline? How do they identify themselves in relationship to the field of Composition? Questions about disciplinary identification and enculturation are not foreign to our field, but they have often revolved around graduate student writing rather than graduate student teaching. For many years, the study of writing in the disciplines has been concerned with the way that both graduates and undergraduates learn to write in their perspective fields, the ways that genres shape disciplines, and the way that acquiring genres shapes new members of that discipline (Bazerman, 1988; Linton, Madigan & Johnson, 1994; Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988, 1991). Previous research has focused on research genres such as the seminar paper, prospectus or dissertation (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1991; Prior, 1998). We rarely see teaching genres—syllabi, assignment sheets, comments on student writing—as evidence of disciplinary enculturation or affiliation, nor do we look at the experience of first-year teaching as participation in our field. Yet, for Composition, those genres and experiences are often the first point of contact for those entering our field. Furthermore, teaching continues to be central to the work of our discipline.

Drawing on social theories of disciplines, disciplinary enculturation, and situated learning, this dissertation examines the transition that GTAs in composition undergo over their first year of graduate school. Many of these GTAs move from little or no knowledge of Composition as a discipline to teaching their own composition courses.<sup>2</sup> In order to help them with this transition, in order to teach them to be participants in the communities of our writing programs, departments offer a variety of assistance including

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dissertation I use both field and discipline to refer to Composition because I feel that in light of a socio-cultural perspective on disciplinarity the distinction between a discipline and a field is not significant.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I use “capitol C” Composition to represent the entire research field, which includes pedagogy as well as theory, and “lower case c” composition to refer only to the first-year course.

experience shadowing current teachers, practicum courses, individual or group mentoring, and professional development seminars. I study the ways these activities help GTAs in one first-year writing program move toward a fuller understanding of and participation in Composition. While this understanding may have implications for future teacher preparation, my main aim in this study is to further examine the way that disciplinarity is constructed through first-year writing programs and GTA preparation. Prior (1998) argues that it is “necessary to examine [disciplines] in non-routine use, in development as relative newcomers are learning them, or when routine functional systems are are disrupted.” Thus, he argues graduate education is the perfect site to study disciplinarity (p. xiii). As we move from a notion of disciplines as fixed boundaries surrounding content areas to a notion of disciplinarity as ongoing social formation, a very important spot to study disciplinarity is at that intersection where GTA meets Composition Studies.

### *Historical Context*

Before moving into the details of my study, it is important to get a brief sense of the historical situation that has prefaced our current moment. GTAs’ views of Composition are, often without their knowledge, reflective of larger views within the community of English studies. Naturally, the political situation in English departments is not universal and should be looked at in terms of local dynamics as well as larger historical trends. However, a brief historical overview may allow us to see more clearly how our individual, local narratives fit into more global, historical narratives as they are told within the larger realm of English studies.

English departments are a modern phenomenon. In his history of English studies, Scholes (1999) explains that early universities had rectors who lectured and tutors who worked one-on-one with students (not an unknown model today). By 1767, there were tutors in English grammar, composition and language, and by 1817, Yale sported the first professor of Rhetoric and Oratory (p. 3). In fact, it was only in the late 1800s that literature became an important part of the curriculum and equaled rhetoric, and even then, reading literature was used as a model for writing, and literary techniques were not seen as separate from rhetoric and oratory (Scholes, 1999, p. 4-7). Other histories also comment on this initial connection between reading and writing. Donahue and Falbo (2007) look at the figure of Francis A. March, who was the first English chair and is often credited with being the father of English studies. They explain that he saw writing as a way to understand literature and thus did not see his literature requirements as a departure from rhetoric (p. 47). For Donahue and Falbo, "March reminds us that any claims about the origin of literature as distinct from composition are suspect, and that the history of English is, indeed a story of reading and writing" (p. 53). This united history of reading and writing extends beyond composition to creative writing as well. Creative writing programs began to emerge in the 1920s and 1930s and were not originally seen as a distinct and separate area of English studies. Crowley (1998) explains that the originator of the Iowa Writer's Workshop, Norman Foerster, saw creative writing as a way to get graduate students to better understand literature (p. 136). These historical accounts seem to indicate that some of the most famous founders of English studies did not see the separations between sub-fields that we so keenly feel in many of our departments today.

If writing has such an established history within English, why is it that new master's level GTAs are rarely aware that Composition exists beyond the first-year class? Why do we feel such a separation between the different areas of English studies? Many authors attribute the problem to the New Criticism movement in literature (Crowley, 1998; Andrews, 2009; Graff, 2009). This theoretical position viewed the text as a sacred artifact to be analyzed in terms of its internal formal features rather than its production or reception. Roman Jakobson and the Russian formalists began by investigating the *literariness* that made artistic language different from (and better than) ordinary language. Of course this idea was not new, as even Aristotle separated the poetic from the rhetorical. However, the difference became one of great importance in the early 1900s because of other political and social changes. Berlin (1991) sees the "reservation of literature to the creative or imaginative" as "a response to the dehumanizing conditions of the new social order of industrial capitalism" (p. 26). Likewise, several authors comment on the perceived need for literature to fulfill a spiritual role in society (Miller, 1991; Crowley, 1998). In order to compete with the growing number of research disciplines, English needed a strong way to show their necessity to the university. Susan Miller (1991) explains that in order for English studies to be considered a discipline it had to ally itself with "religious and nationalistic ideals" (p. 44). Historians have suggested that the establishment of Harvard's first-year course served this purpose by creating the need for citizens who were both grammatically correct and culturally literate. Crowley (1998) comments on this shift when she talks about the role of English departments in "developing taste" (p. 34). She explains that "American colleges did not abandon ethical instruction when they abandoned rhetorical education; rather, they transferred instruction

in the development of character to the study of English-language literary texts" (p. 36). It was no longer enough to train leaders to be strong orators; English departments had to train the new incoming college population to be cultured citizens. Thus literature needed to be separated from other types of discourse in order to ensure that students were becoming cultured in nationalistic ideals and that English departments were fulfilling their role in the new research university.

Crowley (1998) goes on to explain that the notion of individual genius, which was perpetuated by New Criticism, was the only way to avoid the rhetorical idea where taste is a matter of community standards (p. 150). This view of author as individual genius is one that still affects our departments today. Andrews (2009) argues that even though many literature departments have moved away from New Critical ideas, the lone genius myth continues to be perpetuated in creative writing workshops that focus on the individual features of a text rather than the process and context of its creation (p. 247). It is ironic that this idea of genius perpetuated by the New Critical movement has been so widely accepted in creative writing where as a whole, literary theory has been rejected (Graff, 2009, p. 272).

Andrews (2009) finds this separation between literature and creative writing isolating and damaging to the field (p. 243). Through her critique and others, we see the way that our sub-disciplines of English Studies have been seen through a territorial lens. Andrews recalls her own first semester as an MFA student where she was told that theory was the sort of stuff she just didn't need to know, and tells of her own personal conflict when needing to separate her interest in criticism from her interest in writing (p. 243). In this same issue of *College English*, Mayers (2009) goes as far as to suggest an alternate

branch of study—"creative writing studies"—that, unlike its more common counterpart, embraces theory as well as pedagogical research (p. 219). Unlike the original narrative where composition, creative writing, and literature were all important because of the way they supported each other, we now see a debate over whose territory is whose—does "theory" *belong* to literary studies or is it a part of creative writing as well?

Of course all of these differences are compounded by differences in the varying professional status that often exists among members of the English department. Graff (2009) refers to "the two-tier system in which the 'regular' faculty teaches literature and mostly graduate students and contingent faculty members teach composition" (p. 276-277). Similarly, he mentions the unrealistic expectations for creative writers who seek tenure-track positions. These positions often require publications before hire, only to be followed by high teaching loads after hire. Thus, another important part to the historical and political situation facing new GTAs, particularly those focusing on literature or creative writing, is the whole situation that sets them up to teach composition rather than literature or creative writing in the first place. Connors (1997) explains that "the concept of composition as an apprenticeship to the real work of literature had begun as early as the 1890s, when the use of graduate students as teaching assistants first became widespread in universities" (p. 195). From the beginning of composition courses, the very position that GTAs hold was symbolic of the larger power struggle between the sub-fields of English as well as the demand for composition teachers. When the majority of first-year writing courses are staffed by GTAs and contingent faculty, while the majority of literature and creative writing courses are staffed by permanent faculty members, the impression conveyed is that one must put in the time doing composition in order to later

rise in the ranks to teach the more prominent areas of English studies. Although this is not always the case in today's universities, Slevin (1991) notes that composition courses often carry the label of staff in the course schedule while literature courses are tagged with a professor's name, giving the impression that literature courses are authored while composition courses are anonymous (p. 5). This comment is particularly striking because it also shows how one might get the impression that literature courses are works to be credited to a professional teacher while composition classes are all generic creations of a writing program, an impression only reinforced by programs that require common syllabi and assignments. Again, GTAs may be given the idea that only once they have experience teaching composition will they move on to the superior position of authoring their own higher level courses.

As previously mentioned, a part of that struggle for legitimization has come in the form of arguments about teacher preparation. Some models for early teaching preparation programs do exist and are surprisingly comparable to today's methods. As early as 1916, teacher preparation arose as an issue for NCTE; however, the suggestions offered were not often implemented (Pytlik, 2002, p. 7-8). One notable exception is Tufts College, which by 1927 had implemented a strong teaching fellows program where graduate students met to discuss rhetorical theory as well as practical issues involved with teaching. The Director of Composition made three class visits for each fellow, once to model good teaching, then to participate, then to observe. Faculty also held student conferences and read selected themes that fellows had graded (Pytlik, 2002, p.8-9). However, Tufts College was far from the norm. Pytlik (2002) explains that in the majority of cases, it was assumed that all one needed to teach writing was the ability to

write oneself (p. 4). Of course, this idea fits nicely with the notion of genius, where writing itself cannot be taught but must be inspired by those who have already achieved greatness, a notion that was not absent in ancient times but was most recently advanced by New Criticism.

These same issues about teacher preparation, as well as the status of Composition, are frequently discussed in the current scholarly publications. However, I am struck by the lack of critical awareness that has been brought to bear on these issues, which are often discussed more in terms of personal experience than research. For example, Farris (2002) argues that the way composition has been marginalized means that those taking practicum courses see it as "a-disciplinary and un-theorized." She notes that these students assume that teaching composition will "not be as fraught with complexity as the 'sacred' texts, theories and rituals they are encountering in the rest of the profession" (p. 101). Although Farris has done other research that involved interviewing GTAs (1996), her claim here comes within her own narrative about teaching composition as cultural studies, not in the context of empirical or qualitative work that engages with the actual opinions of GTAs. Similarly, when Fischer (2005) talks of MFA students, saying "I suspect they think that delving into what makes their writing work in ways that would serve them as teachers might somehow 'mess up their muse' by asking them to analyze too closely how they write," she speaks only from personal experience and opinion, not in the words of actual GTAs (p. 204). Often these experiences are told in terms of individual classroom success narratives—perpetuating our own sort of individual genius, that of teacher and WPA—and not in the context of our own historical, political, and theoretical positioning. Certainly this is not true for all studies. Elizabeth Rankin (1994)

and Sally Barr Ebest (2005) give us strong examples of case studies of GTAs teaching first-year composition. However, further research that reports on the actual experiences and opinions of GTAs in preparation programs rather than just on the views of teachers and administrators of these programs is essential when connecting these accounts to the construction of disciplinarity in Composition.

While it is impossible for one study to discuss all of the historical, theoretical and political influences on our teacher preparation practices, I seek here to look at GTA preparation in terms of larger social theories about learning and disciplinary enculturation. By looking at what influences actual GTAs cite for their views on teaching, we may have a better idea what influences GTAs are most attuned to and aware of. I use empirical methods, outlined below, to see what GTAs themselves have to say about their experiences and their views of C/composition. As I have acknowledged here, GTAs are often placed in the middle of a larger historical conflict in English studies, one that often puts literature, creative writing, composition and other sub-areas of English in competition with one another. The question that concerns me here is what do graduate students do when faced with these conflicting identities—that of a literature or creative writing student and scholar with that of composition teacher? When they are forced into the role of being a legitimate peripheral participant in the community of a writing program, do they embrace that role, moving toward full participation in the community or do they resist it? These are large questions that can only be addressed on a small scale with the research presented here; however, I believe the value of this study is in getting real answers from real GTAs about their experiences with our field. What I hope to offer is a thick description of how GTAs in one writing program serve as legitimate

participants, what this means, and how and why they move toward fuller participation in Composition. Participation is significant to study when looking at disciplinarity and the way that Composition is viewed by both outsiders and newcomers. It is the stories we tell about these interactions that help form our views of what it means to be a member of the field. As Newkirk (1991) argues, case studies are useful for their narrative qualities. The burden of generalization falls on the reader who either accepts or rejects the way a case study lines up with his/her own experiences. Thus, these case studies serve to complement the current research on teacher preparation and disciplinarity in Composition by adding the stories of our GTAs to our own stories as WPAs.

### *Methods and Research Questions*

This dissertation provides a case study of one class of new teaching assistants in their first semester of graduate school at a large research university, Virginia Tech. Although this introduction has reviewed some larger historical trends in English studies, it is important to note that the political situation in each department at each university is different. Methods of GTA preparation also vary at different universities. Furthermore, each GTA enters his/her graduate education with different experiences that will shape that educational experience. In Chapter 3, I go into depth on the specific research setting and participants as well as the methods used in this study. However I offer a preview here in order to lay the frame for this dissertation project as a whole.

In order to gather as much information as possible, I used multiple-methods, gathering data from a variety of sources. Lauer and Asher (1988) believe that "deliberate and interactive mulimodality, especially rhetorical and empirical research, offers a richer opportunity for studying the complex domains of composition studies" (p. 7). Likewise,

MacNealy (1999) notes the importance of both empirical and theoretical work in Composition (p. 11). In stressing the importance of using multiple methods for his study of graduate student enculturation, Prior (1995) says, "employing a triangulated, emergent design allow[s] for thick description and grounded interpretation" (p. 321). Using multiple methods allowed him to look at how writing "reflected and partially constituted situated negotiations over knowledge, identity, and community" (p. 322). I, too, seek to look at the relationships among writing, identity and community. In this case, I look at the ways that a disciplinary community of first-time Composition teachers is shaped through discourse and writing.

In addition to employing multiple methods, my research design is emergent. I began by looking specifically at the genres that GTAs write in, particularly comments on student papers and assignment sheets. However, through my research I discovered that social relationships with mentors and peers were equally, if not more, important to forming the GTAs' views of Composition and their relationships with the field. While I had always planned to include interviews, observations of mentoring sessions, and textual data, in my original design, interviews and observations were to support the information gathered from textual sources. As the project developed, however, these data types became more essential to answering my research questions. Thus, my research expanded to include more in-depth interviews with GTAs and more general questions about their experiences with the field and teacher preparation rather than just about the genres they write in as teachers.

It was important to choose a site of study with a strong teacher preparation program. New teaching assistants at Virginia Tech begin by taking a six-hour course

titled “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing.”<sup>3</sup> Although this course was more than a traditional practicum course, it was often referred to by my participants as “practicum.” In addition, the field has consistently talked about teacher preparation courses as “practicum” courses even though it is not uncommon for these courses to include an introduction to both Composition theory and practice. The “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing” course involves reading and discussing Composition theory as well as planning for the next semester where each student will teach his/her own composition course. In addition to this course, first-semester graduate students assist in a composition class and work in the Writing Center. After their first semester, these students are assigned to one of three mentoring groups, each of which work with an experienced composition instructor. This instructor observes GTAs’ classes and meets with them to discuss their classroom practices and grading. Another fact that makes Virginia Tech well suited for this research is the variety of specialties offered for graduate work, including creative writing, literature, composition, and professional writing. The variety of resources and opinions that GTAs are exposed to at Virginia Tech made this a useful site of study for examining the influences on their professional identity.

I began by recruiting participants during the first semester practicum course. After observing several class meetings, I collected GTAs’ end-of-semester portfolios. During the spring semester, I observed meetings between the GTAs and their mentors and collected graded papers and assignment materials from their teaching. Using these documents as well as transcripts from my observations, I formulated specific questions

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<sup>3</sup> This course is titled “Theory and Practice in University Writing Instruction” in the course catalog, but I use the title from the course syllabus included in the appendix.

for in-depth interviews, which were conducted after the GTAs' first semester of teaching. These multiple data sets were then analyzed for common themes related to GTA enculturation and my research questions. In addition, I interviewed the three mentors who work with GTAs in their first and second semesters teaching.

The questions that emerged through this research included the following:

- 1) What role do teacher preparation courses and mentoring programs play in development of GTAs' professional and disciplinary identity? What view of Composition do GTAs report receiving through these opportunities? How do they define their participation and their identity within this professional and disciplinary context?
- 2) How do GTAs move from peripheral participation in Composition to become teachers of record? To what extent do they accept or deny an identity as participants in C/composition? How does the interaction with mentors influence GTAs' views of the field and their role as teachers?
- 3) How do GTAs acquire teaching genres? How do they form their syllabi and assignment sheets? What or who shapes their responses to student writing? How is the GTA's identity as composition teacher conveyed in these documents?
- 4) What view of the discipline of Composition do new GTAs have? How does this view change through teaching? Specifically, what or who do GTAs see as significant in

forming and changing their views of C/composition and their identity within the community of practice of the Writing Program?

### *Overview of Chapters*

Each of the above questions works to frame this dissertation. I begin in Chapter 2 with a literature review that provides further discussion of the theoretical grounding that has shaped the point of view I bring to the research questions addressed here. First, I review the social theories of learning, particularly the theory of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). I explain the concept of a community of practice and how this concept might be applied to writing programs. I then outline the history of teacher preparation in Composition as well as current issues, such as the role of theory in the practicum course (Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Dobrin, 2005; Ebest, 2005; Stancliff & Goggin, 2007). I apply social learning theory to these discussions in order to raise questions about the role of teacher preparation in the overall graduate student experience. Next, I detail the research in Composition on disciplinary enculturation, much of which has applied theories of situated learning. I include literature on disciplinarity including those studies that focus specifically on the enculturation of graduate students (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman, 1988, 1991; Prior, 1995, 1998; Bazerman and Prior, 2005). Chapter 2 concludes by connecting these two areas of research. I tie the literature on identity formation and disciplinary enculturation to teacher preparation.

Chapter 3 outlines the way in which these theories of disciplinarity and enculturation lead me to conduct the study at hand. I detail my methods in this chapter, including site and participant selection, methods of data collection, and methods of data analysis. This chapter also introduces my research participants and site of study and

provides a graphic representation of the relationships within the writing program. In order to contextualize this study, it is important to explain the specific situation at Virginia Tech including both the approach of the Composition program that GTAs are a part of and the specifics of GTA preparation. I also provide demographic information about my particular research participants. This chapter concludes with the advantages and limitations of my particular study as well as complications that arose during data collection or analysis.

My analysis is then broken into three chapters, each of which focuses on a different type of participant within the composition program. I based this division on Wenger's (1998) categories for participants in a community of practice. Chapter 4 looks at graduate students who see themselves in an outbound and/or marginal role in relationship to their graduate education. These are the students who clearly expressed that they were *not* "Composition people" and did not ever wish to be so. I show that other communities of practice can cause a GTA to resist Composition, but that resistance is often paired with a resistance to the graduate student experience as a whole. Next, Chapter 5 provides a description of those students who engage as peripheral members. These are students who do not necessarily see themselves as future composition teachers, but who are more comfortable with their role as a teaching assistant. Being able to connect one community of practice to another on an intellectual and personal level is key to these GTAs accepting Composition, particularly when they do not see themselves as inbound members of the field. Finally, I turn to those who might be considered inbound members. Chapter 6 details the experiences of two graduate students who have chosen to major in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. This chapter shows that even inbound

members must navigate multiple communities of practice, and that teaching as well as research helps these students feel validated as members of the field. Throughout these chapters, I also explain the role of boundary and insider members, whom I also consider as research participants in this study. In particular, I examine the way that instructor/advisors and PhD student mentors work as insiders but also as boundary members who interact with new graduate students to discuss teaching in the composition program as well as their graduate studies in general. These observations and analyses thus help us to connect the role of practicum and teacher preparation with the overall experience of the English graduate student. Whether or not GTAs consider themselves inbound members to Composition, their identity can not help but be affected by their exposure to it. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that "learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon" (p. 115). As GTAs learn to teach composition, they also learn to *be* composition teachers. They learn to act as member of a community of practice, whether they see that community only in terms of a localized writing program or in terms of a larger field of Composition Studies.

These chapters work together to look at three important areas of the identity formation of GTAs in relation to C/composition—the social interaction of classroom and mentoring sessions, the linguistic aspects of that communication, and the written genres where the GTA asserts him/herself as a teacher in charge of a course. Each chapter deals with individual GTA's experiences in practicum, with their mentors, and as teachers responding to students work and creating assignments. WPAs have written extensively about the importance of the GTA preparation course and many agree that the inclusion of theory helps GTAs recognize Composition as its own discipline with its own scholarship

and research (Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Dobrin, 2005; Stancliff & Goggin, 2007).

Likewise, scholarship seems to agree that mentoring new GTAs leads to better classroom practice (Liggett, 1999; Weiser, 2002). While most agree that both the practicum course and mentoring are key components in a GTA preparation program, we have not often discussed how these practices might work together (or against one another) to shape GTAs' perceptions of themselves within the field. By focusing each chapter on specific GTAs rather than a specific part of their preparation, I am able to provide a description of how these practices interact to influence the way the GTA responds to Composition as a whole.

My analysis uses both comments from interviews with GTAs as well as a series of written documents connected to their teaching. Teaching reflections from the first semester practicum report on the views GTAs held of composition as they entered their respective degree programs and the way that these views changed through their practicum course and first-semester mentoring opportunities. Interviews show how these views continued to evolve after a semester of teaching. I look at the way that these GTAs characterize their work aiding in another teacher's course as well as tutoring in the Writing Center as peripheral to their later work as teachers of record.

I also draw on the writing that GTAs do as teachers, including syllabi, assignment sheets and responses to student writing. Genre theorists have agreed that language is an important part of identity construction (Bazerman and Prior, 2005). As Artemeva (2008) notes, "we are socialized into particular situations through genres" (p. 163). Thus, genre analysis is another key in answering the question of how GTAs construct their role within Composition. In particular I look at syllabi and assignment sheets. Prior (1998) notes that

when students are constructing the writing task called for in an assignment, they also make judgements about their teacher, the person who will evaluate the writing (p. 44). In addition, the teacher may evoke larger disciplinary and institutional views (Prior, 1998, p. 46). Thus, assignment sheets can provide clues to the assumed identity of these new composition teachers, how that identity is communicated to students, and how that identity reflects the goals of the institutional writing program and the discipline as a whole. In addition to assignment sheets, comments on student papers are a key genre, and one that GTAs express a great deal of anxiety about. Part of this anxiety stems from GTAs' identification with responding to student papers as a central teaching activity. It is here that they assert their supreme authority as teachers—that of assigning a grade. Thus, response is an important element in teacher identity formation. However, it also reflects the view that the GTA hold of Composition and the writing program. Anson (2000) argues that responding to student writing is affected by “the influences of cultural, institutional, disciplinary, departmental, and personal standards” (p. 14). Again, a textual analysis can identify key features of a GTA's comments, but interview responses provide the context of those comments as well as the issues that GTAs are concerned with when responding to student work—issues that often reflect their own anxieties about whether or not they are maintaining the standards of the department, the writing program, or even their individual mentor as they grade student work. Each chapter thus also incorporates the experiences of GTAs writing as teachers.

Finally, I conclude this dissertation by discussing the implications of this data and of social theories of learning on our GTA preparation practices. A better understanding of how GTAs learn to teach composition and what affects their views of Composition

Studies provides us valuable data that compliments our already existing studies of teacher preparation. However, I believe that it is important to look beyond our own teaching practices in our own practicum courses. Studies in Composition of the way that writing and language form academic identity can complement studies within the field of higher education, where the issue of academic identity is already well discussed. Education scholar Jeff Jawitz (2009) comments that “the relationship between teaching and research within the discipline also impacts on the nature of academic work and hence on academic identity” (p. 242). While most disciplines initiate graduate students first through coursework, then through research, and lastly through teaching, teaching is often the first point of contact for students of Composition. Thus, we can provide a unique and interesting look at the way that teaching impacts disciplinary enculturation and identity formation. Furthermore, we can examine the way that disciplinarity is constructed through teacher preparation. This dissertation offers one such look.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

As explained in the introduction, Composition studies has a long history of preparing graduate teaching assistants to teach first-year writing courses. Multiple anthologies and articles have addressed the best ways to prepare graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) through teacher preparation courses, mentoring, and professional development workshops (Pytlik & Liggett, 2002; Dobrin, 2005; Stancliff & Goggin, 2007; Reid, 2009). Some studies have even provided us detailed case studies of the lives of GTAs and their development as teachers (Farris, 1996; Ebest 2005). As a field, then, we know a great deal about teaching GTAs from our own experiences and from theirs. However, we often view GTA preparation as a separate enterprise rather than as an overall part of the enculturation of the graduate student. So do our colleagues in literature and creative writing, and so do the GTAs themselves, many of whom have been known to complain that time spent in practicum courses and professional development seminars is time away from the “real” work of graduate school. No doubt most of us can recall being told at some point by someone that our focus during our graduate studies was to be on research and coursework rather than on teaching. Yet, if we return to educational theory, it becomes clear that teacher preparation is not only important to staffing our classrooms, it is also central to the goals of graduate education at large. While much of our educational system is designed to provide information and top-down teaching approaches, having a graduate teaching assistantship provides an opportunity for experiential learning that can complement and be even more valuable than disciplinary coursework, particularly if GTAs go on to teach after completing their degrees.

This chapter begins with an overview of social learning theory, particularly the concept of situated learning as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998). I then apply this theory to the literature in Composition surrounding teacher preparation. I also detail the research in Composition on disciplinary enculturation, much of which has applied theories of situated learning. Finally, I lay the groundwork for my current study by connecting these two separate research traditions.

### *Situated Learning*

Well known for their views on knowledge management, Lave and Wenger (1991) first outlined their theory of learning in their 1991 book *Situated Learning*. This view rejects the idea that learners simply receive factual knowledge but instead sees learners as agents engaged in activities that are always situated. Lave and Wenger (1991) express the view that "agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other" (p. 33). They go on to explain that when we see learning as participation, we focus on relations among people, actions, and the world rather than on facts to be transmitted (p. 50). This extends to knowledge. For Lave and Wenger (1991), "learning, thinking and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (p. 51). Lave and Wenger position learning within a social context. Situated learning is not a theory of how learning occurs in certain social situations; rather it is a description of the way that *all* social situations inherently involve learning.

Central to their idea is the notion of communities of practice, a concept taken up by Wenger in more detail in his 1998 book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. In this book, Wenger uses an example of claims processors at an insurance company to explain the way that learning revolves around community practice rather than

institutional mandate, even within the context of organizations and corporations. Wenger (1998) explains that communities of practice develop over time as collective learning results in shared practices and those practices become supported by a community (p. 45). Thus, communities of practice are both historical and social.

A community of practice has three dimensions: "1) mutual engagement, 2) a joint enterprise, 3) a shared repertoire" (Wenger, 1998, p. 73). In other words, there must be a common practice or set of practices that the community engages in, and the community will develop a repertoire, including shared language and genres when engaging in this practice. Although Wenger uses the term community here, he is careful to show that a community is not homogeneous nor is participation or engagement always positive. In fact, he notes that participation may include conflict rather than collaboration (p. 56). At times, the community of claims processors he studied even formed the community through their resistance to institutional mandate.

Members of a community of practice have different relationships to that practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) focus on legitimate peripheral participation as a notion that replaces earlier concepts of apprenticeship but continues to explain the way that newcomers learn the conventions of a community. The difference between this concept and earlier models of apprenticeship is Lave and Wenger's focus on the social nature of communities. Rather than a master passing down information to an apprentice, they see learning as a matter of "old-timers," whom I prefer to call experienced members, and newcomers negotiating what it means to belong to a certain community of practice. In his later work, Wenger (1998) goes on to classify additional trajectories for participants in a community of practice. *Peripheral* participants, as he defines them here, are those that

have enough access to the community and participate fully enough to affect their identity but who may not intend on becoming full members of the community. In contrast, *inbound* members may be peripheral at first, but enter the community with the intent to become full participants. *Insiders* are those who have achieved full membership, something that is determined by the community itself rather than by outside standards; however, even being an insider involves a continual renegotiation of identity as the community itself grows and changes. *Boundary* participants are those that link across communities and often act as brokers between communities. For example, Wenger talks about the claims supervisor as a boundary participant who must broker between her group of claims processors and upper management. Finally, there are *outbound* participants. Some systems are designed with a natural exit point from the community, such as childhood or educational degrees, which offer options upon exiting. In this sense, their participants are often outbound rather than inbound (p. 154-155).

Whatever the position of the participants in relationship to the community, he or she is involved in the continual negotiation of meaning within the community of practice and in terms of their own identity in relation to the community of practice. For Wenger (1998), "identity serves as a pivot between the social and the individual" (p. 145). Identity is a matter of negotiation between the two (p. 146). Furthermore, negotiation of identity is key to learning. Lave and Wenger state that, "learning involves the construction of identities" (p. 53). Wenger (1998) goes on to explain that the construction of identity might include becoming a participant in a community, but it might also include rejecting that position. Thus, our identities are formed not only by those

communities where we are inbound or inside members, but also by communities to which we are peripheral or even marginal.

This theory of learning fits well with Composition studies, particularly when it comes to theorizing about GTA preparation. When we look at who makes up our teaching assistants, we are likely to see a mix of peripheral and inbound members. In addition, even those who have achieved full participation through their position as full time instructors often maintain a boundary position, maintaining membership in multiple academic communities, only one of which is Composition. This is true of instructors who teach in multiple programs including literature, creative writing, and composition, as well as those instructors who teach at multiple institutions or in multiple departments. What is particularly interesting to me about our GTAs is that they are either inbound or, more likely, peripheral members in multiple communities of practice at the same time. They must negotiate their identities as new creative writing or literature scholars while at the same time negotiating their identity as writing teachers. Participating in a community of other graduate students and GTAs is particularly important to this process, but so is the relationship with mentors and advisors within the writing program. The question then becomes, how do these multidisciplinary graduate students learn to teach composition?

### *GTA Preparation Programs*

The first thing that comes to mind when many of us think about GTA preparation is the practicum course, yet what exactly that involves varies significantly. The term “practicum” has been used to specify a variety of courses and workshops in Composition. It is often used for the pre-service teaching course that departments may offer whether that course is a summer seminar or a full semester of preparation. In addition, the term

has been used to describe courses that deal solely with practical teaching advice and experience as well as those that involve study of Composition theory. Some practicum courses carry credit and are graded, some carry credit but are not graded, and some do not carry credit. I use the term to refer to any course that is required of GTAs as a requirement for them to hold their teaching assistantships. As explained in more detail in Chapter 3, Virginia Tech offers several courses that fit this description. English 5984—Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing is a six-hour graded teacher preparation course offered in the first semester, and English 5034 is a non-graded more practice-oriented course taken in subsequent semesters. A review of the literature on teacher preparation courses and their history will provide a more complete picture of where Virginia Tech stands in relation to the field on this issue.

Practicum courses in composition began to emerge in the mid-1940s but did not become commonplace until much more recently. As Composition established itself as a discipline distinguished from literary studies, the common view that anyone who could write could teach writing was challenged. In 1956, *CCCCs* held a workshop to “integrate the work of graduate students in English with their training as composition teachers” (Dobrin, 2005, p. 15). Dobrin (2005) notes that even these early discussions of practicum courses centered around a need to introduce students to Composition theory; so that idea is certainly not new (p. 17). In fact, Kitzhaber saw his practicum program at KU (one of the first practicum courses) as providing “a disciplinary understanding” of teaching Composition (p. 11). Programs like Kitzhaber’s were a rarity, though. Wilhoit (2002) notes that in 1972 there was very little teacher preparation in composition, but that by

1988 many departments had workshops, pedagogy courses and mentoring and by 1996 these activities were wide spread (p. 17).

Several changes led to the more wide-spread adoption of teacher preparation programs. There were shifts in the field and the research that was published. Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2008) note that the article "Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers" (1977) was a turning point in the history of teacher training, when the field really began to take it seriously again (p. 357). However, there were also significant institutional shifts at this time. By the 1970s, English departments had a basis for teacher preparation programs, but they were not fully developed. However, with an increased interest in Composition, "what was to come in the 1970s was the appointment of Directors of Composition who had an interest and a background in the teaching of writing" (Pytlik, 2002, p. 14). While it is clear that some earlier directors also had this sort of background, it became more widespread in the 1970s, and with it came an "increased concern about the status of TAs; formal, credit-bearing methods courses; summer workshops on rhetoric and composition; graduate programs in rhetoric and composition; and emerging respectability for the teaching of writing--in short, the beginning of a new discipline" (Pytlik, 2002, p. 14). Pytlik seems to associate disciplinarity here with the creation of programs. Still, a concern with teacher preparation is not necessarily tied directly to the discipline of Composition. In fact, many still resisted the idea that Composition theory should be taught to GTAs. Dobrin (2005) notes that in her 1997 book Wendy Bishop protested against forcing our theories on GTAs that come from their own disciplinary backgrounds with their own theories of teaching. Bishop feared that multiple theories would confuse these new teachers (Dobrin, 2005, p. 18).

While a concern with Composition theory as well as composition practice has certainly escalated in recent years, it is still hardly mainstream. Of course, what would be considered mainstream in teacher preparation has become increasingly hard to say.

By 2008, Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon argue that it is impossible to generalize about the state of GTA training because it is highly dependant on individual institutions and individual administrators (p. 358). However, surveys give us some approximation of what activities GTA preparation involves. According to a survey of WPAs conducted by Sally Barr Ebest (1999):

77.4% of the WPAs observe their TAs' teaching, 61.3% provide students with a mentor, and 57.5% hold summer workshops. Moreover, 33% prepare new TAs by having them take two semesters of pedagogy courses, 35.8% tutor in the Writing Lab, and 47.2% observe other classes (p. 67-68).

While this survey is limited in that the researcher contacted only programs whose directors were members of the Council of Writing Program Administrators, it gives us a general overview of the types of teacher preparation available. However, the numbers tell us very little about the philosophical approach undertaken by programs.

Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2008) categorize four major approaches to GTA preparation: functional, organic, conversion, and multiphilosophical. *Functional* approaches focus on the details of classroom management. The theory behind this approach is that GTA preparation serves the institution, and the most important aspect of it is providing teachers that can function well in the classroom. Composition theory is not a big part of this approach, and the view is that professional training shouldn't be the

main point of graduate education (p. 358). *Organic* approaches focus on apprenticeship, often with GTAs working closely with mentors in their classes. Underlying theoretical assumptions behind this approach are that it serves the graduate students and that professionalization is a goal (p. 359). A *conversion* approach is designed to cause a perceptual change on the part of the TAs, to use theory to advocate a certain approach. The idea here is that undergraduates are better served by having teachers who are more in line with the work of the field. Composition theory is central to this approach and professionalization is a by-product but not the main goal (p. 359). Finally, *multiphilosophical* approaches value diversity and getting GTAs to develop their own approaches and philosophies. As expected, the theoretical underpinnings behind a multiphilosophical approach are more varied. Ideally, this approach serves graduate students, undergraduates, and the institution. Rather than focusing solely on Composition theory, this approach recognizes that other disciplinary approaches to language and teaching are important to GTAs (p. 359).

While some approaches may favor certain activities, such as mentoring in the organic approach, overall, any of these approaches can be found within the different types of GTA preparation. In terms of mentoring, Wilhoit (2002) notes that the apprenticeship model has come under fire in recent years for not fostering independent thinking, yet it is still the most widely used (p. 19). However, many scholars still feel this approach serves an important function. Weiser (2002) explains that graduate students at Purdue are assigned a mentoring group that is run by a graduate faculty member or graduate student in rhetoric and composition. This is done to clearly send the message that “teaching first-year composition is not simply something anyone can do; it requires

disciplinary knowledge and support, and one way to get both that knowledge and support is to work with an experienced teacher/scholar" (Weiser, 2002, p. 44). In terms of social learning theory, this apprenticeship model can be valuable when it creates an opportunity for experienced community members to negotiate practice with newcomers rather than simply enforce existing practices. Observing other classes and working with mentors can give GTAs a good sense of what is expected within this new community that they are entering. However, in some programs, such as the one at Virginia Tech, mentors are not faculty or majors in rhetoric and composition but non-tenured instructors. These instructors gain disciplinary knowledge through professional development opportunities as well as teaching; however, their participation in the field may be seen as peripheral by those who contribute more directly to both teaching and research in Composition.

Working from Weiser's statement about disciplinary knowledge, this practice may at first seem problematic. Belanger and Gruber (2005) note that this may send mixed messages for GTAs who experience one view of composition in the practicum and another in their day-to-day mentoring (p. 122). On one hand, this may indeed be an issue, particularly if one prefers a conversion approach and is concerned with enforcing the idea that a certain disciplinary expertise is needed to teach composition. However, I propose that instructor-mentors may serve as brokers, a term Wenger (1998) used for those members of multiple communities who were able to straddle the boundaries and who serve a key role in welcoming peripheral participants to a new community. Furthermore, I would argue that even faculty who come from non-Composition backgrounds but who have experience teaching composition *do* have disciplinary expertise, and even if they construct the discipline in a different way from others in the department, that is not necessarily a

source of confusion but an important opportunity for negotiation to take place. Mentoring may go deeper than an apprenticeship or organic model and may be more multiphilosophical if the GTAs and mentors are able to actively engage and negotiate their ideas about teaching and writing.

According to Ebest's (1999) survey, mentoring was one of the more common activities for GTAs to be engaged in. However, a large number were also tutors in a Writing Center. Writing Center work might be seen as a part of the functional approach to GTA training since it both staffs the center and provides hands-on experience for GTAs. Certainly, Writing Center work can often give GTAs insight into their own teaching. In her contribution to *Preparing College Teachers of Writing* (2002), Harris focuses specifically on the role that Writing Centers can play in teacher preparation. For example, Harris (2002) mentions that when tutors see how students misunderstand teacher comments, they are less likely to "write those extensive and jargon-laden notes" on their own student papers (p. 199). She also notes that tutors "gain deeper insight into the varieties of reader response" (p. 204). These are all functional suggestions that GTAs can apply directly to their own classrooms. However, working in the Writing Center can also allow the GTA opportunities to see the field and their work from multiple angles. In the same collection on preparing teachers, Burnham and Jackson (2002) argue that the Writing Center is a key locale for GTA preparation because it involves a "triangulation of sorts—teacher, consultant, graduate student--that invites them to consider the teaching of writing, the coaching of writing, and writing, from multiple perspectives" (p. 167). GTAs get to see writing from other courses, other disciplines, even other graduate students. In

this way, Writing Center experiences may actually contribute to a multiphilosophical approach to GTA preparation.

Probably the most discussed area of GTA preparation is the Practicum course. As mentioned at the start of this section, these courses may involve all of the above activities but may also include pedagogy and/or Composition theory. Multiple articles in Dobrin's (2005) collection *Don't Call it That: The Composition Practicum* take up the issue of what approach should be taken in the "Practicum" course. Hardin argues that it should be a more foundational focus and that anything else might cause GTAs to mistake composition pedagogy for the entire field of Composition (p. 38). However, other scholars in the collection (Michel, Fischer, Odom et al.) stress the need for Composition theory in the preparatory course for teaching assistants. There has been a conscious effort by many scholars and WPAs to draw on what GTAs already know about teaching and thus engage in a more multiphilosophical approach. Stancliff and Goggin (2007) note that this view of teaching practicum "advocates building teacher-training curriculum around the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions graduate student teachers bring to a program" (p. 14). Dobrin (2005) comments that new TAs tend to base their teaching heavily on their previous educational experiences and that the practicum class can draw on those experiences, name them, and then "codify, critique, [and] validate what can be considered good teaching methodologies" (p. 25). Powell, O'Neill, Phillips, and Huot (2002) advocate for GTAs coming up with their own answers to pedagogical questions, noting that they often ask GTAs, "What is your theory of language?" (p. 125). This position is also advanced by Popham, Neal, Schendel, and Huot (2002) who advocate teacher preparation that involves looking at underlying beliefs and assumptions in

textbooks and writing assignments (p. 26). By challenging and naming underlying beliefs rather than simply providing advice on teaching or reading theoretical articles, students engage in a multiphilosophical approach that allows them to sort through the available theories and find their own place within the world of Composition.

A multiphilosophical approach also fits well with theories of situated learning. For learning to be productive, Wenger (1998) argues that "our identities must be able to absorb our new perspectives and make them part of who we are" (Wenger, 1998, p. 217). It stands to reason, then, that teacher preparation programs that offer GTAs a chance to reconcile their previous educational views with those encountered in Composition will be particularly effective. How that reconciliation occurs and what might work against it is a question to be addressed more specifically by empirical research; however, theoretically such an approach offers GTAs a crucial opportunity to meld their own perspectives with those of the field. Probably the more difficult part of Wenger's philosophy to enact is the second half of the above statement. It might be reasonable to get GTAs to connect their past experiences with their current teaching, but to make that teaching a part of their identity is another thing altogether. Wenger (1998) goes on to add that, "our communities must have a place for us that does justice to the transformations of identity that reflection and excursions can produce" (p. 217). Clearly, Powell et al.'s call for GTAs to answer their own pedagogical questions creates such a space for GTAs to contribute their own educational ideas. In addition, Liggett (1999) advocates GTA's developing their own pedagogy, noting that they are "less likely to feel like imposters if they are not striving to be somebody else" (p. 67). She also lets them draw on their own disciplinary backgrounds, such as an MFA screenwriter drawing on film to teach rhetoric (p. 68). Not

only does Liggett address the issue of identity here—saying that GTAs must not “feel like imposters,” but she links that sense of identity to their home, degree-granting disciplines. However, many programs still require GTAs to follow a common syllabus and limit the ways that they can express their own identities within the confines of first-year teaching. It is an issue that WPAs must approach with caution; too little freedom and GTAs may not have the space to learn; too much freedom and the program and experiences presented to first-year undergraduates may suffer from inconsistency. In either case, as newcomers, GTAs will have to continually negotiate and learn the goals of the writing program.

#### *Disciplinary Enculturation and Graduate Students*

If we look at teacher preparation in Composition within the larger context of graduate education, we must also look to the literature on disciplinarity and disciplinary enculturation. Within education, much of this work draws implicitly or explicitly from Vygotsky’s theories of education. However, it is important to note that interpretations of Vygotsky vary significantly. Hyland (2004) credits Vygotsky with the view of education as socialization. He notes that “learning a disciplinary culture and learning its language are inseparable” (p. 130). This view of education as socialization is the one picked up in Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning, and it is often referred to as a *sociohistoric* or *sociocultural* perspective. This view sees disciplinary enculturation as a process that affects both the individual and the community of practice. Rather than disciplinary knowledge as something that is handed down from experienced members of the field to newcomers, it is something that is continually negotiated. Prior (1998) explains that sociohistoric theories portray knowledge, community, and individuals as

“concretely situated, plural, and historical phenomena” (p. 19). In other words, both selves and disciplines are plural and co-constructed, and this pluralism grants a type of agency. The notion of disciplines becomes replaced with that of *disciplinarity*, “a heterogeneous sphere of activity that partly constitutes other social domains of practice, whereas those other domains simultaneously co-constitute disciplinarity” (Bazerman and Prior, 2005, p. 153). An individual is not a free agent able to cross among systems, but neither does he/she lack agency within a wholly external system. However, even though Bazerman and Prior (2005) call a discipline a “social domain of practice,” the idea of a community of practice is more localized than the idea of a discipline. Rather a discipline is a “constellation” of smaller communities of practice that exist on a local level and are where the discipline is formed day in and day out through negotiation and social interaction.<sup>4</sup>

Initially much of the discussion in Composition around disciplinary enculturation came out of the writing-in-the-disciplines movement. The idea of discourse communities first used by Bizzell (1982) became a key concept when talking about the way that students learn to write academic discourse as well as specific discourse in their perspective fields. Bartholomae (1985) picks up on this concept when he talks about students needing to learn the codes of language used in the “discourses of our community,” and although he recognizes that academic discourse is multiple, the idea fosters a sense of unity among different academic groups. That false sense of unity is what many scholars have objected to in the concept of the discourse community.

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<sup>4</sup> When I say local here, I do not necessarily mean a physical location. For example, I would say the WPA listserv might be viewed as a community of practice that constructs the discipline of Composition in a particular way that may or may not be different than the way it is constructed on other professional lists.

Bazerman and Prior (2005) react against the structuralist underpinnings of discourse communities, noting that the view of disciplines as discourse communities has led us to see them as "autonomous objects existing in detemporalized spaces, unified territories to be mapped, systems to be diagrammed, abstract rules and knowledge that govern action and are passed on to novices" (p. 152). Faigley (1992) explains that part of the reason that the notion of the discourse community has proved inadequate is that it conflates the notion of a speech community and the notion of an interpretive community. The first of these theories comes from linguistics and refers to speakers in the same geographic location, while the later comes from critical theory, namely reader response, and is not defined by location but by assumptions that certain groups of readers are likely to make (Faigley, 1992, p. 34). Disciplines, however, are not tied to a location and interpretations of important issues vary even within the same field. In associating disciplines with discourse communities, we run the risk of simplifying the complex negotiation that goes on in the daily interaction among those who contribute to the field. For this reason, I prefer to draw on Lave and Wenger's notion of communities of practice when talking about disciplinarity rather than the term discourse community. Disciplines are constructed from multiple communities of practice.

In some ways, the idea of a discourse community is similar to that of a community of practice. Swales (1990) lists six characteristics to define a discourse community. For him, a discourse community has common goals, common mechanisms for communication, including common ways of providing feedback and information, common genres and lexis, and a significant number of members that can claim expertise (Swales, 1990, p. 24-27). Many of these criteria seem to match up with Wenger's (1998)

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explanation of the community of practice, which shares a common enterprise and common repertoire (p. 73). In fact, Swales sounds a great deal like Wenger when he talks about the social nature of discourse communities and asks how a discourse community “uses its discursal conventions to initiate new members or how the discourse of another reifies particular values or beliefs” (p. 22). However, Swales notes that these questions don’t help us in actually explaining how we recognize a discourse community as such. He distinguishes between speech communities, which people are born into, and discourse communities, which train and recruit members (p. 24). In contrast, Lave and Wenger (1991) would reject the view that some sort of outside criteria define a community of practice but rather hold that it is defined by “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p. 98). Over time, these relationships and practices lead to reification, which allows the community to be recognized both by internal members and those of other communities; however, communities of practice develop organically.

If we see disciplines as continually enacted by communities of practice, then learning to write becomes a process of being socialized in these communities. In his history of WAC/WID, Russell (2002) explains that eventually the discourse of the community is learned so thoroughly that the new member “begins to think and act--and write--like a member of the community” (p. 16). Writing, then, is also evidence that enculturation has occurred. This view is certainly taken by Berkenkotter, Huckin, and Ackerman (1988, 1991) who studied how a first year PhD student in rhetoric, “Nate” (later revealed to be Ackerman himself), became a member of that discipline. This study uses discourse analysis to show how the style of Nate’s writing becomes similar to

professionals in the field. However, Prior (1998) finds this study stuck in more structuralist attitudes because it focuses solely on the changes undergone by Nate whereas sociohistoric perspectives view this process as a negotiation rather than the transmission of conventions.

Other studies of disciplinary enculturation have drawn more directly from the theory of situated learning. WAC and ELL scholar Belcher (1994) also looks at three graduate students writing dissertations. She recruited these students from her writing class for non-native graduate students and focuses specifically on how students fit with their research communities, their attitudes toward that community, and their relationships with their mentors (p. 26). In addition to meeting regularly with the graduate students, she also sought out their advisors for interviews both during and after the dissertation process (p. 25). Not surprisingly, Belcher (1994) found that more hierarchical forms of mentoring were less successful and that these students felt less at home in their chosen fields (p. 32). When more negotiation actually took place between mentor and mentee, the graduate student was more easily able to feel a part of the disciplinary community.

Prior's (1998) work also draws on Lave and Wenger (1991) to show that disciplinary enculturation is not a one-way street of initiating new members to a field but a set of "continual processes whereby an ambiguous cast of relative newcomers and relative old-timers (re)produce themselves, their practices, and their communities" (Prior, 1998, p. xii). Prior's research (1995, 1998) also emerged from his work with ELL graduate students. However, rather than using his own course, Prior observed graduate students in a sociology seminar as they drafted dissertation prospectuses. In addition to analyzing drafts of these documents, Prior (1995) interviewed both the professor and

students about changes made to the documents. Through the use of discourse-based interviewing, he found that in about half of the cases, the student chose her own original language showing that the professor's changes were not as persuasive when removed from the authoritative situation (p. 311). Even more interesting, however, was Prior's finding that the professor also on occasion chose the option of the wording in the original student text over her suggested changes (p. 315). This led Prior to conclude that disciplinarity is not a one-way assimilation nor does it happen without student resistance (p. 320). This view does not see enculturation as a one-time entrance requirement for a coherent discourse community, but rather an *ongoing* means of deciding what discourse is "normal" within the community.

Although there has been research on writing and disciplinary enculturation in terms of the way graduate students learn academic genres, there has been little research into the role of disciplinary enculturation and learning *teaching* genres. This dissertation, then, seeks to connect the research on graduate student teachers and the research on disciplinary enculturation of graduate students. If we follow sociohistoric theories in which learning is situated, then the most significant learning experiences are those that involve participating, however peripherally, in a community of practice. While undergraduate education is almost always an example of outbound participation because students are not being trained for any one specific career, graduate education is often seen more in terms of professionalization in the field. Certainly it is true that there are many graduate students who do not wish to pursue a career in academia; however, even those who do not may benefit from the kinds of experiential learning offered by having an

assistantship. As Wenger (1998) notes, our identities are formed through rejecting different roles not just through accepting them.

### Chapter 3: Methods

Graduate teaching assistants must navigate a complex matrix of overlapping communities of practice, including the communities they build as students and the ones they are initiated into as teachers. Wenger (1998) explains that “as an analytical tool, the concept of community of practice is a midlevel category. It is neither a specific, narrowly defined activity or interaction nor a broadly defined aggregate that is abstractly historical and social” (p. 124-125). Writing Programs constitute communities of practice in that they share the pursuit of common activities (mainly teaching), and have a shared set of genres that community members use (such as assignment sheets and syllabi). In this dissertation, I focus on the participation of first-year GTAs within one writing program. Writing programs are local and political spaces with their own histories and their own local practices that have evolved over time. As newcomers to these communities, GTAs are often not aware of those histories, and they must quickly learn how to operate in this new environment, often while fighting their own resistances to teaching and/or to Composition. What interests me most here is both the way that GTAs learn the specific community of practice of the writing program, and also how they connect one community of practice with another. In particular, I look at the way that their experiences in this one local community affect their view of the field of Composition as a whole.

So, how does one study a community of practice and the way that individuals participate within that community? Since communities of practice are composed of “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 98), it is important to use methods that can, at least in part, capture these relationships. MacNealy

(1998) notes that ethnography is defined primarily by the interest in “relationships between inhabitants and between the environment and its inhabitants” (p. 215). Wenger’s (1998) book on communities of practice features an ethnography of a claims department at an insurance company (p. 16). However, a study does not need to be a full ethnography to contain ethnographic qualities. Geertz (1983) says that thinking “ethnographically” is done “by describing the world in which it makes whatever sense it makes” (p. 152). This view supposes a certain openness to the environment where research is being conducted as well as the ability to let research emerge and change from that environment. Lauer and Asher (1988) explain that ethnographic studies view knowledge as a social construction (p. 40). This underlying epistemology means that multiple methods are necessary and that research design must be emergent (Lauer & Asher, 1988, p. 40). Multiple methods can be used to engage in ethnographic research without completing a full-fledged ethnographic study.

For example, Paul Prior’s (1995, 1998) study of writing in the disciplines drew on multiple methods, which allowed him to provide a “thick description and grounded interpretation of response practices not even imagined before the research” (p. 321). He notes that this method is particularly important in moving from looking at writing as a text to looking at writing as a social activity. Multiple methods allowed him to look at how writing “reflected and partially constituted situated negotiations over knowledge, identity, and community” (Prior, 1995, p. 322). Although he focused on this one particular practice—the writing of a PhD prospectus, his methodology allowed him to see the way this practice evolved as a part of a community of practice. In addition, Prior’s emergence research design allowed him to expand his original study, which had included

mostly textual evidence, to add observations and interviews that gave him a broader perspective on the social interactions that went into the writing tasks (Prior, 1998, p. 300). Emergent research design is particularly important to ethnographic study because it allows the research to be guided by the environment in which it is conducted as new relationships between participants and between their environment become clear. Lauer and Asher (1988) explain that the “validity of this kind of research” comes from “reciprocity” between the researcher’s developing conclusions and the way those conclusions are continually grounded in the community that is being studied (p. 40).

As I will explain in this chapter, my own research uses multiple methods, is ethnographic in nature, and my research design is emergent. The methodology guiding this dissertation is one that privileges local knowledge and favors thick description over generalizability. Although I focus on a limited number of participants—nine graduate students from one class and their three teaching advisors—I stress the relationships between these participants and their environment. In this way, I consider my work a series of ethnographic case studies. Although I attempted to study a wide number of factors that might influence the work of GTAs, I had to make assumptions about which relationships were most important to study. For example, I observed GTAs meeting with their teaching advisors, but I did not observe them talking to officemates about their teaching. However, multiple methods, particularly the inclusion of in-depth interviews, allowed me to see the multiple relationships that GTAs identify as key to their work as teachers in the writing program.

While I attempt to avoid value judgements, such as claiming one GTA is a better teacher than another or that one mentoring method worked better than another, I do not

see complete neutrality as a goal or a possibility for a study such as this one. For Newkirk (1991), "neutrality or objectivity—even if it were possible—impedes generalization because it disguises the value system that underlies the account" (p. 130). In order for an audience to make the most out of an ethnographic case study, that audience must be privy to the details of the study, including those that may be specific to the researcher and his/her location in respect to the study. Similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that all knowledge is "gained only in specific circumstances" (p. 34). Thus, they believe that "the generality of any form of knowledge always lies in the power to renegotiate the meaning of the past and future in constructing the meaning of present circumstances" (p. 34). The goal of this study is to provide the readers with enough detail that they may themselves negotiate the meaning of events in relationship to their own previous and future situations.

I begin by detailing the site of study and why it was chosen. I then move on to detail the evolution of the current study. Like Prior's (1995) study, my research design has been emergent. Epistemologically, it was important for me to allow interviews and data collection an organic form that accounted for the different situations and concerns of different GTAs. I adapted my study as it progressed to give more attention to issues that were important to GTAs. After detailing how this study changed through research, I introduce my study participants and explain my methods of data collection and analysis.

### *Site of Study*

For this study, I selected a site of study with which I was already familiar, the Virginia Tech first-year writing program. As with much WPA research, I studied the program in which I was a participant. When I began this research, I was a graduate

assistant to the Director of Composition and hoped to create a study that would be relevant to the program. However, my primary aim of this study was not to serve as a program assessment but to address larger issues within the field of Composition.

In terms of this larger picture, Virginia Tech proves to be a valuable site of study because of the diversity of GTAs and the strength of the teaching preparation program. Virginia Tech offers three graduate programs in English, a general MA degree, an MFA, and a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing. As such, three of the major areas of English studies (literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and writing) are represented. While many programs staff first-year composition courses with GTAs from terminal degree programs (MFAs and PhDs), not all MA programs offer these opportunities. Since this study focuses on the enculturation of new graduate students, it was important to find those who have had as little experience with teaching and graduate school as possible. Thus, the master's level GTAs serve as an ideal population for this study. Because MAs often go on to teach as contingent faculty members, it seems to be in the long-term interest of English departments to look at the workings of GTA preparation programs at the MA-level. In addition, WPAs have often commented on their difficulties reaching MFA students, who may come to practicum courses with different expectations for what it means to write or to teach writing from those of composition instructors (Ede, 2004; Fischer, 2005; Michel, 2005). Yet, these comments most often come from anecdotes of WPAs and rarely involve actual research or the point of view of students from MFA or MA programs. A study of the enculturation of these students, then, may prove useful to these WPAs who work in programs that offer teaching assistantships to MFA students. Again, many of these students teach Composition after graduate school as well. Thus

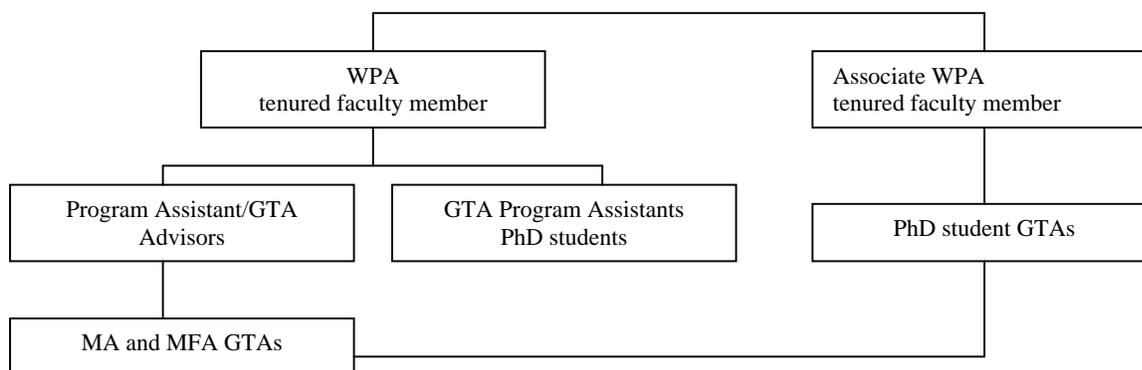
even WPAs who do not work in programs with MFAs as students will likely encounter new MFA graduates as they hire and train them as instructors.

Finally, Virginia Tech has a new PhD program in Rhetoric and Writing. While this program will not be the focus of my study, it serves as a useful comparison to the other two programs. Unlike the MA and MFA students, the majority of the PhD students have teaching experience, mostly in first-year composition, and many have long-term career goals that involve the teaching of writing. However, I included in my study one PhD student who did not have teaching experience when he began his course of study. Thus, his professional development provides an interesting contrast to the MA and MFA students. Furthermore, several of the MA students have expressed an affiliation with rhetoric and writing rather than literature, a shift for Virginia Tech in terms of the MA student population, which was previously more focused on literature.

Although selecting participants from a diverse group of programs was important to my study, it should be noted that I do not automatically assume that disciplinary identity and degree program go hand-in-hand, and clearly there are multiple subdisciplines represented within any one program. For example, some MA students may be interested in careers in secondary education or technical writing and some may identify more with Composition than literature. Although the variety in degree programs at Virginia Tech offers an opportunity to talk to students with different areas of interest in English studies, interviews, rather than degree programs, served to identify these students' disciplinary and professional interests. In other words, a key topic in interviews was a student's disciplinary affiliation and background as well as where that student sees his or her career heading. Rather than setting up a direct comparison between an MFA

student and a PhD student, my study focused on these GTAs' own expressions of the similarities and differences in how their disciplinary and professional identities are shaped.

As seen in the chart below, Virginia Tech's composition program is headed by a tenured faculty member who serves as the WPA. In addition, another tenured faculty member serves as Associate Director. The WPA supervises Program Assistants, who are three non-tenured faculty members. These faculty members also serve as GTA advisors and supervise the MA and MFA GTAs in their second and third semesters. In addition,



two PhD students serve in the role of program assistant, also called the graduate assistant to the director.<sup>5</sup> These students work directly with the director to assist in GTA preparation, professional development workshops and other tasks as needed. Meanwhile, the associate WPA supervises all other PhD GTAs teaching composition.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that these roles have shifted over the last few years, particularly with the creation of the new PhD program. In addition, as I was completing my study, one of the Program Assistants was named GTA Coordinator and after my data collection was complete, he was also promoted to Assistant Professor. The structure of the writing program as outlined here, then, is just a moment in time in an ever-shifting programmatic structure.

Virginia Tech is in the middle of some significant changes in GTA preparation, including the institution of a 6-credit graded teacher preparation course<sup>6</sup> and a new Coordinator of GTA Education. Previously the teacher preparation course was three hours and graded pass-fail and was taught directly by the WPA. A second course, Composition Pedagogy, was paired with it in the second semester. This companion course included pedagogical theory. My primary data set consists of students from the first 6-hr practicum class; however, as a program assistant I aided in the 3-hr practicum course the year before. This new course is titled “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing”<sup>7</sup> and involves both theoretical readings in Composition, experience observing and teaching in a first-year composition classroom and the Writing Center, and the preparation of a syllabus and writing assignments for the spring semester course. All new MA and MFA students took the “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing” course in the fall of their first year and did not begin teaching until the spring. PhD students who were new to teaching at Virginia Tech took a 3-credit version of this course which consisted of attending the first six weeks of class with the MA and MFA students to discuss the theoretical readings and then breaking off into a smaller group. All PhD students, except one, were also teaching 1 or 2 sections of first-year composition. These students mentored the MA and MFA students. Sam, a PhD student with no prior teaching experience, remained in the 6-credit course and participated fully in all the required elements, including sitting in on another PhD student’s class. While there is a clear structure in place for the program, as shown by Sam’s example, Virginia Tech is flexible

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<sup>6</sup> As explained in Ch. 2, participants often referred to this course as “practicum.” In addition, courses of this nature—that include both theory and practice—have been referred to by the literature as “practicum” courses. However, as seen in the title of Dobrin (2005) book *Don’t Call It That: The Composition Practicum*, that label can be deceptive, particularly for a course like the one at Virginia Tech.

in accommodating the needs of different groups of GTAs, and the program has continually shifted to do so. This balance of working with GTAs of different levels of expertise and experience is a challenge in many teacher preparation programs.

In addition to the 6-credit course, Virginia Tech offers an extensive mentoring program for MA and MFA students. Following their initial practicum course, the GTAs are split into three mentoring groups, each one led by one of the GTA advisors. These groups provide support during the first two semesters of teaching. The advisors are full-time non-tenure track faculty in the composition. Belanger and Gruber (2005)<sup>8</sup> note that GTAs often experience one view of composition in practicum, especially when run by the WPA, and a different view when mentored by instructors who may not be members of the tenure-track Rhetoric and Composition faculty (p. 122). However, research has yet to show just what effect this has on GTAs and their professional development. These instructors are given a great deal of support in terms of professional development including opportunities to work on the custom textbook, workshops and speakers, and funding to attend conferences. Some of these instructors do identify with Composition as a research field, and those that do not still often identify closely with the community of practice of the writing program. An established mentoring program such as the one at Virginia Tech offered an opportunity to study the relationship between teaching advisors and GTAs and the relationship between a teacher preparation course and a mentoring program. Again, this provides a way to look at the development of disciplinarity as an interaction among community members.

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Overall, Virginia Tech proved to be an exemplary site of study that offered a thriving teacher preparation program as well as a diverse population of GTAs from multiple areas of English Studies. While the composition program at Virginia Tech may not be typical because of the inclusion of MA students, as I have shown in Chapter 2, the program fits well with current thinking on teacher preparation within the field. The new 6-hour course is a prime example of the multiphilosophical approach that Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2008) advocate. This approach introduces students to Composition theory but allows them to develop their own philosophies regarding the classroom. As such, Virginia Tech offered an excellent site to study the most current trends in teacher preparation and the way these practices affected GTAs' identification with the community of the writing program.

### *Composition at Virginia Tech*

In addition to knowing about teacher preparation at Virginia Tech, it is important to get an idea of the focus of the Composition Program and its position within the department. The current WPA is well known in the field and was recruited to direct the program beginning in 2005, which corresponded with the development of a new PhD program in Rhetoric and Writing that accepted its first class in 2007. The first-year composition program currently consists of a two-semester sequence of 1105 and 1106. Under the current program, 1106, which is the first course that GTAs teach and thus the focus of my study, is based on writing from research, including both library and field research. English 1105 and 1106, as well as the honors section 1204H, have a rhetorical focus and follow the WPA outcomes for first-year writing courses. Within this structure,

both GTAs and instructors have a great deal of freedom. The WPA brought a focus on visual literacy to the program, a specialty of hers. Oral presentations are also required as well as both formal and informal writing. These changes came about in part because of new leadership and in part because the university implemented new general education outcomes that included both visual and oral literacy. However, unlike many writing programs, there are no common syllabi or assignments that must be used, and there are no common attendance or revision policies. However, there are certain textbooks that are required and GTAs often draw from assignments that have been used by previous instructors. I was particularly interested in the way this level of freedom affected GTAs and hypothesized that greater flexibility would allow them a better opportunity to develop their own identities within the program. Yet it is the balance between freedom and constraint that is key to defining C/composition for these GTAs.

The three GTA advisors and the WPA determine a list of approved textbooks for experienced GTAs to use. Newcomers are required to use the same book, *Reading Culture* (George and Trimbur, 2009) for 1105 and *The Call to Write* (Trimbur, 2010) for 1106. After their first semester teaching, they have a list of approved textbooks to choose from. In addition, the program publishes a custom textbook, *Composition at Virginia Tech*, each year. This book is written by instructors and GTAs and includes sample student essays and sample assignment sheets as well as information on writing. This book is revised each year and new student contributors are honored at a ceremony each spring. In addition, this book is structured according to the Council of Writing Program Administrators outcome statements. Thus, it serves as a connection to the field at large. Instructors and GTAs who work on the textbook are hand-picked by the WPA and are

given a stipend for their contributions. As we will see, although there are no required common assignments, this textbook serves as a unifier for the program, and GTAs seek to copy or adopt many of the sample assignments found within. This process of finding and using assignment sheets has recently become even easier for GTAs with the creation of the online OCELOT system—the Outcome-Centered Electronic Library of Teaching Resources—an online resource with a database of current and past assignments that GTAs and instructors may look to for inspiration. This website was created by Patrick in his new role as GTA coordinator and was mentioned frequently by GTAs when they discussed planning their courses. Thus, while there are no “standard” assignments, the textbook and website sanction for GTAs what types of assignments are acceptable in their courses. Some of the most common assignments include an ad analysis, a film review, a researched memoir, and a fieldwork report. Whatever assignments GTAs choose, the focus is on rhetorical conventions including genre and audience.

Within the English department at Virginia Tech, the composition program plays a key role. While I focused primarily on the writing program, I was interested in the way this program interacted with the other parts of the English department, at least in the minds of the GTAs in my study. From personal observation, problems between areas of English studies do not seem to be as prevalent as they are at many other schools. None of the GTAs in my study reported a particular animosity between their major professors and those in Composition. As one MFA student explained, no one had discouraged his interest in Composition, but no one had encouraged it, either. It is important to note, however, that the MFA and PhD programs were both very new at the time of this study, and they cannot help but shift the dynamic in the department. As noted by several of my

research participants, graduate students from different programs tend to cluster together rather than intermingle, a fact that at least one student found quite troubling. Rather than the historic conflict between literature and rhetoric/composition that is found in many departments, an area of resistance at Virginia Tech appears to be between creative writing and rhetoric, perhaps because both offer terminal degree programs.<sup>9</sup> These factors pertain to the way that GTAs negotiate the multiple communities of practice they are engaged in and are thus important when contextualizing the current study.

### *Preliminary Study*

As mentioned above, my research design for this study was emergent. In this section I describe the way that my research changed from my initial study to the final dissertation study and how my current research questions emerged from the data I was gathering. My initial research question focused on the disciplinary influences affecting new teacher response practices. In particular, I was interested in the way that GTAs from varied disciplinary backgrounds responded differently to student work. In the spring of 2008, I began a pilot study to address this question. After asking for recommendations from their mentors, I recruited three new GTAs from the class entering fall 2008. I had participated as a teaching assistant in the fall 2008 practicum; thus, I was already familiar with the structure of this course and the students. I asked the three students who agreed to participate in my study to photocopy a set of student papers that they had commented on and to meet me for an interview regarding their response practices. Of the three participants, only one submitted copies of graded papers, although all three met with me. I intended to continue collecting a grades set of papers and continue doing interviews for

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<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that many creative writing students as well as their instructors value the training they

each semester that these GTAs taught composition. However, only one participant, an MFA student, continued to meet with me and provide the accompanying graded set of papers. In addition, I realized that a truly meaningful study of GTA response would be best conducted in a longitudinal fashion and involve a large number of GTAs.

However, what became apparent in these initial interviews was not so much the different disciplinary backgrounds of these GTAs, but the way they worked with others to develop their teaching and grading strategies. In particular, I became intrigued by the relationship between GTAs and teaching advisors. However, by the time I had recruited my most reliable participant, she had already met to discuss her response with her advisor. Thus, I was unable to observe this interaction, although it was discussed in interviews. As Prior (1998) realized in his study, the texts I was looking at—in this case responses to student writing—existed within a complex matrix of literary activity. For example, response and assignment sheets are inherently linked, and both work together to construct the identity of the teacher in the composition classroom. Furthermore, in the case of GTAs' responses to student writing, these texts are often negotiated with teaching advisors when GTAs meet to discuss their grades. As my study continued I added observations with advisors and GTAs, which showed a more complete picture of the influences on student response as advisors sometimes would prompt GTAs in what to say in their comments or what grades to give papers. Still, what was key in these observations was the way that advisors helped GTAs gain confidence as teachers and as graders. In other words, the way that advisors initiated GTAs into the community of practice of the writing program became key. I therefore refocused my research questions on GTA

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receive in teaching composition. Rather the tension I perceived here was a social one.

enculturation in composition in general rather than specifically looking at response practices.

*The Dissertation Study: Research Participants*

Working from my pilot study, I initially recruited participants for the dissertation study with the idea of focusing on student response. In keeping with my initial focus on response, I attended several classes in the fall 2009 “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing” course that focused on responding to and grading student papers. I observed these classes, collected in-class work from students done during a grade norming session. I asked participants to sign an IRB-approved consent form allowing me to observe and interview them as well as collect textual data. Of the initial class of seventeen, I recruited eight participants. Three of these were first-year MFA students, three were MA students with a focus on literature, one was an MA student with a focus on rhetoric and composition, and one was a PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing with no prior teaching experience. I was satisfied with the distribution of participants across programs, but I also sought to have several participants from each of the spring mentoring groups. I noticed early in the spring semester that I only had one participant from one of these groups and was able to recruit a second participant. In addition, one participant from another group did not end up participating in the study in the spring, and one who had not originally signed up allowed me to attend a mentoring meeting but did not participate further. Another student allowed me to collect documents and observe two sessions with her mentor; however, she declined an interview. In addition, the PhD student did not belong to one of the three mentoring groups. Thus, I ended up with a total

of nine participants, three MFA students, three MAs with a focus on literature, two MA students with a focus on Composition, and one PhD student. However, the data collected varied somewhat among the participants.

These students also varied in terms of gender, age, and background. Four were female, five male. Four had gone straight through school, with less than a year between degree programs. Three students had spent significant time in the workplace, and one MA student had a previous graduate degree. The PhD student had completed an MA program while maintaining full-time employment.

In addition to my main research participants, entering graduate school in 2009, I consider the mentors, whom I also observed and interviewed to be research participants. Of these instructors, one has a MA background in Composition, one in literature, and one has an MFA. At the time of the study, they had served as mentors and GTA advisors from four to six years. One was male and two were female. Their teaching experience varied, with one mentor having over 20 years experience. Two had taught courses at other institutions, while one had remained at Virginia Tech exclusively. In addition to their mentoring duties, two of them serve on the Composition committee, and one had just been named Coordinator of GTA Education for the Fall 2010 school year. All taught their own sections of first-year composition along with other undergraduate courses in the department.

Though these statistics give a good overview of the study participants, the focus of ethnographic case study is on thick description; thus, it is important to go beyond simple demographics when describing research participants. The list below provides a more complete description of the three GTA advisors as well as the MA, MFA, and PhD

students. In order to maintain the confidentiality of my participants all names are pseudonyms. This was done to protect research participants who might later be seeking employment as teachers or scholars in Composition. In addition, while this dissertation does not aim to evaluate the writing program, to learn about the resistances that GTAs have, it was important for them to feel free voicing concerns related to their teaching and their position within the program.

**GTA Advisors:**

**Rita**—long-time instructor at Virginia Tech, MA in literature, GTA advisor for six years

**Patrick**—instructor, MFA, new Coordinator of GTA Education, GTA advisor for four years

**Monica**—instructor, MA with focus in rhet/comp from Virginia Tech, GTA advisor for four years

**MA Students:**

**Marty**—recent graduate, intends on becoming a teacher, focus on American lit

**Blaire**—recent graduate of Virginia Tech, was a history major who hopes to become a librarian, focus on American literature

**Sophie**—a non-traditional student who returned to major in English as an undergraduate after years as a research analyst. Focus in cultural studies with plans to pursue a PhD.

**Valerie**—has an MA in Education, including student teaching experience, now focusing on composition

**Emily**—an MA student focusing in composition, unavailable for interview

**MFA Students:**

**Kevin**—an English and philosophy major as an undergraduate, took one year off from school, a poet

**Seth**—undergraduate English major, planned to go straight on for an MFA, had a semester off because he finished his first degree early<sup>10</sup>

**Caleb**—completed an English degree at Virginia Tech in 2001, worked in a variety of jobs including as a special education assistant, but mostly as a chef. Returned to get an MFA and finish his novel.

**PhD Student:**

**Sam**—first-year PhD student, who returned after completing an MA and working full time in university administration. New to teaching and completed the first semester practicum with the MA and MFA students.

*Data Collection*

I began by collecting data in the Fall 2009 Practicum course. As previously noted, I observed two sessions of this course and recruited participants. I also collected the final portfolios that were submitted to fulfill the course requirements. These portfolios

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<sup>10</sup> The data from Seth was not particularly significant. Therefore, while he is included here, he is not featured heavily in this dissertation.

included a teaching reflection, three responses to readings on Composition theory, a letter from the GTA's first semester mentor and the syllabus and assignment sheets the GTAs had prepared for their course the following semester. In the spring semester, I requested that GTAs inform me when they would be meeting individually with their advisors to discuss graded papers. In addition, Rita and Patrick both allowed me to attend one practicum meeting where all of the members of their mentoring groups were present. Both of these meetings focused on grading student work.

In terms of individual meetings between GTAs and advisors, the most common reason for meeting was to discuss a set of graded papers. However, the frequency of these meetings varied among the advisors. Patrick met only once with each of his GTAs, leaving additional meetings up to the discretion of the GTA. However, Rita and Monica met with their GTAs to discuss at least a handful of papers from each graded set. While I was interested to see how the GTA/advisor relationship might change throughout the semester, I was only able to observe one meeting between Patrick and his GTAs. In other cases time constraints prevented me from attending every meeting, but I attended two meetings that occurred between the other GTAs and their advisors. In these sessions, I tape-recorded, observed, and took notes. Since Sam, the PhD student, did not meet with an advisor to discuss graded papers, I did not collect this data from him. Although Sam did not discuss papers with an advisor, he did provide me all of his graded assignments for review.

I asked the GTAs to provide me with the papers they had graded so that I could see their commenting style as well as reference the documents being discussed in these mentoring meetings. Originally I was hoping for GTAs to remove student names from

these papers before photocopying them, but mentoring meetings often took place only a few hours before returning papers, and I was forced to quickly copy the papers between events. Because student names and grades also often came up in the mentoring meetings, I felt it was important to get permission from the undergraduate students whose papers I would be reading. Thus, I discarded any data from students who did not give such permission and deleted their names, if referenced, from transcripts of the mentoring sessions. Therefore, my data may not be representative of the class as a whole. In particular, students with lower grades may have been less likely to sign the permission forms.

Finally, during the summer between the GTAs' first and second semesters of teaching, I interviewed them regarding their first year at Virginia Tech. I worked from a basic set of questions that included information about the GTA's educational background, experiences in the first semester "Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing"—including working with their PhD student mentors and in the Writing Center, experiences with their GTA advisors, and experiences teaching composition for the first time. Finally, I asked GTAs how their views of Composition had shifted during their first year, which proved to be one of the most fruitful questions across the board. I also adapted questions for individual GTAs after reading their practicum portfolios, transcribing the recordings of their mentoring sessions, and reading the comments on their student papers. This individualized approach led to follow-up on specific areas of concern for GTAs and allowed for me to ask for clarification on other parts of my data. For example, I noted from his advising session that Marty objected to giving "D" grades, a point I was sure to follow up on in our interview. This allowed me to see more specifically what had

influenced his position on this point and how he had negotiated this difference with his mentor, Rita. Thus, this multi-modal analysis provided me with a more complete view of the role of these new GTAs in relationship to the writing program and Composition as a discipline.

### *Data Analysis and Organization*

In my analysis, I looked for trends across the data. I did this in two ways. First, I looked for overall trends across the entire corpus of GTAs. I identified issues that came up multiple times in the transcripts and interviews. For example, multiple GTAs expressed anxiety about reading Composition theory. In addition, I noticed the ways that advisors helped GTAs feel like members of the community of writing teachers. Second, I identified trends across the data set of each GTA. I saw common themes and sometimes even the same stories repeated in the reflections written for practicum, the meetings with advisors, and the interviews. These commonalities helped me identify areas of particular importance to each GTA. However, I also looked for areas in which what the GTA said initially in the portfolio did not line up with what was said or done during the second-semester teaching experience. These patterns suggested that either the GTA was adopting a different persona based on the situation or that the GTA had changed his or her view. Since the interviews were the last set of data collected, when these types of conflicts arose, I privileged the information from the interview as the most recent source. In addition, since the interviews were not tied to supervisors or courses, unlike the practicum portfolio or the meetings with advisors, I took these responses to be the most genuine.

After identifying patterns among the GTAs, I grouped my participants into three categories based on Wenger's (1998) categories of participation. I categorized GTAs as outbound, peripheral, or inbound. I identified outbound participants as those who showed continued resistance to Composition across the data. As Ebest (2005) explains in her study of resistance and GTAs, that resistance is not always active. While some GTAs directly objected to Composition, I also categorized those that did not actively engage in the community of the writing program as "outbound" participants. Although many participants started as outbound members, I categorized them based on the type of participation that was most fitting as of the end of their first year rather than at the beginning. The most defining quality of outbound participants was the way they continued to adopt the role of the students in the composition program and did not become comfortable with the role of teachers within the program. Next, I categorized those students who did not want to go on in Composition or in teaching but who actively participated in the writing program as "peripheral" participants. These GTAs felt comfortable contributing to the program as teachers. In this category, I saw conversion narratives—those students who initially resisted Composition but came to accept it. However, conversion was not the key factor in categorizing students in this group; rather I looked for signs in the data of participation that went beyond responding as students doing a job. Finally, I categorized those students who had declared a Rhetoric and Composition major and intended to go on in the field as "inbound" participants. In many ways the participation of these students was similar to that of the students in the peripheral category; however, the desire to continue in this area meant that these students identified differently with the writing program and Composition. These categories

allowed me to see how GTAs with different relationships to the field might respond differently to the same teacher preparation activities. They also shift the focus away from disciplinary enculturation as the learning of genres and activities—an approach that might be the focus of a genre analysis—toward a focus on the way that Composition is constructed socially through the experiences of GTAs. These categories served as a basis for organizing and analyzing data and for explaining different types of GTAs.

However, there are limitations to these particular categories for data analysis. The biggest disadvantage is the way these categories over-simplify the relationship between GTAs and the composition program. For example, GTAs may move between categories. They may start as inbound participants but discover that they do not actually want to continue in Composition. Likewise, they might start strongly opposed to Composition, clearly outside participants, but decide that they would indeed like to pursue a career teaching. Since my data only captures the first year of the GTA, I am not able to adequately account for these shifts between categories. Although I do comment what allowed students to move from an outside role to a peripheral role, one year's worth of data is not enough to show a stable relationship between the GTA and the community. I wish then, to reiterate the point that these categories represent moments in time rather than stable identities of these GTAs. Furthermore, these categories simplify the way that GTAs may be outbound in one community but inbound in another. For example, a GTA may be an inbound participant as a teacher, but an outsider in Composition. These complexities were difficult to capture with this coding scheme.

Thus, it should be noted that the realities of the relationships between GTAs and the community of the writing program and between GTAs and the larger community of

Composition is decidedly more complex than these categories allow for. Prior (1995) notes, "One-way stories of assimilation into the center of a community and equally stereotyped tales of resistance belie the complexity of enculturation as practices situated within local relationships and contexts" (p. 320). While these categories begin to move us away from simple narratives of those who convert to Composition and those who resist it, as I will show throughout this dissertation, the realities of enculturation are complex and multi-faceted. In addition, themes that run throughout the data include the importance of social interactions, the relationships among different communities of practice, the relationship between theory and practice, and the role of anxiety and the previous experiences of the GTA.

#### Chapter 4: “Not a Composition Person”: How Outbound Members Define the Field

As Writing Program Administrators are well aware, many of the graduate teaching assistants they prepare have no intentions of teaching or continuing study in Composition after they graduate. Sometimes it is all too easy to dismiss the experiences of these students—after all, they won’t be continuing. Yet when we view disciplinarity as a locally constituted practice, one that is negotiated among newcomers and experienced members of the community, then the view of these “outbound” students becomes important to the way Composition is viewed within a department and by other GTAs. By participating, however temporarily, in our writing programs and by teaching our first-year students, these GTAs have power over the way that Composition is socially constructed. This chapter works to better understand the way these temporary community members construct the discipline of Composition, even when they do not see a role for themselves within it.

As we sit down for what would be a two-and-a-half hour interview, I ask Blaire, a young master’s student in literature, about her background. She begins almost immediately by telling me something that she says she’s not *supposed* to admit: she applied to graduate school to satisfy her nagging parents. Over the course of the interview, it becomes clear that she has no desire to teach or research and that she is dissatisfied with her graduate school experience. Blaire, in Wenger’s (1998) terms, is an *outbound* participant in both the community of the writing program, where she teaches, and in the community of scholars in her field. Of course, Wenger uses degree programs, in general, as an example of communities of practice that have mainly outbound participants. Since most degrees do not lead to one specific job or career but rather to a

plethora of options, and since there is a set point for exiting the community, it is arguable that all graduate students are outbound participants. Certainly we need to remember that there are plenty of students like Blaire who do *not* intend to continue in academia. Nevertheless, I do not classify all of my research participants as “outbound” because doing so would oversimplify their relationships to the multiple communities of practice with which they engage. Some, like Blaire, are intentionally outbound participants in both their field of study and in teaching composition. However, others intend to continue in their field of study or in teaching. In the context of this study, I define outbound participants as those who resisted active participation in the community of the Writing Program. At times, this resistance was overt; at other times, it was subtle. However, these students did not engage with the complexities of the discipline but rather chose to see themselves as external to it.

In this chapter, I describe and analyze the experiences of two graduate students: Blaire and Marty. Of my research participants, these two seemed the most resistant to Composition, both as a field and as a course. Likewise, these two expressed the most discomfort with their graduate experiences in general. Both are fairly young, with no more than two years between their undergraduate education and their graduate studies. Blaire and Marty are both MA students in literature. In this chapter, I explore what contributes to these two students’ resistance to Composition teaching and research. I begin by introducing both students in detail. I then synthesize their experiences with their first semester of practicum, observing a composition class and working in the Writing Center. Next, I talk about how these students viewed their first semester teaching and

working with their teaching advisors. Throughout I comment not only on the interview responses given by these three students but also on the genres they write in as teachers.

### *Blaire's Communities of Practice*

Blaire was clearly the most vocal about her resistance to Composition, to teaching, and to graduate school, in general. As mentioned above, Blaire did not initially want to attend graduate school, but she was at a loss for what to do next with her life. Likewise, Blaire does not want to be a teacher. In fact, she has such a strong fear of public speaking that she received hypnotherapy before she would even enter the classroom. This fear almost caused her to turn down the assistantship, and she even had doubts about continuing with it her second year. However, a sense of practicality and the influence of her family and friends has kept Blaire returning to the classroom. When looking at Blaire's experiences, I found myself asking what communities of practice she *did* associate with since she clearly distanced herself from both the teaching community of the writing program and the community of scholars in literature. However, in analyzing the transcript from our interview, it became clear that Blaire identified strongly as a member of the student community at Virginia Tech and that this association affected her views and her identity.

Blaire is conflicted about the new points of view she has encountered over the past year. On one hand, she tells me, she has learned a lot about just what can be considered "composition;" on the other hand, she is irritated that she is teaching a course where a film review is an acceptable and common assignment. She is unable to reconcile her former notions of what constitutes appropriate assignments for the course with what she has been told by faculty and other graduate students in the current program at

Virginia Tech. Similarly, she admits surprise and dismay at the courses offered to her as a graduate student. As an undergraduate minor in the department, Blaire explains that she thought she knew what to expect but that she should have researched the graduate program offerings more carefully, and had she done so, she might not have attended. Thus, in both her academic studies and her teaching, Blaire's expectations have not been reconciled with the realities of her current situation.

Furthermore, Blaire has had difficulty transitioning from her role as an undergraduate at Virginia Tech to a teaching assistant. Having gone straight through school at Virginia Tech and being a native of the surrounding community, Blaire admitted that she had some friends in common with some of her students. In fact, she rattled off a number of students with whom she had some personal connection, whether through her own connections or through family friends. While her teaching advisor has cautioned her about these relationships, Blaire says that she likes having people she knows in her class the first day and giving them a "shout out." She recognizes that there is some complexity to negotiating these sorts of connections, but comments that she enjoys that challenge and that she does not think that any of her students expect special treatment because of their connections to her.

Her detailed explanation of the relationship with her students indicates that Blaire strongly identifies with the Virginia Tech student body at large. In fact, she did not apply anywhere else for graduate school because she did not want to leave Virginia Tech. This association colors Blaire's view of her students. "I just disdain freshmen," she says with more than a hint of disgust; "I've been looking down on freshmen since my sophomore year." Here she speaks as a member of a student body, one in which she has obtained a

position of power, in which she is an insider who looks down on newcomers. It is no wonder, then, that she has rejected the WPA's characterization of first-year students as smart and technologically savvy. That view conflicted with the view of a community of practice where Blaire was already an inside member.

Seeing herself as an insider to the Virginia Tech community already, Blaire finds it difficult to adjust her views to accommodate the changes to the Composition program that have occurred since she was a first-year student. "That's not how I learned it," Blaire recalls, "This year has been about having to readjust my perception of what it is all about, and it's been hard." In fact, it has been so difficult that Blaire frequently longed for the composition program she experienced as a first-year undergraduate, explaining that she felt that approach afforded more liberty for teachers and that GTAs would prefer that approach. She even went as far as looking over the custom textbook from her own first-year composition course where she found a grading sheet that she referred to as "The Holy Grail."

Interestingly, though, some comments by Blaire indicate that she may not see the first-year course she took as "composition." At one point in the interview, Blaire dwelled on the fact that the course is officially labeled "Freshman English," which she believes is a misnomer. She states that "If they had just called in Freshman Composition, no misnomer, everyone would know what was going on that class." She followed up by saying that *she* would have known what she had gotten into when she took the position as teaching assistant. She then related a story about registering for "Advanced Composition" as an undergraduate at Virginia Tech. When she went to that course, she expected to do a lot of writing but was dismayed when she found that it involved doing digital narratives

and conducting interviews, and she dropped the course. It seems that in retrospect, Blaire connects the teaching she is being asked to do with the Advanced Composition course rather than with her Freshman English course, and it is clear that she prefers the approach she associates with “Freshman English.”

Considering the changes in the program at Virginia Tech and Blaire’s focus on literature within her MA program, it might be tempting to conclude that these comments stem from Blaire’s association with literature as a field, that she might prefer to teach literature and thus might cling to a current-traditionalist view of what constitutes a composition course. Certainly an element of that disciplinary tension is present. When she talks about the way that “Freshman English” was taught at Virginia Tech five years ago, she talks about how that approach would be preferable not only to her but to other graduate students, to her “colleagues.” She includes other graduate students in literature here, but separates those who are majoring in Composition noting that the exception to her statement about preferring the previous approach are those who are as “enamored with Composition” as the director of the program. When she resists teaching genres like the film reviews, she states that “a lot of us are too ivory tower” to see the value in assignments like that, again seeming to indicate that those in literature are somehow removed from public-based discourse. These statements indicate that despite her resistance to graduate school in general, there is an element of disciplinary identity at work here. When talking about her graduate cohort, Blaire notes that “a lot of us are literature people.”

However, when put in the context of her overall feelings about teaching, the academy, and graduate school in general, I do not believe that the primary force behind

Blaire's resistance to the new approach to composition is disciplinary. When thinking about Blaire's fondness for the first-year writing course she took, it is important to remember the role that composition serves in initiating students to a community of practice. As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, often classrooms serve as places where students are initiated into such communities, but not in the way we might think (p. 272). Rather than initiating them into the community of the discipline and learning the practices of that field, students may simply be initiated into the community of schooling. While Blaire may be experiencing enculturation, it may not be an example of *disciplinary* enculturation. Learning to be a member of a community of students, learning what is needed to survive graduate school, does not precipitate learning what it is to be a professional in the field. However, even in maintaining a student role for herself, Blaire still constructs a view of the field.

The evidence supports that Blaire sees education, in general, as a means of being enculturated into a student community rather than a professional one. She hints at this notion of education when she comments that on the first day of the fall semester she plans to (somewhat sarcastically) say to her students, "You guys are so lucky because I am your first experience at Virginia Tech." Furthermore, when Blaire talks about her graduate courses, it is clear that she does not see them as part of a course of professionalization. Rather she comments that graduate school is not really all that hard as long as you figure out the "hidden formula." I suspect, then, that Blaire feels such a strong connection with her Freshman English course because it was positioned at the point of entry when she became a member of the Virginia Tech community. This year has not just been about changing her view of composition but about changing her view of

what it means to be a member of the Virginia Tech community as evidenced by her comments that she thought she knew the English department better than she did. Thus, when Blaire clings to her previous course in composition, I would suggest there is very little that is theoretical or ideological in that connection but rather that it has to do with her sense of identity as a student. Her view of herself as student negates her view of herself as teacher and thus she resists efforts to prepare her to be a teacher.

This student identity is also apparent in the way that Blaire talks about her fellow graduate students. When doing so, she most often relays stories of a community of resistance. More often than other participants, she uses pronouns such as “we” or “us” when talking about reactions to graduate school and teacher preparation. For example, when talking about how graduate school wasn’t what she expected, Blaire says that “a lot of people are kind of disappointed.” She goes on to say many fellow students who were interested in PhDs are now no longer interested. In fact, she returns to this point at the end of the interview and goes on to list who exactly she thinks will go on and who won’t. Although I did hear from other students that they did not like the required textbook,<sup>11</sup> Blaire makes a blanket statement that “we all hated [it].” Similarly, she mentions graduate courses, not just those in Composition, that her entire cohort hated. She clearly speaks as a member of a community of practice here, that of her fellow graduate students. And that practice involves both graduate coursework as well as teaching. However, Blaire also clearly separates herself from those who are not MA students. She talks about the way that PhD students are “high and mighty” and professors are intimidating. Rather than seeing her community of practice as one that includes these students and faculty

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<sup>11</sup> All first time GTAs were required to use the same book in addition to the custom *Composition at Virginia Tech* book that is required in all sections of first-year writing.

members as insiders in a community that she is joining, Blaire sees them in oppositional terms. She has had to interact with these other communities differently this past year, which is reflected in several comments about what she should or shouldn't say in front of others. For example, she mentions an embarrassing situation where she made negative comments about a professor only to look up and see that person's spouse in the hallway. These are the kind of interactions she would likely not have dealt with as an undergraduate where she would not have been spending an extended amount of time working in the same space as her professors. Shifting to the role of graduate student within the community of the English department has been difficult enough and switching to see herself as a teacher has been nearly impossible.

#### *Marty's Communities of Practice*

Like Blaire, Marty has a strong connection with Virginia Tech. In fact, he moved to Blacksburg a year before beginning graduate school, explaining that he had missed the deadline for Fall 2008, and his application was postponed until Fall 2009. Although he applied to other schools, his preference was clearly to remain in Blacksburg and attend Virginia Tech. However, the community of practice that Marty seems to identify most clearly with is the Marines. Unlike Blaire, Marty does want to be a teacher, but other commitments take precedent over and sometimes conflict with that goal. He begins by telling me the story of how he had been offered his "ideal job" teaching American literature at a small private high school, but that he turned it down to go to Iraq with the Marine Corps.

Although Blaire's identity as a student seemed to negate her seeing herself as a teacher, Marty more readily adopts a position as a teacher. However, that position is

influenced heavily by his identity as a member of the Marines. What is particularly interesting is the way that Marty uses his experiences in the military to explain and/or justify his teaching practices and relate to his students. When explaining why he does not like to give D-grades in his classroom, Marty mentions that the Marine Corps has to score an 80% to pass every test they take. “I believe in holding people to a higher standard,” he says. He thus rejects the notion that 60% should pass his course. Rather than recognizing that he is operating within a different community of practice, Marty, like Blaire, clings to ideas that have been useful to him in other settings. In fact, his teaching advisor goes over the grading scale at Virginia Tech with Marty, explaining how Ds are a part of the university’s grading structure. Nevertheless, Marty can’t fully accept that a D at 60% should ever be passing a course, regardless of institutional context.

Later Marty relates the story of a student who was upset about her grade and told him (after the fact) about some personal issues that made her unable to concentrate on her work. Like many teachers, Marty would have preferred to hear that this student was having trouble before the paper was due rather than after she had received a poor grade. However, his identity as a Marine also comes into this story as he explains that he once had to write a paper when one of his friends had been hurt in Afghanistan. Again, individual and local circumstances do not concern Marty here, and he sees little difference between the situation he faced and the one his student is facing.

Finally, Marty talks about how a student misrepresented information about a policeman’s actions during a raid, a fact he knew was wrong because of his military training on how to handle a similar situation. This particular story is something he discussed with his teaching advisor when I was observing, and that he repeated to me in

our interview. Thus it seems to represent a particularly important moment for him. If we look at this story in terms of communities of practice, it is not hard to speculate as to why this example comes up multiple times for Marty. As a member of the Marine Corps, he is an insider. As a composition teacher, he is a newcomer. Thus when he has the opportunity to draw upon his role as military insider, it is particularly significant to him. In this particular case, that insider knowledge proved valuable as Marty was able to point out an error in his student's thinking. However, in the other cases listed above, Marty seems to make very little distinction between situations he faced as a member of the military and situations in his classroom. Rather than engage with each context individually and on its own terms, he uses his knowledge of one community to construct the other. Future research might look at how addressing these interactions between communities more directly might affect teacher preparation and disciplinary enculturation.

Like Blaire, Marty also refers frequently to his previous educational experiences. To some extent, this is true for all the GTAs, and only natural that they relate their experiences in the classroom as a teacher to those they had as students.<sup>12</sup> However, both Marty and Blaire seem particularly defensive of their previous experiences, calling on them frequently to justify ways that they differ from other composition teachers in the program. Again, Marty defends his policy of not giving Ds, despite the fact that they are on the Virginia Tech grading scale and that his teaching advisor disagrees with this policy, by saying that he went to a high school that did not give out Ds. Their already existing views of education often conflict with the current views they are being asking to

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<sup>12</sup> I did not directly ask about previous experiences taking composition, but this came up frequently in my interviews.

accept; however, rather than adjust or evaluate their previous conceptions, Marty and Blaire both cling to those views, perhaps because their identities are still tied to those communities of practice.

*Theory and Practice: Resistance in Practicum*

I move now to talk about how Blaire and Marty's views of themselves affected and was affected by their different experiences within the teaching preparation program at Virginia Tech. MA and MFA students at Virginia Tech do not teach until their second semester, and thus the first point of contact between the Virginia Tech Composition Program and its graduate teaching assistants is the fall course "Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing," commonly referred to by my participants as "practicum." As detailed in Chapter 3, this course is a 6-credit class that aims to introduce students to both the discipline of Composition Studies and the practical skills necessary to teach a first-year writing course. As the syllabus states, this course is "doing double-duty." It is designed to prepare GTAs who will teach by giving them one-on-one experience in the classroom with a mentor and guiding them through designing their own syllabi and assignments. It is also designed to provide students with "some background in the field of Composition and Rhetoric so that you begin your teaching informed in the work of this discipline" (ENGL 5984 Syllabus, Fall 2009). This includes rhetorical theory such as Bitzer's (1968) "Rhetorical Situation," as well as readings based on pedagogy such as Trimbur's (1990) "Consensus and Difference."<sup>13</sup> As I will outline in future chapters, this inclusion of Composition theory was problematic for multiple participants, who often had difficulty connecting theory and practice. I would argue that this distinction between

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<sup>13</sup> For a full syllabus see the Appendix

theory and practice is largely false. Nevertheless, the course started with Composition theory and then moved on to classroom observations and assignment creation. This decision made sense in terms of workflow but was seen by many GTAs as the “theory” part of the course and then the “practice” part. Blaire and Marty’s resistance manifest in a similar way; both dismissed the theory section of the course almost entirely and expressed their relief at moving on to the practice part.

Both Blaire and Marty were clear that they did not feel like they were the intended audience for the theoretical readings in the practicum course. When asked about the readings they encountered, both exhibit a fairly high level of resistance. Blaire notes that she didn’t think they helped at all. “No offense,” she says explaining that maybe she would have appreciated it more if she were going to go on in academia. “That’s really how the class was set up, for people intending on going on to teach and be professors,” she laments. Of course, Blaire ignores the fact here that she herself *is* going on to be an instructor the very next semester. Rather, she says she just kept reminding herself that it was only two years and wishing that the WPA would recognize that some people were only there to pay their tuition. Of course, this is something the WPA knows all too well; however, she has to consider the needs of undergraduate students who are taking courses in the program. Blaire may “disdain” freshmen, but the writing program has an obligation to make sure that these students receive quality instruction. Blaire does not see her role in this process as an entering professional, but sees herself as a student in a graduate course.

Although Marty’s resistance is not as direct as Blaire’s, he states that the theory part of the course was better “for people who really understand Composition and think about it a lot more.” Although Marty is more comfortable with teaching composition than

Blaire, he states, “the theory of it, I’m like, I don’t know that’s not really my thing, and it’s never been my thing. It’s just another world I don’t understand that well.” Like Blaire, he notes that he was at first dismayed at the thought of doing “this” for two years. It is important to note that neither Blaire nor Marty had previous experience with theoretical readings in general, and both also commented negatively on their critical theory seminar. Blaire states that she never understood what was being talked about in critical theory, and Marty notes that he received a less than stellar grade in it. Thus, it seems that the resistance here may not be disciplinary. Rather both students may be experiencing difficulties with adjusting to the highly theoretical readings often required in graduate school, in general. Resistance here spans communities of practice, and resistance to a particular topic—such as theoretical readings—in one context may perpetuate resistance in another context.

Both students also expressed frustration with the more practical aspects of the practicum. In particular developing assignment sheets as a part of the course was particularly problematic for both of them. While many schools adopt common syllabi, at Virginia Tech, graduate students create their own courses and select their own themes. The requirements for the 1106 course, which students were preparing to teach their second semester, are that the assignments are based on research, that first-year students engage in both library and field research, and that visual design and oral presentations be incorporated into the course. It is not uncommon, then, for one class to complete a researched memoir while another does a more traditional research paper assignment. As outbound members, Blaire and Marty did not have the confidence to create their

assignments, and both wanted an easier answer to the question of what to teach in composition.

Blaire complained that her first assignment draft was graded and that she received a low grade when she had yet to really know what she was doing.<sup>14</sup> She saw the comments that she received on her draft as written “to someone who knows what they are doing.” Blaire does not see herself as someone who, at least initially, could create an assignment sheet. Thus, it is difficult for her to engage in a productive dialog about improving her assignments. One implication here that warrants further exploration is the degree to which the addition of the grade to the practicum course (graded pass-fail in earlier semesters) unintentionally encouraged participants like Blaire to remain in a student role. While the grades clearly enforced the importance of creating quality assignments, and worked to ensure that students created assignments that did fit with the program, they also place the GTA clearly in the role of student. I followed up with Blaire and specifically asked if some of her comments had to do with the fact that the assignments sheets they were creating were graded, and she commented that it stressed her out.

Similarly, Marty struggled with meeting the WPA’s expectations for assignment sheets. He describes the process as follows:

And the analogy I use is we were told go draw me a picture. We’d bring it in, and we’d work really hard on it, and this assignment that we thought was really great, and we’d get, well, that’s not a picture of an animal. And we’re like, oh, you want a picture of an animal? Ok. And we’d go back

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<sup>14</sup> Assignments did not receive final grades until the portfolio at the end of the course, but the WPA felt it was important to give initial grades to make expectations clear.

and redo it and draw a picture of an animal, and then, it's not a horse, and then go back and draw a picture of a horse. It's not a *blue* horse, and so it got really frustrating.

As a key genre of composition teachers, assignment sheets enact the view of the community of the writing program that has been negotiated by its members. Wenger (1998) calls this process "reification," whereby knowledge of the community takes the form of an artifact such as a written document (p. 55). Assignment sheets reflect the view of the community of practice on what it means to teach composition. However, as newcomers and outsiders, Blaire and Marty struggle with their understanding of the writing program and are then frustrated trying to produce documents that reflect that understanding.

Of course, struggle is an ongoing part of reification. Wenger (1998) explains that reification is never complete (p. 62). Indeed, experienced members of the program still frequently change their assignments. The process that Marty describes might be seen, then, as very natural process of figuring out what is expected within a community of practice, particularly which assignments might be appropriate in the writing program at Virginia Tech. However, Marty does not see this as his own process of becoming accustomed with the program and/or the field, nor does he see this as part of the on-going struggle of a community of participants to negotiate what should be taught in the course. Rather, for Marty this is a never-ending quest to figure out what the WPA wants. This limited view of the community of practice causes him to remain an outsider to the community.

Nevertheless, Marty did start to realize the role of assignment sheets as documents within the community of the writing program. The course was designed so that GTAs could work together to create assignments. In addition, students were encouraged to take assignments from already established teachers and adapt them for their own classrooms. In fact, Marty recalls learning that it was ok to “steal” assignment sheets, that “it’s part of the culture as teachers.” What Marty *is* learning here is how community members share documents. However, he still does not fully engage with the complexities of this practice. After he found out this was ok to do, Marty copied an assignment directly from the custom textbook put out by the program and handed it in for his grade. It seemed like Marty had finally figured out the puzzle of how to create an assignment sheet that would be acceptable within this new community of practice. However, he was surprised that the WPA’s response to that assignment was not entirely positive. Rather he described her as ambivalent about the assignment and said she gave him many of the same responses he had received on other assignments he had turned in. Marty learned that sharing assignments was an important way to participate in the community, but he expected that this would then alleviate a need to *continually* evaluate the value of those assignments. Again, Marty remains an outbound member of the writing program by not engaging fully with the process of reification and negotiation that is essential to any community of practice.

### *First-Semester Mentoring and Teaching*

Starting six weeks into their first-semester, Marty and Blaire also worked in a composition course taught by a PhD student. These experiences worked to further inform their notions of what it means to teach composition. However, both expressed some

resistance to the process and their mentors. Marty was particularly opposed to his mentor Renee's philosophy of teaching composition, which involved a great deal of digital technology while Blaire's resistance centered more around her own anxieties with being in the classroom. Once during the term, the new GTAs taught the PhD students' classes and their mentors wrote up these observations along with teaching advice. Thus, while the PhD student mentors were not direct participants in my study and I did not interview them, I got a sense of the mentoring relationship both from my interviews with the GTAs and from the observation reports written by the PhD students and included in the practicum portfolio.

Marty's mentor was Renee, a first-year PhD student in the Rhetoric and Writing program with a particular interest in digital media. After observing Renee, Marty strongly correlated digital discourse with composition. This is not an unfair association as our field has certainly worked on stressing this area, and one of the five WPA Outcomes statements for first-year composition courses is "Writing in Electronic Environments." However, this association seems to only distance Marty from the field. In our interview, he expressed his view that students already knew how to compose in digital environments, but that they needed instruction on writing an academic essay. He negatively associates writing digitally with "how to write not in complete sentences for five pages, barely complete thoughts." He modifies this statement by saying that he knows it isn't Renee's goal to teach students this truncated form of discourse, but that she does draw heavily from "that world" in her teaching, while he prefers a more "traditional" approach. Although he talks specifically about Renee's class, Marty also mentions the new section on digital literacy in the custom composition textbook, thus

showing that he sees this not only as Renee's preference but as a part of what it means to teach composition in the writing program at Virginia Tech.

Having a mentor that focuses particularly in this area may have only reinforced Marty's view of himself as an outsider to Composition. Although he has aspirations of teaching at the college level, Marty states, "I'm not a Comp person, ya'll do that and that's awesome; that's not my thing." It is possible that this clear separation between Marty's identity as composition teacher and his view of those who do Composition, who are "Composition people," may in part be due to the extreme distance he felt between himself and Renee. Although he seems to vacillate between being skeptical of Renee's focus on the digital and seeing that as "cool," the type of participation that involves doing that work is a long way off for Marty.

In addition, the nature of the social interaction between Marty and Renee may have added to his separation of his identity from composition teaching. While Marty is a particularly stoic individual, Renee is quite vivacious. In addition to conflicting on what ought to be taught in composition, they conflicted in terms of personality and classroom conduct. This is particularly clear in the observation report that Renee writes for Marty. Although Marty says in his interview that the teaching evaluation Renee did for him "wasn't bad or anything," her tone in it is particularly adversarial and authoritarian. In her write-up of the lesson that Marty taught in her class, Renee comments that asking students to shut their laptops at a certain point in the lesson was not a good idea since many of her students take notes on the computer. Renee writes, "In our meeting we talked about being careful not to deter students from things just because you have a

problem with them.” Renee clearly takes a directive approach with Marty; again, reinforcing his identity as a student rather than as a new teacher.

In contrast to the direct conflicts that I sensed between Marty and Renee, Blaire at first seems very positive about her mentor, Grant. In fact, he did much to relieve her fears about teaching. However, despite Grant’s best efforts, Blaire separates herself from Grant rather than seeing herself as a member of the same group of writing teachers. Blaire explains that Grant actively involved her in his classroom, having her do something little every day leading up to her teaching a full class period. With Blaire’s fear of public speaking, she found this to be helpful to ease into teaching. She also appreciated that Grant was extremely organized and helped her to be so, another thing that worked to relieve some of her anxiety. However, when I asked if Grant continued to be a mentor for Blaire, she explains that she ultimately felt as though she couldn’t relate to him. Although she recalls seeing Grant “stalking” her office at the beginning of spring semester to see how she was doing with teaching, she explains that she didn’t feel overly comfortable with Grant. Rather she calls him “a mentor with a capital M.” She notes that she would rather talk to the other master’s level GTAs in her practicum group “because we have similar problems.” Ultimately then, Grant is associated with her professors and the other PhD students in Rhetoric and Writing, whom Blaire sees as a part of a different community of practice, which has problems different from her own.

Without more data, it is difficult to say whether the relationships that Marty and Blaire had with their first-semester mentors lead them to identify more as outsiders to Composition or whether the fact that they identified themselves that way affected their view of the mentoring relationship. Marty’s disconnect with his mentor on both a

personal level and in terms of the content of the course definitely did not help him see a place for himself as a teacher in her classroom. However, Blaire did not have the same kind of disagreement with Grant, but nevertheless separated herself from him, noting that they just didn't have the same problems to discuss. It seems Blaire found it difficult to see how someone like Grant, an insider in Composition, would have similar issues in the classroom as someone like herself, whom she clearly defines as an outbound member. In her study of graduate student mentoring, Belcher (1994) found that more hierarchical mentoring styles combined with a lack of comfort with one's field impeded success in graduate school (p. 32). These two factors clearly go hand-in-hand. A lack of comfort with C/composition seemed to lead to a perception that mentoring was hierarchical, and mentoring that was directive seemed to add to a discomfort with composition. These factors worked in concert to allow Blaire and Marty to maintain their identities as outbound members of the writing program.

Another place where Blaire and Marty had an opportunity to build their identities as teachers during their first-semester was their work in the Writing Center. Another requirement of their practicum course, they each spent an hour a week coaching students. While this experience did not come up as much in my interviews, both Blaire and Marty comment on it in their practicum portfolios. It seems clear from these reflections that Blaire and Marty knew they were supposed to get something of value out of their Writing Center experience. Blaire notes that she learned to respond to student work without focusing so much on grammar and mechanics. Marty explains that he learned to work with non-native speakers on their writing. However, as McKinney and Chiseri-Strater (2003) show, GTA's reflections, particularly in the context of a course such as this one,

can sometimes be misleading. When submitting their final portfolio for a grade, GTAs understand the importance of showing what they learned from all the different activities connected to the practicum. However, in my follow up interviews, neither Blaire nor Marty indicated that the Writing Center work they did had any real effect on their teaching or their identity as teachers. As I will show when I talk specifically about Blaire and Marty's responses to student writing, they do not seem to be applying what they reported learning from their Writing Center experiences. Again, they see this community as a separate one that they do not belong to, but that they need to show they have learned from in order to do well as students.

#### *Building Community in Second Semester Practicum Groups*

After their first semester, Blaire and Marty were assigned to the same practicum group for the spring semester and shared the same GTA advisor, Rita. Rita is an experienced member of the writing program and also an experienced advisor. Although she identifies herself with Composition, she originally hails from literature. I divert a little here from my narrative of Marty and Blaire to explain how these issues of identity as an outsider/insider change after years of teaching. With over 20 years of teaching experience, Rita is clearly an insider in the Writing Program. However, many might not see her as an insider in Composition. Despite recent attendance at Composition's major national conference, the Conference for College Composition and Communication (CCCCs), Rita has never presented or published scholarly research in the field. Nevertheless, she sees herself as *both* an insider in the writing program *and* in Composition.

As a professional who has focused on teaching, this activity seems to be the primary source of Rita's professional identity. When I asked Rita what discipline she most associated with she replied, "I've always taught composition." In part, she may not associate with literature because she received her degree so long ago. She went on to explain to me that other members of the department from her generation also had degrees in literature and that degrees in rhetoric and composition were uncommon at the time. In particular, she mentioned the current WPA and department chair, both of whom are well established scholars in the fields rhetoric and composition and technical writing. Although Rita told me that she had never presented at disciplinary conferences, nor did she intend to, she seems to view herself as just as much a part of the discipline of Composition as these senior scholars. Rita never said that she would have preferred a degree other than her literature MA or that she wished she had contributed to the field through research. Rather, she was secure in her academic identity as a composition teacher, and that identity was enough to make her feel a part of the field at large.<sup>15</sup>

Rita was well positioned to serve as both insider in the writing program and as a "broker" who could help these GTAs negotiate their own position as both composition teachers and literature students. Both Blaire and Marty worked quite well with Rita and did not express the same kind of resistance in the relationship with her as they did when they spoke about the Director of Composition or about their PhD student mentors. Even though both had their disagreements with Rita, they found her particularly open to their points of view. Blaire expresses some concern over whether Rita will allow her to grade her papers without a rubric, but says, "Unless I completely read her wrong, Rita is the

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<sup>15</sup> The identity construction of non-tenure faculty members in Composition is another important area for research to be completed.

kind of person, it seems, that as long as you can justify what you're doing and why you're doing it, she's ok with what you're doing." Similarly, Marty tells me that Rita forwarded him an article about a school that did not use Ds since she knew he was interested in that issue. These kinds of statements show that her students find Rita to be more of a collaborator despite what I would have initially characterized as a more hierarchical approach to mentoring. A closer look at the transcripts from my observations of Rita's meetings with Marty and Blaire helps to clarify this issue. In both cases, I observed two different sessions with each of these students going over a set of graded papers with Rita. While these sessions focused on graded papers, they often delved into broader teaching questions as well.

At her advising meetings with her GTAs, Rita comes out from behind her desk and sits next to her advisee. It is not uncommon to see both participants huddled over the set of papers with pencils out discussing and pointing to problematic passages in the student paper. At several points in the sessions I observed with Marty and Blaire, Rita would actually mark on the student's paper herself, although she would often say something about doing so. For example in a session with Marty she asks to borrow his pencil saying, "Just because I'm an editor at heart, and I see these things." Similarly, she explains to Blaire that she is marking an agreement error on one paper and a spelling error on another. Although both Blaire and Marty seem fine with this practice, it could be interpreted as authoritarian. In addition, Rita's comments about grades and responses on student writing can be very directive. At one point, she tells Marty that he has to change an A grade to an A- because the works cited page is not in alphabetical order. Similarly, when Blaire is talking about how she will word her end comments to a particular student

and says “I will write that overall it was a good paper,” Rita directs her to “say ‘strong’” rather than “good.” Rita telling a student directly what to say either in response to a paper or a situation in the classroom is not uncommon.

However, a closer look at the transcripts show that this directive stance is only one aspect of Rita’s mentoring style. For as often as Rita makes directive statements like “Mark that in red,” she also hedges many of her suggestions. Often she prefaces her suggestions with language like “I would” or “I think that” rather than using direct commands. It is worth noting that these instances are more common in the second meeting with Blaire than in the first, where her language is more direct. Thus, this may be seen as a sign that Rita feels that Blaire has begun to appropriate the discourse of the community and that she does not need as much direct instruction.

Furthermore, Rita often makes statements that relate her own experiences in the classroom to those of her GTAs. She tells a lot of stories about problems in her classes, showing that it is not just newcomers that experience difficulties. When Marty complains that a student misunderstood the assignment but that his peer reviewers provided only positive feedback, he relates the story as a personal failure. “I feel like there must have been some type of failing on my part,” he says. But Rita tells Marty, “that happens... When that’s happened in my class...” In these moments Rita is able to show her advisees that she too is a member of the same community of practice, that she has the same sorts of problems as they do. This connection extends into the emotions that are tied to teaching as well. As expected, Blaire demonstrates a lack of self confidence throughout her sessions with Rita, constantly second guessing her grades and her marks on the rubric as well as the assignment requirements she set out. But Rita encourages Blaire saying,

“We want every single student to excel, but the fact that not every single student does is not our fault, ok?” Again, Rita uses the plural pronoun here to include herself and Blaire in the same community of teachers who have the same concerns and feelings.

Finally, Rita makes it clear that her own practice is based on that of other teachers in the program. On multiple occasions she mentions other faculty in the department explaining that she got a particular idea about grading or policies from a member of the community. She includes her GTAs in the community when she asks both Marty and Blaire for copies of assignments they have done in class. On looking at an instruction sheet Marty has with his set of graded papers, she exclaims enthusiastically, “Oh. I’d like to take this!” Similarly, she compliments Blaire multiple times on the layout of her fieldwork assignment and tells her, “please do send me that assignment because it is nicely done.” By accepting their ideas, Rita encourages newcomers to participate in and identify with the community. She thus asks as a broker who is able to help new GTAs connect with composition. In fact, I would argue that she is better positioned to fulfil this role than the WPA since she is not involved in the research field. Although the WPA shared her experiences teaching with her practicum class, noting, for example, that first-year students were technologically savvy and smart, both Blaire and Marty seemed distrusting of this perspective, which they saw as far removed from their own. Although Rita is in charge of the GTAs’ practicum for second semester, unlike the first-semester course, it is not graded, and functions more as a teaching circle.

In fact, as great as Rita’s influence is, it is important not to discount the overall impact of group mentoring. Kathleen Yancey (1999) talks about the importance of building teaching circles for faculty mentioning that faculty stay longer when they have

groups that provide both academic and social support (p. 136). Similarly, an important experience for the GTAs is working with their mentoring groups, and these groups can contribute significantly to the GTAs' view of teaching. One thing that Rita likes to suggest is that her group come up with similar assignments and use the same textbook for their second semester teaching. With some groups she has seen this work well; however, she notes that the previous year there was a particular person in the group that was very negative and set the tone for the group causing collaboration to be difficult. When her groups do collaborate, Rita also participates in this. She notes that she's hoping the GTAs can agree this year and she says, "I don't think I'm going to use the book they're going to use, but I'm going to look to them for tweaking some of my own assignments." Again Rita shows that she creates a community with her students of which she is an active part.

This community is clearly important to both Marty and Blaire who talk about their fellow GTAs often in their interviews. In particular, they both talk about their mentoring group when discussing the assignments they will be using in the fall. Rita had mentioned wanting the group to use the same assignments, but by the time I interviewed Marty, he indicated that the group had decided against this, much to his disappointment. He noted that he was hoping to work together on a common syllabus to make things easier. However, he has continued to use both Blaire and Sophie (who will be featured in the next chapter) as resources when designing his fall course. He notes that he was originally collaborating with Blaire and was going to do a film review like hers. However, he decided that he liked the way Sophie had set up her course around a theme and decided to take that approach instead. Blaire also mentions collaborating with Marty on the film review assignment. However, Blaire comments that she is less likely to take

assignments from GTAs in her group than from more experienced instructors and GTAs. Sharing these assignments is a key way that GTAs construct the discipline of Composition through their teaching. By negotiating what assignments are being taught they are contributing to the discussion of what it means to teach first-year writing at Virginia Tech.

In some ways, Blaire and Marty share assignments in the same way that students share class notes. Rather than actively engage with the assignments, they try to help each other find the “right” answer. Blaire maintains her view that separates experienced teachers from her and her fellow GTAs. Thus, she doesn’t feel particularly confident taking assignments from other GTAs, explaining that, like herself, most are not confident in their assignment ideas. She goes on to explain that her first semester teaching the assignments were developed by her group in the practicum, and that they just didn’t work well for her. However, when Blaire does use assignments from the OCELOT website<sup>16</sup> she adapts them to fit her own course. For example, she noted taking part of her film review assignment from one I had produced but using my assignment as only one option for students while adding two additional options that she created. Clearly, Blaire is not just pulling assignments from the website and using them whole cloth but is taking time to consider them closely and modify them for her teaching.

Marty, too, seems to work hard on his assignments but also seems to abandon them quickly when he sees something he likes better. I found it interesting that he took a bit of time to list films and work on the film review assignment but then dropped that assignment altogether when he heard Sophie’s ideas for her class. It seems that Marty is

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<sup>16</sup> This website (Outcome-Centered Electronic Library of Teaching Resources) was created to give teachers at Virginia Tech, particularly GTAs, a database of assignments to look at when planning their courses.

still looking for the right colored horse and rather than revise the picture, he just starts a new one. However, unlike Blaire, Marty likes taking assignments from his classmates and seeks more direct collaboration with them. Perhaps this is because Marty sees himself more as a teacher and thus also sees his classmates as teachers. Although he seems uncomfortable creating his own assignments from scratch, he values what his classmates have produced. Perhaps this attitude also comes from the fact that Marty had no better luck with the assignment that he pulled from the *Composition at Virginia Tech* custom textbook than with the ones his classmates worked together to create for the spring semester.

Although she makes her own modifications, Blaire seems to use the resources of the community as an authorized source that tells her what she should teach. After all, she did comment several times on her surprise that a film review was an acceptable assignment, yet this is one that she chose for her fall semester students. Thus, when Blaire shares these resources with her mentoring group, she is passing on resources that she has accessed as a student. In contrast, Marty seems to refer to his classmates as the experts. However, he does not create and share his own materials. Both students use the community as a resource but seem to see themselves as on the margins of the community. They engage more as receivers than producers of knowledge.

#### *Blaire and Marty as Teachers*

McKinney and Chiser-Strater (2003) explain that the persona that GTAs present in practicum courses, particularly in teaching reflections may be different from the personas they actually adopt in the classroom. Both Blaire and Marty talked in their practicum portfolios about the way they would apply what they learned to their own

classrooms. Multiple types of data are important to seeing how the persona adopted by GTAs in one setting, such as a practicum course or meeting with a teaching advisor, might differ from the persona adopted in the classroom. Although I did not observe Blaire and Marty in the classroom, I talked to them both about their teaching. In addition, I collected assignment sheets and graded student papers from each of them. I looked for common themes in these multiple data sets to get an overall sense of how these GTAs portrayed themselves as teachers when writing to their students.

When looking specifically at responding to student writing, Anson (1989) shows how teachers move from a dualistic, to a relativistic, to a reflective stance on response (p. 345). One pattern that emerged not only in Blaire and Marty's response to student work but also in their comments about working with students in general was that they took a dualistic approach to teaching. Anson explains that in such a philosophy "the assignment becomes a kind of rhetorical trick" to get a student to show his/her problems with grammar and style (p. 347). Dualistic responders tend to be very directive in their response and focus on issues such as grammar and style rather than content (Anson, 1989, p. 351).

As we've already seen, Blaire and Marty seem to share this overall view of education, even their own. Blaire talked about the magic formula to succeed in graduate school as well as the perfect rubric that she found in her previous composition textbook. Marty searched for the horse of the right color or the perfect assignment sheet that would be guaranteed to work. Thus, they both displayed a dualistic approach to education, overall, one in which there are right answers to be figured out and puzzles to be solved.

This perspective is also clear in their syllabi and assignment sheets, and as Anson notes, it comes with a directive stance. As I've shown with Rita, response that is directive is not necessarily authoritarian; however, both Marty and Blaire also display a certain authoritarian attitude in regard to their teaching and in the tone of their teaching documents and responses. In their syllabi, both GTAs are concerned with spelling out certain rules. Blaire is particularly concerned with plagiarism and cheating. In fact, she outlines three different bullets on her syllabus, one for cheating, one for plagiarism, and one for falsification, each of which she explains in detail. Similarly, Marty has six bullet points on his syllabus in reference to attendance. Despite the fact that the Virginia Tech program stresses visual rhetoric, including document design, both of these GTAs take a dualistic approach to formatting papers as well. Marty specifies formatting guidelines on his syllabus—the typical 12 pt font, Times New Roman, 1 inch margins—and Blaire does the same on each of her assignment sheets. Length requirements are also significant to both of them and are specified on each assignment sheet. When talking about a student who failed the final paper, Marty is very clear—to both me and Rita—that the paper was half the required length and thus had to automatically fail regardless of other qualities. While many teachers specify such guidelines, and Blaire and Marty were certainly not the only ones to do so, these factors stood out as particularly important to both of them. They come up more frequently across the data than they do for other participants. This dualistic approach is also prominent in Blaire's comments on student writing. For example, her most frequent comment is reminding students that a paragraph must be at least four sentences long.

Of even greater interest, however, is the way that Blaire and Marty learn to comment on student writing and how their identity as a teacher is reflected in this process. As we've seen, Blaire is particularly insecure about her identity as a teacher, and this comes through very clearly as she grades papers. When I attended the first session where Blaire and Rita went over her grading, Blaire had not completed most of her end comments. She looks for Rita for a formula to write these comments, and once she has this, she follows it on most of her papers. The formula involves starting with a positive comment, moving to some specific comments about the paper, and then offering advice for the next paper. Smith (1997) found that end comments do tend to follow patterns such as this one, and it seems that these are the types of genre expectations that are passed down by experienced members of the community of writing teachers to newcomers. However, Blaire is particularly deliberate and consistent with this formula. In addition, she frequently crosses out comments and re-does her grading sheets. All of this reflects her insecurity with her identity as a teacher as well as her status as a newcomer to the genre of commenting.

In contrast, Marty seems more comfortable as a teacher and evaluator of student writing. He comes closer to the identity of an inbound teacher when he talks about the way he has modeled his response to student writing on those responses he has received from his professors. However, he particularly mimics professors that seem to fit with his already existing view of education. He mentions one graduate class where he received high grades but a lot of "red" all over his papers and another where he did poorly but made progress. Although he characterizes himself this way and see himself as emulating this style of response, Marty's graded papers are not covered in red. Marginal comments

are minimal. Particularly when it comes to response practices, it seems that Marty's view of himself as a teacher and the way that that persona is conveyed to students differs.

Marty seems particularly authoritarian in relation to his students, and it is clear that he wants to hold them to a high standard. Yet his comments to his students also often show a certain sensitivity that he does not show in his session with Rita or his interview with me, where he often spoke negatively about his students and their work. While his comments are directive at times, he sometimes cushions them with statements such as, "as a reader, I..." However, the frustration he shows in his mentoring meetings also shows through in some cases. In his meeting with Rita, Marty doubts the validity of a student's field research. However, he is hesitant to directly challenge the student since he does not have proof. Rather he comments, "You write very well, but this feels like you spent minimal effort and time on it." Again, he begins with the positive comment before moving to express his doubts about the paper; however, his frustration shows through.

To show the way that the teaching persona of a GTA might shift between comments, I return to the comments Marty made about the Writing Center in his practicum portfolio. Marty talked about the Writing Center quite a bit in his teaching reflection, explaining that he learned about working with ESL students. However, in practice he seems to have failed to identify or assist the ESL students in his classroom. In the meetings with his mentor that I observed as well as the student papers I collected, I found that Marty clearly had at least one student who was struggling with English. In his comments on paper, Marty often asks students to read their papers aloud to catch grammar errors, a strategy that might not work particularly well for a non-native speaker. In particular, he struggles with one student who has difficulty with punctuation as well as

capitalization. He becomes frustrated with this student and comments, “I even pointed this out to you when you showed me [a draft].” Marty assumes that the students aren’t applying what he has told them to apply out of laziness when there may be deeper issues at stake. When discussing a failing paper, Rita asked Marty if that particular student was a non-native speaker. Marty replied, “I have some not native speakers, but I don’t have anybody in my class who I consider to be English as a Second Language. They all speak and are capable of writing very well.” Yet, the paper under discussion was receiving a failing grade, which Marty seems to indicate had less to do with the student’s ability and more to do with lack of effort. In a later mentoring session, he mentions that after students’ final presentations for the semester, he realized that a particular student “might be a little more ESL than I thought originally.” Thus, if Marty did learn about working with ESL students through his experiences in the Writing Center, he has not applied that knowledge to his own classroom. Not surprisingly, when I asked Marty about his experience in the Writing Center, he neglected to mention anything about working with ESL students.

As teachers, Blaire and Marty were not necessarily ineffective.<sup>17</sup> Even though they struggled with their identity as composition teachers, they had to present an identity to students on a daily basis, through their interactions with students and through their writing in teaching genres. They developed a sense of these genres through their experiences with their teaching advisors as well as through their own experiences in receiving comments on their writing. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Blaire and Marty used their past experiences when developing this identity. For example, Marty

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<sup>17</sup> I did not evaluate their teaching in any way and did not collect teaching scores or other measures of teaching success.

wants to be a particularly hard teacher because he himself found failure a valuable lesson that made him a better student. Nevertheless, Marty's persona as teacher also shows signs of being influenced by the norms of the community of practice—he uses many positive comments and uses these to lessen the blow of his negative criticism, a common move in composition (Smith, 1997). Similarly, Blaire follows a specific formula for her responses. Since neither feel completely comfortable with their identity as teachers, these formulas are particularly important to these GTAs.

### *Conclusion*

Although Blaire and Marty are only two GTAs, their experiences can help inform our understanding of the way that those students who are outbound participants in our writing programs respond to our teaching preparation efforts. Rather than simply lament the lack of participation inherent with this group of students, it is important to see through their eyes briefly, to understand the way that what we do interacts with their lives and the identities they construct.

First, it is important to note that identity is constructed by multiple experiences and multiple communities of practice. As Compositionists, WPAs often see the resistance that students have to reading Composition theory, but what we may not notice is that some students struggle with theoretical readings in general, and this may not be a *disciplinary* specific resistance. However, these multiple resistances are likely to build on one another. They are also perpetuated by the social connections among students. Although she overstates the case, Blaire notes that everyone in her cohort disliked critical theory class. Group resistance is a particularly powerful social force.

Often a goal of teaching Composition theory in a practicum course is to get GTAs to recognize the unique status of Composition, to note that it has its own theorists and scholars, and that not just anyone who can write can teach writing. At times, Blaire and Marty separated Composition distinctly from their other communities of practice and from themselves. For example, they both rejected the digital discourse that they saw as a part of Composition: Marty in his interactions with Renee, and Blaire in her rejection of certain assignments, including the digital narrative she had been asked to do in Advanced Composition. However, at other times, Blaire and Marty attempted to apply models they had learned in different settings to their work teaching composition. Blaire wanted to use the way she had been taught first-year writing in her own classroom, while Marty drew on policies from not only his previous educational background but also his experience in the military. It is oddly paradoxical the way that Marty and Blaire both separated Composition as something completely other and yet still tried to apply these experiences in the classroom. I take this paradox as an indicator of the complexities in the relationships among communities of practice and of Blaire and Marty's difficulty negotiating their roles within these multiple communities.

Finally, the narratives told in this chapter serve as examples of the way that disciplinarity is negotiated through the practices of a writing program. Disciplines are constructed not just by inside members, but also by those who define themselves in opposition to the field. No matter how outbound Blaire and Marty are, they still construct a view of what it means to teach composition, both at Virginia Tech and within the larger community of Composition as a field. Creating assignments was one way that Blaire and Marty constructed the writing program. Negotiating what assignments to use was not

only about deciding what was ok to teach in first-year composition at Virginia Tech, but it was also about constructing what is acceptable to teach in composition courses at large. For Blaire, Composition is about writing in a broad range of genres, including the dreaded film review. For Marty, Composition is about learning to write digital discourse and not feeling comfortable with that makes him “not a Composition person.” In addition, sharing stories about teaching with their advisors and fellow GTAs means constructing the common practices and common concerns of writing teachers. As Blaire and Marty construct their course, their assignments, and their role within the writing program at Virginia Tech, they are negotiating not only what it means to teach composition but also what it means to be a “Composition person,” even if they themselves reject that identity.

## **Chapter 5: “I’m actually starting to like it”: Peripheral Participants’ Acceptance of Composition**

The participants in the previous chapter ultimately rejected C/composition as a part of their identity, resigning themselves to what Wenger (1998) calls a marginal or outbound position in relation to the writing program and the discipline. Some of the literature (Ede, 2004; Fischer, 2005) seems to place most MFA and MA students not specializing in rhetoric and composition in this category by noting only the resistance these students express toward their teaching. However, this study shows that resistance does not always mean a rejection of Composition. Even Blaire, the most resistant GTA from Chapter 4, noted at the end of her interview that even though she hated teaching, she still wanted to do her very best at it. Blaire will likely never see herself as a teacher or as a member of Composition; however, other GTAs who had initially expressed resistance moved to be more accepting of the field and of their role within it. I label these GTAs *peripheral* participants.

Wenger (1998) explains that "peripherality provides an approximation of full participation that gives exposure to actual practice" (p. 100). In this way, GTAs, in general, can be seen as peripheral participants in our writing programs. They are given access to the community and its practices, including their own classrooms. However, they do not yet have full access as they do not teach a full load or bring in a full salary for their work. Nor are they often authorized to make programmatic change. Rather they are guided by their teaching advisors who supervise their work. While Lave and Wenger (1991) initially focused on the concept of legitimate peripheral participation to show how new community members are enculturated, Wenger (1998) goes on to separate peripheral

participation from other types of community involvement. He clarifies that peripheral participation is full enough to affect identity, but it may not lead to full participation (p. 154-155). Using these terms, I separate GTAs whose participation is peripheral from those who are outbound and inbound. While outbound members were certainly affected by their experiences as teachers, as we saw in Chapter 4, they continued to identify closely with communities they belonged to before graduate school. They often seemed to use those identities to explain their current experiences, and they seemed to place those identities in conflict with an identity within Composition. However, those GTAs who I label peripheral members commented more positively on their role as teachers and/or on their connections with Composition as a discipline. While other communities of practice continued to be important to them, even dominant, they were better able to reconcile those experiences with their role as composition teachers. Nevertheless, these participants do not intend to become full members of the community at this time.

This chapter focuses on three GTAs whom I consider peripheral participants: Sophie, Kevin, and Caleb. Like Marty and Blaire, Sophie is an MA student focusing in literature and is in the mentoring group with Rita. While Sophie would prefer to work in literature rather than composition, she has more readily accepted her role as a writing teacher. Kevin and Caleb are both MFA students who expressed an original skepticism of Composition but who talk about their relationship to the field as a sort of conversion. While they are still committed to creative writing first and foremost, it is clear that teaching composition has become an important part of their graduate school experience. Together these cases provide us with a better look at what allows GTAs who are not Compositionists to find a place for themselves within our writing programs.

*Sophie*

Sophie's relationship to graduate school and the Virginia Tech community differs greatly from what we saw with Blaire and Marty in Chapter 4. Rather than going straight through school to her graduate work, Sophie is older (in her mid-30s) and has been in the workforce. She attended community college briefly after high school, but didn't finish and did not have the funds to attend a four year institution. At 26, she returned and finished the two-year degree, then went into the workforce for four years, and then completed a bachelor's degree at a small private college where she received a scholarship to their creative writing program. However, she ultimately focused more on cultural studies with English studies rather than creative writing, and thus is pursuing an MA rather than an MFA degree.

Sophie clearly identifies herself with her home field. She clearly and directly states her affiliation with cultural studies. She makes such statements as "since I was a cultural studies person." And "I do a lot of work with gender, with race, class." "I do eco-criticism," she states. These types of statements exist throughout the interview transcript and show Sophie's close identification with her field of study and her academic work. The language she uses points to the way that disciplinarity is about identity and action. When talking about her work Sophie states *I do* this or *I am* this. Although she says that her focus is "all over the place," in actuality Sophie articulates a very clear view of herself as a scholar and academic. She combines aspects of cultural studies and American literature to address important issues of American culture. Unlike the students in chapter 4, not only does Sophie have a clear scholarly agenda, but she is also able to mold the

program into what she wants it to be. She exerts agency over her program of study rather than looking for someone else's answers to her questions. For example, when I asked her if she felt her work fell under the discipline of American studies, she commented on the connection, but noted that she did not see a degree in that field as useful. Rather, she wanted an English degree that would let her put together her interests the way she wanted; something she has been happy with at Virginia Tech. In other words, Sophie functions as an insider in English by shaping that discipline to accommodate her interests and research. Furthermore, she speaks of herself as an insider, as a scholar in the field.

Teaching is also important to Sophie, and she notes that the opportunity to teach at the master's level is another reason why she picked the program at Virginia Tech. She characterizes herself as "hugely excited" to teach. Although she intends to pursue a PhD in English, she hopes not to teach composition. She explains that she expects teaching composition to be a part of her assistantship in a PhD program, but her ultimate goal is to work on cultural studies and literature rather than Composition. Since cultural studies is closely connected with composition at Virginia Tech, this transition may be easier for Sophie than for students with other specialties. However, while teaching is a part of Sophie's professional identity, she sees herself as a peripheral rather than an inbound participant in C/composition. She takes on the role of a composition teacher, but only temporarily.

### *Caleb*

Like Sophie, Caleb has returned to graduate school after time in the workforce. He completed an undergraduate degree at Virginia Tech in English nine years ago. Although he briefly worked in education as a special education advisor in a high school,

if anything, that experience pushed Caleb farther from teaching and academia. He became frustrated with the institutional setting he experienced and described his role as “more tutorial, unfortunately a lot of babysitting.” In fact, Caleb didn’t keep this job for long and has spent most of his time away from school as a chef. His overall view of education and of academia borders on cynicism. He says, “a lot of times it [academia] seems like the snake that’s eating its own tail, you know, just feeding, just an institution that’s built itself up and doesn’t have anything to do with anything, especially like an English department.” However, he says that after the last year in the MFA program, his cynicism is mellowing. He notes, in particular, that getting to know the people behind the institutional forces has changed his view to be more positive overall.

Caleb came into his graduate studies with a clear idea of what he wanted to accomplish. He wanted to write a novel, and he realized that he couldn’t do that while maintaining his job as a chef. He identifies himself clearly as a creative writer, and throughout the interview it was clear that his primary goals, both professional and personal, involve writing. His identity as a writer definitely takes precedence over his identity as a teacher. Unlike Sophie, he was initially skeptical about teaching, perhaps because of his previous negative experiences, and he wasn’t sure that he had made the right decision to be a GTA. However, like his overall view of academia, his view of himself as a teacher has changed. When he started his MFA, he says he wanted to get in and get out, to write the novel and then move on. However, as he was asked by others about whether or not he wanted to be a professor, he started thinking more about the possibility. Like Blaire in Chapter 4, he states that he initially just wanted the assistantship for the benefit of paid tuition, but unlike her, he has come to see his three

years teaching as an MFA student as a professional investment. He now figures that it would be a waste to not take advantage of the training and experience he is receiving in teaching. And although he states that his first semester teaching did not go well, he also feels confident that he can make adjustments that will lead to better teaching in the future.

In terms of his relationship with C/composition, that too has shifted over the course of Caleb's first year of graduate school. Like Blaire, Caleb had experienced the previous composition program at Virginia Tech, and he too notes that it has changed significantly. However, he is pleasantly surprised by that change as well as by the depth of the field of Composition. He enjoyed reading Composition theory and "realizing that... not only is it important, but a lot of very intelligent and unique thinkers are working on it." For Caleb, the people involved and the ideas are paramount to making a discipline. The same way that he characterized his shift in thinking about academia—from seeing it as a self-serving institution to seeing it as a community of thinkers—he stresses the *people* working in Composition. This view fits with the view that learning is about becoming a member of a community and that disciplines are, in fact, composed of communities of practice negotiated by people. Rather than seeking knowledge and answers in his graduate studies, Caleb seeks out socialization and community.

In terms of his future goals, Caleb thinks it would be "fun" to continue to teach composition in the future. However, when I asked him if he would want to contribute to the scholarship in the field, he expressed his doubts about his own abilities to do so. He says "I'm not a very good scholar," and goes on to explain that his primary focus on creative writing would make it difficult for him to commit the time to become involved in Composition at that level. At first, Caleb seems to be playing into the teaching/research

divide here, perhaps in part because of the wording of my questions. He finds himself able to identify with composition in terms of teaching but unqualified to contribute to the scholarship. However, these two appear to be more closely linked in Caleb's mind than it first appears, as he states that he might actually want to and be able to contribute to the field as he gained additional teaching experience. Caleb's view of Composition and his relationship to the field is clearly complex. He does not outright state that he is *not* a Composition person, and he finds a lot value in the field. However, it is clear that the community of creative writing currently takes precedence for him, while he is a more peripheral member of Composition.

### *Kevin*

Kevin is an MFA student like Caleb; however, with the exception of one year off, he has gone straight through from his undergraduate program. Kevin attended a small liberal arts college where he double majored in English and philosophy. Although Kevin still draws on his background in philosophy, it is clear that he identifies with creative writing. He does not talk extensively about his work, but he frequently references creative writing professors as role models for his teaching and his writing. Teaching is important to Kevin; however, he states, "the teaching was an added bonus, but I came to write."

As we will see, Kevin had some initial resistance to Composition as a "real" discipline; however, he became rather enamoured with it, both as a course and as a field of study. When asked how their views of Composition had changed over their first year of graduate school, many GTAs talked about composition as a course. This is when many of them referred back to the differences between the composition courses they had taken

and the composition course they had just finished teaching. However, Kevin's response seemed to get at something much deeper. Because I find it particularly noteworthy, I quote it at length here:

I'm actually starting to like it. Before I was dragging my heels. I was so confused by it, I was scared by it, that I'd shut it out. I was annoyed by it. And now I'm starting to realize that it's kind of cool. It's kind of this... there's so many options for it... there's kind of this weird, uh...in a way it's like philosophy. I come from a philosophy background sort, I'm an undergrad philosophy major. It's like that. It's so much less about dangling whatever, modifiers, crap like that; it's more about creating something, like *really* creating something. I feel like it's more, composition and rhetoric is more along the lines of creation than about writing. You're creating the whole mood of this piece when you're thinking about audience and where it's showing up or where your piece is going to be read. A mood begins with it, it changes. You're not just writing empty words anymore; your words really matter. So, I think it's a little cooler. And actually as a creative writer it does a similar thing—what am I going to do with this poem? And then you start thinking about it in terms of ethos, logos, pathos—or weird things like that. It's a little bit nerdy, but it works.

What really made Composition come alive for Kevin was his ability to connect it, not to his own first-year composition course, but to his experiences as a creative writer and thinker. He initially felt scared and confused perhaps because he felt that he might remain

an outsider and be unable to connect with teaching. However, Kevin finds that when he is able to explore assignments in the classroom that connect to his own interests, he feels more at home with the identity of being a composition teacher.

Thus, I include Kevin along with Sophie and Caleb in this chapter because all three of these students' first-year graduate experiences were highly influenced by their experiences with Composition and with teaching. As Wenger (1998) notes, participation means both being a participant in a community of practice and "constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). In the case of the outbound participants in Chapter 4, identities were constructed through the rejection of the communities of practice that make up C/composition. However, the participants in this chapter more closely incorporated their work teaching as a part of their professional identity. As we will see, doing so involves reconciling membership in multiple communities. This chapter shows the way that Sophie, Caleb and Kevin were able to reconcile their different community memberships and thus take on more agency within the writing program.

#### *Initial Resistances and Experiences in First-Semester Practicum*

Although the students depicted in this chapter eventually came to see the value in Composition as a research field rather than just a first year course, the idea that Composition involved reading highly theoretical texts was initially shocking to them. In this way, introducing GTAs to such theory is highly effective in allowing them to recognize Composition as its own subfield within English Studies. However, it also was a potential danger area for losing the interest of new GTAs. Many expressed feelings of being quickly overwhelmed by the new readings before them. We clearly saw that this was true for Blaire and Marty. In fact, many of the participants in this section started as

outbound participants. However, they were able to move beyond this position. In this section, I explore how and why Sophie, Caleb, and Kevin ultimately defined their relationship with Composition theory differently than Blaire and Marty, particularly when their initial reactions to it were similar.

Kevin admitted that he was “a bit of a jerk” at the beginning of Practicum when confronted with this new area of study:

My first interaction with comp and rhetoric was in pedagogy, was in this conversation about theory, and I didn't know what anyone was talking about. And there's PhD students studying this stuff. This is made up! I've never heard of this! And you're getting your PhD in this? That was my whole attitude at first.

At first, then, Kevin was just as resistant to Composition theory as Blaire or Marty. He admits that much of that resistance came in not having any background in the subject and feeling like he was unable to understand what he was reading.

Coming from a background in cultural theory, Sophie had been exposed to a lot of theoretical readings in the past, yet Composition theory still took her by surprise:

I was really familiar with theory, I mean wholly, completely familiar with theory. You could throw Derrida at me with no problem whatsoever, but when we started reading Composition Studies and like the theories of Composition, I just thought what is this?!? I'd never had any exposure to it at all. What am I reading? Is this what I have to teach?

Sophie shares Kevin's surprise at encountering Composition theory for the first time; however, Sophie's anxiety is not just about theoretical readings. Upon realizing that there

was more to Composition than she had thought, Sophie's initial excitement about teaching was combined with concern about the content of the course. Kevin had this anxiety as well. He notes that "it's like being asked to teach about Medieval literature and never having read anything like that." By nature of encountering Composition theory in the practicum course, both Kevin and Sophie initially indicated that they thought they might be learning these theories, not to inform their pedagogy, but to make up the content of their courses. In some programs, that may indeed be the case, as an approach that teaches first-year writing as an Introduction to Writing Studies has recently gained popularity (Downs and Wardle, 2007). However the focus of first-year writing courses at Virginia Tech is more open, often revolving around a theme of the teacher's choosing. While authors such as Lloyd Bitzer may have been included to help GTAs teach concepts such as the rhetorical situation in their classes, first-year students at Virginia Tech do not engage directly with Composition theory, a fact most GTAs were relieved to hear. However, these comments show that many GTAs initially struggle to make the connection between theory and practice and that when theory is encountered in a teacher preparation course it may be initially be mistaken for the content of the first-year undergraduate course as well.

Unlike Sophie and Kevin, Caleb expressed an interest in Composition theory from the beginning, although he did comment that it took some adjusting to get used to the readings. However, he attributes this period of adjustment to his absence from school in general rather than from a lack experience with Composition specifically. Once he became more comfortable with the readings, Caleb began to connect them with other

areas he has studied. Specifically, he connected his interest in the readings with his interest in postmodernity as an undergraduate:

It's really interesting, I think, because I took a lot of classes on postmodernity and stuff in my undergrad, and a lot of, you know, just the construction of the self and knowledge, power infrastructures, and language, and things like that.

Caleb appreciated the way that Composition drew theories from multiple disciplines and applied them to student writing and is able to connect these theories to other ideas he studied as an undergraduate.

These three GTAs were all more comfortable with theory *in general* than Blaire and Marty, which proved to be an important difference. Sophie was well-versed in critical theory and enjoyed her graduate course work in this area. Thus, she did not reject Composition theory because of its complex nature. She was simply unsure about how that might connect with teaching and was concerned about what she might be asked to teach. As an undergraduate major in philosophy, Kevin was also not a stranger to theoretical readings, and he briefly compares Composition to philosophy. Similarly, Caleb connects his interest in post-modernity to his interest in Composition theory. It seems, then, that much of the resistance WPAs face when getting graduate students to accept Composition theory is a resistance to theory in general rather than a resistance to Composition specifically.

However, when resistance is tied to Composition specifically, it may be greater because it is paired with teaching and with anxieties related to teaching. While graduate students may be able to dismiss the usefulness of a critical theory course, in general, they

know that practicum is an important requirement that they need in order to do their jobs in the classroom. They thus have different expectations for their experiences in practicum than they do for other graduate coursework. Despite his appreciation for Composition theory, when first asked about the course, Caleb notes that he did not feel it prepared him particularly well to be in the classroom. Rather than theory, he would have liked more time spent on practical issues, such as how to fill a class period. As seen above, clearly Sophie and Kevin both have the expectation that practicum will be teaching them what to teach rather than introducing them to a field of study. Interestingly, Kevin refers to the course as “Pedagogy” despite the actual title being “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing.” His view of the course, then, seems tied to the pedagogical aspects rather than the theoretical ones. Because of the institutional positioning of the course as a practicum intended for GTAs who would be teaching, even those who came to enjoy Composition theory for its own sake were confused when trying to make the connection with the classroom. In many ways the course at Virginia Tech was designed to bridge that theory/practice divide; nevertheless, the expectations for the type of material that would be learned in a teacher preparation course left GTAs expecting direct applications for the theories they read. In addition, separating the first six weeks as the “theory” part of the course may have reinforced this view.

Even though these direct applications were not readily apparent, ultimately it was the connection between theory and practice that led these students to a more positive view of the field. At the end of our interview, Sophie comments that she probably should go back and re-read some of the practicum material now that she has taught composition. Now that she is no longer asking the question—what must I teach in first-year

composition—Sophie seems open to revisiting the readings on a different level. Similarly, Caleb connects theory with teaching practice. Since he was the most interested in Composition theory to begin with, I pressed him as to whether or not he could see himself contributing to the research in Composition. He stated that he couldn't; however, his qualifier here is telling. He states, "but that could change, too, as I get more experience teaching." For Caleb, then, being a Composition scholar means being a composition teacher.

To many of us in Composition, these statements are promising. Teacher-based research is an important staple of our field. However, this connection is also why some scholars object to teaching Composition theory in practicum courses. The assumed connection between theory and the composition classroom may leave GTAs with no other conception of the discipline than the side that is connected to teaching (Hardin, 2005). However, I would argue that if disciplines, in general, are connected to practice, then teaching composition is indeed disciplinary work. The danger is not in seeing composition teaching as Composition; it is in narrowly defining only one type of practice as disciplinary work. What comes next is the key to GTAs moving beyond a narrow view of the field as a discipline that is *only* connected to teaching.

In order to develop a more complex view of the discipline, GTAs must make connections between composition theory and other areas of interest, other practices. Caleb clearly does this when he connects Composition to post-modern theory at large, and Kevin does it when he makes the connection to philosophy. However, Kevin also connects what he learned in practicum to his practice as a creative writer. He explains:

I had never in my life studied comp and rhet. I have never really talked about it with anybody. I quickly learned that I knew it, that I had been taught to think, and read, and write critically. But I didn't know that I knew how to do that. So it was a very weird moment of putting names to things that I already knew how to do but had never really thought about.

While an attempt to connect Composition theory with teaching is often an assumed part of the practicum course, connecting Composition theory to other areas of study is not something practicum advisors often stress. Yet, these connections seem vital to those study participants who came to really value Composition. As seen in his quote at the beginning of this chapter, Kevin now thinks about rhetorical concepts such as ethos, logos, or pathos as he works on his poetry. He thus is able to connect with Composition theory on a level that is different, and more significant to his identity, than many GTAs. Rather than place his identity as a creative writer in opposition with Composition, Kevin's connections allow him to see Composition as a part of his overall learning experience in graduate school. In terms of social learning theory, Kevin was able to connect his identity in one community of practice—that of creative writers—to his identity in another community of practice—that of composition teachers. As a result, he is able to resolve the resistance that he originally felt toward Composition.

*Peripheral Participation through First-Semester Mentoring/Writing Center Work*

Peripheral members of a community of practice must be given an opportunity to contribute to the community on a level that is lower stakes where error is more acceptable (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 110). Clearly, the opportunity to observe and contribute to a PhD student's course first-semester fits this description as does working in the Writing

Center. Observing and even teaching another GTA's class involves a situation where error is more acceptable. GTAs were not responsible for assigning grades and usually only taught one class period on their own and while their mentor was present. Although in some cases the master's level GTA had a lot of freedom in terms of the lesson they planned to teach, those lessons still had to fit with the approach the PhD student had laid out for his/her course. Like teaching in a mentor's class, the stakes for error were not particularly high in the Writing Center—tutors are not responsible for grading student work. Furthermore, GTAs only working one hour in the Writing Center rarely saw the same student again, so any "error" in their advice likely went unreported. Certainly an hour a week tutoring was a lower time commitment than working with students when teaching. At times the GTAs in this chapter resisted these experiences; however, there are significant differences from the resistance that we saw in Chapter 4. In particular, the mentoring relationships between these GTAs and their PhD student mentors were seen as more supportive and collaborative.

For example, Kevin resists the content of his mentor's course; however, the support he receives from the mentoring relationship is valuable to making his own decisions as a teacher. Kevin's mentor, Silas, is a first-year PhD student who specializes in digital writing and incorporates a great deal of technology in his classroom. In our interview, Kevin explained that Silas used a lot of video in his classroom and that the lesson he was assigned to teach the class was on video mash-ups, a subject he still doesn't understand the point of. Although he reports that he trusted Silas on importance of the lesson to his course, he admits that he was not committed to it. Even though Kevin later came to accept Composition, as we saw above, he still had trouble understanding

and accepting the focus on digital texts that is often common in composition today. Kevin mentions this issue in his portfolio as well stating, “I struggled to find an effective way to teach this genre, as it is not only new to me, but something I had trouble grasping the educational value of.” Kevin clearly sees his participation as peripheral here because the subject matter is foreign to him. However, he says that the problem was two-fold. He goes on in his teaching reflection to explain: “I couldn’t facilitate a large group discussion with the students because we hadn’t built a relationship.” Just as he was not a central participant in Composition, particularly areas concerned with digital discourse, Kevin’s peripheral position in relationship to the community of Silas’s class made him feel less able to conduct an engaging discussion of the material. What is significant here is the fact that Kevin acknowledges the limits of this particular situation but does not apply these limits to Composition as a whole.

In Chapter 4, we saw the way that Marty also resisted his mentor’s focus on digital discourse. However, Marty seems to have then taken this as a representation of Composition as a discipline. Marty does not see himself as interested in or capable of doing the types of lessons that his mentor Renee did with digital writing, and thus he does not see a role for himself in Composition, explaining that it is great that Composition people do those lessons, but it’s not for him. In contrast, despite his similar resistance to digital writing, Kevin still connects with Composition. It is here that I suspect the details of the mentoring relationship are key. Marty and Renee also did not connect on a personal level, while Kevin and Silas appear to have had a good working relationship.

The difference between these two mentoring relationships is particularly clear in the observation reports written by the PhD mentors. As discussed in the previous chapter,

Renee's write-up for Marty was directive and authoritative. Here is an excerpt from Renee's write-up:

[Marty] then asked students to close their computers for discussion (this is good because they can focus on what is going on in class instead of playing online. However, the problem is that they take all their notes online so they were unable to take notes on the information presented which was important for them to take notes on.) [Marty] made a comment at this point about how students are not use to not having their computers open in class. (In our meeting we talked about being careful not to deter students from things just because you have a problem with them. We all are not going to like the same things but you don't want students to feel as though they shouldn't use something or not like it too).

The tone here is more of an instructor addressing a student rather than a colleague offer teaching advice. Straub and Lunsford (1995) define authoritarian response as a style that "corrects and criticizes" (p. 192). Renee criticizes Marty's decision to have students close their laptops. While she begins by stating a legitimate pedagogical reason that Marty might have for this decision, she ultimately rejects that position as merely a personal preference and corrects his actions. By rejecting Marty's position as mere preference, Renee takes an authoritarian position that places him in the role of student rather than co-teacher. It is clear that she knows what is best for her students while he does not. Of course, Renee is ultimately in charge of her own classroom, and it may be that her students do need to take notes online. Nevertheless, the tone she adopts in her response to

Marty does not provide him a voice as a fellow teacher with his own pedagogical positions.

In contrast, Silas's observation report about Kevin's teaching is written as a letter directly to Kevin and addresses him as a fellow teacher. One of the main concerns Kevin commented on about his day teaching Silas's class was that he had trouble facilitating discussion and that the students did not respond to his discussion questions. On this issue, Silas writes:

With experience, you will be more comfortable with silence and awkward moments. These happen ALL THE TIME in first-year writing classes especially when students are discussing complex topics. I frequently pose ridiculously complicated questions, then wait 30 seconds for an answer. Those 30 seconds are excruciating, but necessary. At some points, you'll need to rephrase or move on, but often the silence prompts thought and interesting discussions.

Silas's response style here is more advisory in that it offers suggestions for solving a problem rather than correcting or criticizing (Straub and Lunsford, 1995, p. 193).

However, he doesn't just give advice; rather he makes an important move to relate his own experiences as a teacher to the anxieties Kevin experienced. The problem of waiting for an answer moves from something that Kevin could have done better with to something that all first-year writing teachers struggle with. Thus, Silas places Kevin in the role of a fellow teacher. This inclusive tone continues throughout the letter, and Silas uses such phrasing as "I have a tendency to do the same." Thus, while Silas certainly comes off as an experienced teacher and an insider in Composition, he includes Kevin in

the community as well by noting that they share similar experiences with facilitating class discussion.

The comparison between the mentoring that Kevin received and the mentoring that Marty received is particularly pronounced in these examples. It would be tempting to think that Silas's inclusive mentoring style would lead Kevin to become more accepting of digital technology in the classroom while Renee's authoritarian style might cause Marty to resist it even more strongly. Interestingly the opposite seems to have occurred, Kevin goes on to ban computers in his own classroom, while Marty explains that he uses technology far more than he thought he would and that he often shows videos in class. One conclusion might be that Renee's mentoring was more successful because it converted Marty on the use of technology in the classroom. However, Marty's comments about his opposition to teaching digital discourse because students "already know how to do it" leads me to propose a different conclusion. It seems that just as Marty copies assignment sheets from other GTAs, he copied Renee's use of technology without accepting it ideologically. In contrast, Kevin feels comfortable making his own decisions for his own classroom. He acknowledges that computers are a necessity in Silas's classroom, but that they do not fit in his. Many in Composition would argue that digital discourse is key to the field and to the composition classroom and were Kevin to become an insider he would likely have to struggle further with this issue. However, the fact that Kevin is making his own decisions about what has value in his classroom rather than accepting what others see as key means that his level of participation in the community of composition teachers is stronger. It is what distinguishes Kevin as a peripheral participant in the writing program rather than an outbound member.

This sort of supportive mentoring was also apparent in Sophie's relationship with her PhD student mentor, Jane. In fact, of all the GTAs, Sophie expressed the closest connection with her mentor. She felt that the two shared a similar approach to teaching as well as similar personas in the classroom. Like Silas's comments about Kevin's teaching, Jane's write-up on Sophie's teaching uses language that includes Sophie in the community of composition teachers. She, too, comments that waiting longer for student responses to questions is important and says, "It may seem like ages to us (as we stand up there squirming), but students often need up to 30 seconds to respond thoughtfully." Again, Jane shows Sophie that the problem of waiting for students to respond in discussion is a common one that teachers in general struggle with rather than a personal weakness. Thus, Sophie is made to feel like a part of a community with similar problems. However, unlike Kevin, Sophie was also able to teach a lesson that fit more closely with her area of expertise. She taught a unit on film, which she stated fit well with her interest in cultural studies. Having a lesson that fit with her interests helped Sophie to connect with Jane's classroom even more closely.

Both of these students were peripheral members of the PhD students' classes, but were able to gain experience as teachers through this opportunity. Another important first-semester experience for Kevin was working in the Writing Center. While for most GTAs this experience was also peripheral in that it allowed them a way to contribute to the writing program with lower stakes, for Kevin the Writing Center became its own important community of practice. In his practicum portfolio, Kevin notes that he originally saw working in the Writing Center as another hoop to jump through, but that he soon became engaged with the students and their writing. Kevin explains that working

in the Writing Center helped him become more familiar with the type of writing being done by students. In this way, it helped prepare him for the writing classroom. However, he also developed a special relationship with the Writing Center as separate from his teaching. He commented on his good relationship with Writing Center staff, and he volunteered to tutor in the Writing Center second semester, when it was no longer required as a part of his assistantship. In many ways, it seems that the Writing Center represents a different community of practice than the Composition program as a whole, and Kevin feels that he fits particularly well with this community. While he is peripheral in relation to Composition in general, by choosing to continue his role in the Writing Center, Kevin has committed to being an insider in this community. Although neither Sophie or Caleb seemed particularly influenced by their time in the Writing Center, it may be that his Writing Center work was one of the reasons for Kevin's positive attitude about Composition as a whole. Thus, we see that disciplinarity was constructed through different experiences for different GTAs, whether that was teaching in a mentor's class or working in the Writing Center.

#### *Building Community in Second Semester Practicum Groups*

Like Blaire and Marty from Chapter 4, Sophie was a part of Rita's mentoring group second semester. She, too, expressed a close relationship with Rita and commented that her advice had been extremely helpful. The mentoring session I observed between Sophie and Rita was similar to those I observed with Blaire and Marty in terms of the procedures being followed; however, the tone of the session varied. While I saw Rita giving a lot of direct advice to Blaire and Marty and the two talking at length over grades, Sophie and Rita seemed more relaxed together. The two often completed each others'

thoughts, whereas Rita almost scolded Blaire for interrupting her. While Rita certainly made it clear to Blaire and Marty that the grades were ultimately up to them, she occasionally presented a fairly forceful position—such as when she insisted that a paper with an incorrect Works Cited page be knocked down to an A- or when she disagreed with Marty that a student who had completed an assignment poorly should receive a failing grade. Rita never directly comments on changing Sophie’s grades in this way. In fact, the following exchange is a clear example of their relationship:

**Rita:** I don’t know if, I don’t know, just on first looking through it and seeing things like this, things like this, and a lot of awkward and really confusing language. I might think this paper was maybe not quite a B

**Sophie:** I was teetering in the B- to B range

**Rita:** But, you need to figure out. I’m not going to tell you to change it

**Sophie:** Oh, I know.

Rita and Sophie also share stories about the classroom openly and frequently. When Marty expressed frustration over peer review not working in his classroom, Rita explained her new favorite peer review activity. This same story comes up with Sophie, but in a different way. In their mentoring session, Sophie talks at length about a particular student and what she feels he gained from peer review. In particular, she notes pairing two students with opposite writing styles so that the two might best benefit each other. Rita responds to this not with advice, since she is not being presented with a problem, but with her own story of successful peer review. It seems clear that Sophie identifies herself as a fellow teacher when she shares these stories with Rita.

The two also share frustration over relying on online sources rather than a handbook and on teaching field research. In these conversations, Sophie continues to

relate to Rita on a fairly equal level. In fact, she brings in her experience in the workplace when talking about her choice of fieldwork assignments. Since Sophie worked with research analysts, she found many of the first-year writing assignments that used field research to be methodologically problematic. In particular, she notes using statistical data is problematic when one does not have a background in this area. Rita relates to this story by agreeing and noting that she has talked to a friend in the sociology faculty who has expressed similar concerns. Both share concerns here as teachers within the specific community of practice that is the Virginia Tech composition program, where field research is a requirement. As members of this community, they negotiate those requirements together, discussing alternative methods of incorporating field work into the composition classroom.

Much of the way that Sophie relates to Rita makes her seem as though she is already an insider; however, this may in part be because Sophie and Rita agree on some many aspects of teaching. When they disagree, Sophie is less likely to take the role of an equal. One area of disagreement is when it comes to using grading rubrics. Sophie hates rubrics and does not feel they are valuable in her grading; however, she explained to me that she felt required to use them. On this issue she says:

I knew [Rita] would probably flip out if I didn't bring her rubrics. And I don't blame her. She probably needs to see some kind of consistency. But I hate them. I would not use them if given the option. I just don't know that I have the option of not.

While Sophie sees that rubrics are helpful for showing Rita that her grading is consistent, she does not feel they are useful for her classroom, yet she feels unable to make this

change without permission from Rita. Rather she continually tries out new rubrics, hoping to find something that suits her needs better. Although Sophie did express a distaste for rubrics in her meeting with Rita, she did not voice her dissatisfaction clearly to her as she did to me. Rather she commented that rubrics were difficult to write, a sentiment that Rita agreed with. What we see here, then, is that despite her confidence, Sophie is not yet an insider in the writing program. Rather, as a peripheral participant she defaults to her advisor's view in areas of disagreement. Although she does contribute her own ideas more directly than Blaire and Marty, she also does not feel that she has complete agency in decisions affecting her classroom.

The mentoring style of the second-semester advisors varied greatly. One particular area of difference was the amount of direct one-on-one mentoring received. The only real negative comment Sophie had about her experience with Rita was that meeting once a week at the beginning of the semester was more than she felt she personally needed. In my interview with her, Rita also commented on the fact that she provided more mentoring than some of the other advisors. She comments that some people feel she "over-mentors" but that she would rather err on the side of too much mentoring than too little. As we saw in Chapter 4, Blaire and Marty seemed to value this degree of assistance. As outbound members, they were particularly unsure of many of their decisions about classroom management or grading. However, as a peripheral participant who is more secure in her identity as a teacher, Sophie may have been fine with less one-on-one contact.

Kevin and Caleb's experience with their practicum advisor provides a contrast to the mentoring relationships we have seen so far. Kevin and Caleb were both in a different

mentoring group with Patrick, an MFA who also works closely with the Writing Program. Patrick has a very different mentoring style from Rita. Rita sits next the graduate student, pen in hand, poring over the papers in detail. In contrast, Patrick sits casually behind his desk and rarely reads the student work in detail. Rather, he asks the GTA about their process when grading as well as their concerns. In addition, while Rita meets with her GTAs for every set of graded papers, Patrick only meets with them on the first set or later if questions arise. As a result, I did not observe these mentoring relationships over multiple sessions the way I did with Rita's students.

Even though Patrick does not require individual meetings with his GTAs as often as Rita does, Caleb and Kevin both found him to be readily available. They did not feel like they were left alone to make decisions regarding their teaching, but they did feel that they had agency over those decisions. Caleb notes that he would often pop into Patrick's office or send him an email for assistance brainstorming ideas for class time. Similarly Kevin notes that he talked to Patrick several times on the phone or via email when developing his assignment sheets. Their advisor was a key insider in the writing community that these GTAs turned to for help with their own classrooms.

However, both Kevin and Caleb also noted the importance of working with their group of peers rather than just working with their advisor. Kevin says that Patrick motivated him, but so did his peer group. "If I'd been treading water alone," he says, "I think I would have drowned." The Director of Composition explained to me that this particular group of students was close knit even before their second-semester mentoring group had formed. She noted that she does not usually divide up mentoring groups along disciplinary lines, but that this group of MFA students worked particularly well together

in practicum, and so she chose to keep them in the same group second semester. Indeed, Caleb and Kevin seemed to enjoy that they were working with other MFA students. However, Kevin and Caleb do not mention collaborating with their peers on assignments or sharing ideas for the classroom as much as they mention the emotional support provided by their colleagues. For example, Caleb mentions the importance of the second-semester practicum groups to be able to “bitch and moan and get encouragement” and comments that “I didn’t feel like it was a class, more like a support group.” Because they were able to connect on multiple levels, this support group went beyond teaching. Caleb mentions that he enjoys working with Patrick both in his practicum group and creatively, and it appears that Kevin has a similar relationship with him.

Working with MFA students positions Patrick as a broker who helps these new graduate students navigate not only the realms of composition but of graduate school in general. While Rita welcomed her GTAs into the community of practice of the writing program, it does not appear that her GTAs turned to her for other advice on graduate school and conversations about coursework or completing an MA in literature rarely came up in the meetings I observed. This may be one reason why Sophie laments the lack of disciplinary diversity in her peer group. She would have preferred to be mixed with MFA and PhD students rather than have a group exclusively composed of MA students in literature. Sophie sees her mentoring group as a *teaching* circle and a support system for her work as a teacher. However, Caleb and Kevin see their mentoring group as more of an overall support system that bridges the gaps between their different areas of study and teaching. Both peer groups are effective but meet different needs.

Another difference between Patrick and Rita was the style of their response to GTAs' grading. Patrick's comments about his GTAs' grading are rarely, if ever, directive. Rather he takes what Straub and Lunsford (1995) classify as a "dialectic" approach, one that incorporates asking questions rather than giving answers (p. 193). This style encourages GTAs to question their own decisions. For example, when meeting with Kevin about a student paper, Patrick asks, "What do you think a person like her or a student like her is going to do after they read their comments?" The same approach continues when questions about specific grades arise. When Caleb expresses doubt over giving a paper a D, Patrick asks him, "So, why do you give him a D?" When Caleb seems unsure, Patrick asks, "Is it an F?" Rather than tell the GTA the grade that he thinks the paper should get, he instead forces the GTA to examine the reasons for possibly giving one grade over another. A question that Patrick asks Caleb here, and that comes up frequently in his comments about grading, is "What do you think would motivate this student?" In part, these comments speak to Patrick's mentoring style—he doesn't provide the GTAs with direct answers, but rather questions them about their own assumptions.

Because Patrick is less directive in his comments, Kevin and Caleb seem to feel a greater sense of freedom in making their own decisions about grading in the classroom. While Sophie was unsure whether or not she was allowed to grade without a rubric, Caleb tells a story about making a decision on a grade that he knows Patrick would disagree with. In fact, it is on the same paper discussed above where Caleb asked about giving the paper a D. When the student received the D, he challenged it, reminding Caleb of a comment he made on the rough draft. Caleb said that the conversation made him realize that he had given the student the ok to turn in what he had turned in, and so he

changed the grade to a B. I asked if he discussed this situation with Patrick, and he said he did not and that “He probably wouldn’t have agreed with my decision.” Since Rita collects a list of the grades given for each paper, it is unlikely that a GTA in her group would have made such a decision without consulting her. However, it is clear that Patrick’s student feels comfortable doing so. This has both negative and positive implications. On one hand, in a tough situation such as a grade challenge it might have been helpful for Caleb to get a second opinion, and more experienced members of the community such as Patrick might have advised him against changing the grade. On the other hand, the fact that Caleb has the agency to make these decisions helps build his identity as a teacher in his own right.

While there were distinct differences between the mentoring that Sophie received and the mentoring that Caleb and Kevin received from their second semester advisors, in all three cases the approach seemed less directive than what we saw with Blaire and Marty. Within the same mentoring group, Rita’s approach seemed to shift as she dealt with a student who was more confident and comfortable with teaching. She clearly adapts her approach to fit the GTAs’ needs. Similarly, while Patrick does not meet individually with his mentees as often as Rita does, he is readily available and responds to the level of mentoring that each GTA needs. While Patrick’s group did not meet over the summer to plan syllabi and did not attempt to use a common book or assignments, they do provide an important support network. For all of these GTAs, then, their second semester mentoring groups were valuable as they adjusted to their roles as new teachers.

*Peripheral Participants as Teachers*

All three of the participants in this chapter represented themselves in different ways when it came to their persona as teachers. While the outbound participants in Chapter 4 maintained a fairly dualistic view of education that was reflected in both their responses to student papers as well as their assignment sheets, the participants in this chapter each have their own perspective on education. From reading each GTAs' syllabi, assignment sheets, and responses to student writing, we can see how these views are reflected and presented to students. At times, however, the personas depicted by these participants conflict, which may show that as teachers, these GTAs are still seeking their own identities in the classroom. Another factor to consider is the way that GTAs formed many of their assignment sheets together and learned to copy language from syllabi from others. Thus, without additional data, it is impossible to separate which parts of these documents were written directly by each GTA.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, even the selections that each GTA made in terms of what language to copy for their policies or which assignment sheets to share show something about their view of teaching. Patterns emerge among this data that give us clues as to the values each GTA portrays to his/her students.

When Sophie talked to me in her interview about her respect for Rita as a teacher she noted that Rita has a good balance between being authoritative in the classroom and yet approachable. This is the same type of persona that Sophie presents for herself as a teacher. Community and working together are all very important to Sophie's classroom. This was clear even when I went to ask her students for permission to use their graded papers in my study as when she introduced me she reminded her students about the

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<sup>18</sup> This question was addressed to a certain extent in interviews where I inquired about the development of these documents, but this data is not specific to actual word choice.

importance of helping others. In her syllabus, Sophie states, “Build a network among your classmates.” Furthermore, her syllabus notes that she expects students to do well and that when they don’t she will allow them to rewrite papers, presenting herself as an approachable teacher who is there to help students do well in the course. However, Sophie also maintains a clear authority in her syllabus. There are many policies, some of which are uniquely hers and which reflect the values that are important to her classroom. For example, she has a policy where she explicitly states that “failure to respect classmates” will result in being asked to leave the class. Sophie thus constructs the type of persona she wants for the classroom—authoritative, yet approachable.

The writing process is also important to Sophie. Her assignment sheets read almost like a syllabus in the way they very specifically lay out dates for each part of the process. Again, this fits with her persona because she is very helpful in showing students what they need to complete each step of the project, yet those steps are laid out by her in a directive manner. Her comments on student papers range from more directive response, which involves firmly guiding a student with specific comments, to Socratic response, which prompts a student to make changes through asking questions (Straub and Lunsford, 1995, p. 192-193). In both our interview and her conversation with Rita, Sophie brings up the issue of how much to take control of student writing when commenting. At times she does give examples of how to rewrite particular passages. However she also explains her comments in detail and offers students a great deal of support. For example, she takes the time to write on a student’s paper an explanation of what a comma splice is rather than simply correcting it. However, she also asks students questions about their writing, such as “Can you give me specifics about...?” According to

Straub and Lunsford (1995), this commenting style “allows the teacher to create an interplay with the student even as it keeps the teacher in control of how the student sees the choices” (p. 193). Socratic questions such as this allow Sophie to maintain her authority while showing more of a collaborative stance towards her students. In her end comments she consistently makes comments such as “For the next paper, we’ll work on...” showing that the onus to improve writing is not only on her students but on her as a teacher. Again, Sophie maintains a consistent and confident identity when writing to her students. This identity is influenced by what she sees and admires in other teachers, such as Rita, but it is still her own teaching persona.

As previously mentioned, the MFA students worked closely together as a group, even during the first-semester practicum. Thus, it is not surprising that Caleb and Kevin’s assignment sheets and syllabi are very similar. Both GTAs’ syllabi take a less authoritative stance and, unlike Sophie’s, have very few specific policies. For example, both mention the importance of attending class but neither specify penalties for missing. Although the wording varies somewhat, Kevin and Caleb also have several very similar assignments, such as an assignment that asks students to practice MLA style through creating a creative bibliography of songs, movies, and stories that are important to them. What is important here, then, is to note the way that the GTA’s identity as a teacher is a part of the more collaborative construction of the writing program. When wording for policies or assignment sheets is developed collaboratively then those genres reflect not only an individual GTA’s persona but a persona for the larger community of practice. In Wenger’s (1998) terms, they reify the beliefs of the community (p. 55). For example, the Director of Composition prefers an attendance policy that remains flexible while

stressing the importance of class participation. This approach is very different from many writing programs where there are programmatic policies that dictate the penalties for missed classes. There are, however, passages that reflect more clearly the individual personas of these GTAs. For example, Kevin adds this statement to his course description: “From formal research papers to poetry, research remains integral in the writing process.” As we have seen, the connection between creative writing and composition is important to Kevin, and this is reflected again in the wording on his syllabus. Although students are likely to think of syllabi and assignment sheets as representative of their specific instructor, what we really see here is the melding of individual teaching persona and programmatic identity.

In terms of their responses to student writing, Kevin and Caleb seem to struggle more than Sophie in terms of adopting a consistent style or identity. For example, Caleb’s comments sometimes appear more supportive at the drafting stage than on the final paper. This issue came up for him, as we saw previously, when a student complained about a grade citing that his rough draft had not lead him to believe that he needed to make such drastic changes. Having a grade attached to comments can also clearly affect the way those comments are read by students and thus the view they are receiving of their teacher. For example, Caleb writes on a rough draft, “All your main points are here; they just need to be expounded on and backed up.” However, on the final he writes, “You make many claims in this paper but give little evidence to why,” and follows this up with the grade of a D.<sup>19</sup> The first comment indicates support, saying you are on the right track, but do more. The second indicates significant shortcomings in the paper, particularly when

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<sup>19</sup> As Caleb did not name names when he mentioned the angry student, it is unclear if this is the exact paper he was referring to or not. However, this example is certainly in line with that story.

paired with the low grade. In some ways it may seem that Caleb struggles between a more supportive teacher persona and a more authoritative one. Certainly, this seems to be how it appeared to the student who challenged his grade. However, these comments also reflect some of Caleb's larger views about the composition classroom. He values the writing process and requires multiple drafts from students. He also responds directly to peer review comments. Part of Caleb's frustration with the particular paper is the way this student did not revise enough based on the feedback received, another point he makes directly in his end comments. In part, Caleb's focus on revision and drafting reflects the values that Patrick expressed to their mentoring group. However, as an MFA student, part of this focus may also be disciplinary; workshopping is an important part of creative writing courses. Anson (2000) notes that reading student writing is affected "by the influences of cultural, institutional, disciplinary, departmental, and personal standards" (p. 14). Just as with assignment sheets and syllabi, the identities that GTAs adopt in their responses to student writing are reflections of not only their own individual standards and personas but their disciplinary and institutional identities.

### *Conclusion*

Overall, what we see more clearly with the GTAs in this chapter is that their multiple identities and communities of practice are reconciled, often in a way that is particularly productive to their development as teachers. Wenger (1998) explains that:

If a nexus of multimembership is more than just a fragmented identity, being one person requires some work to reconcile our different forms of membership. Different practices can make competing demands that are

difficult to combine into an experience that corresponds to a single identity (p. 159).

For Blaire and Marty in Chapter 4, their identities remained fragmented and in conflict with one another. It was impossible for Blaire to look down on underclassmen as a member of the Virginia Tech student body while valuing their contribution as a Virginia Tech teacher. However, Sophie, Caleb, and Kevin all found valuable ways to make connections among their current and previous communities of practice, as students, as teachers, and as intellectuals.

While Sophie and Kevin both expressed an initial resistance to Composition theory and Caleb expressed an initial resistance to teaching, all three students were able to resolve these resistances to the point where they were able to speak positively about their experiences with teaching and Composition. Sophie was most able to make connections within her teaching through incorporating cultural studies in the composition classroom and applying her former work experience to teaching field research. Meanwhile, Kevin connected concepts he learned in practicum to his work as a poet. Both Kevin and Sophie were able to connect their own intellectual interests in some way with Composition and teaching.

In addition to making intellectual connections, social connections were key for these GTAs to see themselves as teachers. Caleb, in particular, talked about how his cynical view of academia had changed through his social interactions with professors and fellow graduate students. While he entered the program wanting to get out of school as soon as possible and pursue other things (clearly, an outbound role), he became invested in wanting to actually pursue a career in academia. He attributed this shift to the people

he had encountered at Virginia Tech. The relationship with his teaching advisor Patrick as well as the close knit mentoring group that was formed contributed to this sense of belonging within academia. In addition, Kevin and Sophie's first semester PhD student mentors encouraged them as fellow teachers. All of these social connections contributed positively to these students feeling a part of a larger community of teachers. Together these social groups worked to form a view of Composition within the writing program.

Finally, a sense of agency is key in moving toward full participation in any community of practice. Just as Wenger (1998) notes, peripheral participants must be given access to the community, although on a more limited scale than full participants. Rita and Patrick as teaching advisors fostered this feeling of agency by leaving important decisions up to the GTAs. The lack of a common syllabus or common assignments at Virginia Tech also fosters this sense of agency. While student still often pick similar assignments—a testament to the fact that composition at Virginia Tech is constructed and negotiated not by individuals but by a community of practice—the ability to modify and create assignments offered these GTAs a position as members of the writing program. When Kevin was able to create his own assignment for his composition course, he felt like a composition teacher for the first time. For access to be meaningful, then, it must involve that sense of agency.

## Chapter 6: “A Rookie in the Field”: Inbound Members of Composition

While most of the GTAs who end up teaching composition do not intend to go on in the field, with the increase in graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition, more GTAs do see themselves as inbound members of the discipline. Our previous discussions about GTA preparation have focused almost exclusively on how to prepare our future composition teachers. However, for this inbound group of students, teacher preparation takes on another level as they prepare for careers as composition teachers and Composition researchers. Looking specifically at the experiences of GTAs in this category can help us better see the different relationships that GTAs have with C/composition and how those identities are developed.

Wenger (1998) contrasts higher education with workplace training, noting that education often offers a variety of outbound choices while workplace training is designed to create insiders in a community of practice (p. 272). Certainly graduate students do have multiple choices after graduation, and many will go into industry rather than academia. However, more so than other levels of education, graduate education often works to create insiders in a particular field. As Blaire disdainfully noted in Chapter 4, the first-semester practicum course seemed to her to be aimed only at those who wanted to be professors. The reality is composition GTAs *are* instructors; after their first semester they are teachers of record in their own classroom. In this way, they all have an inbound trajectory in relationship to Composition, despite their position within an educational system that has many outbound possibilities and from which they will eventually be forced to exit. However, as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, many of the participants in the writing program either reject the identity of a composition teacher or

adopt that identity in only a transitory way. In this chapter, I move to analyze the experiences of three graduate students who see themselves more clearly as “inbound” members of Composition, as they have declared majors in Rhetoric and Writing. Even so, these participants must negotiate multiple communities of practice and must negotiate disciplinarity within these different contexts.

### *Emily*

Emily is a master’s student who has declared a rhetoric and writing focus and who notes in her practicum portfolio that she chose the program at Virginia Tech in part because of some of the strong faculty in Composition. She took two years in-between her undergraduate program and her graduate program to work and travel. After graduating, she plans on continuing to teach composition for a few years and then return for a PhD. Unfortunately, Emily declined to participate in an interview, but I will briefly give her background, as gathered from her practicum reflection and conversations with her mentors.<sup>20</sup>

Although Emily says in her portfolio reflection that she is new to “rhetorical knowledge,” she expresses a strong commitment to teaching writing. She says in her reflection, “I hope that you will read my portfolio knowing that it might not all make sense, and there might be some mistakes, but that I will be prepared for class every day and intend to give my students all I have.” This statement seems to capture the sentiment of an inbound participant. Emily knows that she is still in the process of working out exactly what it means to teach composition, but she is committed to the process and intends to make it a key part of her work. She goes on to say that she knows she is “in the

right place.” It’s clear that Emily feels connected to Composition and teaching, that it is connected to her sense of place and belonging.

Like many other GTAs, Emily makes connections between her work as a graduate student and her work as a teacher. In particular, she notes that as a first semester graduate student she worked through the process of an annotated bibliography, which led to a final semester research paper. She found this process extremely valuable, and thus, she explains she is requiring her first year students to complete an annotated bibliography for their research papers. Emily thus creates her own view of what should be taught in her composition course from her own experiences as a writer and a student.

Finally Emily shares in her portfolio a bit about how her view of composition has changed, a question I asked all the GTAs in their interviews. She says, “I realize now that it is not at all about being an absolute expert in grammatical structure, style, mechanics, or outlining—it is about learning how to see the good things first in someone’s writing before tearing apart someone’s voice.” Emily seems to have moved from a narrow understanding of composition teaching in terms of grammar and mechanics to a deeper, more positive view of the field. Many of the GTAs made similar statements about their changing views of Composition. As we saw in Chapter 5, Kevin commented that he realized teaching composition wasn’t just about “dangling modifiers” but was about “creating something.” However, what makes Emily’s comment different is her relationship to the field of Composition. When Kevin makes his statements about Composition, they are almost a conversion. He was initially resistant to the field and came to like it. However, when Emily makes similar comments, they come from a very

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<sup>20</sup>Emily declined to participate in an interview. Thus I was not able to triangulate the data from her portfolio and mentoring sessions with direct questions about those experiences. She did, however, provide

different place: from the position of someone who always intended to enter the field and who is committed to doing so. This statement then takes on a different meaning. Rather than it being a statement of acceptance of what others do or could do with Composition, it is a statement of Emily's own development as a member of the community of writing teachers. "Learning to see the good" in student writing is an important part of the identity Emily develops for herself as a teacher. As we will see below, this persona is clear in Emily's interactions and the writing she does in relationship to her classroom.

### *Valerie*

Valerie and Sam (see next section) both earned master's degrees before entering the Composition program. Like Blaire, Valerie is a graduate of Virginia Tech. She majored in English as an undergraduate and then went on to gain a master's degree in secondary education and is now enrolled in the MA program with a focus on rhetoric and composition. Valerie chose this option for several reasons. First of all, she wanted to be qualified to teach at the college level. Declaring her focus in Composition was a choice she said she struggled with because she enjoys both literature and composition equally, but she noted that she wanted to learn more about teaching writing, something she felt had been neglected in her previous degree programs.

As a former student at Virginia Tech, Valerie, like Blaire, feels a strong sense of connection to the Virginia Tech community. In fact, she continues to be involved in groups on campus outside of the English department and her graduate work. However, the biggest contrast between Blaire and Valerie is the way they feel about teaching. Valerie sees herself as a teacher, and did so before coming to the current program. She student taught for a year at the local high school, which she loved. Like Blaire, Valerie

knows some of her students by nature of having been in the community for so long. However, having come from teaching at the local high school, Valerie more easily adopts the identity as teacher in relationship to her students. In fact, she reports having a former student from her experience student teaching enroll in her first year composition course. Valerie has already adopted a role as a professional within the larger community outside the writing program itself.

In addition to seeing herself as a teacher, Valerie constructs an identity as a scholar in the field. She has been accepted to present at the national Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCCs) and attended that conference the previous year. These experiences make Valerie feel like an inbound member of Composition. However, she recognizes her status as a newcomer. "I feel like I'm a member of the field," Valerie says, "but at the same time, I feel kind of like a rookie in the field." Valerie's description of her relationship to Composition here fits well with the idea of an "inbound" participant. She recognizes that she does not yet have full status as an insider. She is a "rookie."<sup>21</sup> However, she is in the process of becoming an inside member of the field. Wenger (1998) explains that those on an "inbound trajectory" need to be given "enough legitimacy to be treated as potential members" (p. 101). Her acceptance to conferences as well as her success in teaching helps Valerie see herself not only as a potential member of the field but as a current member of the field. Although she is a newcomer, she is already able to contribute in meaningful ways both to the local community of practice that is the writing program and to the larger community of practices that is Composition as a discipline.

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<sup>21</sup> The metaphor of a rookie works well as it indicates the position of a newcomer to a community of practice who intends on becoming a full participant.

*Sam*

Sam occupies a unique place within the writing program and within my study in that he is a PhD student rather than an MA or MFA student. Thus, Sam did not fully participate in the same activities that the other students in my study were a part of. The PhD students I have mentioned previously had teaching experience prior to coming to Virginia Tech, began teaching their first semester, and took a three-credit practicum course rather than the six-credit “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing.” Sam, however, did not have teaching experience before his arrival and was a part of the six-credit practicum course. In addition, rather than teaching first semester, like the master’s students, he was mentored by a PhD student and aided in that classroom. However, during his second semester as he began teaching, Sam was placed back with the other PhD students rather than in one of the three mentoring groups. As a part of this group, he had several group meetings with the Associate Director of Composition, a tenured faculty member in Rhetoric and Writing, but he did not receive the type of intense one-on-one mentoring that the master’s students received. This example shows the complexity that WPAs who work with GTAs from multiple graduate programs experience when designing teacher preparation programs.

Although he did not have teaching experience, Sam came to the program with a great deal of professional background. He completed an MA in English with a focus in rhetoric and professional writing. While completing his MA, Sam worked full-time in administration at his university as a recruiter. Sam had majored in journalism as an undergraduate, but realized that he enjoyed public relations more than being a reporter,

and saw the connection between this work and a professional writing focus. However, Sam also feels a strong connection with education, particularly administration, and debated for several years between a doctorate in education versus a doctorate in Rhetoric and Writing. He ultimately decided on a Rhetoric and Writing PhD program because he thought it would be easier to move from that into administration than to go from a degree in education to a position as a faculty member.

Although Sam sees his professional trajectory as tied to education and administration, he does not see himself primarily as a Compositionist. Although he enjoys teaching composition, he hopes to teach technical writing or business writing soon. When asked about his view of Composition, Sam noted that “As a field, it’s still not my primary area of interest.” When describing his focus within the Rhetoric and Writing program, Sam talks about connecting his interest in marketing with rhetoric and his interest in higher education. Even though we might classify Sam as an insider in Composition because of his MA focus and his enrollment in a Rhetoric and Writing PhD program, it is clear that he still identifies with multiple communities of practice. Furthermore, it is in drawing these communities together—through connecting public relations and higher administration and rhetoric—that Sam finds his identity within the field. Sam thus serves as an example of the complexities that exist even within the category of inbound participants.

*Reading Theory to Writing Center Work: Inbound Participants’ Practicum Experiences*

Since they are inbound participants, I expected that Sam and Valerie would have the most positive view of the Composition theory that they encountered in the practicum

class.<sup>22</sup> While neither Sam nor Valerie seemed particularly excited about Composition theory—in fact, neither speaks as enthusiastically about it as did Caleb the MFA student from Chapter 5—both connect the theory and practice in a way that was not common among other GTAs. Sam noted that he did not expect the inclusion of Composition theory in the course, but that he was glad to have it and felt that it was particularly good for the master’s students to be exposed to. He had read much of the material himself as a master’s student; however, he notes that he wasn’t teaching at that time and that he appreciated having the reminder in the context of preparing to teach. Thus, Sam implies that he finds the connection between Composition theory and composition teaching personally valuable. At first it seems that Valerie does not make this same connection. She notes that she found several of the readings personally interesting and that she has followed up on them in her own scholarship; however, she feels that they were not necessarily helpful in terms of preparation for the classroom. Rather, she explains that she thinks practical experience is much more valuable when it comes to training teachers, a view that seems at least indirectly affected by her background in education. She does think, though, that the discussions that came from the readings were valuable. “It pushes you to think about your own personal pedagogy,” she notes. This comment is significant because although she does not necessarily find individual articles to be of importance in her teaching, she does recognize the way that the readings lead her to think about her own choices in teaching. This is a key difference between the “outbound” participants, Blaire and Marty in Chapter 4, who completely dismissed Composition theory as impractical for learning to teach.

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<sup>22</sup> Since Emily was unavailable for interviewing, I did not get to ask her about her view of the readings in practicum.

Another key difference between Sam and Valerie and many of the other GTAs was the way that they viewed their work with their first semester mentors as “co-teaching.” This difference was particularly striking because they worked with several of the same mentors as the other GTAs but viewed those mentors in different ways. Like Blaire from Chapter 4, Sam worked with Grant. As previously noted, Blaire found that Grant always had something for her to do in class, but she seems to view these tasks as assignments handed down from her “Mentor, capital M,” while Sam sees them as opportunities for co-constructing the classroom. From Grant’s letters about Sam and Blaire’s teaching, it is easy to see how an authoritative stance might be assumed. He mentions an initial meeting with his mentees where he set out expectations for their participation as well as multiple meetings with each of them to plan the lessons they would deliver individually. Grant portrays these meetings as signs of the commitment of both of his mentees to their teaching. He indicates that the meetings are opportunities for collaboration, as does Sam. Although Blaire found the meetings helpful to quelling her extreme teaching anxiety, she also clearly sees herself in a subordinate role to Grant and the meetings, for her, are more like a student/teacher conference. Gender issues may be part of the discrepancy here between Sam and Blaire’s point of view as well as their educational level and age.<sup>23</sup> Feeling like an insider is certainly influenced by multiple factors and Sam’s previous experience as both a graduate student and a professional as well as his equal footing with Grant as a member of the PhD student may have helped

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<sup>23</sup> Future studies are needed to follow up on the ways that gender issues affect these mentoring relationships. Composition has often been called a “feminized” discipline. Thinking of a discipline as gendered is an interesting concept, and a study that focused on the way that identity interacted with individual gender identity could prove valuable. In addition, studying how the gender of the WPA or mentors in the program affect the mentoring experience would allow for additional factors that may act upon this data.

him see his role in Grant's classroom as equal, whereas Blaire, a younger female straight from an undergraduate program, did not.

Similar to Sam, Valerie had a different experience with her PhD student mentor than other GTAs. Valerie worked in Debbie's class first semester, as did Seth, an MFA student who had little connection with teaching.<sup>24</sup> Like Sam, Valerie talked about her work in her mentor's class as "co-teaching." She comments that co-teaching is extremely valuable to students because they can receive multiple perspectives on their writing. Thus, Valerie clearly sees her contribution to the class as significant, not only to her own development as a teacher but for the students in her class. In contrast, Seth writes in his portfolio that "it was easy to get wrapped up almost as if I were a student in the class." He goes on to say that were he to really relate to Debbie as a teacher, he would have needed to "see the students through her eyes, and vice versa" rather than concentrating on "a kind of self-conscious reaction to her teaching." This perspective is harder for Seth to adopt as he is more familiar with the role of student than of teacher, while Valerie is able to slip easily into the position of co-teacher. Valerie came to the program having already established a view of herself as a teacher, whereas Seth had not.

Since she has some teaching background and experience, Valerie actually has a much clearer view of herself as a teacher than Sam does. Like many of the other GTAs, Sam admitted that he was scared coming into Practicum. Although he had the background to be considered more of an insider in Rhetoric and Composition, he did not have the background to consider himself an insider to teaching. However, because of his background as well as his goals, Sam is better able to transition into the role of a teacher

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<sup>24</sup>Although I did not feel I had significant enough data to include Seth in Chapter 4 with the outbound participants, like Blaire, he takes on more of the role of a student than a teacher in this classroom setting.

than participants who maintain a peripheral or outbound position. After all, he has returned to a PhD program so that he can eventually be a faculty member. Thus, when Sam interacts with his mentor, he is not just thinking about what practical advice he can take on to teaching the next semester, he is thinking about who he wants to be as a future teacher. Like many GTAs, Sam noted that his mentor had a different style than him. However, he comments that this showed him the way that one style could work in the classroom and that he is still finding his own style. “I just need to try different things and see what my style actually is,” Sam says. It’s clear that Sam is developing his identity as a teacher and that the first semester mentoring her received has played a role in that process.

As I have noted in other chapters, the positioning of practicum as a pre-service teaching course means that GTAs expect to get something practical from the experience that they can take into their own classrooms, even when the practicum course focuses on both theory and practice, like the one at Virginia Tech. Clearly Valerie and Sam looked for this when they read Composition theory in a way that they might not have expected had that theory been presented in a course unconnected to practicum and teacher training. While the readings may not have always been applicable to teaching in a clear way, the experiences with the first-semester mentors were. In addition, the Writing Center provided opportunities for Valerie and Sam to experience working with students. As such, it can be seen as another way to prepare teachers for the classroom. Yet, more so than the other first-semester experiences, the Writing Center served a dual purpose for inbound GTAs.

Despite the positioning of their Writing Center work in the context of their training for teaching, GTAs did recognize tutoring as a different community of practice than teaching. When I first asked Sam to tell me about his experience working in the Writing Center, all he replied was “It was good.” In response to my follow up question about what he took away from the experience, Sam began by stating that he learned that he didn’t really like working in the Writing Center. He eventually said that when he worked one-on-one with his own students, he did so in “a writing center fashion,” something he noted taking away “without realizing it.” However, he went on to explain that Writing Center work was not the direction he wanted to go with his career or his research. Clearly Sam recognizes Writing Center work as a possible direction to go in Composition, but it is separate from his own interests.

Valerie explained that she loves working in the Writing Center and that she had previously worked there as an undergraduate student at Virginia Tech. She mentioned that she did use tactics from tutoring when conducting peer workshop days in her classroom. However, she also explained the importance of observing a fellow tutor before beginning work as a tutor. She mentioned that when she initially tutored as an undergraduate this observation was a part of the training, but it was absent from the practicum experience. While she felt fine jumping back into the role of Writing Center coach, she suggested that those with no experience in this area should observe first. Thus, Valerie constructs the Writing Center experience as one that needs its own progression toward full participation. In order to fully participate as a coach, one should first take on the peripheral role of observing. It seems, then, that working in the Writing Center served a dual purpose for those GTAs who made the most of their experience. First of all, it

served to learn techniques for meeting with students and reviewing papers. However, for those who recognized the Writing Center as its own community of practice, the experience there offered them another way to contribute to Composition. It expanded their view of what work in the field might mean and what types of identities might go with that work. Even more so than other areas of teacher preparation, the Writing Center is a place where GTAs may explore different identities and different ways to participate in Composition.

### *Becoming a Teacher: Second Semester Mentoring*

As they moved into their second semester and began teaching, Valerie and Sam encountered different types of mentoring. Sam was returned to a group of PhD students who met once a month, but he did not meet on an individual basis with a mentor. The Director and Associate Director of Composition made this decision based on the strength of Sam's performance in practicum as well as Sam's comfort level with teaching. Particularly when GTAs pull from multiple programs like this, WPAs have to work to accommodate different levels of comfort and commitment to C/composition. However, WPAs can not always make exceptions or change training protocols for GTAs within the same program. Although Valerie was actually a more experienced teacher than Sam, because of her positioning within the MA program she became a member of Monica's second semester mentoring group. This group consisted of other MA students, including Emily. Although I was not able to interview Emily, I did observe several meetings between her and Monica and I include some of that data here along with my observations of Valerie and Monica's meetings. As with my other participants, I attended meetings

where the GTAs were going over a set of graded papers. Like Rita, Monica meets with GTAs on each set of papers, so I was able to attend two meetings with Valerie and Emily.

Monica completed her own master's degree with a focus on Composition, and thus relates to the field a bit more closely than the other advisers. She notes, though, that the majority of her GTAs do not see themselves as composition specialists. However, Emily and Valerie are an exception to that rule, and Monica notes that the higher stakes practicum course as well as the new Rhetoric and Writing PhD program might be shifting that dynamic. Monica's mentoring style fits somewhere between Rita's and Patrick's in terms of the level of direction given her GTAs. While she does not literally sit with the GTAs and mark errors on papers the way Rita does, she is much more hands on than Patrick. Rather than inquire about the grading process and questions that GTAs have, she looks carefully at a range of graded papers. Often she comments on the numerical grade she is thinking of as she reads. However, in my observations she never directly told Valerie or Emily what grade they should give a paper, only what came to mind for her. When the GTAs would ask about the appropriateness of grades they would discuss the reasons for giving a certain grade, but it was clear that the decision was up to the GTA.

Valerie and Monica often see eye-to-eye when it comes to grading, and this helped Valerie gain confidence in her role as a composition teacher. Often during their conferences, Valerie would exclaim happily when Monica agreed with a certain grade. In our interview, Valerie says that Monica was "really good at helping me have confidence in my decisions as a new teacher." In their conferences Monica frequently makes comments such as "I fully support a D for this paper." By doing so, she builds Valerie's confidence in her ability to grade accurately and fairly. When agreement is not as obvious

or grades are not as clear cut, Valerie and Monica still work together to figure out a solution. When discussing a paper with some major citation issues, Monica suggests that if it is a C- it be a low 70% C- grade. At which point, Valerie responds that maybe a D would be more appropriate, and Monica suggests a 69%. Valerie says, “Yeah, let’s do that.” It is clear here that Valerie has reached a decision on the grade through her negotiation with Monica. The choice of pronouns is significant here. Valerie doesn’t say, “Yes, I’ll do that,” she says “let’s do that.” This reinforces the idea that she sees her relationship with Monica as collaborative. Together they are negotiating what it means to receive the grade of C- versus D+ on a paper in the composition classroom.

Emily and Monica also work together to determine just what should affect a grade in composition. On several occasions, Monica comments on an aspect of a student paper that she finds problematic but that Emily does not. For example, Monica comments that for her an A paper won’t contain passive voice. However, Emily explains that in that particular assignment for that genre she wanted students to use passive voice. Monica then admits that this makes sense. Even so, Emily still indicates that she can see the paper as an A- rather than a solid A. However, she has given the student some extra credit for going to the Writing Center, making it an A grade. What is significant in this exchange is the give and take between Monica and Emily. Rather than insisting that A papers never have passive voice, Monica is clearly persuaded by Emily’s notion of what this genre should entail. Without further investigation, it is impossible to say whether or not conversations like these might influence Monica’s own grading, particularly if she did this same type of assignment. However, it is clear from the conversation that Monica is

open to the reasoning that her GTAs have for their assignments and grading, which is key to making them feel like composition teachers.

Monica clearly works with her GTAs to answer questions such as what makes an A paper in a composition class at Virginia Tech, thus negotiating the social truths of the local community of practice of the writing program. In addition, there are times when we can also see the construction of Composition more broadly within her mentoring sessions. For example, Valerie and Monica have a discussion about not being biased in grading in which Valerie says she tries very hard not to look at the name of the student or let who the paper is written by affect her judgement. While Monica initially agrees with this—in fact, she brought up the issue of avoiding bias to begin with—she comments that it is difficult to maintain that neutrality when a student has been trying particularly hard, such as coming to office hours or going to the Writing Center. “It’s the process versus product argument really,” she says. While this conversation started in reference to Valerie talking about a previous student, whom she had in class while student teaching, and the need not to let this influence her grading, it evolved into a more complex discussion about greater issues in the field. While no literature is referenced or theory cited, Monica and Valerie are talking about important issues in assessment here that have been widely discussed by scholars, and as Composition majors, they are aware of these positions in the field. It is in these moments of discussion between GTA and advisor that the larger issues, such as product versus process, are negotiated and disciplinarity is enacted.

By negotiating what it means to teach composition at Virginia Tech as well as some of the larger issues in the field of Composition, Monica helps her GTAs feel like contributing members of the community and the profession. One of the things that

Valerie lists as helping her feel like a member of the field is the discussions that she's had with mentors, such as Monica. However, she doesn't note exactly how these discussions work to make her feel included. Looking at the transcripts of the sessions between Monica and the GTAs she works with can help answer this question as well. Like Patrick and Rita, Monica often relates her own experiences in the classroom when talking to GTAs. At times this comes in the form of sharing activities for the classroom. When Valerie comments that some students are struggling with thesis statements, Monica says that she does a lot of thesis workshopping in her class. Valerie follows up on this and Monica gives her a detailed description of what she does in class, and Valerie decides to try the activity later that week. Again, sharing experiences and activities like this helps to co-construct what teaching composition looks like in practice.

However, Monica also connects on a more emotional level with her GTAs. Valerie admits that it made her nervous to see a good student do somewhat poorly on the final paper, and Monica confirms that this can happen when students get overwhelmed at the end of the semester and that Valerie should not see it as a reflection of her teaching. Similarly, Emily expresses concern about students being upset when receiving grades, and Monica both provides practical advice on how to deal with this—tell students to take 24 hours to reflect on their grade before asking questions—and relates to this concern on an emotional level. “To this day, I still get a little bit nervous when I hand back papers,” Monica says. Sharing these concerns helps validate GTAs as members of a community of teachers, who share some of the same feelings and apprehensions that are involved in their profession. Monica also invites her GTAs to submit their assignments and student work to the custom textbook created by the Virginia Tech Composition program, thus

showing that they are also an important part of the program and the department. In addition, Monica talks with Valerie about her plans to attend CCCCs, validating that she is a welcome member of the larger community of Composition.

### *Identity as an Inbound Teacher*

As Sam noted, even inbound participants are still struggling to find their identity as teachers, and clearly that persona varies between teachers. However, as a group, the participants in this chapter portrayed themselves as particularly supportive teachers in their syllabi, assignment sheets, and responses to student writing. For example, Emily takes a supportive position on her syllabus. She states “I want you to do well in this course,” and “I have the utmost confidence and enthusiasm for you and your development in writing.” She reinforces this view of herself as a supportive teacher in her assignment sheets where she often suggests that students view her and their peers as resources when completing an assignment. Likewise, her comments on student writing are often supportive with a large portion of positive marginal comments. Even when providing criticism, she does so in a supportive and positive manner. For example, when asking a student to include more of his own opinion in a paper, her marginal comment reads, “More of you, smart Peter!” The identity that Emily constructs for herself as a teacher reflects what she said she had learned about teaching composition—that it was about recognizing the good in student writing. The identity she began constructing in practicum is now enacted in the classroom, a key marker of an inbound participant. Her beliefs about teaching and about Composition are reified through her writing in teaching genres, genres that are key to the community of practice of the writing program.

Furthermore, Emily takes a clear position about the importance of the writing process. This theoretical stance is enacted in her classroom practice, particularly in her comments on student writing. Her marginal comments sometimes reference her previous discussions with students, such as when she reminds a student, “one more sentence like we talked about in class or in office hours would really help.” She almost always uses end comments to place emphasis on the improvement a student has made. In my observations, I noted that Emily knows her students and their work well and when she goes over the final set of papers with Monica, she often comments on the improvement a particular student has made. Finally, she also provides extra credit for going to the Writing Center, a policy that further stresses the importance of the writing process.

This position on the importance of process is quite different from Valerie’s position when she talks to Monica about trying not to see names on papers. As Monica noted, this is the “product versus process argument.” What we see here, then, is that Emily and Valerie take different positions within the field, even though they are both inbound participants. They are not just absorbing the knowledge that is being passed down by experienced members in the community, they are developing their own positions on these issues and enacting those positions in their work as teachers. However, these positions are not fully set in stone. For example, Valerie, too, comments on the improvement her students made, which would be impossible to do if she truly did not look at the name on a student paper. This issue of being objective while also acknowledging the way a student has grown throughout the semester seems to be one that Valerie is still struggling with as she forms her identity as a teacher. However, it is also important to remember that there may be a difference in grading versus commenting on

papers. Valerie may very well comment on improvement but not see that as a part of her grading criteria whereas Emily incorporates it directly into her grading by giving students a “nudge” for getting extra assistance on their papers.

Similarly, Sam notes that he tries to provide a lot of positive feedback in his comments as well. In our interview Sam stressed the importance of students improving their writing and building their confidence in their writing. Sam does this through his grades as well, which are often high. For example, he comments on a particular paper “You did more reporting here than you did analysis.” However, he assigns the paper a grade of A-. All of this fits with Sam’s persona as a supportive teacher whose goal is to build up his students as writers. However, it is important to note that Sam did not go through the same mentoring process as the MA students. He did not meet with anyone about his grading or comments, which he notes he did not feel was particularly necessary. However, this means that he constructs his notion of comments and grading more independently than Valerie and Emily who get continual feedback on their grades and their writing as teachers. Nevertheless, the genres that Sam writes in as a teacher reflect his view of what the composition classroom should be.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter points to several important conclusions about the nature of disciplinarity and the enculturation of students who consider themselves inbound to a particular community or field. As Bazerman and Prior (2005) show when they make the shift from talking about disciplines to talking about disciplinarity, a sense of unity or homogeneity in a particular field is misleading. Thus, it is misleading to assume that inbound students do not struggle with the same sorts of multiple identities as those in a

more peripheral role. We see this in both Sam and Valerie's comments about themselves and their decisions to be a part of the field. For Valerie, she struggled with choosing a focus in literature or a focus in Composition. She also comes from a background in English Education where literature was stressed and notes that in some ways choosing a major in Composition was less a matter of a dominant interest and more a matter of wanting to fill a gap in her education. Similarly, Sam struggled with whether to get an EDD degree or a PhD in Rhetoric and Writing. He is still in the process of negotiating his professional identity as a teacher and deciding whether that or administration will play a bigger role in his overall career.

Furthermore, Sam in particular must negotiate the multiple communities of practice that make up Rhetoric and Composition as a whole. Perhaps because he is a PhD student, or perhaps because of his former experiences with the field, Sam makes more nuanced distinctions between sub-fields, and does not actually consider himself an inbound participant in Composition per se. In fact, he rejected that identity at several points in our interview, while still recognizing the value in other areas of the field. For example, he recognized Writing Center work as valuable to the field but not as an area he wanted to pursue. In addition to attending CCCCs, Sam also attended Association of Teachers of Technical Writing conference (ATTW) and has worked in the area of business and technical writing. He feels a connection to this area in particular because of his background with public relations. Thus, his former identity as a professional affects his current identity within the field. When I asked how attending conferences such as CCCCs affected his view of the field, Sam noted that it left him with a good sense of the important issues being explored in the field currently. Yet, when I asked specifically how

his view of C/composition had changed in the last year, Sam talks less about Composition as a research discipline and more about composition as a course. He replied, “I have a view of composition now. And I know that sounds weird, but I never took college comp.” What this seems to indicate, then, is that the view of Composition that Sam holds is inherently tied to teaching. Since he did not experience the course before, he did not have a view of the discipline before. He also reiterates that he had Composition theory as a master’s student but that he wasn’t teaching at that point. Thus, following from his first statement, having theory alone did not allow him to form “a view of composition,” rather teaching is what formed that view. In this view, he separates rhetoric and professional writing and composition as different communities of practice. Thus, even though he can be seen as an inbound member in the general sense that his majoring in this area, he must still negotiate his identity among what he views as separate practices.

The second key point in terms of the way that inbound participants form their view of the field is that, at least in terms of Composition, that view is formed through both research and teaching. When I asked Sam about the connection between his research and his teaching, he noted that this question was something he had not thought much about before. Again, this shows the way that Sam, despite being a PhD student in the field or perhaps because of it, is separating out these different communities of practice. However, there were important connections for Sam. For example, he notes that he brings visual rhetoric into the classroom more heavily because of his research interests. In particular he notes doing an assignment where his students analyzed visual rhetoric of college view books, which relates directly to Sam’s interests in the rhetoric, public

relations, and higher education. In addition, Sam explains that he understands Composition theory more clearly now that he has taught the course. The connection between theory and practice and between research and teaching is an important one for Sam, even when it means negotiating multiple communities of practice.

For Valerie, her scholarship is connected to her teaching, and it is significant the way that these two aspects of her professional life work together to form her academic identity. When talking about her relationship to the field Valerie states:

I feel validated in my work. The fact that I was accepted into CCCC's definitely helps. It validates you in the field a little bit, my teaching my evaluations, the discussions I've had with my peers as well as my colleagues that are my mentors, that helps validate you in the field a bit. My experience with my students and my success with my students makes me feel validated in the field, but I still feel like I have a lot to learn and a lot of growing to do.

There are multiple factors that contribute to Valerie's identity as an inbound member of Composition. It is both her work as a scholar—her acceptance to a national conference in the discipline, and her work as a teacher—her teaching evaluations and experiences with students, that allow Valerie to see herself as a member of the field. For Valerie, then, there is no real separation between her research and her teaching. She feels equally validated by both aspects of her career and both help her to form an identity as a member of Composition. In addition, the different social groups associated with these different aspects of her career are important to Valerie. Merely being accepted to the conference is validating to Valerie, but going to the conference and interacting with other members of

the field is also important as are her discussions with mentors in the local community of the writing program at Virginia Tech. The multiple communities of practice that she encounters—the community of the CCCCs, the community of her mentoring group, and the community of her own classroom—all work in concert to co-construct her identity as a member of the field. Composition is constructed both locally in the context of the writing program and globally in the context of larger disciplinary activities. It is in these multiple contexts that Composition is constructed socially for Valerie, through the discussions she has with scholars, teachers, and students. In contrast, outbound and peripheral participants defined their view of Composition almost entirely on their view of one local community of practice.

Disciplinary construction, then, particularly in reference to the discipline of Composition, is tied to teaching rather than just research. This says a lot about us as field, but it also says a lot about how our inbound members encounter the field. Many inbound members enter the field through teaching. They are enculturated through teaching and the genres they write in as teachers rather than by taking courses and writing seminar papers. They are members of a community of practice of a writing program. That practice focuses on teaching and developing an identity as a teacher. These inbound members are GTAs; they attend practicum courses; they create assignments and syllabi. Institutionally Composition is positioned as the pedagogical arm of English departments because of the first-year course, and this is reinforced through the Practicum. However, rather than see this as a disadvantage, I would argue that this positions Composition differently than other disciplines and allows us to make a clearer connection between the work we do as teachers and the work we do as scholars. While there is certainly much valuable work in

Composition that is not pedagogical, teaching is an important part of the work we do, and initiating new members of our field means including them in that work.

However, the positioning of composition as teaching practice can also work against its construction as a discipline and against even inbound participants seeing connections between their work and the discipline as a whole. Although some would classify Sam's work on administration and rhetoric as Composition, he does not. This may be in part because of the way Composition is constructed at a larger level. Sam did not see the value of Composition theory outside of composition teaching, assuming that theory is not in itself a practice, or at least not the dominant practice in this field. Because Composition theory and composition teaching must have a connection, in Sam's eyes, his own research is not "Composition." Similarly, Valerie does see her work as Composition, but this may be because she is researching audience awareness in the classroom. The discipline is constructed through the practices of these inbound members and the practices they see around them, and the practice they most clearly label as Composition is teaching. Thus the way that inbound members often enter our field—through teaching assistantships—constructs our field in a particular way.

## Conclusion

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 narrated the experiences of eight GTAs in the teacher preparation program at Virginia Tech. I classified these students as either outbound, peripheral, or inbound participants in Composition based on their relationship to the discipline and the writing program. Outbound participants, Blaire and Marty, were the most resistant to both Composition as a field and to teaching composition. They were characterized by their lack of engagement with the writing program, by a dualistic attitude toward education, and by a rejection of the identity of composition teacher. Peripheral participants, Sophie, Caleb, and Kevin, were more positive about Composition as a whole. They felt a greater sense of agency within the writing program and were more confident in developing their own assignments and policies in the classroom. Finally, inbound participants were distinguished mainly in their commitment to the discipline and to the career of teaching. These participants were similar to peripheral participants in terms of their experiences but rather than seeing those experiences in terms of a limited, temporary relationship with Composition, inbound participants expressed their commitment to continuing with scholarship and/or teaching Composition. Naturally, these positions are neither static nor absolute. The relationships among GTAs and the writing program are more complex than allowed for in these categories, and those relationships continue to evolve over time. However, these three levels of participation help to explain the positions GTAs may occupy in relationship to the preparation that is offered by writing programs. As WPAs know well, GTAs come from a variety of backgrounds—both personal and disciplinary—yet our literature has mainly focused on the best ways to prepare GTAs as if they are a unified group. In this conclusion, I return

to my research questions in light of the case studies that I have presented. In addition, I examine the larger questions about disciplinary development that this study leads us to consider.

*Forming a View of Composition through Teacher Preparation*

As stated in Chapter 1, my first research question asked about the role of practicum courses and mentoring activities in the professional development of GTAs. In particular, I asked what view of Composition GTAs reported receiving through these professional development activities and how they defined their own participation and identity in relationship to these activities. Dobrin (2005) argues that “practicum” is or can be “an introduction to composition theory, to research methodologies, to pedagogical theory, to histories of composition studies as a discipline, and to larger disciplinary questions about writing, not just to teaching writing per se” (p. 2). As such, it is not just about what new teachers think of teaching but how they view Composition as a discipline (p. 4). Clearly, the “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing” course at Virginia Tech fits with Dobrin’s notion of a practicum that both introduces students to Composition theory and to pedagogy, an approach that Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2008) label “multiphilosophical.” Rather than asking what approach to practicum courses works best, I instead focused on how a particular approach, the multiphilosophical approach used at Virginia Tech, shaped GTAs’ views of Composition. I was, then, less interested in what worked or did not work about our practicum course and more interested in the ways that this particular community of practice used the tools of teacher preparation to invite newcomers to participate as members of the community.

One thing that is clear from both the WPA literature and my study is that the institutional positioning of practicum as a teacher preparation course influences the view of Composition, as a discipline, that is developed through the course. Joe Marshall Hardin (2005) notes that English departments have traditionally "co-opted basic graduate courses in rhetoric and composition in the service of teacher training and have constructed a primary role for the composition scholar as administrator, teacher trainer, and manager of contingent faculty and graduate teaching assistants" (p. 36). Even when the course material goes well beyond practical experiences and GTAs are introduced to Composition theory, if course enrollment is solely made up of those with a teaching assistantship, there is an assumption on the part of the GTA that everything in the course must be directly applicable to classroom practice and that the purpose of the discipline is pedagogical.

GTAs with different relationships to Composition reacted somewhat differently to this assumption; however, it was a prevalent one in my data. For Sam, the PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing, encountering Composition theory in the practicum course was valuable *because* he saw it as connected to teaching. When he had Composition theory as a master's student, he had not found it as helpful, and he notes that this was because he was not yet preparing to be a teacher. Valerie, also a Rhetoric and Writing major, found the readings most helpful for generating discussion about teaching, again stressing the importance of their connection to teaching rather than their value of theory as a practice itself. These attitudes that theory in Composition must be related to practice likely contributed to Sam's rejection of his own work focusing on the rhetoric of higher education as "Composition." Rather he sees his work as more related to technical and

professional writing. Since he does not see his work as having a direct application to the composition classroom, Sam does not see it as research in Composition. Meanwhile, Kevin and Sophie both were initially intimidated by Composition theory because they believed they would have to teach it in the composition classroom, an assumption that might not have been made had Composition theory been encountered in the setting of a regular seminar course rather than a required course for GTAs. Finally, Blaire and Marty tried their best to forget the “theory” part of the course altogether because they did not see it as applicable to their classrooms and because they were generally uncomfortable with theoretical readings.

Similarly, when asked about their experiences working in the Writing Center first-semester, the GTAs almost unanimously attempted to tell me about how they applied that experience to their teaching, even when I did not inquire about those connections and posed a more open-ended question. The reflections from the practicum portfolios echoed these sentiments. For example, Sam talks about how he now conferences with students in a “writing center” fashion. It was only those GTAs who had experience with the Writing Center outside of the practicum course—Kevin, who continued to work there second semester, and Valerie, who had worked there before graduate school—who recognized the Writing Center as its own site of practice, its own location for disciplinarity. The position of the “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing” course as a practicum intended for GTAs contributed to the view that these GTAs took of Composition as a whole including both Composition theory and Composition practice, such as Writing Center work.

While the curricular location of practicum and the first-semester mentoring and Writing Center experiences led GTAs to initially look for direct applications for their learning, there were also times and specific GTAs who were able to value Composition theory and/or the Writing Center as its own important practice. Both social and intellectual connections among communities of practice helped to shape this view of Composition. Kevin made strong social connections with the Writing Center staff. He felt like a part of that community, and so he continued to volunteer in the Writing Center even after he began to teach. Had he only viewed the Writing Center in terms of learning to teach his own course, he would not have continued to participate in it as a separate practice. Furthermore, intellectual connections with Composition made Kevin more open to Composition theory. He applied the rhetorical concepts of logos, ethos, and pathos to his poetry, and by making those connections he saw the value in Composition theory beyond the composition classroom. Miller, Rodrigo, Pantoja, and Roen (2005) state that "a crucial goal for the practicum is to encourage teaching assistants--regardless of the focus of their degree program... to view all of their work in the academy as scholarly" (p. 82). Clearly a practicum like the one at Virginia Tech is set up to place teaching within that scholarly context, to work from Odom, Bernard-Donals, and Kerschbaum's (2005) assumption that "pedagogy is the enactment of a theoretical position" (p. 215). However, it is difficult to work against the institutional precedent that frames Composition as pedagogical and pedagogy as something separate from scholarship within a system that separates teaching from research through tenure lines and hiring practices. In some ways, however, GTAs may be better positioned to make these connections because they are not

yet fully enculturated into academic communities that draw clear differences between scholarship and teaching or between different disciplines.

By making connections *outside* of Composition, GTAs not majoring in the field were better able to see the importance of Composition. Sally Barr Ebest (2005) argues that GTA preparation *must* move beyond skills and must lead to re-conceptualization of teaching as "an intellectually challenging, complex endeavor" (p. 42). Looking at the way that communities of practice interact, as I have done throughout this dissertation, shows us that the way that GTAs come to see Composition as intellectually stimulating may not have a direct connection to what we present in practicum courses. Rather, the graduate school experience as a whole shapes the GTA, and we often do not have access to or control over these multiple influences. For example, Blaire and Marty both connected Composition theory with their critical theory seminar course, which they both disliked. However, Caleb connected Composition theory with the study of post-modernism, which he enjoyed. The view of Composition that GTAs take away from practicum, then, is not just shaped by our curriculum alone. It is co-constructed with the other experiences that the GTA has during graduate school or even before. What we can do, then, is ask GTAs to make these connections, to reflect on the way what they read in practicum may affect them, not only as teachers, but as scholars and writers.

### *Mentoring Newcomers in Composition*

Bamberg (2002) notes that a "program 'culture' that supports inquiry and reflection" is necessary, and this starts, but does not end with practicum (p. 150). While practicum helped GTAs form a view of Composition as a field, it wasn't until their second semester that they began to teach their own classes. They moved from purely

peripheral participation—aiding in a PhD students’ class—to the more complete participation of designing and teaching their own course. This time was crucial for GTAs to develop confidence as teachers and the writing program helped in this process by assigning GTAs to mentoring groups. My second research question, then, asked about the move to become teachers of record and specifically about the extent to which GTAs accepted this identity. In particular, I was interested in the role of mentoring in whether or not the GTAs came to identify themselves as teachers.

Even the most resistant GTAs did take on the identity of teachers, at least temporarily. Blaire hated teaching, and each semester she thought about not renewing her contract. She spoke of how she only took the position to cover her tuition expenses. Nevertheless, she *did* express a desire to be a good teacher. This desire was paired with frustration and anxiety, but it was not negated. An identity within composition, however, was separate from an identity as a teacher. Blaire never saw herself, even temporarily, as a “composition person.” Similarly, Marty described himself as a teacher and even has long-term goals to teach, but he explained that C/composition and how to teach it was different for him than for those that were actually steeped in the discipline. “Ya’ll have got different things on how to teach it and how to do it,” says Marty, “But I still, just for the sake that I’m not a Comp person, ya’ll do that and that’s awesome, but that’s not my thing.” The identity of being a teacher seems linked to day to day practices, and these practices can be enacted without taking particular agency within the writing program. Marty and Blaire both went to class, graded papers, and handed out assignments. However, they did not always create those assignments or exercise their own agency over what would be taught in their classrooms. Blaire teaches a film review even though she

personally does not see the value of that sort of assignment. In contrast, Kevin created his own assignment where he asked students to create a mixed tape. He says this was the first time he felt like a “comp and rhetoric teacher” rather than just someone talking about writing. Adopting a role as a *composition* teacher, then, seems far more complex for GTAs than adopting the role of teacher, particularly for those who are not inbound participants.

Perhaps one reason that GTAs were more likely to see themselves as teachers even if they didn’t see themselves as compositionists has to do with the interaction in the second-semester mentoring groups. Although Rita tells me that she sees herself as a Compositionist, her background is in literature, and her GTAs are well aware that she has connections outside of Composition. Similarly, Patrick is well known in the department for his work as a creative writer as well as his work with the Composition program. In Wenger’s (1998) terms, these advisors work as “brokers.” They can help bridge the gap between communities of practice. Furthermore, since these instructors are not tenured faculty in Composition, like the WPA, it is easy for GTAs to see that one can participate as a *teacher* in the writing program without participating as a *scholar* in the research field of Composition.

Advisors took several approaches to including GTAs in the community of writing teachers at Virginia Tech. Rita, Patrick, and Monica all shared stories from their own classrooms with the GTAs. They also related on an emotional level with the GTAs, showing that the frustrations and fears they were experiencing were not unique to newcomers but were experiences common within the community. However, these advisors were not simply masters and the GTAs were not apprentices. Lave and Wenger

(1991) argue for a de-centered view of the master/apprentice relationship explaining that in this view "mastery resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is a part" (p. 94). By expressing concerns and challenges as a part of this larger community, the advisors were able to move away from the model of simply imparting their own wisdom by telling the GTAs what to do in the classroom. Rita did this by often referencing other people in the community, other teachers, from whom she drew ideas. Patrick did this by asking GTAs Socratic questions that lead them to their own conclusions about the classroom. Also, by meeting as mentoring groups rather than as individuals, GTAs were able to build teaching circles that were significant to them. Rita's group shared assignments and worked together to create their syllabi for the fall. Patrick's group shared common frustrations, but also made connections as fellow MFA students and writers. These social networks were key for GTAs to see themselves as having a role within the writing program, even if they did not see a role for themselves within the larger discipline of Composition.

In terms of shaping a community of practice, it is important to recognize that mentoring and advising is not just about initiating new members, a point that was absent from my original research question. In his study of disciplinary enculturation, Hasrati (2005) reminds us that the relationship between student and advisor is not unidirectional but bidirectional (p. 563). Similarly, Prior (1998) sees disciplines as co-constructed by both newcomers and insiders. While my study did not specifically follow up on the ways that mentoring affected the GTA advisors, I found several hints of this influence in my data. On several occasions, Rita asked her GTAs for a particular assignment or activity so that she could use it in her classroom. This practice is significant in two ways. First, it

helps GTAs to see themselves as contributing members of the writing program, to see themselves as teachers who can and should share the documents they create for their classroom. Secondly, it shows the way that what is taught in composition is not just a matter of what supervisors pass down to GTAs but a matter of what is negotiated by multiple members of the community of practice. While I did not directly observe Monica asking her GTAs to share their assignments with her, her willingness to see their point of view and talk about issues within the field showed that the mentoring process was not hierarchical for her. For example, in multiple conversations with Emily, Monica inquires about whether or not a particular convention, such as passive voice, is appropriate for a given paper, and each time she defers to Emily's reasoning. Again, further study would be necessary to see if these interactions then affected Monica's own teaching; however, they are indicators that the relationship was not unidirectional. Composition was co-constructed through the interactions between advisors and GTAs.

### *Creating Composition through Teaching Genres*

For Wenger (1998), communities of practice are negotiated through social interaction but these practices are also reified. That is, there is a point when the claims of the community become artifacts. "Reification" is not an end point where negotiation is complete; genres and documents continue to change (p. 55). However, Wenger (1998) sees the "negotiation of meaning" as the mixing of reification and participation (p. 55). Teaching genres, such as syllabi, assignment sheets, and responses on student writing are examples of reification within a writing program. Whether or not syllabi and assignment sheets are standardized in the program, they reflect (or should reflect) the views of that community of practice. In some programs a film review would not be a typical

assignment, but at Virginia Tech it is common, much to Blaire's dismay. This does not mean that every class completes a film review. However, the types of assignments that are possible is determined through negotiation within the community of the writing program.

Thus, my third research question asked specifically about genre. I asked how GTAs acquired teaching genres, how they formed syllabi, assignment sheets, and responses to student writing. In addition, I asked how their identities as teachers were reflected in these documents. However, in some ways, these were the wrong questions to ask or rather these questions only touched on the very tip of the iceberg. Bazerman and Prior (2005) note that rather than look at how genres are learned by new members of a field, a study should focus on "how generic activity is implicated in the ongoing (re)production of all the kinds of participants in the relevant spheres of activity [and] how disciplinarity/interdisciplinarity is produced as participants take up and use tools in situated activity" (p. 154). Ultimately, then, I became more interested in how these documents functioned within the writing program as a means of creating disciplinarity. While I did gather some data on how GTAs develop their assignments, I found that these documents did not just reflect the GTA's individual identity as teacher. Rather they represented a complex mix of both individual and group identity within the community of the Virginia Tech writing program.

GTAs almost always developed their assignment sheets and syllabi collaboratively. During the first-semester practicum they divided into groups to create these documents for their spring course. However, even after this obvious collaboration ended, GTAs continued to share assignment sheets. The OCELOT website that Patrick

put together was frequently used by GTAs to look for assignments that others had done and adopt those assignments for their own classrooms. In addition, the *Composition at Virginia Tech* custom textbook prints sample assignments. When Marty was frustrated with creating his own assignment sheets, he handed in something directly from the custom textbook. Resources like these reify the views of the composition program at large. Even without directly mandated syllabi, these documents have the authority of the program behind them. They are approved, reified. They are evidence of what teaching composition means at Virginia Tech.

The main difference, then, between the GTAs and their relationships to the writing program was the degree to which they saw these resources simply as an authoritative presence rather than as an opportunity to contribute to the community themselves. Blaire clearly views these texts as authoritative. If these sources advocate a film review, then she teaches a film review, despite any personal objections. However, Kevin feels comfortable contributing his own assignment—the mixed tape assignment—which is now listed on the OCELOT site. Liggett (1999) advocates for GTAs developing their own pedagogy, noting that they are "less likely to feel like imposters if they are not striving to be somebody else" (p. 67). Clearly, this is the case for Kevin who cites the development of his own assignment as a shift away from his feelings of being an imposter to feeling like a teacher.

Liggett (1999) also allows GTAs to draw on their own disciplinary background, such as an MFA screenwriter drawing on film to teach rhetoric (p. 68). Again, these connections helped the GTAs in this study feel more like teachers in the program rather than imposters. Sophie was concerned when she thought she might have to teach

Composition theory in the composition classroom. However, she felt comfortable teaching both in her mentor's class and her own class when she was able to draw from her cultural studies background. As Liggett (1999) maintains, this efficacy is key for GTAs. Nevertheless, I do not wish to advocate an approach where composition GTAs choose assignments solely based on their own interests. It is key that their approaches be developed and *negotiated* within the larger social setting of the writing program rather than on an individual basis. All of this is key to both maintaining the identity of the GTA and the identity of the program. Mentoring as well as resources like those provided at Virginia Tech help strike the balance between individual agency and maintaining programmatic identity.

Because individual identity and programmatic identity are co-constructed through the teaching genres used by GTAs, it is difficult to analyze the way that GTAs present themselves through these documents. A simple textual analysis would risk conflating these two identities. As a researcher coming from within the program, I was aware that attendance policies that did not allow for flexibility were not favored by the WPA and that this opinion was filtered down through the GTAs. In fact, Marty talked about worrying that the language of his policies would "paint him into a corner," which is the same phrase often used by the WPA when presenting her objections to such policies. Thus, the majority of the GTAs did not have strict attendance policies regardless of their own individual preferences or the personas they wished to display in the classroom. However, GTAs who wished to present a more authoritative presence in the classroom did so in other ways. For example, Blaire listed multiple policies about plagiarism in great detail while Sophie included a policy on her syllabus saying that students who were

not cooperative with group members would be asked to leave class. By choosing which policies to include in syllabi and how to word them (even if that wording was taken from one of the multiple examples provided to GTAs), GTAs still created an identity for themselves as teachers. However, that identity was neither completely separate from nor distinguishable from the identity of the writing program as a whole.

It may seem that commenting on student writing is a genre where GTAs have more autonomy than creating syllabi and assignment sheets. Since initial assignment sheets and syllabi were submitted as a part of the graded practicum course, GTAs felt pressure to write in programmatically acceptable ways. However, this pressure was mitigated to an extent when responding to student work in their own classrooms. Still, since their second semester advisors met with GTAs to go over sets of graded papers, this genre was also, at times, collaborative. Patrick did not go over these documents in the same detail as the other advisors, but he still offered advice on how to respond to student writing. Monica occasionally provided more specific advice, but mostly offered support. However, at times Rita would actually mark on the student papers herself. In addition, she offered students who were struggling with how to respond to student writing, such as Blaire, specific suggestions for wording her comments. Again, a textual analysis paired with the observations of meetings with advisors showed the way that these comments reflected the negotiation between GTAs and advisors. Nevertheless, the tone of GTAs comments varied depending on their own personas and views of education. Marty and Blaire took a more directive approach, which reflected their dualistic notion of education whereas Emily and Valerie were more supportive in their comments. The genre of

response, while not developed in isolation, was a key genre that reflected the persona of the GTA.

Tardy and Swales (2008) review research that shows that new writers, particularly graduate students, form new identities as they learn genres (p. 571). While research has generally focused on the acquisition of research genres, teaching genres are also essential to developing academic identity. As shown here, that identity is not developed in isolation but is negotiated through interactions with the writing program. Those interactions might include social interaction with mentors and peers, but it might also include interacting with programmatic documents such as the custom composition textbook. For Tardy and Swales (2008):

genres are born of ideologies of a particular site or activity system, and those ideologies become inherent to the genre; enacting genres, therefore, becomes a process of enacting ideologies, and learning genres becomes a process of forming identities that align with those ideologies (p. 571).

As GTAs learn to write assignment sheets or syllabi, they are learning to enact the ideologies of the writing program. In turn, they interpret these ideologies as representative of the larger discipline of Composition. For example, when asked about how her view of Composition had changed, Blaire noted that she had “learned a lot more about what actually constitutes composition and how there’s so many different things that can be can fall into that category.” For her, the film review is a key example of this. However, a film review might *not* constitute composition at another school. It might be seen as an assignment more befitting a journalism class while the first-year writing course might focus exclusively on academic writing. The way that GTAs create

documents such as assignment sheets, including the content they select for those genres, is a reflection of the ideology of the local community of practice.

Agency when writing in teaching genres is essential to GTAs accepting an identity as a teacher in the composition program. However, whether or not they accept that identity, teaching genres still contribute to GTAs' views of the field. Both Blaire and Marty share assignments, but they seem to do so as students share class notes—they are working together to construct composition, but they are attempting to construct a “composition” that fits what they feel is expected of them by their supervisors. Rather than actively shape the course based on their own experiences, the way Sophie does with her fieldwork assignment, these GTAs construct composition from the subject position of students. Nevertheless, they *are* constructing what it means to teach composition and to be a composition teacher, even if they do not readily accept that identity. Genre plays a vital role in this construction.

### *Changing Views of Composition*

My final research question has been particularly influential in this dissertation. I asked specifically what view of the discipline of Composition new GTAs have and how that view changed through teaching. In particular, I asked: what or who do GTAs see as significant in forming and changing their views of C/composition and their identity within the community of practice of the Writing Program? Although I have addressed this question throughout this study, I would like to take this final section to comment on what this question says about issues of disciplinarity, particularly disciplinary enculturation. In particular, I wish to refocus this question not in terms of how GTAs

come to view Composition but in terms of how disciplinarity is constructed within a writing program, particularly through the enculturation of new GTAs.

As evidenced throughout this study, GTAs' views on C/composition changed significantly in their first year at Virginia Tech. Some GTAs came in with particular expectations about Composition, or at least about the first-year writing course. Blaire expected it to be similar to the "Freshman English" course she had at Virginia Tech five years ago. Others came in with fewer expectations; however, none of the GTAs were clean slates. Sam says "*I have* a view of Composition now," indicating that he did not have one before. Yet, Sam went on to explain that he did have a rhetoric and communication course that was co-taught by an English and a Speech Communications teacher. He notes that this was not a composition course, which then assumes that he did indeed have a view on what Composition is and what constitutes a composition course. Many of the GTAs related their experiences teaching to their previous writing courses, whether they saw those as "Composition" or not.

While all of these GTAs seemed to have formed some view, however limited, of C/composition before entering their graduate programs, one key difference between newcomers to a community of practice and experienced members is the realization that change is itself a part of the community. Rita, the most experienced GTA advisor and composition teacher I interviewed, recalls how much teaching composition has changed throughout her career:

We used to teach modes, and then we taught types of discourse, and then we added speaking components to the class, and we've added visual components. I didn't do writing workshops when I first started teaching.

The second class in the sequence, pretty much everywhere I've taught, and I guess my own class would have been an exception, but the second class in the sequence was always, in the earlier years, was always a literature class.

When Rita says "my own class" here she refers not to her teaching but to the course she took as an undergraduate where they focused on critical thinking and writing. Rita lays out here a series of changes she has seen as a member of the community of college composition teachers. That progression follows from her undergraduate courses through her teaching at different institutions. While GTAs were more likely to see changes from one institution to another or from one approach to first-year writing to another as something completely different, as something other than composition, Rita sees these changes all in the context of her career teaching composition. Blaire saw the course offered by the Composition Program just five years ago as "English" not "Composition," while Rita recognized the definition of C/composition as more fluid and as shifting over time.

In addition, none of the new teachers seemed to recognize the shift they saw in terms of a historical shift within the field. Instead they represented themselves as having no experience with composition; the courses they had taken at other institutions or under different names were seen as separate entities rather than as part of a progression to their current experiences. Those who had shifted from other institutions separated their experiences at their undergraduate institution from those at Virginia Tech. Sophie expressed the "culture shock" that she felt moving from a small school focused on literature and cultural studies to Virginia Tech where she felt a strong focus on Rhetoric

and Composition. Even more removed were those who did not consider the “rhetoric” courses they had as undergraduates to be “composition courses.” Sam expressed that his rhetoric and communications course was not “a traditional composition course.” Of course, Sam’s course might be more “traditional” than he knew, considering that the more common model of composition in 1940s and 1950s was the interdepartmental Communications course (Berlin, 1987; Connors, 1997; Crowley, 1998). A historical perspective would not exclude such courses but would place them in the context of the progression of the field as a whole. When Wenger (1998) talks about communities of practice, he talks about them in terms of doing, but also in terms of historical and social context (p. 47). Composition as a discipline is shaped by these historical forces, whether those are local programmatic history, such as the changes Rita lists, or whether those are larger trends in the field as a whole, such as the connections to rhetoric and communication.

Furthermore, a more complete view of the field, as seen by an experienced member, would see different approaches to composition as part of an ongoing debate in the field. Yet newcomer Blaire clearly pointed to the new WPA when she talked about the shift in Virginia Tech’s first year course as if the change was purely personal preference. I expected a similar answer from Rita, who at times resists the inclusion of visual design, a specialty of the current WPA. However, when I asked her if the shifts she had seen in teaching composition had been mandated by changes in leadership, she responded that no, they were simply changes that “made sense.” She saw herself as a member of a dynamic community of practice that she herself was a part of shaping. For her, she had always “taught composition,” even when the first-year course she taught

focused on literature and even when she shifted between institutions. Certainly factors such as new WPA leadership or a shift in institutional setting can be significant when looking at the differences between composition courses; I do not wish to undermine that fact. These shifts are part of the local history that affects a specific community of practice. However, what strikes me here is the way multiple new GTAs labeled their original courses as something other than composition, that they saw these shifts not as Rita did as a part of an ever-changing and evolving field and course, but as something *different*. In fact, these new members made distinctions between courses called “English” and “Rhetoric” and “Composition” in ways that more seasoned members often do not. It seems that in being exposed to the newness of Composition theory, GTAs rejected—or in some cases clung to—their own previous experiences with first-year writing courses.

When newcomers construct a discipline, it seems that they continually compare their experience in other areas, in other communities of practice, with their current experiences. This paradoxically leads to both a rejection of the new community as *different* and a misapplication of past experiences to the current community. We saw this most clearly with Marty, who stated he was not a “composition person” and made clear distinctions between disciplines. Yet, he also applied his military experiences to the composition classroom without fully recognizing the differences in context. For example, he did not think 60% should be a passing grade, even though it is according to the Virginia Tech grading scale. What is most important to recognize here is the way that disciplines are not constructed as individual entities. Rather they are co-constructed with other communities of practice. Likewise, GTAs’ identities are co-constructed in relation to their construction of the discipline. Wenger (1998) clarifies that participation means

both being a participant a community of practice and "constructing identities in relation to these communities" (p. 4). He goes on to talk about how identities are also constructed through rejection of communities of practice not just acceptance. Even though she does not intend to participate as a literature scholar, Blaire nevertheless constructs herself, in her own words, as a "literature person" when she explains her rejection of Composition. In so doing, Blaire constructs both the discipline of Composition and the discipline of literature as well as her relationship to those two disciplines.

Although statements such as Blaire's may seem entirely personal, it is important to recognize the social aspects of disciplinarity. When we move from a notion of disciplines as "unified social and/or cognitive spaces to a notion of disciplinarity as the ongoing, mediated constitution of a kind of social network," as Bazerman and Prior (2005) do, then their construction lies in the development of relationships between those who are insiders and those who are newcomers to the discipline. Negotiation is key here rather than the passing down of traditional lore and knowledge. We saw this negotiation continually through the experiences of the GTAs in this study. Composition was constructed socially in practicum as GTAs interacted with each other, compared the material they were learning to that of other courses, and worked together to create assignments that would be appropriate for the composition classroom. Interactions with PhD student mentors and second-semester advisors constructed the specific community of practice of the writing program. As mentors included GTAs by sharing the emotions and challenges of teaching composition, they welcomed them as participants in the community. For Prior (1998) rather than concrete areas of knowledge, "disciplines appear as very human moments" (Prior, 1998, p. xii). These moments of human interaction, of

social networking, are where GTAs discovered just what it meant to be a composition teacher—in terms of course content, in terms of genres of writing, even in terms of emotional concerns such as the fear of handing back papers. Since many GTAs had little interaction with Composition beyond the local writing program, they then based their view of the discipline on these experiences. In addition, local and global issues often interact, such as when Valerie and her advisor Monica discussed grading on process versus product. Disciplines are both abstract fields of study and concrete local communities of practice, and disciplinarity exists in the interaction between the two.

### *Implications and Areas for Future Research*

I have thus far avoided offering specific applications for teacher preparation. This study was not designed to be a program assessment, and I find it inherently problematic to suggest particular strategies for teacher preparation from such a small data set. However, I will offer some questions here that WPAs might consider when designing teacher preparation programs. First of all, my study suggests that GTAs are more at home with Composition when they connect with it on an intellectual level. Thus, WPAs should consider more closely the connection between Composition and other areas of study, other courses that GTAs take as graduate students. Furthermore, we might use these connections to further justify the importance of practicum courses like “Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing” that go beyond pedagogy. Practicum courses might seek to more actively engage with GTAs’ views of writing and language. Powell et al. (2002) do this when they ask GTAs to examine their underlying theories of language (p. 125). Still, they do so with the specific goal of assessing how those theories affect pedagogy. What I am suggesting is that even if those theories are not immediately

applied pedagogically, those connections are significant to getting GTAs to engage with Composition. One way to do this might be to engage GTAs more directly in research during a practicum course. Sally Barr Ebest (2005) finds that by giving her GTAs the opportunity to complete action research on the areas of composition pedagogy that they resist, she is better able to affect these attitudes (p. 65). Of course, the ability to provide such opportunities rests heavily on local context, the type of practicum course offered, and the students in the program.

In addition to connecting intellectually with Composition, my study indicates that social connections are key to GTAs. Of course, social connections are much harder to control. During the year that I conducted my study, the MFA students at Virginia Tech formed a close bond. They were particularly willing to work together and since several of them took an interest in Composition, their mentoring group provided a particularly fruitful opportunity to develop as teachers. However, Rita mentioned in our interview that she has had mentoring groups where conflict existed or where a particular GTA with a poor attitude brought down the morale of the group. While the quality of such social interaction is somewhat out of our control, we must nevertheless acknowledge the fact that social interactions, whether those are designed by the program or not, influence GTAs perception of the program and of Composition. In addition to the mentoring groups, GTAs talked about interactions with their friends and officemates. Marty talked about consulting his girlfriend, a fellow student, while grading papers. Social influences, naturally, do not stop with the opportunities we provide for GTAs. Rather than seeking to control these interactions, we might instead provide opportunities for GTAs to reflect on the many factors that influence their teaching.

Although this study has provided insight into the links between disciplinary development, GTA preparation, and writing programs, there are still a lot of unanswered questions. This study was limited in terms of the number of participants and the location at one institution. While the methodology of ethnographic case studies allowed for thick description of the experiences of multiple GTAs at Virginia Tech, it does not give us a sense of how these views line up with other GTAs at other programs or even in other years at Virginia Tech. As noted in Chapter 3, the Virginia Tech teacher preparation program is in the process of changes that could affect the way that GTAs construct their identities within the writing program.

But this is always the case, and it is essentially part of the point. Disciplines are dynamic, changing beings. So are writing programs. To the extent that writing programs reflect and construct the discipline of Composition, and I argue that they do, that construction is never complete; it is never final. It is only ever one small piece of the puzzle. Writing Programs are key place where Composition is constructed. According to Gunner (2002) writing programs are "ideological entities," "economic units charged with cultural work" (p. 8). When GTAs are presented with the ideology of a particular program, they often see that as the ideology of the discipline as a whole. For example, GTAs tended to see what they were being asked to teach at Virginia Tech as "Composition" while not giving that label to courses with different ideologies but similar pedagogical functions at other institutions. In other words, a course that was pedagogically positioned as a first-year writing course might not be seen as composition because it focused more on argumentative writing than the program at Virginia Tech. Clearly, the Writing Program completed the cultural work of defining Composition for

many of the GTAs in this study. Further study may give us more information about just how this work is accomplished and how the construction of Composition takes place within writing programs. The concept of communities of practice has been particularly useful in exploring this connection, but there is a great deal more to the practice of a writing program than the preparation of GTAs.

Writing Programs are institutionally and socially positioned to affect change. When we develop first-year curriculum, we provide students with the first view they may have of Composition and of writing at the university. Similarly, when we develop teacher preparation programs we not only affect the view of first-year graduate students, some of whom will go on to become key members of our composition faculty, but we also indirectly impact the view of the field being delivered to first-year students. Adler-Kassner (2008) talks about the important role of WPAs as community organizers, and about our role in changing the stories that are told about writing and about Composition as a field and as a course. Knowing what helps outsiders and peripheral members accept the field and how to help them make connections between their own experiences and ours is key to doing this work. Whether it is working with GTAs, contingent faculty in composition, or faculty in a writing across the curriculum program, it is important to evaluate the way the identity of others and their relationship to Composition affects their views of our field. So doing can help us make connections across communities of practice and build bridges that will help affect change in our writing programs and at our universities.

Writing Programs construct Composition in the eyes of both outsiders and insiders. However, more than that, Writing Programs construct our identity as

composition teachers. Our negotiations with fellow teachers, GTAs, and students help us define what it means to teach composition and to be members of a Writing Program. Our connections with others who share similar day-to-day experiences within that community affirms our identity as “Composition people.” GTA preparation is a key place where these identities first begin to form, but that preparation is not just about shaping new members of our field or our teaching staff. As Yancey (2002) so aptly puts, “In its design, a TA development program constructs us all—students, TAs, faculty and administrators—in ways we plan, in ways we do not” (p. 74).

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## Appendix:

### *English 5984 Syllabus*

#### **English 5984—Theory and Practice in Teaching College Writing**<sup>25</sup>

Shultz 109

#### **Course Description:**

This 6-hour course is meant to both introduce you to the field you will be teaching in and to prepare you for classroom practice. By the time you have completed the term, you should be able to:

- ◆ Explain the interplay of rhetorical theory and current research on the teaching of writing
- ◆ Critically reflect on how your teaching practice is informed by your teaching philosophy
- ◆ Design university-level assignments for teaching writing
- ◆ Demonstrate effective classroom practice
- ◆ Compose a syllabus and major assignments that reflect the Composition Program and University learning goals and outcomes

The course carries 6 credit hours because it is really doing double-duty.

First, it serves as a practicum for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) who will be teaching in Virginia Tech's Composition Program for the first time. To that end, you will be getting hands-on experience in teaching both one-on-one and, eventually, in a classroom setting. You will also be reading student papers, writing your own syllabus, and designing your major assignments for next term.

The second aim of the course is to give you some background in the field of Composition and Rhetoric so that you begin your teaching informed in the work of this discipline.

#### **Requirements**

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<sup>25</sup> I have eliminated names of those from the Virginia Tech program that were in the original document.

- ◆ Attend all class sessions and come prepared with reading and/or writing completed for each day's class.
- ◆ Turn all writing assignments in electronically—in the Drop Box provided on our Scholar site. (You are responsible, as well, for keeping a hard copy and a back-up electronic copy — just in case.)
- ◆ Tutor 1 hour per week in the Writing Center under the direction of Writing Center Associate Director.
- ◆ Beginning Week 6, partner with a mentor whose class you must attend at least once a week. (More on this below.)
- ◆ Prepare your syllabus and assignment sequences for English 1106.
- ◆ Prepare a Teaching Portfolio using your Drop Box on our Scholar site.
- ◆ Write a report reflecting on your teaching day. Attach to that report commentary and suggestions from your mentor.
- ◆ Write a final paper that will introduce your portfolio materials, state your teaching goals, and synthesize the reading and writing you have been doing this semester.
- ◆ Attend the Speaker Series talks in September, Shanks 370.

### **Partnering with Your Mentor**

I will assign you to a composition class to work with one of our teachers—very likely a GTA but not necessarily. You are required to attend at least one class period a week beginning the 6<sup>th</sup> week of class. You will also prepare a lesson and teach at least one class period. While you are in the class, you will serve as an active class member meaning that you will help with groups, help with discussion, etc. As a part of this assignment, you will be reading some student papers in various stages of drafting.

#### *Some Ground Rules*

- When you are preparing a lesson, don't bail at the last minute. You are the teacher in charge. Your mentor should not suddenly have to prep a class you were supposed to prep.
- Decide on a schedule and keep it.
- Work with the class. Never just sit and observe.
- Meet with the mentor to read student papers.

In this way, you will get hands-on experience in the classroom. If you have taught before, this will be your chance to meet the kinds of students you will be teaching next term.

### **Tutoring in the Writing Center**

Starting week 2, you will be tutoring one hour per week in the Writing Center. As with classroom teaching, you can't shift your times around in the Writing Center, and you can't suddenly cancel on students—whether you think you'll actually have an appointment or not.

### **Required Books**

Joseph Harris. *Rewriting: How to Do Things with Texts*

Susan Miller, ed. *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*

John Trimbur, eds. *Call to Write* (provided)

Diana George, gen. ed., *Composition at Virginia Tech, 2009–2010* (provided)

Diana George and John Trimbur, *Reading Culture* (provided)

### **Schedule (note that you have a reading and writing assignment due for the first class)**

Aug 24—Have Bitzer and Booth (online in Scholar) and Chapter 2 of CAVT read. Your writing assignment for this reading is online in Scholar.

#### **WRITING #1 DUE**

Aug 26—Lunsford and Ede on Audience (2 articles: Norton & an article in manuscript form, posted in Scholar); also read Chapters 1 & 2 of Harris--

#### **WRITING #2 DUE**

Aug 31— Bartholomae, Bizzell (Norton); Harris, chapters 3 & 4

#### **WRITING # 3 DUE**

Sep 2 —Tutoring in the Writing Center

#### **WRITING #4 DUE**

**Sep 4 — ANDREA LUNSFORD, 12:15–1:15; SHANKS 370—light snacks available by noon**

Sep 7— Bruffee, “The Conversation of Mankind” and Trimbur, “Consensus and Difference,” Norton

**WRITING #5 DUE**

Sep 9 — Brooke, “The Underlife of the Classroom” and Rose, “The Language of Exclusion,”

**WRITING # 6 DUE**

Sep 14—film showing (Oregon State)

**WRITING #7 DUE (to be submitted on Scholar)**

Sep 16— **TODAY’S CLASS WILL NOT MEET SO THAT YOU HAVE TIME TO ATTEND FRIDAY’S GUEST LECTURE BY JOHN TRIMBUR**

**Sep 18—JOHN TRIMBUR, SHANKS 370, 12:15–1:15—light snacks available by noon**

**WRITING # 8 DUE BY 5 PM**

Sep 21— Lu (Redefining), Royster (When the First Voice)

**WRITING #9 DUE**

Sep 23—Sirc, George (Analysis)

**WRITING #10 DUE**

Sep 28— Readings from DeVoss, Selfe and Hawisher

**Sep 30—Lecture by DeVoss, 12:15–1:15, SHANKS 370—light snacks available by noon**

**ATTEND THIS LECTURE INSTEAD OF OUR 9:30 CLASS ON THIS DAY**

**WRITING #11 DUE BY NOON OCT. 1**

Oct 5—intro to 1106—CAVT

Oct 7—Call to Write/CAVT –What does it mean to write from research?

Oct 12— First research assignment / focus on rhetorical concerns—due (presentations)

Oct 14—Revision of first research assignment—LIBRARY

Oct. 19 Call to Write –Designing a class period—presentations

**Oct 20—Attend National Day on Writing Activities**

Oct. 21 Call to Write & CAVT Teaching from the Text

Oct 26—Call to Write & CAVT — First Draft of Fieldwork Assignment Due—  
presentations

Oct 28— Revision of Fieldwork assignment Due— Writing your Syllabus Pacing the  
course

**Nov 2—First Draft of 1106 Syllabus Due** — How do you incorporate visual literacy  
into your course?

Nov 4—**First Draft of Visual Assignment Due**--presentations

Nov 9—**Revision of Visual Assignment Due**—Reading Student Writing

Nov 11—Reading Student Writing—Grading

Nov 16—Teaching Documentation; issues of ownership and copyright

Nov 18—Scheduling Conferences and Student Presentations; Visitor on GEDI

**NOV 23-27—THANKSGIVING BREAK**

Nov 30 **Second Draft of Syllabus Due**—Working with Peer Groups

Dec 2—Working with Peer Groups

Dec 7 — Using Scholar

9— Your **Teaching Day Reflection Due** with commentary from your mentor on your  
teaching

**DECEMBER 11—EXAM DAY 10:05-12:05**

**Final 1106 Syllabus Due, Teaching Portfolio Due** — Presentations