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# “What Are We Doing Here, Anyway?” An Exploration of the Attitudes and Responses of Teaching Assistants from Composition and from Literature Regarding Their TA Preparation

Jennifer Kathleen Johnson  
*Indiana University of Pennsylvania*

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“WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE, ANYWAY?” AN EXPLORATION OF THE ATTITUDES  
AND RESPONSES OF TEACHING ASSISTANTS FROM COMPOSITION AND FROM  
LITERATURE REGARDING THEIR TA PREPARATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Jennifer Kathleen Johnson

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

May 2013

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Jennifer Kathleen Johnson

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

---

Claude M. Hurlbert, D.A.  
Professor of English, Advisor

---

Gian S. Pagnucci, Ph.D.  
University Professor

---

Jeannine M. Fontaine, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of English, Emerita

ACCEPTED

---

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.  
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: “What Are We Doing Here, Anyway?” An Exploration of the Attitudes and Responses of Teaching Assistants from Composition and from Literature Regarding Their TA Preparation

Author: Jennifer Kathleen Johnson

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Claude M. Hurlbert

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Gian S. Pagnucci  
Dr. Jeannine M. Fontaine

This dissertation is a bounded case study that examines the attitudes and perceptions of Teaching Assistants (TAs) in Composition about their TA preparation in an independent writing program at a large public research university in California. Specifically, this study focuses on TAs who were pursuing Ph.D.s in either English Literature or Composition. Given that TAs’ preparation for teaching first-year Composition is traditionally held within English departments, TAs commonly hail from either Literature or Composition graduate programs. Yet anecdotal evidence, literature in the field, and institutional history all point to a tension between the factions of Literature and Composition within the larger field of English Studies. With this tension in mind, a primary concern for this study has been developing an understanding of disciplinary differences and how they manifest within a TA preparation program in an independent writing unit, separate from English. Therefore, the overarching question in this study focuses on whether TAs from Composition and from Literature respond differently to their TA preparation program and, if so, to what extent disciplinary affiliations play a role.

Methods for data collection include conducting two-part interviews with five students from each of the two disciplines as well as analyzing the TA preparation instructor’s narrative teaching evaluations over a three-year period. Aggregate results of a survey given to the program’s TAs for the purposes of a program review were also considered.

The data collected for this study revealed a clear divide between the TAs from Literature and the TAs from Composition. TAs from the two groups responded to the programs differently, displayed different levels of engagement and resistance, and took away different principles and practices in manners consistent with their respective disciplinary philosophies and affiliations. As further support for this analysis, participants reported that they perceived a divide between Literature and Composition TAs in their preparation courses that they attributed to differences in disciplinary allegiances, interests and philosophies. Results also suggest that institutional policies and practices can influence how TAs perceive and respond to their TA preparation, which may further exacerbate these tensions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I was a child, my paternal grandmother, with whom I spent a lot of time until her passing a few years ago, continually tried to impress upon me the importance of writing thank you notes. Whether they were for a gift received or as a response to some other nicety, my grandma firmly believed in the necessity of a written word of thanks. As I finalize this dissertation after six long years of working on it, I am compelled by both convention and the memory of my grandma to thank the many individuals who have helped and supported me along this journey. In doing so, I hope that the following words will do justice both to her standards and to the deep appreciation I feel for those who I have addressed below.

First, I would like to thank the participants in this study, without whom this dissertation would not have been possible. Your stories are at the heart of this work, and I deeply appreciate the time you took to meet with me and tell me about your experiences as a TA and a teacher of First Year Composition. I sincerely hope that this project does justice to your memories and that you are pleased with the outcome. While I only had a passing acquaintance with a few of you before asking you to participate in this project, I am delighted that at this point I can call many of you my friends.

Thank you also to the staff and faculty in the Writing Program at UCSB. In particular, thank you, Sue McLeod, for helping me to situate my work and also for your support and encouragement along the way. Thank you also to Karen Lunsford, who was always generously willing to answer my questions about methodological concerns and procedures, among other things. And thank you to Haley Orton in the Writing Program office for all of the administrative help you provided me, and to the Writing Program Director Linda Adler-Kassner for being such an enthusiastic and supportive cheerleader of me and my work.

Thanks also to the Composition and TESOL program and faculty at IUP, who, along with the faculty at California State University, Northridge, prepared me for undertaking this project. It was at CSUN that I completed my Master's Degree and where I taught Composition for the first time as a TA. Many thanks to Irene Clark for introducing me to the field of Composition and for encouraging me to pursue a career as a Compositionist. I could not be happier with this choice.

I also want to thank my committee members for the time and energy you each put into reading my work and for all of your support. All three of you deepened my understanding of this project and helped me make it stronger. First, thank you to Claude Hurlbert, my advisor, for pushing me to write more carefully and cogently than I ever have before. To conduct "impeccable research" is a tall order, but one that I am glad that I had the opportunity to aspire to. I thank you, Claude, for your careful reading of this project and for your belief in me. And thank you to Gian Pagnucci and Jeannine Fontaine, both of whom also contributed to this work in important ways. Gian, thank you for the many excellent suggestions you offered and for helping me to see the unstated assumption and implications in my work. Jeannine, thank you for your engaged reading of this project and for the many insightful comments you provided. And thank you also for the generosity that you have shown me and for your willingness to stay on my committee even after you retired from the Composition & TESOL program.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### The Shaping of My Outlook: Personal Experiences and Predispositions

My own experience as a teaching assistant (TA) had a tremendous impact on me both personally and professionally. When I became a TA while pursuing a Master's degree in English at a California State University (CSU), I was in the process of deciding whether I wanted to pursue a career in Literature or in Composition.<sup>1</sup> Having completed my undergraduate degree in an English Literature and Language program, thus far I had managed to straddle the two fields under the umbrella of English Studies. But once I was more deeply exposed to Composition theory and pedagogy as a graduate student in my TA preparation class, I began to see the possibilities offered by this field and I decided that I wanted to dedicate myself fully to the study and teaching of Composition. My initial experience teaching first-year Composition (FYC) came the following semester, and my experience working with students in that context cemented my resolve. I quickly began to immerse myself in Composition studies by reading all that I could, attending regional and national conferences, and exploring various opportunities for gaining teaching experience in the profession.

My TA preparation cohort consisted of about 15 people, all students in the university's Master of Arts program in English. This particular CSU offered an M.A. in English with three separate emphases: Literature, Creative Writing, and Rhetoric and Composition. While a couple of the TAs were enrolled in the Creative Writing option, the majority of us were pursuing our degrees in either Literature or Rhetoric and Composition. It did not take long to notice that the

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I have elected to capitalize the disciplinary areas of Composition, Literature, and Education, although I realize that I am breaking from convention in doing so. Because this study is based on an examination of disciplinary paradigms in Composition, Literature, and Education, I felt it was important to differentiate these disciplinary areas from the compositions that we write, the literature that we read, and the education that we pursue. When used in these ways, the words will not be capitalized.



Literature students responded differently than my Composition-minded friends and I did to the readings, discussions, and reflective work that we encountered in our TA preparation classes. While those of us preparing for a career in Composition viewed these activities as fascinating and even integral to our preparation for the classroom, many of the Literature students appeared to view them as chores or empty requirements with little practical value. For example, while the TAs in Composition would often meet before or after class to discuss the readings we had been assigned or the theories we were learning about, the TAs from Literature showed little interest in these conversations, and as time went on, they seemed to develop a resistance to even completing the readings, a stance they vocalized regularly—albeit out of earshot of the TA preparation teacher.

Since that time, I have encountered a similar attitude within the field of English Studies, often by people in Literature, some of whom still do not seem to recognize Composition as a legitimate area of study and practice. Moreover, discussions on the Writing Program Administrators listserv (WPA-l) and elsewhere in the field indicate that throughout English Studies and even throughout academia at large, there is a perception that Composition theory and pedagogy is somehow inferior to Literature and other disciplinary areas: not inherently worthy of study, but rather simply a set of skills that should be taught to first-year students as a service to the university. Indeed, the fact that across the nation the teaching of Composition courses is still commonly relegated to graduate students and junior faculty members is a testament to the lack of respect many have for this profession (Berlin, 1996/2003; Bousquet, 2004). And despite the many journals, books, graduate programs and scholars the field of Composition has produced over the past fifty or so years, this attitude has continued to prevail. As Payne and Enos (2002) have noted, “most readers will be familiar with the all-too-common lament that Composition

departments reside in academia's metaphorical basement, several floors beneath Literature programs..." (p. 50). So, anecdotally, at least, it appears that there is a disparity between the ways that many scholars and teachers in Literature and Composition respectively view writing instruction and the study of it.

In addition to these examples, many texts—both recent and over the past several decades—have also addressed the fragmented and sometimes contentious nature of the relationship between Literature and Composition (Bergmann & Baker, 2006; Crowley, 1998; Elbow, 2002; Horner, 1983; Maid, 2006; McComiskey, 2006; White 1989). In these texts and others, the sometimes uneasy relationship between the perspectives of Composition and Literature teachers/scholars has been well-documented. However, no studies have been conducted to explore the extent to which these tensions might exist within TA preparation classes that are held in stand-alone writing units, independent from English. This dissertation is designed to do just that.

The final impetus for this project stems from the results of a survey given to all TAs participating in the TA preparation program at the research site. Designed and conducted in 2006 by the writing unit in which the TA program is housed, the survey was developed to collect data for a self-study required by the university's administration. The survey asked TAs about their perceptions of their preparation to become a TA and queried them on what could be done to improve their preparedness for entering the classroom as Composition teachers. Interestingly, the survey yielded a bi-modal response in that respondents were either quite enthusiastic about the preparation program or saw it as a waste of their time.

When I heard about the results of this study, my interest was piqued (given my own experience with TA preparation) and so I requested permission to conduct a preliminary

exploration of the narrative portion of the teaching evaluations—submitted by the TAs—in response to their TA preparation course and instructor. Here I found a similar bi-modality in the data, as some of the TAs wrote of their great enthusiasm for the course while others displayed varying degrees of resistance to the course and its activities. Given that the TAs in the program at the time were primarily students of either the university's Composition Ph.D. program or its Literature Ph.D. program—and thus hailing from either the School of Education or from the English Department—it is possible that the varied responses were a result of attitudes established due to disciplinary affiliation(s). But unfortunately, the surveys did not ask respondents to identify their home departments, so there is no way to correlate the results of the survey with this hypothesis.

This present study picks up where the previous one left off, by working to explore the causes of the bi-modality in the 2006 survey and trying to determine to what extent disciplinary affiliation played a role in the TAs' disparate responses to their TA preparation. By exploring the attitudes of Composition and Literature TAs from this independent writing program in greater depth, this dissertation examines the extent of the disciplinary differences between the two groups as well as the nature and implications of these differences in terms of how they play out both within TA preparation, and later, in the FYC classroom.

### The Marginalization of Composition

Composition has developed considerably over the past hundred years. From its humble origins as a remediation course at Harvard University in the 1870's, today Composition is not only an important component of higher education with required first-year courses in virtually every college and university in the United States, but it has also become a full-fledged disciplinary area. Composition became an area of serious research and scholarship in the 1960s,

and consequently, journals, conferences, and graduate programs in the field began to proliferate, all of which have helped Composition to develop into a discipline in its own right. Likewise, during this time Composition has seen an increase in the number of writing studies majors at universities across the nation. Moreover, as concerns over students' writing skills have intensified, Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) programs have developed and become more common, and these have also helped to expand Composition's reach across the academy.<sup>2</sup>

But despite this evolution, in many colleges and universities Composition courses/programs are still seen as a "service unit," responsible for serving the rest of the institution by teaching students how to read, write, and think critically so that they may then succeed in their other courses (Miller, 1993; Crowley, 1998). Perhaps in part because it has traditionally been housed in English departments primarily concerned with the teaching of Literature, Composition also continues to be marginalized within the larger field of English Studies (Horner, 1983; McComiskey, 2006; Parker, 1967/2009; Wiederhold, 2006). As the CCCC Committee on Part-time/Adjunct Issues reported in 2001, the bulk of Composition classes in the U.S. are still taught by part-time employees, adjuncts, and graduate assistants, often within English departments otherwise staffed by tenured or tenure-track Literature faculty (Conference on College Composition and Communication Committee on Part-time/Adjunct Issues, 2001). In fact, Bousquet (2004) estimates that "as much as 93 percent of all [Composition] sections are taught by graduate students and other 'disposable' teachers" (p. 5). This long-standing staffing arrangement suggests that both within English departments and the academy at large,

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<sup>2</sup> Often these programs are directed by Composition professionals who work with departments across campus to help faculty develop strategies for more effective teaching of writing in non-Composition classes. In doing so, principles of Composition theory and pedagogy are introduced and practiced in places where they were previously unheard of.

Composition continues to struggle to find equal footing not only with Literature, but also with other academic units.

Further demonstrating the marginalized status of Composition is the all-too-common and disturbing attitude that virtually “anyone can teach writing,” which is still reflected both within and outside of English departments at many institutions. Those who have traced and recorded the early history of the field have made it abundantly clear that Composition was originally taught either by lowly graduate students, women faculty members who were lesser-paid than their male counterparts, or just about anyone else willing to take on the “distasteful” task of assigning and grading first-year student essays (Berlin, 1996/2003; Horner, 2006; McComiskey, 2006; Miller 1993). As an example, Bizzell (1992) has aptly captured the lack of respect afforded to Composition teachers during her time as a graduate student in English at Rutgers:

It seemed that the most published and eminent university professors, even though I saw they were fine teachers of graduate students, were not particularly interested in discussing teaching or engaging in the labor-intensive task of teaching writing. The structure of the department implied that the more brilliant a person was, the more he or she published and the fewer and brighter the students he or she taught. Lesser lights taught undergraduates; mere sparks taught undergraduate Composition. (p. 11)

Those who were considered “mere sparks” were poorly compensated and given little respect for the job of working with the legions of students required to take a FYC course (Berlin, 1996/2003; Enos, 1999; Horner, 2006; Miller, 1993; McComiskey, 2006). Often without any preparation or pedagogical support at all, these individuals were “sentenced” to teach freshman Composition in order to enable the “serious” scholars of English departments to focus on what

many English department faculty consider a more enlightened pursuit: the study and teaching of literature (Horner, 2006; Parker, 1967/2009).<sup>3</sup>

Through the development and proliferation of teacher preparation programs for new teachers of Composition (see Dobrin, 2005; Ebest, 2005; Pytlik, 2002) and some hard-won improvements in the quality of material conditions for Composition faculty (Bergmann, 2006), the field of Composition has made some progress since those early days. But unfortunately, despite these and other indications of the increased professionalization of Composition, remnants of the long-standing negative attitudes toward the teaching of writing still continue to prevail in many places, and these are evidenced by the marginal status still held by many Composition teachers and/or programs in colleges and universities across the nation (Bousquet, 2004; Ohmann, 2004).

One response to this continued marginalized status has been a push toward developing stand-alone writing programs that are independent from English departments. Some of these programs offer not only first-year Composition courses, but also other writing courses pertaining to various disciplines and sometimes even writing majors or minors. In fact, a recent study conducted by the CCCC Committee on the Major in Rhetoric and Composition looked at the number of undergraduate majors in writing studies and found a total of 68 such programs, 27 of which are located outside of English departments (Balzhiser & McLeod, 2010), reflecting both a growing interest in the field and a re-conceptualization of Composition's relationship to English.

Still, even in these free-standing writing programs, the trend toward marginalization often continues. Although "freestanding writing programs may be able to maintain their coherence

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<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as Eble (1972) and others have argued, teaching is simply viewed as a lesser activity than scholarship: "The teacher's image has never been as dominant in higher education as the image of the scholar—the one who teaches as against the one who knows" (p. 385). This idea will be discussed further in Chapter Two of this dissertation.

because of their separation from Literature” (Bergmann, 2006; p. 10), these independent units often lack funding and staffing capacities equivalent to those of the English departments from which they came (Aronson & Hansen, 2006; Hindman, 2006; Maid, 2002). For example, while English Literature faculty members tend to be tenured or on the tenure track, many of the Composition classes held in these independent programs continue to be staffed by underpaid lecturers, adjuncts, and graduate students. In this way, the independent programs are sometimes simply replicating the unequal power structures of the English departments that previously housed them (Crow & O’Neill, 2002). Moreover, independent writing programs sometimes lack the financial support necessary to fund adequately their program’s goals and agendas<sup>4</sup> such as attaining departmental status, offering a minor or a major in the discipline, providing funding for faculty travel and research, etc. Taken together, these material realities suggest that while independent writing units are separate from English, they are often not at all equal in stature with their English department counterparts.

Given all of the above concerns about Composition’s marginalized status in academia, both within and outside of the discipline there has been much discussion over what its place in the academy should be, who should teach it, and how it should be taught. Indeed, the complex disciplinary relationship between Composition and Literature has far-reaching implications for students, faculty, programs, departments, and the field itself, and these implications are often played out in one of the primary “contact zones” (Pratt, 1991) where students and faculty of these two factions come together: teaching assistant preparation programs.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The “temporary sub-zero” budget used to fund the program at the site of this present study is an excellent example.

<sup>5</sup> While TA preparation is often referred to as “training,” in this project I have instead chosen the term “preparation.” As Fulkerson (2002), Dobrin (2005), Stenberg (2005) and others have argued, the notion of training does not reflect the richness inherent to the process of preparing to become a teacher.

As the field of Composition burgeons and further establishes itself as a profession in its own right—potentially more and more independent from English departments—it seems wise to consider how TA preparation impacts not only graduate students and their institutions as well as the undergraduates they serve in FYC classes, but also the field itself. As Bishop (citing Neel on p. 24) has pointed out, in TA preparation we have teachers preparing teachers-to-be who will teach undergraduate students, and thus there is great potential for impact in any given TA program (1988). Stenberg (2005) makes a similar point as she has argued that TA preparation courses are “our greatest opportunity to instigate disciplinary and pedagogical change” (p. 30) since they shape the pedagogies and practices of the newest teachers in the profession.

Upon completion of these preparation programs, beginning writing teachers will share their newly developed pedagogies with their own students. Indeed, just as TA preparation courses are an important point of contact between graduate students pursuing degrees in different areas of English Studies, the FYC course is our profession’s point of contact with the students we serve—it is our primary means of disseminating that which Composition scholars have discovered and tested about the teaching and practice of writing. And given the proliferation of TAs as FYC teachers, careful study of how TAs perceive their preparation and what they take away from it thus becomes a meaningful way to explore how our discipline is being represented, particularly when it is standing alone and establishing its independence from English.

It is also important to note that TA preparation classes in Composition are often designed around exposing students to seminal works in the Composition canon as a means of introducing important trends and shifts in Composition theory and practice. Rice (2005) has pointed to the far-reaching implications of the course and its impact, claiming, “The Composition canon is created ... through the practicum, which has become the tool for disseminating knowledge



regarding how to teach rhetoric and Composition” (p. 269). Books such as McDonald’s (1999) *The Allyn and Bacon Sourcebook for College Writing Teachers*, Villanueva’s (2003) *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, Vandenberg, Hum, and Clary-Lemon’s (2006) *Relations, Locations, Positions: Composition Theory for Writing Teachers*, Johnson’s (2008) *Teaching Composition: Background Readings*, and Miller’s (2009) *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*—all of which, according to Haswell (2010), are commonly used in TA preparation courses—reflect and reify the canon of work in Rhetoric and Composition, particularly as they expose non-Composition graduate students to those works that have shaped the thinking and practices common in our field.

As Dobrin (2005) has argued, the TA preparation practicum is often the first and sometimes only Composition course that many graduate students take, and thus that it is “the largest, most effective purveyor of cultural capital in Composition studies” (p. 21). He has further argued that TA preparation

reaches professionals who do not identify themselves as compositionists specifically.

More often than not, too, it is specifically these noncomposition specialists for whom the practicum is the sole experience in composition studies, and thus the sole defining mechanism for them. How the practicum is presented then, defines for the

noncomposition specialist what composition is. (p. 21)

It seems clear, then, that the TA preparation practicum’s unique role in representing and disseminating Composition’s body of knowledge among graduate students renders it inherently worthy of study.

### English Departments and TA Preparation

Composition TAs typically participate in teacher preparation courses held within English departments before they begin to teach the FYC course. As noted above, this assignment is often a means of providing English graduate students with a student teaching opportunity as well as a way of securing funding for their education (Bergmann, 2006; Maid, 2006; North, 2000; Stenberg, 2005). At the same time, this arrangement provides English departments with a relatively inexpensive labor force to staff the myriad sections of FYC that are offered each year (Berlin, 1996/2003; Bousquet, 2004; McComiskey, 2006; North, 2000). The relationship between TA programs and FYC thus tends to be a symbiotic one within English departments, with each entity supporting the other.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that Composition TAships enable English departments to continue privileging Literature instead of treating the study and teaching of Composition and Literature as equally important endeavors (Berlin, 1996/2003). Scholars such as Horner (1983), Crowley (1998), McComiskey (2006), and Bergmann (2006) have argued that relegating the teaching of Composition to TAs, part-time instructors, or even lecturers allows the tenured faculty to focus on Literature. Maid (2006) takes this argument a step further by arguing that the relationship between TAs and FYC allow graduate programs in Literature to stay afloat:

“Since English departments need cheap labor such as TAs to staff many sections of FYC, they can justify otherwise unjustifiable graduate programs. The graduate students can teach FYC while filling the graduate classes of the tenure-line [Literature] faculty” (p. 95). In this way, a Composition TA program not only serves many Literature professors by allowing them to maintain their focus on the teaching of Literature, but it also supports graduate programs in Literature by providing funding opportunities for those seeking Literature graduate degrees.

And this trend is hardly a new phenomenon. In 1939, Columbia English Professor Oscar James Campbell wrote about the problematic state of affairs within English departments in regard to the teaching of English and the stratification of Literature versus Composition faculty. In an article titled “The Failure of Freshman English,” Campbell referred to the teachers of FYC: “Crowds of young men and women have been lured into the teaching of English by the great number of positions annually open at the bottom of the heap, and there they stick, contaminating one another with their discouragement and rebellion” (p. 179). Then as now, Composition is often relegated to serving the interests of Literature faculty within English departments, thereby creating and perpetuating a culture that marginalizes Composition and views it as primarily a service unit.

At the same time, given that TA preparation programs serve not only Composition graduate students but also graduate students in Literature or other areas of English Studies—as well as sometimes even students from outside of English—it seems likely that some of the students enrolled in TA preparation classes would not be inherently interested in considering Composition theory and its relationship to pedagogical practice.<sup>6</sup> After all, the teaching and studying of Composition takes time away from their primary teaching and research interests. As a result, the TA preparation experience has the potential to be, at least for some people, ancillary to the primary goal of obtaining a graduate degree. For Literature graduate students then, TA preparation could even potentially alienate them towards Composition theory and practice instead of helping them embrace it.

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<sup>6</sup> Hesse’s (1993) CCC essay “Teachers as Students, Reflecting Resistance” has described this phenomenon in detail and considered both its causes and its implications.

Indeed, there is often resistance to TA preparation, as Ebest (2005) has well established, particularly by those graduate students who have not chosen Composition as their intended field.<sup>7</sup> But in Composition—as well as in Education—studying and developing pedagogy is a primary goal, making TA preparation and student teaching fundamentally integral to the graduate experiences of students in these fields. As Stenberg (2005) has pointed out in *Professing as Pedagogy*:

In their seminars, Composition graduate students are typically given a chance to integrate the scholarly and the pedagogical, to bring their teaching to bear on their coursework and vice-versa. Composition students' work as teachers is not designated as a mere source of funding their "real" academic work, but as a site of intellectual inquiry that can and should function in dialogue with their coursework. (p. 131)

Because developing the relationship between theory and practice is an important component of graduate study in Composition, it seems reasonable to assume that students pursuing graduate degrees in Composition would view TA preparation and the experience of student-teaching Composition courses as both a practical and desirable means of furthering their studies. And understandably, those pursuing other areas of scholarship and research in English Studies might be less attuned to these activities, particularly if they are pursuing graduate study in other disciplines or if their home department reflects a culture in which the teaching of writing is seen as a less valuable activity than other scholarly pursuits.

### *Independent Composition Units*

Despite the traditional placement of Composition programs within departments of English, currently more and more Composition programs—and thus TA preparation programs—

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<sup>7</sup> This notion of resistance will be explored more fully in the following chapter.

are being housed in writing units or departments that are independent from English. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important is that as the field of Composition burgeons, many of Composition programs' goals and agendas can no longer be adequately supported without developing programs and infrastructures of their own (Doherty, 2006; Maid, 2002). For example, many English departments are unwilling to dedicate the resources necessary to support majors in Composition studies and/or initiatives like Writing Across the Curriculum programs. Separating from English goes a long way toward assuring that faculty in these independent programs share a common interest in and commitment to issues pertaining to writing studies.

Yet because these independent writing programs often recruit graduate students from the English departments they left behind to serve as TAs, there is an even greater potential than in the past for graduate students in Literature to resist preparation to teach FYC. In these situations, often both the teacher preparation course and FYC class are taught outside of TAs' home department of English, likely engendering a certain amount of resistance, despite the pedagogical experiences being a TA offers in addition to the funding that it generates for graduate students' educational expenses.

This project examines one of these standalone writing units as the site of a TA preparation program. As is the case with many TA preparation programs, the particular program under consideration for this project has a large contingent of students from both Literature and from Composition. At this particular university, however, the structure is atypical in that the Literature and Composition Ph.D. programs are housed not only in completely different departments: English and Education, respectively, but also in different divisions. Literature, held in English, is housed in the school of Humanities and Fine Arts, while Composition, held in

Education, is housed in the university's Graduate School of Education. This university may be the only place in the nation where Literature, Composition and TA preparation/FYC are held in three completely different places.<sup>8</sup>

Reflecting what Yin (2003) would call a “critical case,” the resulting uncommon neutrality of this particular TA preparation program makes it an especially fruitful place to investigate whether TAs in the two disciplines respond differently to their TA preparation and to explore how the relationship between the two fields is impacted by the TAs' placement in an independent writing program. As Crow and O'Neill (2002) have noted in their *Introduction to Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Composition Studies*, “Because the formation of independent writing programs is one possibility in the movement toward change, these departments become rich sites of analysis” (p. 6). Indeed, independent writing programs effectively separate Composition faculty and courses from literary faculty and courses, thus providing an opportunity to examine how Composition programs function in the absence of the tension between the two factions that is experienced within many English departments. But what happens when these two groups come together in a TA preparation practicum within an independent program? Will the tension between Literature and Composition that is so often found in many traditional English departments be replicated in this new environment? And if so, how will it manifest itself?

### Research Questions

Considerations of how TA preparation programs address questions about Composition's place in English Studies and the academy at large lead to the four primary research questions for this project:

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<sup>8</sup> Only one other university in the U.S. houses a Rhetoric and Composition program in its School of Education (Bazerman et. al., 2006).

- “How did Ph.D. candidates from Composition and from Literature respond to a TA preparation program held in an independent writing unit in a large public research university in California?”
- “Did TAs from Composition and from Literature exhibit resistance to their preparation program, and if so, in what ways?”
- “What pedagogical practices and principles do TAs from Composition and from Literature still use that reflect their TA preparation?”
- “To what extent did TAs from Composition and from Literature perceive a disciplinary divide in their preparation program experience, and to what did they attribute it?”

A primary concern for this study has been developing an understanding of disciplinary differences and how they manifest within a TA preparation program in an independent writing unit, separate from English. Therefore, the overarching question in this study focuses on whether TAs from Composition and from Literature respond differently to their TA preparation program and, if so, to what extent disciplinary affiliations play a role.

This dissertation addresses the above questions through a bounded case study of a TA preparation program that is housed in an independent writing unit. Ten doctoral candidates—five from Literature and five from Composition—were selected from two cohorts of the TA program to be interviewed about their experiences with their TA preparation courses and what they took away from these experiences. The study also considers the narrative student evaluations that were submitted in response to the TA preparation course(s) as a means of determining if there is a difference in the way students from each of the two groups responded to the TA practicum. Ultimately, this study considers how a TA preparation program in an independent writing unit

negotiates the sometimes uneasy relationship between Literature and Composition and also examines how the Literature and Composition TAs in that program responded to it.

Key considerations for this study include the placement of TA preparation in an independent writing program as well as the nature of the disciplinary relationship between Composition and English Literature. Also, given the particulars of the research site for this study, an understanding of independent writing programs and their similarities to and differences from Composition programs held within English departments is necessary background information.

#### Benefits of Research (Rationale)

The proliferation of TA preparation programs nationwide gives further importance to this study of how individuals within different groups respond to their preparation for becoming a TA. The opening chapter of Pytlik and Liggett's (2002) collection detailing the history of TA preparation offers a discussion of the growth in the number of TA preparation programs across the nation. Pytlik (2002) has characterized this growth as a response to multiple calls throughout the twentieth century for more teacher preparation programs by professional journals and by organizations such as the Modern Language Association (MLA), the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). Pytlik (2002) has documented these organizations' repeated pleas for more and improved TA preparation programs in order to professionalize and prepare the legions of Literature scholars who, despite their goal of becoming primarily teachers of Literature, will potentially be teaching at least some Composition courses once they obtain positions in English Studies. This current project is rooted in an examination of the perceptions and attitudes of TAs, for if there is in fact resistance among some of these students to Composition theory and pedagogy, then how effective has the response to this need for teacher preparation really been?



Working in an independent writing program that is separate from English as I have for the past several years, I no longer see myself as an English teacher (technically, in fact, I am not) but rather as a Composition teacher and scholar. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, and given that Composition is still considered a part of English Studies by the NCTE and MLA, perhaps it is. However, as the trend for Composition programs to split away from English departments continues nationwide (Crow & O'Neill, 2002; Doherty, 2006; Maid, 2002; McComiskey, 2006), it is likely that more and more Composition teachers and scholars will begin to see themselves in this new light.

Still, even when Composition programs seek their independence from English, some may find that it is difficult to achieve a clean break. For example, some otherwise independent Composition units lack graduate programs, and thus they continue to be connected with English departments through the sharing of TAs. In some cases this arrangement is a result of long-held agreements regarding student funding between Literature and Composition. In other cases, it is simply a practical matter of providing graduate students in English Literature with what is often their only opportunity to student-teach while earning their graduate degrees. In order to serve this population of Literature TAs effectively, it is important to try to understand how doctoral candidates in Literature are responding to TA preparation courses with their emphasis on pedagogical theory and practice. A key assumption of this present study is that these students may well view and respond differently to this avenue of study from doctoral candidates in Composition, given the Composition students' arguably more natural inclination toward and interest in considering and embracing pedagogical concerns.

And despite the recent rise in standalone writing programs, it is still the norm for Composition teachers and scholars to be members of English departments, just as most graduate

programs in Rhetoric and/or Composition are housed within departments of English. As such, it is still common for TA cohorts to be comprised of a mixture of graduate students who are pursuing their degrees in Literature as well as those who are pursuing careers in Composition. Given this mix, and given the continued tensions between these two areas of study, it is useful to work toward a better understanding of how both Composition and Literature graduate students negotiate becoming teachers of writing—including their openness to training as well as to developing a theoretical stance and pedagogical approach(es) appropriate to the Composition classroom. Many Ph.D.s in Literature will find themselves teaching at least some Composition courses in their career, whether in English departments or elsewhere. It is partly for their sake, as well as for the sake of the status of the profession, that it is important to investigate whether Literature teachers and scholars really do have a natural or engendered resistance to Composition teaching, theory, and practice, and if they do, then to try and understand why.

### Organizational Overview

In terms of structure, this dissertation moves from an introduction to a review of related literature to a methods section and then culminates with three chapters for the results of the study before providing a discussion of those results and the conclusions drawn from them. This opening chapter has attempted to provide a personal and disciplinary context for the study at hand. The following sub-sections provide further details about the content in each of the remaining chapters.

### *Chapter 2*

This chapter situates and contextualizes this research by providing a review of current literature covering four primary areas. First, it chronicles some of the reasons for and implications of the split between Literature and Composition. Also, this chapter considers

various responses to that split—including the development of stand-alone writing programs such as the one that serves as the study site for this project—as well as the developing relationship between Composition and English Education. The chapter then discusses TA preparation programs as contested spaces given their powerful role in disseminating the collective knowledge of the profession, whether through an emphasis on theory or through focusing on practical concerns regarding the classroom. The next major section of this review considers how TA preparation can help—or hinder—graduate students’ development of a teaching identity as TAs work to negotiate varied teaching philosophies that could potentially conflict with their own predispositions. This section also considers the role of disciplinarity in the development of TAs’ identities as teachers. The last major section of this chapter discusses how resistance operates within TA preparation—a key consideration in this study, given its interest in how TAs respond to their preparation programs and the reasons for those responses. The chapter concludes with a brief overview of the research goals for this project.

### *Chapter 3*

The third chapter opens by providing a rationale for the study’s design and the selection of the research site. It then establishes the methodology for this study by focusing on the rationale for choosing the participants involved, as well as on the procedures used to gather the data, and also on the measures used to analyze that data.

### *Chapter 4*

This chapter is divided into two primary areas. First, as a means of establishing context, the chapter provides an overview, or thick description, of this particular California public research university’s TA preparation program by reporting on its practicum’s materials, syllabi, and reading lists as well as course policies, student makeup, and recruitment policies and

practices. Also in this section is a discussion of the original survey conducted at the research site. The second part of the chapter provides an examination of the results of the TA practicum teacher's narrative student evaluations.

### *Chapters 5 and 6*

These two chapters report on the results of the interviews with the TAs from Composition and from Literature. For ease of reading, the interview results have been split into two chapters with the Composition TAs' responses in Chapter Five and the Literature TAs' responses in Chapter Six. Both chapters are organized according to the research questions for this project, with the participants' words serving to answer the questions.

### *Chapter 7*

This final chapter draws conclusions from the results section and provides analysis of the TAs' perceptions of their preparation program and what they took away from it. This chapter also considers the extent to which resistance played a role in the TAs' responses and examines the reasons for that resistance. The final chapter concludes this study by considering the implications of its findings as well as its limitations. This chapter also makes some suggestions for further research in this area.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As a means of providing a contextual framework for this project, the topics treated in this chapter reflect the major considerations that serve as its underpinnings. Therefore, this chapter covers literature pertaining to four main areas: 1) the divide between Composition and Literature, 2) TA preparation programs, 3) the development of teaching identities, and 4) the role of resistance in TA preparation.

The chapter opens with a discussion of the relationship between Composition and Literature and focuses on the tension between the two disciplines. Both the causes of this tension and some common responses to it are considered here. Because one of these responses is a move toward developing stand-alone writing programs, this section also examines how this independence from English potentially impacts TA preparation programs and, as a result, how that independence could potentially impact TAs themselves. In addition, the present chapter provides a brief overview of TA preparation programs and various models of how they operate, as well as considering how TA preparation programs position themselves in terms of furthering the agendas of various factions of English Studies. Also, some of the ways in which new or experienced TAs might approach the process of developing a teaching identity are examined. Towards that end, this chapter considers the idea that there may be established paradigms for what are considered effective teaching practices in Literature and Composition, respectively, and also the extent to which these paradigms might be implicitly encouraged within graduate study in each of the two subject areas. The role of individuals' personal predilections or philosophies is also considered here, in terms of how these and the above factors might also impact TAs' adoption of or resistance to these paradigms.

An understanding of resistance to TA preparation is key to this project. After all, as mentioned in the previous chapter, a study conducted in 2006 at the site of this research surveyed TAs' responses to their preparation program, and it found that many of the TAs had been resistant to their preparation to serve as Composition TAs. In order to fully understand how resistance might operate within TA preparation sites, it is first necessary to become familiar with the other topics treated in this chapter, including both the causes of and responses to the divide between Literature and Composition, the nature of TA preparation as contested space, and the complicated process of negotiating personal and disciplinary considerations in the development of a teaching identity. Once those topics are examined, the chapter culminates with a discussion of resistance as it pertains to TA preparation before closing with a summary of the research goals for this project.

#### The Divide between Composition and English Literature

Given this dissertation's focus on how graduate students from Literature and Composition responded to their TA preparation—and whether their responses are borne of their disciplinary affiliations—the storied relationship between these two disciplines is really at the base of this study. As such, it is useful to consider some of the causes and effects of what Maid (2006) refers to as “the problems, the rift, the disagreement, the animosity, the class warfare, the bad marriage, or the whatever between Literature and Composition” (p. 93). And because FYC, the “biggest rhetorical activity in our discipline” (Farris, 1996, p. 16), is commonly taught by TAs in the process of pursuing their graduate degrees in either Literature or Rhetoric/

Composition,<sup>9</sup> it seems likely that these tensions might be replicated as the two groups come together within TA preparation programs.

As the previous chapter has suggested, Composition teachers have long been marginalized and afforded little respect within English departments primarily concerned with the teaching of Literature. Recent debate on the Writing Program Administrator's Listserv (WPA-I) ignited by a discussion of Graff and Birkenstein's (2006) very popular Composition textbook *They Say, I Say* speaks to the continued tension between Composition and Literature. On the listserv, then-CCCC Chair Charles Bazerman charged that Gerald Graff's simultaneous role as author of this text and current MLA President were in conflict, and given what some see as the book's reductive approach to teaching inter-textuality, that Graff and Birkenstein's (2006) book reflects a divide between the ways Composition scholars and Literature scholars view the teaching of writing (Bazerman, Graff & Birkenstein reply, 2008; Bazerman, Raising the stakes, 2008). At the same time, the book's emphasis on helping students more effectively utilize texts to substantiate and support their claims is seen by many in the field as both well-intentioned and quite useful. Still, the debate itself, between the 2008 program chair of the CCCC (Bazerman) and the 2008 president of the MLA (Graff), powerfully illustrates the tension resulting from the relationship between Literature and Composition.

As a means of providing context for this present study, it is important to not only establish that this tension exists, but also to consider some of the reasons that have been forwarded by various scholars to explain its origins. Indeed, an understanding of the root causes of the divide between Literature and Composition can offer clues as to how and why these tensions might be replicated within a TA preparation program as well as to elucidate some of the

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<sup>9</sup> Granted, in some universities, TAs are recruited from across campus to teach the FYC course, especially in WAC/WID-based writing programs.

reasons why TAs from the two disciplines might respond differently to the process of becoming a TA for FYC.

### *Causes and Effects of the Divide*

The divide between Composition and Literature is prevalent enough that it has been discussed—both explicitly and implicitly—throughout the literature in English Studies. Indeed, scholars have debated both the causes of this divide and its effects. But whether it is considered from a historical perspective, as Bergmann (2006), Comley and Scholes (1983), and McComiskey (2006) have done, or from a theoretical perspective as Horner (1983) and Kaufer and Young (1983) have discussed it, or from a disciplinary perspective, such as Graff (1987/2007), North (2000), and Goggin and Beatty (2000) have offered, it is clear that tracing the causes of the divide is no simple task. Nevertheless, a consideration of some of these arguments is useful, as such an overview will provide important context for how and why the divide continues to have an impact throughout the field of English Studies, including within TA preparation sites.

Because scholarship in Composition theory and research did not become pronounced until the late 1960's (Lauer, 2006), at the same time that the once-powerful literary studies was heading into a concurrent downslide (Elbow, 2002; North, 2000; Scholes, 1998), to the casual observer it might seem that the tension between Literature and Composition is a result of the difference in the relative age of the two disciplinary areas. Yet although it might seem apparent that Literature courses have enjoyed a longer history than Composition courses in the university, upon closer examination, this potential explanation for the tension between the two fields becomes untenable.



For one thing, Rhetoric—to which Composition is closely affiliated—has a very long and illustrious heritage, stretching back to the time of the ancient Greeks. Moreover, the existence of English departments as we know them is in fact a relatively new phenomenon, as Parker (1967/2009) pointed out in his seminal piece on English departments and their origin. He noted that at the time of his writing over forty years ago, the teaching of English (Literature) in university settings was only about a hundred years old, and the existence of departments of English is even more recent (Parker, 1967/2009; Scholes, 1998). Similarly, Horner (1983) reported that at the time the MLA was established in 1883, there were a total of 39 English (again, Literature) professors at the twenty largest universities in the U.S. (p. 3). Although the actual teaching of English Literature has been around for a lot longer than these numbers suggest (Parker 1967/2009), institutionally at least, the teaching of Literature appears to have enjoyed little more support historically than the teaching of Composition, which became a common area of teaching after its debut at Harvard in a large program in 1875 (Brereton, 2009). So the idea that Literature might have garnered a more natural place in the academy than Composition by way of a longer history is simply untrue.

Over the years, a number of scholars have focused on the historical relationship between Literature and Composition as a means of addressing the causes for the inequality between the two disciplines and the resulting animosity (Bergmann, 2006; Comley & Scholes, 1983; Horner, 1983; McComiskey, 2006). For example, while noting that the “teaching” of writing and the “teaching” of Literature (quotes in the original) are “closely connected, often inseparable, and always fundamental to the study of language” (p. 2), Horner’s (1983) Introduction to *Composition and Literature: Bridging the Gap* delineated several historical events that have contributed to the breach between the two areas of study. Among these, she has considered the

system of textual categorization that has come to delineate literary versus non-literary texts. Her text considered the impact of the limited view of Literature that is commonly held, as texts primarily consisting of “poetry and the literature of the imagination” (quotes in the original, p. 4) rather than continuing to include other genres such as history, biography, expository, and didactic texts, all of which were classified as Literature from the mid to late 1800’s, and many of which continue to be emphasized in Composition classes today. She argued that this rigid form of textual categorization has played a powerful role in the establishment and perpetuation of the divide between Composition and Literature, both in terms of their classification as separate identities and in terms of the degree of privilege that each enjoys.

Comley and Scholes (1983) have agreed, as they noted that a binary was often imposed on texts, classifying them as “literary” vs. “non-literary,” the first of which is consumed, while the second is produced (97). Under this model, Composition was relegated to the non-literary, and, “as might be expected in a society like ours, we privilege consumption over production, just as the larger culture privileges the consuming class over the producing class” (Comley & Scholes, 1983, p. 97). A decade later, Berlin (1996/2003) posed a similar argument:

English Studies was founded on a set of hierarchical binary opposites in which literary texts were given an idealized status approaching the sacred. Against these privileged works, rhetorical texts and their production were portrayed as embodiments of the fallen realms of science and commerce and politics, validating in their corrupt materiality the spiritual beauties of their opposite. (p. xiv)<sup>10</sup>

Horner (1983), Comley and Scholes (1983), and Berlin (1996/2003) have thus invoked the cultural milieu to explain how the consumption of literary texts has been deemed “good” and

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<sup>10</sup> Granted, the field of Literature has since moved away from canonized texts and embraced a broader conception of what constitutes literature.

the production of non-literary texts as correspondingly less-than. Similarly, citing as evidence the large body of critical theory that has been developed, Horner (1983) also noted a historical shift from an emphasis on creating rhetoric to interpreting it. As interpretation of text becomes emphasized over textual production, literary study consequently shifted into a dominant position over the composing of texts, the primary goal with which Composition is concerned.

This well-noted system of textual classification goes a long way toward explaining how Composition took a backseat to literary studies in terms of institutional respect and privilege. All of the above points reflect shifts in academia's collective perception of what it means to study and produce text. Given the primary interests of the fields of Literature and Composition, this seems like a plausible place to begin developing an understanding of the evolution of the divide between the two disciplines and why it continues to be perpetuated. It also sheds light on some of the reasons why TAs from Literature and from Composition might have different views about working with first-year students in their efforts at text production.

In addition to the above historical considerations, the contributors to Horner's (1983) collection on "bridging the gap" between Literature and Composition have posed a number of other reasons to account for the different perspectives between the two disciplines and the resulting disparity between how they are treated in the academy. For example, Kaufer and Young (1983) have suggested that the tension between the two fields is based on two primary assumptions often held by those in English departments. They explained that the first assumption separates writing from thinking, and in doing so, relegates writing to formal concerns such as syntax and grammar, or what they argue amounts to editing. In their opinion, Composition courses that follow this model,

may be necessary for subsequent college work, they may improve the student's ability to produce acceptable prose, and they obviously demand a great deal of the teacher's time and energy, but as intellectual activities they demand little, certainly in comparison with what is demanded by traditional literary scholarship and teaching. (Kaufer & Young, 1983, p. 151)

Their reasoning thus underscores the development of an unfortunate result of the divide between Literature and Composition: the notion of Composition as a service course, a position to which Composition has been relegated over the years, rather than an important intellectual activity. It seems likely that if this view of Composition is held by a university's literary faculty, it might negatively impact the way that graduate students in Literature would approach activities such as the teaching of FYC and therefore their TA preparation.

Horner (1983) has made a similar point to Kaufer and Young (1983), as she cited the disconnection between FYC and its philosophical or rhetorical base, which she claimed results in an emphasis on surface concerns rather than rhetorical ones. This emphasis has arguably contributed to the unrealistic expectation that taking a single FYC course will enable students to write error-free prose not only in the courses they take throughout the academy but also out in the world at large.

More than fifteen years later, Goggin and Beatty (2000) considered the implications of this development for the relationship between Composition and Literature, as they noted:

...as the focus of the modern university shifted, the number of courses in rhetoric dwindled to two, the now-familiar first-year Composition classes. Whereas once philosophies and theories of discourse were the core of rhetorical study, the Composition course and the textbooks it gave rise to concentrated almost exclusively on the

mechanical aspects (correctness and ease) of discourse. At the same time, literary studies, the new kid on the block, was inversely gaining in strength, numbers, and prestige. It was neither inevitable nor predictable that the study of rhetoric would dwindle into a state of such minor importance, nor that the study of Literature would assume the central place in English Studies. (p. 37)

While the first assumption says that writing and thinking are separate, the second sees the two as inseparable in the sense that writing ability is considered by some to be a natural, inborn talent, or an art. Kaufer and Young (1983) have argued that this assumption leads to the conclusion that “writing can be learned but not taught” (p. 151) and also to “a reliance on extensive practice innocent of rhetorical theory and on extensive reading as the two principal means for helping students cultivate writing ability” (p. 151). Ironically, the second assumption that Kaufer and Young (1983) have argued is held by many English faculty seems to be in direct opposition to the first, although they also claimed that sometimes both assumptions are accepted by the same people.

Kaufer and Young (1983) concluded that the result of these two assumptions is the attitude that the study and teaching of writing is of little merit, and that therefore, faculty members who subscribe to this idea are reluctant to encourage either their colleagues or their students to view the study and practice of Composition as an avenue worthy of exploration. Bizzell’s (1992) recollections from Rutgers are again apropos: “To treat Composition theory and pedagogy seriously was to define oneself as more student oriented, more pedagogy oriented than those who aimed at careers in literary theory or criticism, and thus to depict oneself as somehow a less professional scholar” (p. 6). Kaufer and Young’s (1983) argument sheds light on the

genesis of this attitude, and it also provides an explanation for the origins of some of the continued marginalization that Maid (2006), Crowley (1998) and others are so concerned about.

Many of the above considerations about the inequality between Literature and Composition can be attributed to the development of disciplinarity in the modern university, a topic that has been treated by a number of scholars, including Berlin (1996/2003), Downing (2002), Graff (1987/2007), Goggin and Beatty (2000), McComiskey (2006), and North (2000). Disciplinarity's role in perpetuating the divide is an integral consideration in this dissertation, as it helps explain why TAs from Literature and Composition might react differently to the prospect of teaching FYC, which, as the above literature has made clear, is an activity that has been relegated to the "mere sparks" in English departments (Bizzell, 1992).

Along with the scholars listed above, Goggin and Beatty (2000) have explained that prior to the adoption of the German university model at the end of the nineteenth century, a college education was a classical education. Its mission was to "instill piety and morality, and above all, to *preserve knowledge*" (italics in the original, p. 36). In the nineteenth century, however, the classical college was replaced with the modern university, which had different values: "to create, use, and preserve knowledge; to eradicate ignorance; and to credential newly emerging professions" (Goggin & Beatty, 2000, p. 36). Thus a new value was placed on creating and using knowledge, thereby diminishing the value of simply preserving knowledge. They argue that these new goals led to the university we know today—a university divided into departments and disciplines where each unit is responsible for generating and using its own body of knowledge (Goggin & Beatty, 2000, p. 36). According to Downing (2002), this specialized idea of disciplinarity "has fundamentally shaped the divisions between Literature and Composition" within English departments (p. 25) as it "both facilitates and justifies the subordination of writing

to Literature” (p. 26). The disciplinarity model values that which is measurable and concrete, and thus according to this model the “*objects* of knowledge such as literary texts” will always be favored over “the ‘processes’ of composing” (Downing, 2002, p. 26, italics in the original).

Moreover, disciplinarity created the opportunity for Literature to become dominant in English departments because research in Literature could be crafted to meet the demands of scientific research in ways that research in Composition could not. McComiskey (2006) has reported that with the rise of philology out of the German universities in the nineteenth century, the early philologists in American universities “turned English broadly speaking into the *science* of language and literary studies, bringing historical fact-finding, empirical linguistic methodologies, and enlightenment rational inquiry to bear on imaginative texts” (italics in the original, p. 8). However, with the exception of those studies generated by the cognitivist movement, the teaching, study, or process of writing did not fit as easily into a framework of scientific research. As Downing (2005) has claimed:

The institutional principles of disciplinary knowledge will always favor those domains where the objects of knowledge such as literary texts (or, as in the disciplining of cultural studies, cultural texts) can be more successfully designated than the carnival of unruly composings that students bring to the academy. (p. 244)

In part because Composition as a field is so often conflated with FYC, especially by those outside of the field, the boundaries between the study of text and text production—particularly student text-production—are often presented as a binary opposition to one another. Yet this perspective ignores the fact that textual consumption and textual production are in fact complementary to one another, as Scholes (1985) has argued so effectively in *Textual Power*.

Nevertheless, once the rise of disciplinarity resulted in establishing the dividing lines between those texts that were deemed scientific versus those that were not, the stratification of Literature and Composition became entrenched. As Scholes (1998) has argued:

The useful, the practical, and even the intelligible were relegated to Composition so that Literature could stand as the complex embodiment of cultural ideals, based upon texts in which those ideals were so deeply embedded as to require the deep analysis of a trained scholar. Teachers of Literature became the priests and theologians of English, while teachers of Composition were the nuns, barred from the priesthood, doing the shitwork of the field. (p. 36)

Arguably, these disciplinary divisions and the resulting marginalization of Composition have held to this day. And as a result, it is no wonder that many graduate students in English Studies choose to study Literature over Composition, and also that the teaching of FYC continues to be largely relegated to TAs and junior faculty members.

Moreover, as McComiskey (2006) has made clear, it is also no wonder that many Composition programs have elected to seek their independence from Literature, as a means of gaining some legitimacy for themselves:

Particularly in American higher education, as philology-based literary studies increased in prestige with the other sciences, what were perceived as “practical” and therefore (by definition) less rigorous academic endeavors received less attention and less funding from university administrators, ultimately forcing those endeavors to either secede and form separate departments (oratory seceded from English and became communication studies) or remain under the umbrella of scientific literary studies and accept marginal status (Composition, for example). (p. 11)



While most Composition programs across the U.S. continue to be housed within English departments and to accept marginalization, a growing number of programs are moving in the direction that oratory did by seceding from English and claiming their own territory, such as is the case at the research site for this dissertation.

The notion of disciplinarity serves to give us further perspective on why the teaching of writing has historically been devalued in comparison to the study of Literature. But perhaps most importantly within the context of this dissertation, the role of disciplinarity also helps us understand why graduate students from Literature might have a tendency to view the teaching of writing as a less valuable activity than the study and teaching of Literature. After all, if the idea that textual consumption is superior to textual production is indeed embedded within the culture of literary studies, it would stand to reason that aspiring literary scholars would adopt and perpetuate this idea. And if this notion does in fact continue to be perpetuated, it seems likely that it would be particularly evident within those TA preparation programs that primarily serve Literature and Composition students, such as is the case at the program under investigation for this dissertation.

Given the breadth and depth of the discussion over the origin of the tension between the two fields, it is clear that such a tension still exists and also clear that a complete understanding of how and why it developed is a complicated endeavor. And whichever of these reasons one may choose to embrace—if any—the purpose of this present study is not to exaggerate or perpetuate the divide, but rather to investigate whether and to what extent it might manifest itself in a particular venue: TA preparation in an independent writing unit.

*Responses to the Divide*

Once the notion of a divide between Literature and Composition has been established, in terms of this present study it is useful to consider some of the varied responses to this divide. Despite the tensions stemming from the divide as described in the previous sections, some scholars and practitioners have nevertheless called for further connection between the two disciplines in an effort to celebrate their commonalities and share their best practices with one another (Elbow, 2002; Raymond, 2008; Tokarczyk & Papoulis, 2003; Young & Fulwiler, 1995).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, others have proposed splitting away from Literature programs and literary texts, and even sometimes from English departments entirely (Bergmann, 2006; Hairston, 2006; Maid, 2002), as has been the case at the site of this dissertation. The following literature reflects both positions.

Bergmann's 2006 collection of essays on Composition and/or Literature takes up where Horner's left off 20 years prior as it considers ways of responding to the divide. While Horner's (1983) previous collection emphasized "bridging the gap" between the two fields, Bergmann's (2006) subsequent text encouraged readers to consider how teachers and scholars of Composition who are members of English departments interact with those Literature faculty in their departments who also teach Composition. Considering the major strides Composition has made in terms of its development as a discipline in its own right over this time period, Bergmann (2006) has invited us to consider both what has changed and what issues still remain in terms of relating to the literary scholars and teachers that many compositionists find themselves working alongside.

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<sup>11</sup> Bérubé (1998) has made a slightly different point as he has called for unification between the two fields in order to save literary studies from becoming irrelevant.

In Horner's (2006) foreword to Bergmann's (2006) text, she noted that while much has remained the same in terms of a gap between the two fields, some of our institutions, departments and classrooms have changed greatly, particularly given the rise of Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines models and the move toward stand-alone writing units (p. xi). Still, these fairly recent developments reflect only a fraction of the Composition programs in the U.S., whereas the more prevalent model remains an English department in which Composition is taught primarily by TAs, adjuncts, lecturers, and even full-time faculty who were trained in literary studies and who may not have firmly adopted Composition as their chosen field.

Bergmann (2006) has considered the literary background of many of today's Composition teachers, and she has posited that the problematic nature of the relationship between Composition and Literature came further to the forefront in 1993, sparked by a debate over the efficacy of using literary texts in the Composition classroom. At a meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), Lindemann and Tate opened a debate that was later published in *College English* in 1993. In it, Lindemann argued that texts outside of literary studies, including student texts, are an effective source of models and sources of discussion in the classroom (1993). Tate, on the other hand, argued for the use of literary texts in the Composition classroom, seeing them as rich resources for students to model and consider (1993). Bergmann's (2006) collection has continued this debate as many of its contributors considered what happens to the practice of using Literature in the Composition classroom when Composition breaks away from the control of English departments, as opposed to when Composition units continue to be a part of English. According to Bergmann (2006):

Unless writing programs separate themselves from English departments (which may or may not be a good idea), it is reasonable to expect that Literature faculty will exert a significant influence over how they teach Composition in their own classrooms. Although Composition faculty have by and large managed to gain and maintain professional direction over the first-year Composition curriculum, most English departments are still outnumbered by faculty and students educated in literary studies, who [...] may have only a limited understanding of what compositionists are asking them to do in their classrooms, or why. (p. 5)

Indeed, many Composition teachers and scholars were originally trained in Literature, given that doctoral programs in Composition were rare if not non-existent until a few decades ago. Roen, Brown, and Enos (1999) have underscored this trend as they explored the disciplinary backgrounds of 19 prominent scholars in Rhetoric and Composition. The first-person narratives in their text reveal that for a great many of these individuals, the study of Literature served as a gateway into a career in Composition studies. As a result of this very common disciplinary crossover, it is no wonder that some English department faculty feel a sense of ambivalence about the notion of a divide between the disciplines of Literature and Composition and that they would therefore rather see scholars from the two disciplines work together as opposed to their splitting further apart.

Siding with those who would like to see the gap between Literature and Composition bridged, in his 2002 article in *College English*, Elbow addressed the question of what the cultures of Literature and Composition could learn from each other. He claimed that as Composition was on the upswing in terms of its disciplinary status, Literature was experiencing a

concurrent downslide,<sup>12</sup> and he argued that as factions of English Studies, it would be beneficial for both if each would embrace some of what the other offers in terms of assumptions about texts and text production.

The idea of mutually embracing the commonalities between Literature and Composition has been considered by a number of other scholars and texts as well, such as Young and Fulwiler's (1995) *When Writing Teachers Teach Literature*, Tokarczyk and Papoulis's (2003) *Teaching Composition/Teaching Literature*, and Raymond's (2008) *College Composition and Communication* article "When Writing Professors Teach Literature: Shaping Questions, Finding Answers, Effecting Change." Each of these texts have emphasized the movement to bridge the divide between Literature and Composition and considered the implications of doing so.

Yet despite this movement, the tension between the two fields remains very real for many scholars and practitioners. Referring back to the WPA-I debate between Graff and Birkenstein and Bazerman, it seems that while those who call for connection might see Graff's contribution in a positive light, those looking to break away might view his book as an encroachment on hard-won territory. Indeed, while Bazerman (2008) charged that it was "an attempt at colonization" (Re: Graff & Birkenstein reply), Graff and Birkenstein (2008) responded by noting that they "understand that behind this conversation is a larger history of mistreatment of Composition by literary studies, and that when literary scholars do notice Composition, it is often with a disdainful, haughty, or patronizing attitude" (Re: Graff & Birkenstein reply), but that nevertheless, "one of our central goals is to help rectify these historical wrongs, not to reinforce them" (Re: Graff & Birkenstein reply). So while Graff and Birkenstein clearly acknowledge the long-standing tension between the two fields, they nevertheless defend their right to contribute to

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<sup>12</sup> Elbow is not alone in voicing this concern. Scholars such as North (2000), Scholes (1998), and others have considered the reasons for and implications of this turn of events.

scholarship in the field of Composition—given that they regularly teach Composition courses—and claim that they see it as a way of attempting to bridge the gap between them. Haswell (2008) seemed open to their attempt at collaboration, as he responded to the palpable tension on the listserv over Graff and Birkesnstein's (2006) book "with sadness," and he indicated that his response was a reflection of his recent work focused on forging further connections between the two fields, which in fact he views as two aspects of one diverse field.

The Bazerman/Graff exchange on the WPA-I reflects this tension by raising some interesting questions: Is there still an inherent connection between Literature and Composition underneath the umbrella of English Studies? Is it desirable for the president of the MLA to write a book addressing concerns typically addressed by compositionists? What if the MLA president has regularly taught Composition courses over the years? Is it ever acceptable for Literature scholars to teach Composition? And do compositionists feel it is acceptable for Ph.D. candidates from Literature to serve as TAs in Composition? As the above discussion suggests, the answer to these questions depend on one's individual perspective. While many compositionists are working toward finding ways of connecting with scholars who are primarily attuned to literary studies, others are moving toward a more complete *dis*-connection from them. Presumably, at least some TAs from both disciplines are being faced with a similar choice, as they work to complete their graduate study and become full-fledged members of their chosen field.

This dichotomy of encroachment versus connection is a key consideration in this dissertation. On the one hand, the independent writing program under study here has made the break from English in the sense that it is a stand-alone unit.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the requirement

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<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting, however, that this particular program did not seek its own independence from the English department that had housed it; instead, the English department decided on and executed the division on its own as:

that the writing program continue to serve the English department by providing Literature graduate students with TAs as well as the limited funding afforded to the unit by the same college that supports the English Department in larger measure suggests that sovereignty has not been fully achieved. This study will consider how this unique status of a limited independence from English affects the experience of being a TA in a preparation program like this one, as well as the dynamics between the TAs themselves, who consist primarily of doctoral candidates from Literature and from Composition.

### *Independent Writing Programs*

Although there may have been informal discussions about a separation between Composition and Literature prior to Hairston's 1985 CCCC address, she has posited that it was the first public call by a writing professional for Composition to break away from English (p. 142). In her address, she depicted the tension between Literature and Composition:

within individual institutions [...] we often find ourselves confronting the Literature faculty who dominate so many departments, and we feel that we are fighting losing battles: battles to get hard money to staff the writing center, battles to establish programs for training writing teachers, or battles against staffing Composition courses with underpaid, low-status part-timers. (Hairston, 2006, p. 133)

While recognizing that a formal separation of the two disciplines into distinct departments was an extreme proposition, Hairston (2006) suggested that if less extreme measures were not effective in garnering change, then separation may be our only hope for gaining the equality we need to do the job our students deserve. Twenty-plus years down the road, many Composition

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"...lecturers arrived at work one morning in 1988 to find that their offices and mailboxes, along with their chair, had been moved to another floor" (Tingle & Kirscht, 2001, p. 224).

faculty continue to fight these same battles as they consider the potential benefits and ramifications of a split from the English departments that have traditionally housed them.

More recently, Bergmann and Baker's (2006) collection on the relationship between Composition and Literature has considered the schism between the two fields and traced how some writing instruction programs have moved toward splitting away from English departments to govern themselves while others try to forge an uneasy coexistence. In the Introduction to this collection of essays, Bergmann (2006) characterized this phenomenon as a result of "the theoretical differences and intra-departmental strife between compositionists and literary scholars" (p. 1). Attesting to this strife, Maid (2006) has offered a compelling case for moving away from English departments as he considers the issues of "privilege, power and economics" that he believes maintains the schism between Composition and Literature (p. 93).

Maid (2006) is not alone in his advocacy of a split away from Literature. As editors Crow and O'Neill (2002) contended in the Introduction to *Field of Dreams: Independent Writing Programs and the Future of Writing Studies*:

the creation of stand-alone writing units—whether programs or departments—provides us with an opportunity to define ourselves in new ways instead of against Literature and literary scholarship. It is a chance to begin new and better academic traditions where we can enact what we value instead of spending our energy defending it. (p. 9)

If independent Composition programs do in fact provide an opportunity for writing scholars and teachers to develop these "new and better traditions," it would seem that TA preparation within an independent program would be a prime location for that to occur. This dissertation will explore how a particular independent writing program supports TAs from Literature and Composition—and what TAs from the two groups take away from the preparation



program—given the tension between the two disciplinary areas that is so well-cited throughout the literature in English Studies.

*Composition and English Education*

While admittedly not a common response to the divide between Composition and Literature, at the site of this present research the graduate program in Composition is assured of its separation from the graduate program in Literature, as the Composition graduate program is held in the university's School of Education. Although there is little doubt that Composition has always had—and continues to have—a complex disciplinary relationship with Literature, a less often-considered disciplinary relationship is the one between Composition and English Education, which some scholars argue (Bazerman et. al., 2006; McComiskey, 2006) is at least as important to consider as Composition's relationship with Literature.

The field of Composition shares many similarities with the field of English Education, given both disciplines' emphasis on pedagogical concerns, theory, and praxis. As Bazerman et. al. (2006) has noted: "Respect for classroom practice, the professionalism of teachers, and the motivated engagement of students are core values shared between Composition and Education" (p. 311). Brown and Miller (2006) have made a similar argument, pointing out that "writing, teaching, and English education were the seed-beds of rhet/comp programs" (p. 289).

Further pointing to the inherent connections between Composition and Education, Bazerman et. al. (2006) also cited the similarities between the two fields in terms of research agendas, which for both are often inextricably linked to the classroom: "Education faculty work closely with students and teachers, observing learning processes, aligning research concerns with teachers' and students' concerns, and recognizing the local wisdom in situated practice" (p. 311),

which are also key considerations for Composition scholars and practitioners. Bazerman et. al. (2006) has taken the comparison even further, noting that,

Culturally, [Education scholars] are very close to Composition faculty and researchers; in many ways closer than literary scholars are to compositionists. They respect egalitarian dialogue with practitioners in all job titles, publications meant for the practitioner, the production of materials for use in the classroom, and the development of curricula and educational programs as serious professional contributions. (p. 312)

In addition to the many similarities between Composition and English Education in terms of concern for pedagogical issues and praxis, Tremmel and Broz (2002) have argued that both Composition and English Education also share a history of “marginalization and neglect” (p. 3) by English departments, and they have noted that the two disciplines have developed along parallel but separate avenues. As evidence, it is worth considering that Composition programs are generally housed in English departments—unless they make the split from English and declare their independence—while English Education is often conducted in departments of education.<sup>14</sup> As McComiskey (2006) has noted, this is in part because “education, quite simply, seemed more accommodating” (p. 34). This disciplinary schism results in what Tremmel (2002) has referred to as the

odd fact that even though English educators and writing program administrators (WPAs) have been engaged in many of the same disciplinary labors for over half a century, and even though they have had significant points of contact with each other in the past, they

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<sup>14</sup> Smagorinsky and Whiting’s (1995) study of syllabi from pre-service English teachers’ methods courses reflected a 17:31 ratio between the course being housed in Education and in English.

currently live separate academic lives, fenced off from each other in largely separate bureaucratic compounds. (p. 1)

This division is particularly ironic, given that many of Composition's pioneers hail from backgrounds in Education (as well as Literature), in part because the first graduate programs in Composition did not emerge until the early 1970s (Chapman & Tate, 1987; Lauer, 2006).

Attesting to Education's powerful role in preparing Composition scholars-to-be, Bazerman et. al. (2006) reported that an informal query to the H-Rhetor listserv in July 2002 identified almost seventy compositionists with doctorates from Education schools, including many leading figures of the profession (p. 310).<sup>15</sup>

Yet despite these shared roots, practitioners in Composition and in English Education are often not as aligned as they might be expected to be. In his introduction to their edited collection of essays on the relationship between the two fields, Tremmel (2002) has recalled asking himself:

'How is it ... that I can be the coordinator of an English Education program in an English department, working daily to prepare beginning writing teachers, yet I never walk down the hall to consult with our department's Composition director, who is also working daily to prepare beginning writing teachers whose students are often only three months older than my students' students?' How is it that other English educators and writing program administrators around the country generally act this same way, teaching and even writing about their work as if they had no disciplinary connections with each other and no

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<sup>15</sup> The list Bazerman et. al. (2006) provides here is worth noting, including Rick Beach, Anne Beaufort, Pat Belanoff, Steve Bernhardt, Lil Brannon, Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Hugh Burns, Wayne Butler, Suresh Canagarajah, Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, Barbara Couture, Janet Emig, Ann (Matsuhashi) Feldman, Ann Ruggles Gere, Keith Gilyard, Bob Gundlach, Joe Harris, Irv Hashimoto, Mary Lynch Kennedy, Barry Kroll, Janice Lauer, Marty Nystrand, Lee Odell, Sondra Perl, Donna Qualley, Jackie Jones Royster, David Schaafsma, Cindy Selfe, Geneva Smitherman, Patricia Lambert Stock, and James Zebroski.

significant shared traditions? More importantly, given where all of us have come from and where we find ourselves today, why haven't we thought about forming an alliance based on our consilient actions and needs in order to build a broader, more coherent, mutually supportive academic and institutional base for ourselves?' (p. 1)

Given the alliance that has been forged between English Education and Composition at the site of this present research, Tremmel's (2002) questions are especially worthy of consideration. Yet what may be most compelling about the research site is that instead of uniting under what many would consider the common flag of English Studies (McComiskey, 2006; Webb, 2009; Yagelski, 2006), the two subject areas have both claimed their independence from English and allied instead within a department of Education.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because the TA preparation program under investigation here is also independent from English as it is held in a stand-alone writing program, the English department at this university has effectively become unburdened of three disciplinary areas that are deeply concerned with pedagogy and pedagogical concerns: Composition, English Education, and TA preparation. This arrangement allows the English department to focus virtually all of its attention on the study and teaching of Literature and literary theory—which Alsup (2009) has argued is the primary mission of most English departments anyway—without having to devote attention to the pedagogical concerns that the field of Composition is so attuned to. Alsup has suggested that focusing on Literature at the expense of a sustained interest in pedagogy for its own sake is at least partially responsible for the marginalization that both Composition and English Education face when they are housed within departments of English (2009).

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<sup>16</sup> McComiskey (2006) has offered a brief discussion of the pros and cons of English Education's secession from English, concluding that it is a valid response in cases where "English departments continue to describe their scope as literary texts and their function as, in the words of Richard Ohmann, 'the fostering of literary culture and literary consciousness'" (2004, p. 34).

As this chapter makes clear, there are many reasons why dividing lines have been constructed and maintained between various factions of English Studies. One of the primary goals of this present research is to see how these disciplinary divisions play themselves out in a situation as unique as the one that is found at the research site of this project where Composition, Literature, and TA preparation are held in three separate places on campus. When Composition and Literature graduate students are asked to step outside of their home departments (i.e. Education and English) to participate in TA preparation held in a stand-alone writing program, will new disciplinary connections be fostered between these three areas, or will the divisions become further entrenched?

### TA Preparation Programs

Within the field of English Studies, much has been written about TA preparation and how, why, and for whom it is conducted. Established as a means of preparing graduate students to enter the FYC classroom, TA preparation is generally held within English departments and is often conducted by the university's writing program administrator, who also is responsible for overseeing the FYC program overall (Dobrin, 2005; Payne & Enos, 2002; Stenberg, 2005). The history of TA preparation programs in the United States has been collected by several scholars (Berlin, 1987; Connors, 1986/1991; Crowley, 1998; North, 2000; Stewart, 1982), and each of these individuals have also chronicled the evolution of writing teacher education for teachers of FYC courses. A very brief consideration of that history is useful here as a means of providing context for this study.<sup>17</sup> The following literature reveals that TA preparation has evolved greatly over the years, as it developed from a lack of any organized approach to a relatively consistent

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<sup>17</sup> For a much more detailed overview of the history of TA preparation programs, see Bishop's (1988) dissertation or Pytlik and Liggett's (2002) collection.

set of activities designed to guide the development of new teachers, particularly at those college and university campuses that largely rely on TAs to teach their FYC courses.

In large part because of the status of Composition as a service course—and also as a result of the concerns about graduate student funding and the use of graduate students as an inexpensive labor force to teach FYC as discussed earlier in this chapter—teacher preparation programs have not always been available for new teachers of Composition. There was a time when new teachers of Composition were simply handed a textbook and sent in to the classroom, with no formal preparation or support at all (Fulkerson, 2002; Pytlik, 2002). Kaufer and Young (1983) have considered the reasons for this lack of preparation and concluded that the conception of writing as devoid of thought “has allowed English departments in good conscience to staff Composition courses with literate but untrained teachers” (p. 151).

Many compositionists today can recall the days when little or no preparation at all was offered to new teachers of FYC. In fact, Fulkerson (2002) has argued that the lack of TA preparation in the past has become “lore,” which in turn has become so entrenched that it has now achieved “mythic status” (p. xi). As he and others have told the tale: “New TAs, often fresh from an undergraduate Literature curriculum the previous spring, were given in the fall one or more textbooks (and maybe a syllabus), then shoved into a classroom full of unruly and more or less baffled first-year students, and told to teach them to write” (p. xi).<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in tracing the ways that graduate students were prepared to teach writing from 1850-1970, Pytlik (2002) has reported that this lore is rooted in fact, as her study made clear that at most universities (with a few notable exceptions such as the University of Michigan, which began offering teacher preparation courses as early as 1925), teacher preparation opportunities were nonexistent or

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<sup>18</sup> Fulkerson (2002) has also noted that we should not allow this well-worn myth to detract from its essential truth.

limited at best until the 1970's, which heralded

...the appointment of Directors of Composition who had an interest and a background in the teaching of writing; 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 [...]. (p. 14)

Nevertheless, despite these improvements, Eble's (1972) article claimed that even at this time, few of the teacher preparation programs that were available effectively prepared individuals to teach writing, at least in part because the teaching of writing was simply not respected within the English departments where the TA preparation was held. Arguments such as Eble's (1972) provide further impetus for this dissertation as they establish that English departments have historically engendered resistance to TA preparation, which would go a long way toward explaining why some TAs might display a degree of resistance to participating in TA preparation—and particularly to a TA preparation program held outside of the English department.

Still, despite the resistance to TA preparation evident in many English departments, Wilhoit's (2002) bibliographic essay on recent trends in TA instruction has chronicled the improvements in TA preparation that have developed nationwide in the past few decades and reported that there have been many advancements in teacher preparation practices during this time, such as longer and more comprehensive pre-service orientations, in-service practice, and mentoring relationships that provide support to TAs. Similarly, Fulkerson (2002) and other contributors to Pytlik and Liggett's (2002) *Preparing College Teachers of Writing* have also noted that programs for preparing Composition teachers have vastly improved in the past few

decades—and thus today there are far fewer unprepared teachers in the Composition classroom than there were in the past.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, teacher preparation programs seem to have become more regularized in terms of the activities they offer. Wilhoit (2002) has noted that while there has been much discussion over ways to improve TA education over the past three decades, nonetheless today there seems to be a general consensus over the basic structure of these programs. He has documented that most TA preparation programs these days include four primary components: some type of pre-service orientation program (most of which have expanded from a few days to at least a few weeks in length); some in-service course work or practice based on Composition theory and pedagogy; an apprenticeship or mentorship model; and some type of writing center work (Wilhoit, 2002), all of which arguably bode well for the development and preparation of today's TAs.

### *TA Preparation as Contested Space*

Due in large part to its unique—and potentially conflicting—role as both a crash course in Composition theory/pedagogy and an introduction to teaching overall, TA preparation has become a site of great discussion and debate. In fact, Dobrin (2005) has referred to the Composition practicum as “one of the most contested and questioned courses offered in graduate-level English Studies” (p. 2), and Stancliff and Goggin (2007) have argued that it is “a hotly contested intellectual arena of diverse practices and philosophical positions” (p. 13).

Bloom, Daiker, and White's (1996) edited collection provides insight as to why the practicum inspires such debate. Their text addresses questions originally presented at the

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<sup>19</sup> As Leverenz and Goodburn (1998) have noted, without the efforts of compositionists to develop structures that value and support pedagogical training, “graduate students’ ‘professional development’ might still be limited to finding a book and syllabus in their mailbox with the admonition ‘good luck.’ ” (p. 25).



Conference on Composition in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Crisis and Change, sponsored by the Council of Writing Program Administrators in 1993 to discuss and examine the “major changes in concept, theory, and research, which invariably affect pedagogical theory and practice” (p. xi). Among the eight questions addressed at this conference are two that are particularly germane to teacher preparation: “What is Composition and why do we teach it? Who should teach Composition and what should they know?” In a later version of the same project, Bloom, Daiker, and White’s (2003) text reflects disciplinary changes in the field as they address the question “Where will Composition be taught, and who will teach it?” Because this dissertation is examining TAs from Literature and Composition who are preparing to teach FYC in an independent writing program, separate from English, these questions are particularly important to consider.

In a review of three recent texts pertaining to TA preparation published in the *Journal of the Council of Writing Program Administrators*, Reid (2007) has made clear that these and similar questions continue to plague those who teach TA preparation courses: “what do students *already* know and desire to know, what do they *need* to know (to accomplish personal and/or institutional goals), what *can* they come to know in a single semester, and what *ought* they to know to enter into the discipline rather than remaining on the threshold” (italics in the original, p. 247).

All of the above questions are pertinent to those who conduct and participate in TA preparation, and ultimately it is the answers to these questions that both shape and drive the preparation courses that are offered to new Composition TAs at universities across the nation. However, answers to these questions are not easy to arrive at or agree on, as TA preparation also serves as a means of furthering departmental and institutional needs and perpetuating the philosophies of their respective departments and/or institutions (Yancey, 2002). And regardless

of how these questions are framed or answered, Wilhoit (2002) has found that for the most part the overall structure of TA preparation programs seem to be generally in alignment with one another: “Today, TA in-service programs must balance three related needs: to educate TAs in Composition theory and pedagogy, to maintain a theoretically coherent writing program, and to respect the TAs’ own theories of writing and teaching” (18).

At the same time, despite the general consensus over the basic components of the practicum, there continues to be debate over the focus of the course, particularly in terms of the amount of theory and or practical information that students need in order to approach the teaching of FYC. It is clear that teacher preparation programs should work to prepare TAs to enter the classroom as FYC instructors, but questions remain about how best to accomplish this. Much of the debate centers around the issue of whether this goal should be achieved through a focus on the practical concerns of classroom management or if an emphasis on Composition theory would better serve TAs in their preparation (Dobrin, 2005). While many new TAs are interested primarily in “what to do on Monday morning” (Fischer, 2005; Mattison, 2003; Recchio, 2002), and these concerns are certainly important to consider within the practicum, many TA preparation facilitators are understandably also concerned with providing TAs with a sound theoretical basis upon which their pedagogical practices can be based (Stenberg, 2005; Wilhoit, 2002). Indeed, much of the Literature in this review focuses on how theory is or is not recognized as an integral part of the one’s preparation to become a teacher of FYC, and because theoretical concerns could very likely play a role in TAs’ resistance to their preparation, this is a topic that will be more closely examined in the following section.

### *Theory vs. Practice*

The split between theory and practice is hardly new to Composition, or in fact to English

Studies as a whole (McComiskey, 2006), yet Dobrin (2005) has argued that one of the prime places this debate has played out is within the TA practicum. Arguing that the theory/practice split is in fact a hallmark of TA preparation, Dobrin (2005) has posited that it has been reflected in the course ever since the very first practicums—those rare few that were held in the early part of the twentieth century. And because this dissertation is focused on how TAs from Literature and Composition approach and respond to their TA preparation, the theory/practice split is worth considering from a broader angle: as it pertains to disciplinary affiliation.

Discussions over the use of theory and its role (or its absence) in preparing TAs to teach FYC are found throughout the literature on TA preparation. For example, Latterell's (1996) study of TA requirements at 36 Ph.D. granting institutions in Rhetoric and Composition found that the majority of the programs she studied lacked a theoretical basis as they continued to rely on skill-based methods to prepare teachers to enter the FYC classroom (p. 27). Similarly, Payne and Enos (2002) have cited the work of Latterell (1996); Haring-Smith (1985); and Hesse (1993) when they noted that, "It is still common for TAs to be led through a practical, nuts and bolts 'training course' that enables them to simply get through their very first semester of both graduate school and teaching" (p. 51). Preparation courses such as these may appeal to TAs' concerns about entering the classroom, "Yet such TAs often do not gain the theoretical background many deem necessary for adequate instruction in Composition, nor are they given the opportunities to understand why their preparation takes the form that it does" (Payne & Enos, 2002, p. 51). While those TAs who are interested primarily in practical classroom concerns may not see such nuts and bolts preparation courses as lacking anything important, scholars such as Scholes (1985) and Berlin (1996/2003) have reminded us that pedagogy is inextricably

intertwined with theory, and that therefore, without an acquaintance to theoretical principles, such TAs are at a clear disadvantage as they work toward developing their pedagogies.

In his essay exploring how first-year students and graduate students alike often show resistance to new and difficult—often theory-based—material, Hesse (1993) has concluded that despite the resistance that some TAs exhibit toward embracing theory in the practicum, it is nevertheless important to expose TAs to theory as a means of helping them prepare to teach: “By continually having graduate students reflect on the theories that would explain their teaching and on the theories that would explain their students' practices—and their own practices as students—we help develop habits of learning and teaching that well serve both them and the profession” (p. 231). While theory informs pedagogy, reflecting on the relationship between theory and practice can help TAs—and all teachers—sharpen their pedagogies and become more effective at their craft (Gebhardt, 1977). Attesting to this claim, in the Spring 2007 issue of the *Journal of Writing Program Administrators*, Stancliff and Goggin advocated using theory in the TA practicum as a means of resolving conflict over varied philosophical positions pertaining to the FYC classroom. Their essay chronicles the TA practicum that they have developed and the ways in which they strive to encourage TAs “to understand that pedagogical decisions are always mediated by the theoretical assumptions a teacher holds” (p. 20).

Still, a TA preparation course that focuses solely on theory at the expense of a consideration of practice is also an issue. As Stenberg (2005) has argued, “There is nothing inherently problematic about offering TAs either ‘what works’ practices or Composition theory; both, in fact, are necessary” (p. 7). Similarly, Haring-Smith (1985) has also advocated what she refers to as the “integrated approach” between theory and practice to teacher preparation: “The integrated approach is the only one that admits our graduate students to collegiality. It

acknowledges that they need to study Composition before teaching it, but it also allows them to investigate the subject from a more sophisticated angle than that which they will present to their students. It treats them as teachers and thinkers, not clones or apprentices” (p. 36). By integrating theory and practice within a TA practicum, TAs are encouraged to try and balance the two into a cohesive and sustainable pedagogy that reflects their own values and beliefs. Ostensibly, TAs who are invested in developing such a pedagogy would be receptive, rather than resistant, to an integrated approach within the practicum.

Yet whereas the interrelationship between theory and practice is a necessary component in the development of a sound teaching identity, at times this relationship is ignored or undervalued within TA preparation courses. Odom, Bernard-Donals, and Kerschbaum (2005) have pointed to the irony they see evident in the theory/practice split as it is often played out in teacher preparation sites:

when pressed, most teachers and theorists of writing suggest that the tension between practice and theory is what keeps us honest; it forces us, unlike many in other subdisciplines of English Studies, to be continuously vigilant about the “why,” about the reasons behind our teaching practices and the material consequences of our theoretical considerations. Yet the fact that many practica seem to dwell so heavily on either the theory or the practice of teaching writing suggests that [ironically] ultimately we’re doing the greatest damage to new teachers when they need most to understand the relation, rather than the divide, between theory and practice: as they begin teaching first-year writing. (p. 215)

It seems clear that if new TAs are not provided with a balance of theory and practice as they begin teaching, they may find themselves at a serious disadvantage when they try to justify their teaching practices and as they work towards developing their identities as teaching professionals.

Yet despite the logic inherent to offering a balance between theory and practice to graduate students as they prepare to enter the classroom, Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2007) have suggested that the prevailing methods for teaching the practicum continue to fall along theory/practice lines. Their piece has considered what they see as the most common models of TA preparation and classified them into four primary categories: functional, organic, conversion, and multiphilosophical. They have explained that a functional approach to teacher preparation “focuses almost exclusively on the nuts and bolts of teaching—a ‘what-to-do-on-Monday-morning’ endeavor” while an organic approach “favors an existential or experiential model of TA preparation” that “emerges from interacting with students.” As they have described it, the conversion approach is more finite in that it “holds that TAs need to learn, and teach by, the theory and philosophy upon which the particular writing program in their home institution is built” while the multiphilosophical approach to TA preparation “advocates building teacher training curriculum around the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions graduate student teachers bring to a program” (pp. 13-14). This categorization system reflects the developing nature of the theory/practice debate, as it allows room for nuances, rather than reifying a simple split between theory and practice. Nevertheless, because both the functional and organic approaches reflect an emphasis on practice or practical knowledge while the conversion and multiphilosophical approaches are rooted in theoretical concerns, the above classification reveals that the theory/practice debate continues to be a key consideration in the development and

facilitation of TA preparation courses and that many programs tend to focus on one component at the expense of the other.

Stenberg (2005) has focused on the concern that many teacher preparation programs are one-sided, and she has noted that this phenomenon may be a result of disciplinary divisions: “What is worth noting, however, is how teacher-preparation sites tend to feature one or the other, following disciplinary trends in making pedagogy either a body of knowledge or a skill” (p. 7). Stenberg’s (2005) invocation of disciplinarity is interesting here, as it proposes that disciplinarity has not only impacted the relationship between Literature and Composition within English Studies, but that it has also impacted TA preparation sites by suggesting that pedagogy belongs in either one court or the other. If Stenberg (2005) is correct, and disciplinary paradigms are responsible for TAs’ embracing or resisting of theory and/or practical classroom concerns within TA preparation sites, then this insight would go a long way toward explaining why for example, TAs from Literature would be more resistant to a theory-based practicum than Composition students might be.

A key concern of this dissertation is how the emphasis on theory and/or practice was received by TAs from Literature and from Composition at a particular teacher preparation site. As noted in Chapter One, the results of a survey developed and conducted by the independent writing unit and given to all FYC TAs in 2006 at the study site revealed that at least some of TAs surveyed were resistant to their teacher preparation program. What is not clear, however, is where that resistance originated, and if the theory/practice split or other issues pertaining to disciplinarity played a role in its development.

### Developing a Teaching Identity

The process of developing a teaching identity involves many factors, and it is not necessarily a straightforward one, regardless of how a given TA preparation program is designed and conducted. Bishop (1990) and Farris (1996) have considered some of the ways in which the development of a teaching identity occurs. Both have also considered the complexities of this process, which requires a negotiation of the perspectives about teaching that students bring with them to their graduate study along with the new ideas and theoretical positions that they will encounter as they pursue their coursework and move along the path to becoming teachers themselves.

At least to some extent, it seems clear that teaching philosophies are shaped by individuals' personal predispositions, but pertinent to this study is the question of how an individual's own predispositions play a role in the development of one's disciplinary affiliation—or vice versa. In other words, do individuals choose a discipline—and then align with a theoretical position located within that discipline—to dedicate their professional lives to as a result of their personal predispositions, or are those predispositions developed as a result of developing as a scholar in one's discipline? This question is worthy of consideration as it may help explain why TAs from different disciplines might respond to their preparation to become Composition teachers in disparate ways.

Berlin (1982) has addressed the relationship between worldview and pedagogy broadly as he outlined what he considers to be the major pedagogical theories of Composition studies. He argued that when we teach writing we “argue for a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation in it” (p. 766). By claiming that one's pedagogy reflects one's ideology, which in turn reflects an individual's world view, it seems apparent that according to this



perspective, an individual's predispositions ultimately govern his or her theoretical stances. If this is indeed the case, then that would suggest that an individual's predispositions and worldview will—or at least should—play a significant role in determining his or her disciplinary affiliation.

However, weighing in on the same question with her study of TAs' attitudes and practices in their first year of teaching, Farris (1996) has argued that the process of negotiating the relationship between predispositions and disciplinarity is based less on an individuals' worldview than it is on their experiences and understanding of what it means to be a teacher. In direct response to Berlin (1982), Farris (1996) has posited that:

Constructing a theory of Composition is primarily an interaction among an individual teacher's past, present, and future, his or her students, the program, the textbook, and Composition 'lore.' It is an active, recursive, and critical process. Instructors continually test what they already believe about writing by simultaneously adjusting practice and theory in order to resolve differences between that belief system and what they confront in the student writing, textbook, program guidelines, and graduate experience that constitute their total academic experience (p. 170).

While Farris (1996) acknowledges that teachers will make adjustments to their pedagogies in an ongoing process, she describes a closed system, one that is based on a teacher's experiences in and out of the classroom. Berlin (1982), on the other hand, is citing the broader conception of worldview or ideology in his argument, which of course also allows for growth and evolution. For the purposes of this study, it will be useful to consider not only how TAs' preconceptions about teaching and experiences with their classrooms and programs, but also how their

worldviews affect their development of a teaching identity. Such a consideration will allow room for examining how disciplinary affiliation might also play a role in this process.

Similar to the point that Farris (1996) has made, in *Something Old, Something New* Bishop (1990) reported that all six teachers in her study of teaching assistants' development "filtered all of their learning through personal constructs that affected the ways their classrooms actually developed" (130). By citing Goetz and Lecompte (1984) and Miles and Huberman (1984), Bishop (1988) has worked to explain this finding by providing a conceptual framework of what shapes individuals' teaching philosophies. The framework consists of three categories that effect teacher change: *preexisting factors*, *training classroom factors*, and *factors affecting the classroom*. The first category includes *preexisting factors* such as teaching history, literacy history, writing ability, implicit or explicit theoretical orientation, and personality factors. The second category, *training classroom factors*, includes class activities such as writing, direct instruction, peer discussion, research, and development of writing theory. The final category, *factors affecting teacher's own classroom*, includes institutional constraints, class size, text and syllabus requirements, ability to fit new knowledge to classroom practices, insecurity or confidence, peer support, and administrative support (p. 38). According to this framework, teaching philosophies are shaped by the interplay between both personal and disciplinary factors, both of which will be considered further in the next two sections.

### *The Role of Personal Predispositions*

By the time a student begins to prepare to teach, he or she has had a great deal of experience with teachers and thus has likely developed certain assumption about what it means to be an effective (or ineffective) teacher in terms of classroom persona, demeanor, behavior, etc. (Kennedy, 1998). To work with, rather than against these assumptions, many teacher preparation

facilitators have advocated developing their programs around what TAs bring to their preparation programs in the way of assumptions about what it means to be a teacher (Roen, Goggin, & Clary-Lemon, 2007; Stancliff & Goggin, 2007; Wilhoit, 2002; Yancey, 2002).

For example, the multiphilosophical approach to teacher preparation, as defined by Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon (2007), seeks to honor the perspectives that new teachers bring with them to their preparation programs in an attempt to help new teachers develop a teaching identity more readily and to mitigate resistance to the practicum. Stancliff and Goggin (2007) described their iteration of the multiphilosophical approach in their development of the TA preparation program at Arizona State University. While they noted that they were hesitant to call their approach purely “multiphilosophical,” in that it did not fit neatly into that category due to their use of modeling to emphasize certain behaviors and what they referred to as “policing” to ensure that their graduate students are aware of and in compliance with things like copyright rules and human subjects guidelines, there is no doubt that their program as described strives to accept and utilize the assumptions about teaching that their graduate students bring with them to the program.

Similarly, in her essay on developing effective teacher preparation programs, Yancey (2002) has also argued that it is important to consider and honor TAs’ notions about what it means to be a teacher:

Just as a student walks into a classroom with a rich text of lived experience, so too does the new TA. Accordingly, attention to the TA’s identity, both the preconceived identity the TA brought to the experience of development and the new/revised identity developed over time, is critical. Such attention includes considerations of questions having to do with the TA’s construct of teacher/faculty member. How does the new TA understand the

identity of a teacher? A faculty member? In other words, what experiences and education have shaped the TA's construct of a teacher, and how does he or she construct his or her relationship to that identity? (p. 72).

While Yancey (2002) has viewed these considerations as integral to developing an effective teacher preparation program, Alsup (2006) has found that at times these pre-established assumptions can also cause problems for new TAs. In her study of teacher identity development in six pre-service English education students, Alsup (2006) discovered that if pre-service students have a rigid construct of what it means to be a teacher, the process of developing a teaching identity can be made much more complex:

One of the problems faced by some students in the study is that although their personal identities were multiple and diverse, their perception of the professional identity of the teacher were not. They saw the teacher identity as rigid and unchangeable. Although this view has grown out of long-held cultural scripts and therefore had some validity, such a perception often made the assumption of a teacher identity seem difficult, if not impossible. (p. 182)

For those TAs who view the identity of a teacher in such a well-defined way, the task of becoming a teacher would thus require abandoning their own identities, as they struggle to fit themselves into the pre-defined mold that they see as representing a teaching identity.

At the same time, Alsup (2006) found that the reverse was also true, thus revealing that the negotiation of varied personal and professional identities can also be troublesome for new teachers who are struggling to develop a professional identity with which they are comfortable:

The opposite type of problem was also evident: The student teacher who saw her personal identity as being fairly uncomplicated and coherent, yet found the teacher identity

overwhelmingly complex and many-faceted. The disjunction between an awareness of the multiplicity and complexity of personal and professional identities often increased tension and unease when the participants were transitioning from student to teacher. (p. 182)

In this case as well, TAs will also struggle, as they attempt to align themselves with a teaching identity that is antithetical to their own sense of self. In either of the above situation, it seems that TAs will be best served if they are able to recognize that there is space for them to bring their own identities with them to the process of becoming a teacher, and if they are encouraged to develop a teaching identity that is consistent with their own predispositions, senses of self, and worldviews.

While the Literature in this area has acknowledged that personal predispositions influence reactions to teacher preparation processes, these works have not considered how or if these personal experiences reflect and are shaped by disciplinary paradigms, as this current project is seeking to determine. The following section will consider how these paradigms might play a role in the development of a teaching identity.

### *The Role of Disciplinarity*

Because this study is focused on teacher preparation and how TAs respond to it, the consideration of what it means to be an effective teacher is particularly germane. To some extent, each person preparing to teach a writing class—or any other class, for that matter—must decide for him or herself how best to approach and teach that class. As Lindgren (2002) has argued, “All teachers make choices about how to relate to students and whether and how to involve students in determining course content and processes. These decisions often position TAs on a continuum, with a lecture-based course on one end and a workshop-oriented course at the other”

(p. 297). It seems likely that at least to some extent, a TA might position him or herself on that continuum based on his or her notion of what makes for an effective classroom dynamic, a perspective that is very likely informed by disciplinary norms and affiliation.

For example, despite the range of classroom approaches adopted by TAs—as well as by experienced teachers—there does seem to be some agreement within Composition studies as to certain “best practices” for Composition classes, such as an adherence to the process model, peer reviewing activities, work-shopping student texts, teaching grammar within the context of student work rather than as a drill, etc. And attesting to the consensus within Composition studies about some of the above practices, in 2000 the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) adopted the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, which identified desired outcome for students who have completed FYC. Certain assumptions are delineated in the introduction to this document, among them that, “Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance” and that moreover, “Helping students demonstrate these outcomes requires expert understanding of how students actually learn to write” (Council of Writing Program Administrators, 2000). Both of these assumptions suggest that Composition courses are best taught by professionals—or at least professionals-in-training—who are dedicated to the teaching of writing and in turn, to the agreed-upon classroom strategies that the field of Composition has developed and refined.

Yet not all of these practices may be as appealing to faculty in other disciplines, or even to some of those in other sub-disciplines of English Studies. For example, Literature faculty may not share assumptions about effective teaching strategies with Composition faculty (Peterson,

1995), given that the teaching and studying of Literature is a very different activity than the teaching and studying of writing, focusing as it does on text consumption versus text production.

The history and development of disciplinarity in the modern university may be key to understanding not only the origins of the divide between Composition and Literature as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, but also to understanding how individuals' teaching philosophies are developed and why graduate students from Literature and from Composition might respond to TA preparation in disparate ways—and with different levels of resistance. In addition to the schism between Literature and Composition in terms of the two disciplines' material realities, there is also a disparity in the way the two subject areas regard research and pedagogy. As Stenberg (2005) has pointed out:

The problem then, is that pedagogy is conceptualized either as a “subject matter” or mere “practice.” Either way, the result is the same; teaching is understood as a set of skills, not as an epistemic activity central to professorial work. I contend then, that even as “pedagogy” has gained scholarly legitimacy and practical urgency, our conceptions of professing have not been sufficiently revised. Professing remains tied, primarily, to the production of research. (p. xvii)

As a result, Stenberg (2005) has argued, today “research remains the professional work that ‘counts,’ with teaching understood, although most often tacitly, as its by-product” (p. xvii). Pedagogy, then, takes a backseat to the production of research within the academic community at large, and even, as Stenberg (2005) has posited, within English Studies, as literary scholars continue to uphold this perspective.

To understand the origin of the idea that research is superior to pedagogy, it is worthwhile to look to the past. Before the adoption of the German university model at the end of

the nineteenth century, knowledge was thought to be constructed by experts and then delivered by teachers, thereby creating a distinction between the two (Stenberg, 2005). In the words of Hart (1874), an American who studied in Germany in 1861, “The professor is not a teacher, in the English sense of the term; he is a specialist. He is not responsible for the success of his hearers. He is responsible only for the quality of his instruction. His duty begins and ends with himself” (cited in Stenberg, 2005, p. 8). Yet this description of professing is antithetical to the principles governing many Composition teachers’ pedagogies—as well as the demands of the WPA Outcomes Statement (2000) as described above, which, among other things, calls upon teachers of Composition to engage with their students and provide “informed guidance,” rather than merely professing their knowledge to students about a given subject area.

This division between research and teaching has been reified by the professional organizations that represent Literature and Composition, respectively: the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE). As Graff (1987/2007) reported, “In 1916 a clause in the MLA constitution describing the object of the Association as ‘the advancement of the *study* of the Modern Languages and their Literatures’ was amended to read, ‘the advancement of *research* in the Modern languages and their Literatures (emphasis in the original). Moreover, as Graff (1987/2007) has also noted, “In 1929, the president of the association declared with finality that ‘henceforth, our domain is research” (p. 121). As for the representation of the Composition arm of English Studies, Downing (2002) has reported, “With its formation in 1911, the NCTE became the home for teaching and writing in the profession, and the basic splits between Composition and Literature, teaching and



research, became solidified as prestige accrued, naturally enough, to the more disciplinary forms of literary research” (p. 28).<sup>20</sup>

Because graduate students are in the process of acculturating themselves to their discipline, it is not at all surprising that they might adopt and perpetuate these divisions as they seek entrance into the disciplinary community of their studies. While this process may occur throughout graduate studies, it may be particularly prevalent in TA preparation (Dobrin, 2005). Because of the far-reaching implications of the way writing is conceptualized in even one FYC class, the practicum is also sometimes used as a means of forwarding the goals and agendas of the program or department (Dobrin, 2005; Roen, Goggin & Clary-Lemon, 2007), and thus enculturation can become particularly pronounced in this arena. The practicum can thus function as an “ideology-shifting control mechanism” (Dobrin, 2005, p. 24) that exposes graduate students—and through them, FYC students—to the prevailing culture(s) of the times and/or the institution. As Pagnucci (2004) has argued, “Education is never simply about learning information: receiving an education also means receiving an ideology” (p. 26).

Latterell’s (1996) dissertation has supported this idea as it found that new graduate students are “molded along existing lines of institutional interest” that “almost always focus on inculcating individuals into the belief system and language of a particular writing program” (p. vii). The following section will consider the causes and implications of this type of enculturation on TAs participating in the practicum.

### *Enculturation*

A number of scholars have considered the role that enculturation plays in the development and success of graduate students. Various referred to “enculturation” (Dobrin,

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<sup>20</sup> Both Graff and Downing, it should be noted, speak from the perspective of the more privileged class, as both are professors and scholars of Literature, rather than of Composition.

2005), “acculturation” (Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1998), “conversion” (Bishop, 1990; Roen, Goggin, & Clary-Lemon, 2007; Welch, 1993), “indoctrination” (Ackerman, personal communication, March, 2006), or “apprenticeship” (North, 2000; Sosnoski & Burmester, 2006), the idea that there is an expectation that graduate students in English will adhere to an established set of behaviors reflective of their professors can be found throughout the literature pertaining to graduate work in English (North, 2000; Sosnoski, 1994).

Sosnoski and Burmester (2006) have argued that these expectations are so firmly entrenched that they have developed into “scripts” to be performed by graduate students and professors alike: “After years of schooling, we have scripts of ‘being educated.’ From this perspective, it is not difficult to recognize that graduate programs acquaint us with differing scripts we need to know if we are to be successful in various academic situations” (p. 325). Sosnoski (1994) has explored the dynamics of the graduate student/English professor relationship, and detailed the top/down nature of the master/apprentice model. He argued that according to this tradition, graduate students must demonstrate their allegiance to their professors and what he refers to as the “Magisterial Curriculum” in order to be successful.

North (2000) has also discussed the Magisterial phenomenon and its implications at length, as he noted that “the *Magister* could demand—and expect to get—a conformity in disciplinary and professional behavior that belied heterogeneities of other kinds” (italics in the original, p. 66). However, North (2000) also traced the Magisterial Curriculum’s rise and subsequent fall within English departments that were grappling with the burgeoning of Composition studies, which, he argued, played a role in the system’s demise. Moreover, North (2000) has argued that as English Studies has expanded to the point where it is no longer possible to simply add specialists representing the many areas of English that are currently

studied, a strategy common in the past that Graff (1987/2007) referred to as “field coverage,” there is a far lesser emphasis on graduate students’ “imitatio” of their “Magister” professors than in the past.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that North’s (2000) analysis of the Magisterial Curriculum’s fall appears tied to the rise of Composition within English departments. This begs the question then, of the extent to which the Magisterial Curriculum continues to operate within English departments that have become divorced from Composition, such as is the case at the research site for this project.

Despite North’s (2000) argument that this form of enculturation has declined significantly, the notion of conversion is still common in the discussion of both graduate study and teacher preparation programs, which ostensibly consist of and serve graduate students.

Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman (1998) broadly considered the enculturation process that many graduate students experience as they reported on their study of “Nate,” a graduate student struggling to learn the rhetorical conventions common in his graduate program’s discourse community. The study posited that although Nate was familiar with teaching Composition, his Ph.D. program was far more research-oriented, and it chronicled the sense of pressure Nate experienced as he strived to acculturate himself to that community.<sup>22</sup> In her 1993 *College English* article, Welch described something similar as she chronicled the pressure she experienced as a graduate student trying to fit in to a program that embraced a theoretical construct that was antithetical to her own perspective. As a means of emphasizing the fervor with

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<sup>21</sup> Graff’s (1987/2007) discussion of “field coverage” within English departments also underscores the notion that literary scholars have deeply subscribed to the role of disciplinarity, as their roles have been more and more specialized.

<sup>22</sup> At a meeting of Doctoral Consortium held at the 2006 4 C’s, I spoke with Ackerman briefly about this study and about the notion of graduate student “indoctrination,” which he indicated that he believed was still “alive and well” in doctoral programs (personal communication, March, 2006).

which the program faculty attempted to convert her and her fellow graduate students to the theoretical paradigm dominant in the program, Welch (1993) relied on an extended religious metaphor in her essay, referring throughout it to notions of “testimony,” “confession,” “baptism,” and “conversion” (p. 387).

Yet enculturation is evident not only in graduate study overall, as the above scholars have argued, but also within TA preparation sites. Indeed, Dobrin (2005) has posited that the TA practicum can serve as a powerful site of enculturation, arguably even more so than other areas within graduate study. Attesting to his claim is a body of literature that focuses on the idea of TAs’ conversion or acculturation as a reflection of their process to further establish their identity as members of that scholarly community (Bishop, 1990; Stenberg, 2005; Welch, 1993). According to Dobrin (2005), the practicum “generally speaking, is not merely a space in which new teachers are ‘trained’ or even professionalized, but one in which they are enculturated into the cultural ideologies of Composition. This, I argue, makes the practicum one of the most powerful and important spaces of occupation in Composition studies” (p. 21). Indeed, because the practicum prepares large numbers of teachers to teach FYC, it can have a far-ranging influence in terms of disseminating a particular ideology. As Dobrin (2005) has noted,

the cultural capital and programmatic identity that is purveyed through the practicum often can be traced to the cultural capital/program identity of the WPA’s own practicum experience—should he or she have had one. Hence, a single semester practicum has the power to affect the culture not only of that one classroom but also of large numbers of institutional identities around the country. (p. 27)

It seems clear that the perspectives and theoretical constructs already apparent within graduate programs would only be more evident within the TA practicum, given the practicum’s role in

disseminating theory and in helping graduate students embrace a paradigm that will serve the institution as the TAs move toward teaching the FYC course.

Indeed, Bishop (1990) also found that the graduate-level Teaching Basic writing seminar she was studying was designed to “convert” students from following a current-traditional model to adopting a process-centered writing workshop, which was more in alignment with the ideology of the institution. Stenberg (2005) has also considered this possibility, as she described the “teacher as trainee” model of teacher preparation, in which TAs are viewed as “empty vessels” (p. 64), and thus “the pedagogy of the teacher-training program was not left open to reflection or critique, nor were students positioned as having valid insights and ideas that might work in dialogue with, or even alter those ideas” (p. 65).<sup>23</sup>

Still, as Farris (1996) made clear in her study of four new teachers of freshman Composition, this conversion is not a simple process, given graduate students’ varied backgrounds, perspectives and personal predispositions. Bishop’s 1997 book *Teaching Lives* illustrated similar findings as the TAs in her study “developed their own idiosyncratic versions of the process paradigm [forwarded in their TA practicum], based primarily on their personal teaching histories and their perceived classroom needs” (p. 139). Also along these same lines, York’s (2007) dissertation attested to the complexity of the relationship between TAs’ adoption of theory and their development of teaching practices. She found that TAs’ inclinations toward both theory and practice rest on a complex set of criteria including “teacher perceptions, beliefs and/or values, familial and educational history, and a basic picture of the realities of current

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<sup>23</sup> Stenberg’s (2005) “teacher as trainee” metaphor is also reflected by Roen, Goggin, & Clary-Lemon’s (2007) conversion model of TA preparation, as described earlier in this chapter.

classroom experiences, among other variables” (p. 8), all of which the teacher of the TA preparation courses should arguably encourage TAs to investigate.

As these studies have suggested, graduate students develop their teaching philosophies through a complex interplay between factors such as their educational experiences, their personal perspectives, and their preconceptions. And even though enculturation processes may have shaped their philosophies, graduate students may not be aware of the extent to which they have been shaped by their disciplinary affiliations. This shaping can take the form of an adherence to a particular philosophy or theoretical frame but can also extend to actual teaching practices within the classroom. The following section will consider two prevalent models of teaching within English Studies and the ways in which these models reflect disciplinary paradigms relating to the sub-fields of Literature and Composition, respectively.

*Teaching Paradigms: Teacher as Scholar vs. Teacher as Learner*

In an effort to better understand why TAs might respond in different ways to the teaching paradigms presented in their preparation courses, this section considers the role of a Composition teacher relative to the different pedagogical positions an instructor may take as well as the impact of these choices on the way a class is conducted. A consideration of these different positions is important to this study because they reflect varied goals and agendas for the classroom that may fall along disciplinary lines—particularly those pertaining to Literature and Composition. Given the already-established desire of graduate students to acculturate themselves to their graduate programs, the notion that there are various models of what it means to be an effective teacher also poses a potential answer as to how and why graduate students from Literature and Composition might potentially hold different assumptions about what it means to

teach and learn to teach writing. And given the focus of this dissertation, these models and their origins are worthy of exploration.

Stenberg's (2005) *Professing and Pedagogy* discussed and critiqued four primary models of teaching within English Studies: "teacher as scholar," "teacher as owner," "teacher as trainee," and "teacher as learner." While the "teacher as trainee" model was discussed above as a reflection of the conversion approach to TA preparation, the "teacher as owner" metaphor is useful to consider here, as it reflects the idea that "professors are thought to develop in isolation, or in relationship to the scholarship they engage, rather than as a result of collaboration with other teachers" (xxii). The model then, denies the collaborative nature of teacher development, seeing the process as instead based purely on discipline-specific norms and ideologies. Along with Stenberg (2005), Sosnoski and Burmester (2006) see this approach as problematic, since it reifies the "master/apprentice tradition in education" at the expense of a more collaborative, collegial interaction. Particularly key to this study however, is the delineation between "teacher as scholar" and "teacher as learner," as Stenberg (2005) has suggested that these models reflect the disciplinary expectations for professors in Literature and in Composition, respectively.

Stenberg (2005) has argued that "no metaphor has played a greater role in the professorial enterprise than that of 'teacher as scholar'" (p. 33) in which teaching is the by-product of scholarship, and teacher development is thought to come naturally as one develops as a scholar. Under this model, "good professing has more to do with the relationship one has to knowledge than to students" (Stenberg, 2005, p. 12). Similarly, citing Friedrich Nicksen, North (2000) has noted that the German philologists who served as the "forbears and in some cases the founders of what became U.S. English departments" (p. 6) viewed teaching as a natural outgrowth of scholarship: "Teaching as such they did not consider at all as an art which could itself be taught,

but rather took it for granted that anyone who was himself proficient in a science ought to be able to teach others” (p. 6). Indeed, the notion that teaching is naturally connected to one’s scholarship is reflected even today, as many Ph.D. candidates in English are provided with little if anything in the way of pedagogical training within their own discipline. Case in point: at this study’s site, TAs preparing to teach courses in English Literature are provided with only a weekend-long, non-credit training opportunity before they teach a quarter-long gateway courses in Literature for the first time. Conversely, when these same TAs later prepare to teach FYC at the same university, they will be expected to participate in a one-to-two-quarter-long practicum (depending on the amount of prior teaching experience they have at the university level).

Yet the Composition students at this university, especially those who have been studying at the doctoral level in an Education department, are virtually immersed in considerations of pedagogy by the very nature of their studies. Presumably, such students would be quite receptive to the Composition theory and pedagogy offered in TA preparation, whereas Literature students from an English department that does not appear to value close consideration of pedagogical questions might be much less interested in engaging with it, as Peterson (1995) has argued. Given that the Literature students are in the process of preparing for a career in teaching English Literature and that they may be coming from a culture in which—according to Stenberg’s (2005) argument—all they need to know to be a good teacher is a lot about their disciplinary area, (in this case Literature), these students might even see this same teacher preparation as something to resist.

Stenberg’s (2005) “teacher as learner” metaphor enacts a learning-centered model of teaching, in which teachers continue to learn and develop throughout their careers, as opposed to achieving “mastery” over teaching at one point and then becoming stagnant, as she argued that



those who adhere to the teacher as scholar model are in danger of doing. Stenberg has posited that this metaphor is in keeping with Slevin's (1996) view that the field of Composition abides by the original meaning of the word "discipline" which derives from the Latin word for learner (cited in Stenberg, 2005, p. 129). Along these same lines, Crowley (1998) has claimed,

[Composition's] interest in pedagogy inverts the traditional academic privileging of theory over practice and research over teaching. Composition scholarship typically focuses on the process of learning rather than on the acquisition of knowledge, and Composition pedagogy focuses on change and development in students rather than on a transmission of a heritage. (p. 3)

Bishop (1990) closed her book on TAs' development with a similar observation, which she used to characterize the manner by which Composition teachers are encouraged to relate to their students: "writing teachers are no longer expected to be at the center of the writing classroom. They are learning instead to stand supportively to the side and offer their students opportunities to grow and learn" (p. 144). Similarly, Finkel's (2000) book *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* has argued that although the idea of the "great teacher" who spouts knowledge and pontificates during class is still entrenched throughout academia, a more collaborative approach to teaching and learning is far more effective.

At the same time, Sosnoski and Burmester (2006) have argued that "academic training (and recognition) in English departments is [still] based on competitive rather than collaborative attitudes" (p. 327), a tendency that they have claimed results "from an overreliance on the master/apprentice script" (p. 327). Based on the above reports, it seems possible that the fields of Composition and Literature subscribe to very different ideas of what it means to be an effective teacher. If this is in fact the case, then that would help explain why the collaborative approach to

teaching encouraged in the TA preparation program at the site of this research might perhaps be less appealing to the Literature students—and might therefore engender a sense of resistance in them—than it would be to the Composition students.

This dissertation considers these disparate ideas about the value of pedagogical training and the implications of these varying perspectives for TA preparation. It also builds on the work on Stenberg (2005) as it explores the extent to which disciplinary paradigms related to teaching such as the “teacher as scholar” and “teacher as learner” metaphors resonate with TAs from each of the two disciplines.

### Resistance to TA Preparation

In addition to the Literature considering how graduate students and especially TAs are enculturated into their disciplines, there is another dominant theme in the Literature regarding TAs’ responses to teacher preparation, and this theme explores their resistance to the practicum (Dobrin, 2005; Ebest, 2005).

Several scholars have addressed the idea of resistance, specifically as it pertains to TA preparation, among them Ebest (2005), Dobrin, (2005), Hesse (1993), Bishop (1997), Welch (1993), and Stenberg (2005). These scholars have considered resistance in different lights, however. Some have considered graduate student resistance overall, while others looked at TAs’ resistance to programs that were functional in nature, and still others considered how TAs have resisted the conversion model of TA preparation and the related enculturation process that such models engender (Bishop, 1997; Welch, 1993). Several scholars have also considered TAs’ resistance in terms of disciplinary affiliation (Fischer, 2005; Huntley, 2005; Mattison, 2003; Petersen), and others have considered TAs’ resistance to theory (Fischer, 2005; Hesse, 1993; Rankin, 1994), two topics that are especially pertinent to this dissertation. As such, the following

literature not only reflects the many reasons that TAs have resisted teacher preparation programs, but it also reflects ideas addressed previously in this review as it builds on issues such as the theory versus practice dichotomy, the process of enculturation and/or conversion models of teacher preparation, and disciplinary affiliation/discipline-specific teaching paradigms.

Much of the literature describing TAs' resistance has focused on the role that theory plays in teacher preparation programs. For example, Hesse (1993) has examined how exposure to theoretical positions—and the sometimes complicated reading that delivers these positions—can cause graduate students in the practicum to resist embracing these new ideas, just as first-year student sometimes resist grappling with difficult ideas and assignments. Similarly, Fischer (2005) considers graduate students' resistance to theory in teacher preparation courses, as she found that TAs resisted the practicum for several reasons. For one thing, Fischer (2005) recognized that the TAs she worked with had, for the most part, tested out of first-year Composition as undergraduates, thus their first experience with the class was as instructors. Fischer (2005) noted that as a result,

Their successes with literacy over the years have not required them to be analytical about the reasons for those successes; they have not needed to figure out *how* they write well. And so when they are asked to consider how writing can be taught to English 101 students, [...] TAs are being asked to be analytical about processes that have become a tacit part of who they are. (p. 204)

In addition, Fischer (2005) also discovered that the TAs in her program exhibited resistance to the theory present within the practicum. While in part she attributed this resistance to their frustration at being asked to embrace theory instead of focusing on more practical classroom management concerns, Fischer (2005) also posited that “[t]hey do not realize that, as a discipline

whose primary aim is theorized teaching, Composition studies is a robust and valid discipline, and a course in writing pedagogy is far more than technical training” (p. 205).

Somewhat similarly, in her study of five new teachers in a university writing program, Rankin (1994) has considered the causes of the resistance to theory reflected by the TAs in her study and determined that their resistance stemmed largely from the way that the theory was presented to them in their preparation class:

In the seminar we had called “theory” only those ideas expounded in our readings. The ideas the TAs held, the assumptions and values they brought to their teaching, were always secondary, always *responses* to theory, not theoretical in their own right. It was only natural then, that the TAs would think of theory as something alien to them, something to study in graduate courses, something, in many cases, to resist. (p. 127)

Ebest (2005) has built on these findings as she discovered that resistance is quite common as TAs transition from being students themselves into becoming teachers in their own right. Conducting case studies of 18 TAs, Ebest (2005) explored how these individuals responded to the theoretical positions and related pedagogical approaches offered in their practicum and examined how their acceptance or resistance to that pedagogy affected their success as instructors. Ultimately, she found that writing and reflection are integral to helping graduate students overcome resistance to their TA preparation. At the same time, Stancliff and Goggin (2007) have concluded that Ebest’s (2005) approach falls under the category of the conversion model, and they argued that the resistance her students evidenced was directed toward the theoretical positions that she expected them to adopt, despite their own assumptions and personal predispositions.

Like Stancliff and Goggin (2007), Welch (1993) and Stenberg (2005) have also considered resistance in light of the enculturation process that many claim graduate study—and by extension TA preparation—often entails. Welch (1993) examined her own resistance to TA preparation by describing her experiences in two graduate programs in Composition: at what she referred to as University A and at University B. In her article, Welch (1993) discussed how her experience at University B differed from and challenged the assumptions she had developed as a student at University A. Still, because she wanted to be successful as a graduate student in the program, she attempted to acculturate herself to the program's theoretical paradigm, until it became clear that this was not possible for her to do, and ultimately she chose to withdraw from the program and return to University A. Welch concluded the essay by explaining that in the end, attending University B enabled her to recognize her “assumptions as assumptions, as historically situated and politically informed ways of constructing and understanding teaching and learning” (1993, p. 399). Nevertheless, she has also noted that she does not feel that the conversion model of teacher preparation at University B was productive, given that it served to alienate not only her but also several other students in her cohort who also abandoned the program to seek out other endeavors. Welch's (1993) essay has effectively demonstrated the risk of attempting to convert TAs to a particular theoretical position as well as provided a first-hand account of how and why resistance to TA preparation can be manifested.

TAs' resistance has also been considered in terms of disciplinarity by several scholars, although none have examined this form of TA resistance in the terms of this present study. For example, Fischer (2005) and Huntley (2005) have noted that in their TA preparation classrooms, creative writing TAs have been more resistant to Composition theory than TAs who are studying Composition. However, these statements were based on anecdotal evidence, rather than on

empirical study, and their work did not examine the responses of graduate students in Literature to TA preparation. Peterson (1995) has considered the role of Literature graduate study on new Composition teachers; however, her work did not compare the responses of Literature and Composition TAs to their preparation. Mattison's (2003) dissertation was similar to Peterson's (1995) in that it too focused on graduate students in Literature who are serving as TAs and the ways in which these TAs develop their identity as teachers and scholars, given what he refers to as the "pedagogically antithetical positions" found in graduate Literature classrooms and first-year writing classrooms. While these two studies in particular lay important groundwork for the present study, this dissertation picks up where the work of Peterson (1995) and Mattison (2003) left off, as it is examining and comparing how TAs from both Literature *and* Composition responded to their TA preparation held within a program separate from English, and considering if or to what extent disciplinary affiliation played a role in their responses.

### Research Goals

The primary goals for this research project were to determine how doctoral students from Composition and from Literature viewed and responded to their TA preparation held in an independent writing program and whether they might have shown any resistance to the program as well as to determine if any potential differences in their responses correlate with their disciplinary affiliations. This study was also conducted to determine what students from each of these two disciplines took away from their TA preparation in terms of pedagogy. Specifically, the research questions under investigation are as follows: 1) "How did Ph.D. candidates from Composition and from Literature respond to a TA preparation program held in an independent writing unit in a large public research university in California?" 2) Did TAs from Composition and from Literature exhibit resistance to their preparation program, and if so, in what ways?" 3)

“What pedagogical practices and principles do TAs from Composition and Literature still use that reflect their TA preparation?” and 4) “To what extent did TAs from Composition and from Literature perceive a disciplinary divide in their preparation program experience, and to what did they attribute it?”

### Hypothesis

Based on anecdotal evidence, literature in the field, and institutional history, the expectation for this project is that there are appreciable differences in these two groups’ attitudes and responses to TA preparation, and moreover, that the participants’ current teaching practices reflect different emphases, theoretical underpinnings, and pedagogical approaches, based at least in part on their disciplinary affiliations. As the above literature has shown, scholars in Literature and Composition not only have different conceptions of what constitutes text that is worthy of study, but they view the production and dissemination of knowledge in different ways. Moreover, the literature pertaining to graduate student enculturation and indoctrination suggests that at least to a certain extent, such enculturation is necessary for successful graduate study, particularly within departments of English.

Although I do have an expectation about the outcome of this study due to my familiarity with the program in question and my personal predisposition to the idea that the relationship between Literature and Composition within English Studies can be a rocky one, throughout this project I strived to remember what a senior scholar in the field has termed “the cardinal rule of research:” that one must not draw conclusions before conducting the research necessary to generate data (S. McLeod, personal communication, May, 2007). Instead, as Lauer and Asher (1988) have reminded us: “Even with hypothesis or questions in mind, however, a descriptive researcher tries to withhold judgment in order to allow the weight of the data to suggest new

conclusions” (p. 25). This has been my guiding principle throughout the process of developing, conducting, and analyzing this research.



### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Because this study is focused on a particular TA preparation program in a particular era (2002-2005), it is a bounded case study (Creswell 1998). According to Yin (2003), case study methodology works best for “How?” and “Why?” questions, and in this study it will be used to try to gain more insight into how the TAs viewed their preparation program and why they saw it the way(s) they did. Yin (2003) also makes clear that an explanatory case study explains the causal relationship in a particular phenomenon, and this study is also being conducted to consider if there is a causal relationship between TAs’ disciplinary affiliations and the ways in which they responded to their preparation for becoming teachers of FYC as well as to their experiences with teaching the course.

#### Research Site

The TA preparation program selected for examination in this study is housed in an independent writing program at a large public research university in California. Along with providing TA preparation, the program administers Composition courses for undergraduate students in the university using a combined Writing across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) approach. The FYC course, required of all lower-division students, is based on a WAC model, as it emphasizes the conventions common to academic writing in three broad disciplinary areas: the humanities, the social sciences, and the hard or natural sciences. In this course students write papers in each of these areas as a means of becoming acquainted with the different ontological and epistemological concerns of the different disciplines, with the goal of familiarizing them with what it means to write academically across the curriculum. The WID emphasis of the program is enacted once students begin their upper division coursework, as they may select either a research-based advanced Composition course or a discipline-specific writing

course directly related to their major. Examples of these discipline-specific courses include Writing for the Social Sciences, Writing for Business and Economics, Writing for Film, etc. Further reflecting the WID philosophy, the program also reaches out to faculty in other departments across campus to encourage and support the use of effective writing assignments within the disciplines. And, along these same lines, several sections of the lower-division required writing course are linked to popular introductory general education courses such as Sociology, Political Science, Music, and Environmental Studies. These “Links” courses offer students an opportunity to further explore a given subject by writing papers related to the content of their general education course.

The program itself is a stand-alone unit, in that it—and, therefore, TA preparation—is separate from both the University’s English Department and its Ph.D. Program in Composition, which at this university is held in the Graduate School of Education. Currently comprised of one full professor, one associate professor, 30 full-time lecturers (16 “temporary” faculty on one and two-year contracts and 13.56 “continuing” or permanent faculty), and approximately 40 TA’s (who reflect 15 FTE), the faculty currently consists of about 70 individuals<sup>24</sup> (Self-study). Faculty in the program have a wide range of backgrounds, and therefore they specialize in many different genres of writing—from technical to literary to business. Most of the program’s faculty teach both the lower and upper division courses as they collectively strive to fulfill the program’s mission:

The mission of the Writing Program is to produce better undergraduate writers across the full range of academic disciplines, and to train graduate students from a variety of disciplines to teach writing effectively. Strong written and oral communication skills

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<sup>24</sup> In addition, two retired faculty are on recall for two courses a year. One is an Emerita Lecturer with Security of Employment, and the other is a Research Professor.

(including an understanding of related issues such as collaborative work and computer technology) are essential for our students' academic success, and for their active participation in professional and civic life. We offer courses that focus on critical thinking, research, and literacy in specific contexts, providing opportunities for the intensive practice of communication skills throughout our students' university experience. (Writing Program Mission Statament, n.d.)

Because TAs represent almost half the number of total faculty in the program,<sup>25</sup> it is especially important to examine and understand what they think about teaching Composition and how their preparation to teach Composition has impacted them. Moreover, since the current mission statement for the program includes a dispensation for “train[ing] graduate students from a variety of disciplines to teach writing effectively,” this study's goal of understanding how students from different disciplines respond to their TA preparation is especially appropriate.

### *Rationale for Program Selection*

The program currently draws TAs from all over campus, but up until the past few years it has primarily served graduate students from English and Education, where the Literature and Composition Ph.D. programs are respectively housed. Based on an agreement established when the program was still a part of the English Department, the English Department requires all of its Ph.D. candidates to apply for a Teaching Assistantship with the program to secure their funding, and as a result, there are generally a large number of Literature graduate students participating in TA preparation. At the same time, the TA program also provides preparation in teaching writing for the Composition graduate students who hail from the Education school. The TA program thus becomes a place of contact for graduate students from Literature and Composition—two

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<sup>25</sup> At least in terms of bodies, although not in terms of sections taught per year.

disciplines that in are often closely associated with one other due to their affiliation with English Studies, but who in this case might not otherwise interact. This site thus provides an especially appealing opportunity for exploring how TAs from these two areas of English Studies respond to a two-course program designed to prepare them to teach FYC.

Typically, Literature, Composition, and TA preparation are all components of an English department, and in these cases TAs may not always be firmly affiliated with one discipline over the other. As a result, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to get a clear read on disciplinary distinctions in TA attitudes at most institutions. Due to the unique situation of the study site in which Literature, Composition and TA preparation are all housed in separate departments, this university offers a rare opportunity to isolate and explore potential disciplinary differences in the attitudes of Literature and Composition students toward their TA preparation and writing instruction in general.

Further making this particular program a desirable place to conduct this study is the fact that from 2001-2007, the Writing Program and the TA preparation program were directed by a nationally recognized scholar in Composition who has been heavily involved in teaching, research, and publication in the field for more than 30 years. In addition to teaching graduate courses in Composition at the study site and elsewhere, this individual has also been a participant and leader in various committees for the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and its college organization, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), as well as for the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA). As such, it seems reasonable to assume that her standards for preparing new Composition teachers are in keeping with the standards of the field (i.e. the 2000 WPA Outcomes Statement for FYC, etc.). Nevertheless, as is the case with many Rhetoric/Composition specialists of her generation, her

own degree is in English Literature.<sup>26</sup> Given this study's goal of determining the extent to which graduate students' disciplinary affiliations impacted their response to TA preparation, the director's background is important to note as it suggests that her attitudes about the importance and value of teaching Composition could potentially be viewed as more in alignment with the Composition students than with their Literature counterparts, despite her graduate training in English Literature.

Also worth noting within the context of this study is the fact that the University's Composition program (held in Education) is headed by an internationally recognized scholar in Composition who has built a strong and well-respected program heavily based on theory, research, and praxis.<sup>27</sup> This individual has also recently been involved in the leadership of the CCCC. Given that the Composition students take courses from this individual, and indeed, many graduate students in the program cite this faculty member's presence as their reason for enrolling in this program, it seems fair to assume that the graduate students' views about the teaching of Composition are at least somewhat in alignment with those of their program's director. Similarly, considering the Composition graduate program's overall emphases, the Ph.D. candidates from this program have likely been steeped in current theory and research practices common to the profession. Both of these factors that may also play a role in their willingness to embrace the Composition theory and pedagogy espoused in the TA preparation program.

In conducting local research there is a potential concern that the researcher may feel pressured to interpret data in a particular way to appease his or her superiors at the research site.

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<sup>26</sup> Because graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition were uncommon until the late 1970's, many of the Rhet./Comp. specialists in the field today earned their degrees in English Literature.

<sup>27</sup> Despite these contributions to the field of Composition, this individual's graduate training was also in English Literature.

Although this study was conducted at the institution where I am employed as a teacher of writing, I am not, nor have I ever been, associated with the school's TA preparation program. Moreover, because I have studied the responses of TAs who participated in the preparation program several years ago (primarily so I can have the benefit of seeing how they have responded a few years after completing it), these individuals have now all moved on to other institutions, and thus their position as TAs at this university were not compromised by their sharing of their insights with me. Finally, this study chronicles the TA preparation program as it was conceptualized and overseen by the person who is now the ex-director of the program, as she has since retired. As a result of these factors, I believe I experienced a lot more latitude in drawing my conclusions than I might have otherwise, given that I have not been writing about either those in subordinate positions to me or those who hold power over my current position.

#### *Rationale for Time Period of Review*

This study considers TAs' responses to the TA preparation program as it was conducted from 2002-2005. This time period was selected for examination for several reasons. First, this time covered much of the TA preparation facilitator's six-year-long tenure as director of the program. After she took the helm of the program in 2001, the program continued to evolve and grow under her leadership, and it seems that by this time she had become comfortable with the program's standards and begun shaping it towards her own philosophy. Thus, this era was selected as a starting point in order to account for potential programmatic or other changes to the TA preparation program over this time period.

Also, for the purposes of a university-mandated program review, in 2006 a study was conducted at this university to gather data on students' responses to their preparation to become TAs. This study consisted of disseminating an open-ended, narrative survey to all the TAs who

had participated in the Composition TA preparation program from 2000-2006. Designed and conducted by the writing unit, the survey queried TAs about their perspectives on how the preparation program could be altered to increase their teaching effectiveness, and it also asked them to comment on any other aspects of the preparation program. In terms of survey respondents' opinions about the preparation program overall, interestingly, the results reflected a bi-modality, in that students either responded very positively to their preparation program and overall TA experience or saw it as a waste of their time. Unfortunately, reasons for these disparate responses were not apparent from the survey data.

Because the 2002-2005 classes reflect the mid-point of the (2000-2006) group surveyed, examining this era offers an opportunity to better understand how TAs from that time responded to their preparation program and to further explore why survey respondents responded in the ways that they did. However, the TA preparation classes are relatively small with an average of about 15 students<sup>28</sup> per quarter, and therefore the sample size of one year's practicum participants is rather limited. In order to get a broader sense of how TAs responded to the class, four years of narrative evaluations from the preparation program were examined in this study.

Finally, selecting 2002-2005 as the era for analysis enabled present-time interviews with individuals who had completed their TA preparation approximately five years prior to the interviews. The years that elapsed since the participants' TA preparation involvement provided an opportunity for their perspectives on teaching Composition to have settled and for them to have further developed as scholars within their respective disciplines.

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<sup>28</sup> The initial TA preparation class, 501A, is required only of those who have not previously taught Composition. As such, the class tends to be much smaller than 501B, which is required of all TAs.

### Case Study Analysis

In this case, it is important to try and determine how the TAs from Literature and Composition responded to their preparation program and to the teaching of FYC and to consider to what extent resistance is present in the responses of TAs from either group. These findings will hopefully serve as a means of understanding why some of the TAs indicated on the 2006 survey that they felt their preparation was either unhelpful or unnecessary. Moreover, this study has been conducted to determine the extent to which disciplinarity has played a role in any potential resistance demonstrated by the TAs.

Yin (2003) and Lauer and Asher (1988) recommended obtaining data from a variety of sources for a case study, and accordingly, this study utilizes several qualitative data collection methods including: 1) developing a thick description of the program under study by reviewing the program's policies and practices, its syllabi, demographics, and also the aggregate results of writing unit's 2006 survey regarding TA preparation; 2) analyzing narrative teaching evaluations of the 2002-2005 TA preparation course(s); 3) conducting two stimulated recall interviews with each of 10 former TAs (five of whom were graduate students in Literature, and five of whom were graduate students in Composition). In addition, each interviewee was asked to submit written artifacts, such as teaching philosophies and first-year writing course syllabi, which were then analyzed for the purpose of developing individualized questions to ask them in the second interview, which focused on their current teaching practices.

### *Thick Description*

#### *Rationale*

A thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the program under study has been developed in order to provide context and a better understanding of some of the institution-specific policies of



the university and the TA preparation program. This context is being provided in the interest of helping to explain student responses to the TA program as outlined in the research question. In particular, by identifying those policies and quirks that are unique to the program, the forms of resistance that are in fact related to disciplinarity can be better isolated.

As the literature cited in the previous chapter makes clear, several forms of resistance are commonly demonstrated in TA preparation classes—whether it be toward the preparation itself, toward the theory presented in the practicum, toward students from other disciplines in the practicum, or toward the disciplinary paradigms represented in the practicum (Ebest 2005; Dobrin 2005). Yet most of the TA preparation classes represented in the literature were held within departments of English, where graduate students of Literature and of Composition were pursuing their graduate degrees under the umbrella of English Studies. This particular TA preparation program, however, is held in a stand-alone writing unit, separate from both the university's Literature and Composition programs, and therefore there is the potential that some of the resistance traditionally attributed to the divide between Composition and Literature within English departments could be alleviated.

*Data Collection.* This analysis was conducted by reviewing the program's policies and practices, its syllabi, demographics, and analyzing aggregate results of the writing unit's 2006 survey regarding TA preparation.

### *Aggregate Survey Results*

#### *Respondents*

Because the 2006 survey was distributed to everyone who had been a TA in the program from 2000-2006, those participants may be slightly different than the participants for this present

research. Approximately 28 individuals completed the 2006 survey, and these may or may not include those who participated as interviewees in this dissertation.

### *Procedures*

Aggregate data from the 2006 survey is all that is available for this research, due to the data owners' concerns about anonymity and the potential misuse of their data. As a result, the 2006 data can only be considered in a very broad sense. At the same time, it provides some useful insight into overall patterns of responses that are then further investigated through the interviews and/or the analysis of the narrative teaching evaluations. Moreover, the aggregate data is useful in identifying institutional quirks and policies so that these can be separated out from the question of how disciplinary affiliation might affect TAs' perspectives.

### *Measures*

Because the 2006 survey was conducted for program review purposes, it did not ask students to disclose their disciplinary affiliations, in part because of the administration's concern that doing so would compromise respondents' anonymity. As a result, while these surveys provide important data regarding the TAs' perspectives about their preparation, unfortunately they are not helpful in answering whether the disparate perspectives represented are due to different disciplinary affiliations. Nevertheless, because the surveys did yield some interesting information in terms of TAs' responses to their preparation course(s), themes and patterns from the aggregate data of these surveys are discussed and referred to throughout this project, and these are also reported on at length in the thick description section of Chapter Four.

### Narrative Teaching Evaluations

Narrative evaluations from eight TA preparation courses—reflecting four course sequences held over the period under review—were evaluated in this study. These evaluations

offer the best available record of TAs' responses to their preparation course(s) at the time that they were taking the course(s).

It is the writing unit's policy that each section of every course be evaluated by all students in the course at the end of each term via both the university-wide qualitative data collection requirement as well as with a quantitative form consisting of narrative questions designed and administered by the writing unit itself. While the university-wide evaluations are comprised of two questions (What do you think of the instructor's teaching? What did you think of the course, independent of the instructor's teaching?), both of which are to be answered on a standard Likert Scale with the rankings of "Excellent, Very Good, Good, Fair, and Poor," the narrative evaluations ask qualitative questions that will help shed light on the students' quantitative rankings. Both of these forms are completed by students in class during the last week of the term.

### *Rationale*

Although this information was collected by the department for the purpose of evaluating the preparation program and its facilitator, the data contained in the narrative evaluations is useful in assessing how the TAs perceived their preparation and in learning what they saw as being particularly beneficial or lacking in their preparation. In addition, given this study's emphasis on exploring the potential impact of disciplinary affiliation on the TAs, it is especially helpful that the narrative evaluations ask students to list their home department on the evaluation form.

This data set is useful in determining if there are patterns inherent to each of the two disciplinary groups and if so, in identifying those patterns. Also, the narrative evaluations indicate the extent to which TAs from each of the two groups evidenced any sort of resistance to

the TA reparation program. Because the TAs' disciplinary affiliations are listed on the forms, this data set is also useful in identifying whether any of these trends appear to be related to disciplinary affiliations and/or program distinctions.

### *Courses Evaluated*

TAs' responses to the narrative teaching evaluations for the TA preparation classes of 2002, 2003, 2004, and 2005 were analyzed for this project. There were few, if any, changes in the preparation program courses during these years as they were taught by two individuals who worked closely together to develop the TA preparation program, and as such, these individuals utilized many of the same course materials and activities. Moreover, during these years a large percentage of the overall TA population hailed from either Literature or Composition; thus analysis of those four years provides some insight into the question of whether TAs from the two disciplines responded differently to their preparation program.

### *Respondents*

Overall, the narrative evaluations in this study include the responses of 50 TAs from Literature and nine TAs from Composition.<sup>29</sup> The 50 narrative evaluations returned from Literature graduate students were out of a total possible 74 responses, in that 44 individual English graduate students were enrolled in TA preparation during this time, but 28 of them took both courses and two dropped out after the first course. The 9 evaluations returned from Composition graduate students were out of a total of 13 possible responses, as 12 individual students from Composition were enrolled in TA preparation during this time, but one of them took both courses. Thus the narrative evaluations collected here reflect the opinions of 69% of

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<sup>29</sup> The reasons for the wide disparity in the number of TAs from Literature and from Composition will be discussed in the next chapter.

the Composition TAs (9 out of 13) and 67% of the Literature TAs (50 out of 74) who participated in the TA preparation program during the time period under study here.

Table 1 lists the sections of the TA preparation course included in this study, along with the course breakdowns in terms of students' disciplinary affiliation as well as a reporting of the number of Composition TAs who returned narrative evaluations and the number of Literature TAs who returned them in each section. (See Appendix D for a complete narrative description of these breakdowns.)

The table below reflects the above information by indicating the total number of TAs in each of the sections studied for this project. It also shows the number of TAs from Literature and from Composition as well as from other disciplines. Finally, the table reflects the number of narrative teaching evaluations returned from each of these three groups in each section.

Table 1

*Number of Respondents by Class and Disciplinary Affiliation*

<b>Class</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>Literature T.A.s</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>Composition T.A.s</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>T.A.s from other Disciplines</b>	<b>R</b>
<b>1</b>	12	11	6	5	0	0	6	6
<b>2</b>	20	16	10	7	4	3	6	4
<b>3</b>	10	7	9	7	0	0	1	0
<b>4</b>	15	12	11	8	3	3	1	1
<b>5</b>	12	12	7	6	0	0	5	5
<b>6</b>	18	14	5	5	2	0	11	9
<b>7</b>	14	0	8	7	1	0	5	7
<b>8</b>	17	14	9	4	3	3	5	7
<b>Remarks:</b> R= Responses In class 2, two of the evaluations returned had no disciplinary affiliation listed Some of the Responses from T.A.s from other disciplines could have been from Literature and/or Composition, but because there was no disciplinary affiliation listed, they could not be considered								

### *Procedures*

The narrative teaching evaluations were analyzed by a system of coding, as Seidman (2006) suggests. Themes and patterns were isolated in an effort to gain an understanding of how participants responded to their preparation to become TAs and to determine whether or not there are shared perspectives and/or differences in opinions among the students in each disciplinary group. In particular, themes associated with disciplinary affiliation and disciplinary paradigms as delineated in the review of literature were sought out and compared between the two groups of TAs.

### *Measures*

The narrative evaluation forms are designed in-house by faculty in the program, and occasionally they are revised to try and elicit more useful information. Indeed, the narrative evaluations for the TA preparation classes underwent some revision during the four years studied, but their purpose remained stable as they all consisted of two to four open-ended questions focused on students' experience with the preparation program and whether the students had suggestions for ways that the preparation could be improved. Despite the tweaks that are sometimes made to the narrative evaluations' prompts, the gist of the questions remains the same: what aspects of the course were students pleased with and what aspects did they feel needed improvement? Although the prompts on the narrative evaluation forms remained consistent in the third through eighth sections reviewed for this study (with one additional prompt included in the sixth section), different prompts were provided in the first and second classes that were reviewed. These prompts yielded additional insight into how the TAs from Literature and Composition responded to the courses, and therefore they have been included in this data set.

Listed below are the specific narrative evaluation prompts for each of the eight sections studied. See Appendix E for a table listing the prompts and quarters in which they were asked.

In the spring 2002 501A class, three prompts were included on the narrative evaluation forms; however, because Prompt 2 pertained to the part of the preparation class that these students had not yet completed, all five respondents left that prompt blank.

- Prompt #1. Assess the effectiveness of 501A in preparing you for the instructional challenges of Writing 2.

- Prompt #2. Assess the effectiveness of 501B in assisting you with the instructional challenges of Writing 2.
- Prompt #3. Please offer any comments you may have upon the training you have so far received and upon the training process more generally.

In the fall of 2002's 501B class, there were four prompts on the narrative evaluation forms:

- Prompt #1: There is a wide variation in the prior teaching experience Writing Program TAs have. Because of this variation, the main objective of 501B is to provide as much support as possible for those new to teaching writing, while at the same time providing freedom within the curricular guidelines to make the course your own. Please comment on how well you feel this objective was met.
- Prompt #2: Please comment on the teacher's effectiveness in modeling good Composition teaching practices in the course itself (e.g. leading discussions, use of small groups for brainstorming and peer critique, use of handouts, etc.)
- Prompt #3: Please comment on the effectiveness of integrating the meetings with your TA supervisors with 501B.
- Prompt #4: Please add any other comments you feel would help the instructor improve the course.

In the spring of 2003, there were two prompts included on the narrative evaluation form this term; in fact, for the next five terms (fall of 2003, spring of 2004, spring of 2005, fall of 2005) the narrative evaluations forms would consist of these same two prompts (although one additional prompt was provided in the fall of 2004).

- Prompt 1: What in the course was useful to you?
- Prompt 2: How might the course be improved?



In the fall of 2004's 501B class, one additional prompt was included with the two above:

- “According to the syllabus, the course’s objectives are as follows: ‘Writing 501B supports you as you teach Writing 2, but beyond that, introduces you to Writing Studies theories and pedagogies so that you can better position your own teaching philosophy. The course will combine reading, discussion, shared responses, writing, and observation of other teachers.’ In your experience, to what extent and in what ways (if any) were these objectives met?”

### Interviews

#### *Rationale*

The interviews were designed to elicit further information about how the TAs had responded to the TA preparation program and also to try and discover what they had taken away from it in terms of pedagogical practices and principles. While the narrative evaluations indicate how the TAs responded and the extent to which resistance was demonstrated by TAs in each of the two groups, the interviews provide information about *why* individual TAs responded to the program in the ways(s) that they did. These interviews were conducted approximately five years after each group of TAs had participated in the TA preparation program so that the participants would be able to reflect back on their preparation and consider the extent to which their current teaching practices and principles were or were not related to what they had been exposed to during their preparation courses.

There was an added benefit to interviewing the groups of TAs from Literature and from Composition several years after they had completed the TA preparation program, in that the time that had elapsed made it further possible to identify whether those principles that were potentially attributed to the interviewees’ disciplinary affiliation had endured over time.

Conducting these interviews several years after the completion of the program thus provided more solid answers to not only the research question pertaining to what the TAs had taken away from their preparation, but also in terms of better understanding whether and to what extent there may be a causal relationship between the interviewees' perspectives and their disciplinary affiliation(s).

### *Participants*

Interviewees for this study were selected primarily on the basis of their successful involvement with the TA preparation course in the years under study and on the basis of their willingness to participate. Selection criteria also required that they be either from the university's Literature or Composition graduate programs and that they be currently teaching or have recently taught FYC. Individuals who were not successful in the TA preparation program (i.e. those who were not rehired or who resigned from the program) were excluded as participants from this study. This exclusion is based on the fact that this research is interested in examining the attitudes of individuals who successfully utilized their preparation to become teachers of Composition. Moreover, this exclusion will ensure that the findings are not subject to more of a bias than is necessary, as resistance is likely to be higher among those TAs who were considered unsuccessful.

Twelve individuals met the above criteria, including six from Composition and six from Literature. Ten of these twelve agreed to participate. Five of the interviewees were graduate students from Composition and five were from Literature. As of this writing, all ten individuals have completed their Ph.D.s in their respective fields. At the time they were initially contacted and asked to participate in this project, four of the ten interviewees had already accepted positions at other institutions. Three others were preparing to leave the university to accept

tenure-track positions and one was leaving to pursue other endeavors before perhaps returning to academia at a later date. The remaining two planned to remain at the university as they completed their dissertations and hoped to continue teaching Composition there should classes be available for them.

Pseudonyms have been used throughout this study to protect the identities of participants.

### *Procedures*

The interviews were conducted in what Seidman (2006) refers to as a form of “in-depth” interviewing. In-depth interviews are particularly appropriate in situations where context is an important consideration (Seidman, 2006, p. 17), and given the particular placement of the Literature graduate students, the Composition graduate students, and the TA preparation course(s), context is especially key to understanding the dynamics of the situation in this project. While Seidman (2006) recommends a three-interview series, due to time constraints and limited access to the interviewees, in this study a two-part interview process was utilized instead.

The twelve potential interviewees were emailed a request to participate, which was sent to their respective university email accounts along with a brief description of the study and an informed consent form. (A copy of this description and the form are included in the Appendix.) Ten of the twelve agreed to participate, and each of these ten individuals were interviewed twice. The interviews were arranged by email and or phone and they took place over two six-week periods: one in 2009 and the other in 2011. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. All of the interviews were tape recorded.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and member-checked, as Lincoln & Guba (1985) have suggested, giving participants an opportunity to revisit their comments and check them for accuracy. The transcriptions were then subjected to an analysis in order to establish

common themes and patterns across the responses. The transcripts from the two disciplinary groups were also analyzed in juxtaposition with one another, in order to determine whether participants in the groups share any perspectives or other commonalities.

In particular, the coding of the transcripts focused on a search for responses that reflect the major themes discussed in the review of literature. Thus, evidence of TAs' preference for theory versus practical classroom concerns, manifestations of disciplinary paradigms in terms of classroom practices, examples of the process of developing a teaching identity and its relationship to disciplinary affiliation, and evidence of the divide between Composition and Literature were searched for and subsequently compared between the two groups.

### *Measures*

The first interview was standardized for all participants. (A copy of this interview script can be found on the Appendix.) This interview focused on putting the participant's experiences in context by asking respondents to discuss their background both academically and professionally and to explain what brought them to the university for graduate school and to the TA program in particular. This interview also invited respondents to recall their TA preparation experience and what they took from that experience. These interviews utilized stimulated recall by showing interviewees the syllabi from the TA preparation course(s) as a means of attempting to stimulate their memories about the preparation program and their responses to it.

At the conclusion of the first interview, all ten respondents were encouraged to submit primary artifacts including, but not limited to, statements of teaching philosophy and course materials for their first-year Composition courses such as assignments and syllabi. All but one of the participants complied with this request by providing these documents prior to the second interview. As Clark (2003) has pointed out, Composition syllabi reveal a great deal not only

about a particular program or department's goals and policies, but they also reflect individuals' "personality as a teacher and orientation toward the teaching of writing" (p. 543). Identifiable themes and patterns were examined in these documents, particularly pertaining to the ways in which they may or may not reflect the desired outcomes and/or concepts covered in the TA preparation classes. However, although these course documents and teaching philosophies represent another form of primary data collection as they do shed some light on what the TAs took away from their preparation classes, they were used primarily to develop questions for the follow-up interview, which was designed to elicit information about this same question.<sup>30</sup>

The second interview focused on what respondents took from their preparation and asked them to make meaning of their experience as a TA (Seidman, 2006, p. 19). In the interest of trying to trace how participants' current teaching philosophies developed and to determine whether any ideas contained in them seems to reflect the principles addressed in the preparation program, questions for this second interview were largely developed on the basis of the documents supplied by the respondents.

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<sup>30</sup> While these documents were primarily used to develop interview questions for the second interview, they are also referred to in the reporting of the data when they support or complicate the themes and patterns yielded by the rest of the interview data.

## CHAPTER 4: THICK DESCRIPTION AND NARRATIVE TEACHING EVALUATION ANALYSIS

This chapter is divided into two primary areas. First, it provides a “thick description,” as Clifford Geertz (1973/1983) conceptualized it, of the California public university’s TA preparation program that is under study here. This description includes several components, including an overview of the TA preparation program’s policies, course design, and recruitment practices during the time the data in this study was gathered as well as an examination of the TA handbooks from both the writing unit and the English Department. Also in this first section is a discussion of TAs’ responses to a survey conducted in 2006 by the program for the purposes of a program review. The second section of this chapter centers around an examination of the TA instructors’ narrative student evaluations over a four-year span, focusing on the attitudes and opinions of the TAs from Literature and from Composition about the efficacy of the preparation program, both before and after the 2006 survey was conducted.

### Thick Description of the TA Preparation Program

As was noted in chapters one and three, at this particular university TA preparation is held in a standalone writing unit outside of English. This unit is responsible not only for TA preparation but also for the teaching of the undergraduate writing courses at the university, including Basic Composition, FYC, and a comprehensive palette of discipline-specific upper-division writing courses. Because this university requires an upper-division writing requirement in addition to FYC, the writing unit serves not only first and second-year students, as is the case at many universities across the nation, but also provides courses necessary for juniors and seniors

to satisfy their upper-division writing requirements. TAs, however, teach only in the lower-division sequence with most TAs teaching the standard FYC course.<sup>31</sup>

From 1997 to 2011,<sup>32</sup> TA preparation was held over a two-quarter sequence, beginning with a graduate seminar in the spring quarter before TAs went into the classroom and culminating in a practicum during the fall when the TAs were assigned their first course to teach. During this era, there was a policy in place such that TAs who had taught Composition elsewhere were exempted from the first quarter seminar, but all TAs were required to take the second quarter practicum course.

The TA preparation program courses are generally taught by the director of the writing unit, but on occasion they are taught by another qualified individual. Five of the eight TA preparation classes under study here were taught by the program's director, while the other three courses were taught by an assistant professor in the writing unit who also taught and continues to teach graduate-level Composition courses at the university.<sup>33</sup> This individual worked closely with the writing unit's director on multiple projects and also had and continues to have the distinction of being the only tenure-track faculty member in the writing unit other than the director, as all of the rest of the writing unit's faculty are ranked as lecturers. The program's director taught the first four class sections and the last one; the other professor taught the fifth, sixth and seventh of the sections under study here.

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<sup>31</sup> TAs with experience in teaching Composition are sometimes asked to teach either the basic Composition course or the advanced Composition course. There is also a Composition sequence for Engineering majors, which some advanced TAs are invited to teach.

<sup>32</sup> A new director of the writing unit was hired in 2010. In 2011, the new director replaced the spring TA preparation seminar with a summer seminar to be held prior to the fall practicum.

<sup>33</sup> The students enrolled in these sections would later take the second course of the TA preparation with the programs' director.

In addition to the TA preparation course instructor(s), the TAs in the program are also provided with a support system consisting of five to six TA supervisors. Each TA is assigned to one of the supervisors so that each supervisor has a mix of new and returning TA's—approximately six to eight total—to maintain contact with throughout the TAs' first year(s) of teaching. Supervisors' responsibilities include reviewing the TAs' syllabi, assignments and other course materials; conducting in-class observations of the TAs; reviewing the TAs' grading and commenting practices before they return their first set of papers to their students; serving as a point of contact for any issues that might arise in the classroom (i.e. plagiarism cases, authority problems, etc.); overseeing the TAs' final grade submissions for their students; and also reviewing and discussing the students' evaluations of the course with the TAs once the course is over in an effort to help them learn from the students' comments and adjust their teaching practices accordingly. In addition, the TA supervisors are deemed Instructor of Record for the courses their TAs teach, meaning that although the TAs plan their courses and interact with their students directly, the supervisors are ultimately responsible for the course and the grading done by the TAs.

#### *TA Preparation Program's Course Design*

During the era under study in this dissertation, the first course in the two-course TA preparation sequence was a seminar consisting of readings in Composition theory and practice, observations of first-year Composition classes, and construction of individual syllabi that the TAs were encouraged to continue developing in the fall and which they would then use in their winter quarter classes. TAs were required to pass the seminar course in order to qualify for a teaching assistantship. In the summer before the second-quarter practicum course and before the TAs began teaching, all TAs in the practicum were required to attend a two-day orientation



session in order to review policies and touch base with their fellow TAs as well as their supervisors and the program's director. The orientation was also an opportunity to share assignments and get answers to any last minute questions that might have arisen over the summer as the TAs prepared themselves to teach their classes. The practicum course in the fall quarter consisted of sharing course materials in addition to doing assigned readings and participating in class discussions about Composition theory and research. Both the seminar course and the practicum met weekly for an hour and fifty minutes during each of the two ten-week-long quarters.

During the time the data for this study was gathered, the TA preparation course underwent few, if any, changes in terms of curriculum and design. The course description on a representative 501A seminar class syllabus from this time period states, "The objective of this course is to prepare you to teach Writing 2, but beyond that, to help you become a good teacher of writing at any level. The course will combine reading, discussion, writing, and observation of other teachers. The course is graded Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory; in order to receive a satisfactory grade, you must complete all assignments satisfactorily."

Assignments in the 501A seminar course consisted of weekly readings from Lindemann's (2001) *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, posting weekly responses to these readings on the course's online forum, conducting two observations of a first-year Composition class and submitting a written two-page summary response of each, and drafting an individual syllabus for use the following year. Readings covered from the Lindemann (2001) text include "Developing Writing Assignments," "Responding to Student Writing," "Teaching Writing with Computers" and other similarly useful topics for new Composition instructors.

In addition to the Lindemann (2001) text, all TAs in 501A were given a copy of Behrens & Rosen's (2002) *Writing and Reading across the Curriculum*, which the writing unit required at that time as the common FYC text for the first year that TAs taught the course. Along with the common text, TAs used a common syllabus for their first quarter of teaching, but after that they were encouraged to develop their own individual syllabi and assignments.

The 501B course was designed to build on the work of 501A by providing a place where TAs would be offered support during their first quarter of teaching. As the course description for the practicum states, "This course is designed to provide support for you in your first quarter of teaching Writing 2, through reading, writing, and discussion with your peers. We meet once a week to share ideas and resources and to develop our pedagogies." Assignments in 501B included readings from Glenn, Goldthwaite & Connors' (2003) *St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* as well as more readings from the Lindemann (2001) text, a small group presentation to the rest of the class, participation in the course's online forum, meetings with the TA supervisors, and a completing a syllabus along with three assignments for use in the following quarter.

The writing unit's commitment to collaboration is evident in a note on the practicum's syllabus in regard to the required presentations:

Teaching is an isolated, sometimes isolating activity. But we usually get our best ideas from other teachers. The Writing Program is a very collaborative place; we encourage you to sit in on each other's classes, to share ideas, and to work on assignments together.

The reason for the presentations in 501B is therefore twofold: to have you share your ideas with your peers, and also to get you used to talking with others about your teaching.

This emphasis on collaboration is evident throughout the preparation program as well as in the writing unit overall. Indeed, this aspect of the program's philosophy was addressed by several of

this study's participants, and thus it will be discussed further in the later parts of this chapter as well as in the next chapter.

### *TA Handbooks*

Both the writing unit and the English department developed and distributed TA handbooks to help ease their TAs' transition into their roles. Both of these documents were written in 2003; the Writing Program printed its handbook and made it available in paper form while the English Department posted its handbook on its website.

These two handbooks reflect different teaching and learning cultures as they portray TAs' roles in disparate ways. Granted, the responsibilities associated with TAs in the two programs are quite different, as TAs in the Writing Program develop their own courses and do all of the interacting with their students, whereas Literature TAs do not give lectures or run classes but rather attend large lecture classes where faculty members give lectures, after which the TAs run small discussion sections and grade student papers. Nevertheless, the summaries of the two programs' handbooks below offer a starkly contrasting picture of the respective programs' goals for TAs in Composition and in Literature and the cultures in which they operate.

#### *Writing Program's "Hands-On Handbook"*

Eighty-eight pages long, the writing unit's "Hands-On Handbook" (2003) consisted of succinct essays written by at least 22 individual faculty members, staff, and veteran TAs in the program, and these essays were organized into twelve distinct chapters covering various topics of interest to new teachers in the program.

Chapter titles in the handbook included "Getting Started;" "Course Description;" "Course Development;" "Classroom Practice;" "Teaching with Technology;" "Beyond the Classroom;"

“What I Wish I’d Known Before I Stepped into the Classroom;” “Course Closure;” “Support;” “Course Essentials;” “Professional Development;” and “Administrative Information.”

While a thorough review of this document could generate a chapter’s worth of material on its own, suffice it to say that peppered through these pages are classroom activity ideas, words of encouragement, and classroom management principles that clearly reflect accepted practices within Composition Studies. As examples, the handbook touts group work—both large and small—promoting writing as a process, peer reviewing, and the use of student texts as models in the classroom.

The handbook also makes clear that the Writing Program is a collaborative place where classes are “process-oriented workshop classes, where work tends to be learner-centered” (Miele, 2003, p. 20). Indeed, in terms of collaboration, Rohrbacher (2003) explains that “There is not one ‘best’ way to craft a writing assignment; the only way to find out what works for you (and your students) is to try as many variations as possible, and when you find an assignment that gets good results, share it with your colleagues!” (p. 23).

But perhaps most tellingly, embedded in the handbook is the assumption that teaching is also about learning. According to Smith (2003),

Your first class will be a major learning experience. The first time you teach a composition course, you are most likely teaching it (a) the way someone has told you to teach it or (b) the way you’ve seen someone teach it. Sure you get to put some of your own flair into the class, but for the most part you’re doing what you are told to do. In this first class you will learn so much—quite possibly more than your students. You will learn your theoretical beliefs about teaching writing, and you have to learn to trust your instincts about these beliefs. You are choosing to teach something for a reason; learn

what the theory is behind your decisions, and you will create a much more comfortable course for you to teach in subsequent quarters. (p. 59)

Theory, then, is characterized as a way of understanding what is happening in the classroom, and a means of refining classroom activities so that they will work even better in the future.

The handbook also promotes the idea that teaching effectively requires engagement with students, a point that Donelan (2003) makes very clear,

Teaching is not a chore to be done quickly so that the real work of research can resume; teaching is the heart of the professor's vocation. The quality of the students' experience often stems from the instructor's sense of the importance of teaching and of the human contact it represents. An instructor who believes in undergraduate education demonstrates this belief through diligence, sincerity, energy, and time, both in the classroom and in the office.

Tourney (2003) supports this idea when he describes the importance of connecting with students outside of the classroom via conferencing:

A number of years ago I decided to have a 20 minute interview with each student during the first or second week of class. It would have no obvious pedagogical purpose, no agenda. Their writing wasn't the subject. Its purpose, rather, would be simply to have a genuine conversation, the way real humans do when they meet each other at a party or when seated next to each other on a plane. The focus would be on them. My purpose, originally, was simple: to learn their names, my theory being that if I could meet students face to face, get to know them a little, learning names would be easier. And it was. But something else also happened. I realized that I enjoyed these conversations. When actually "met," the students were interesting, usually funny, often admirable. They had

values and attitudes that were worthy of my respect. And like all people, regardless of their age or condition, they want to be more than a number, more than a mere name. They wanted to be recognized and valued and feel that their teacher was interested in who they were, why they were here, and how they might be successful in the course. (p. 53)

Tourney (2003) goes on to explain that this type of personal engagement with students creates an environment where learning is not only possible, but where its potential is maximized.

*English Department's Teaching Assistant Handbook*

The English Department's "Teaching Assistants Handbook" (2003), which at the time of this writing can still be found on the English Department's website, consists of approximately three standard pages<sup>34</sup> and includes seven sections, including an Introduction and six subsequent sections respectively titled, "Teaching Assistants in the English Department—An Overview" (this section contains several sub-sections); "The Function of Discussion Sections;" "Teaching Assignments;" "Facts and Benefits;" "Relations with Professors;" "Teaching Goals."

The document promotes the importance of TAs to graduate students' development by explaining that:

Many TAs find that teaching is the most rewarding aspect of being a graduate student because it gives you the opportunity to work closely with professors and undergraduates and provides you with professional training as a teacher of English. TAs are designed not only to provide adequate financial support for graduate students during the school year and to supply needed personnel for important undergraduate courses, but also to enhance your intellectual and professional development as a whole. Teaching almost inevitably enables you to understand the material you're covering with your students

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<sup>34</sup> It is presented as a single webpage, so page length is approximate.

more clearly and thoroughly and is often helpful in preparing for your first and even second qualifying exams.

But despite these benefits, the next line of the handbook makes clear that TAs must not allow their teaching to interfere with their scholarship, given that, “teaching has a way of expanding until it gets out of control: always keep in mind that renewal of your TAsip is based on your graduate student record, not on your performance as a teacher. Your work as a TA should not be so time-consuming that it interferes with your progress towards the degree.” A similar admonishment is repeated further down in the document under a sub-heading titled, “Sanity and Health.” “Although these responsibilities (plus your own graduate work!) might seem overwhelming at times, remember that your most important concern is your own mental and physical well-being. And although you have a responsibility to your students, your primary responsibility is to your own work in the graduate program.”

In terms of connecting with students outside of class, the sub-section titled “Office Hours” clarifies the English Departments’ expectations and advice for TAs in this regard:

As a TA you are required to have one scheduled office hour per week. You should also offer to make appointments with students who cannot make it to your scheduled time.

Some TAs make at least one office visit per quarter mandatory for their students. While this is a great way to get to know all of your students, it can consume a lot of time. Office hours can be very quiet except around paper and exam time, so plan to have some of your own work to do. Some TAs like to hold office hours outside or at the coffee shop for a more relaxed atmosphere and a nicer place to hang out if no one shows up. Sometimes, however, students will use your office hours as their personal therapy session. If you feel

you cannot handle a troubled student's problems on your own, by all means refer them to the professor or even to Counseling and Career Services.

The Department's position on "Review Sessions" is similar, as the handbook notes that

While these are in no way required, students often request them. If you don't have the time, don't feel obligated to have one (or, if possible, use the final section meeting to review course material). If you do conduct a review session, make it clear that it's not your job to lecture and ask the students to come prepared with specific questions.

Consider joining with another TA to offer a review session for students in both of your sections. Review sessions are also a good time to offer advice on taking exams and writing in-class essays (write legibly, formulate a thesis, use evidence, etc.)--things which will make your grading easier.

The sub-section on grading focuses on the time and effort involved in reading student papers, and it advises TAs to try and limit the time they spend on this task:

Although it can be stimulating, if not rewarding, to respond to students' written work, grading is also easily the most thankless and time-devouring of all TA duties. Try to space your grading out so that you don't find yourself with 35 papers to grade in one night, as this can damage healthy brain tissue and reduce life expectancy. Also, try not to spend more than 20 minutes per paper (maybe 30 when beginning a batch); this is more difficult than it sounds.

Under the section titled "Teaching Assignments," the document notes that while TAs can request certain courses for their Literature TAships, these requests may not always be honored. But it goes on to note that, "if you don't get the courses you requested, do keep in mind that you can learn something from almost any teaching assignment."



*TA Preparation Program's Recruitment Policies and Practices*

In part because the writing unit views training graduate students from across the disciplines to teach Composition as part of its mission (Writing Program Mission Statement, n.d.) and also because it does not have graduate students of its own, TAs for the unit are recruited from across campus: "Since we don't have a graduate program, we hire students from other departments to teach for us. In 2005-06, we employed a total of 39 graduate students from eight different departments" (Writing Program Self Study, 2006-2007).

During the time the data was collected for this study and still at the time of this writing, the writing unit advertises TA positions via the graduate advisors' listserv in an attempt to reach all graduate students at the university. Then and now, prospective TAs must apply for the position and be interviewed by small teams of TA supervisors, who then make their recommendations to the director of the program. Those chosen to become TAs receive a one-year contract to teach one class a quarter with the possibility of a one-year renewal. Experienced TAs reapply and are rehired on the basis of recommendations from their supervisors (Writing Program Self-Study, 2006-2007).

Because of the varied funding arrangements established by the graduate programs across campus for their students, TAs in the writing unit are often at different stages of their graduate careers. For example, during the time under study here, TAs from Composition were generally in their first year as graduate students, while TAs from Literature were quite often in their third through fifth-year of graduate school, mainly because they often had an opportunity to serve as Literature TAs for the English Department in their first and/or second-year before applying for TAships with the writing unit, which they would then do in their third-year. TAs from other disciplines (such as History, Music, etc.) were then and continue to be often in their sixth or

seventh-year of graduate training, which again often meant that they had served as TAs elsewhere on campus before becoming TAs for the writing unit. As will become evident in the next chapter, institutional quirks such as this one seem to have an effect on many TAs' attitudes about their experience in the writing unit.

*Accounting for the Disproportionate Disciplinary Affiliations*

As will become especially evident in the following section detailing the narrative evaluation responses of TAs from Literature and TAs from Composition, there is a noticeable disparity between the relatively large number of TAs from Literature and the relatively small number of TAs from Composition. (As noted in Chapter Three, during the eight quarters under study here, there were fifty TAs from Literature and nine from Composition.)

There are a number of reasons for this disparity. For one thing, as noted above, if a TA had prior teaching experience in Composition, he or she was exempted from taking the 501A course. Since many of the Composition TAs had already completed M.A. degrees in Composition at other universities before being hired by the writing unit, they had often served as TAs elsewhere and thus were exempted from the first course in the sequence. This was not the case nearly as often for the Literature TAs, however, in that many of these students had had no prior teaching experience in Composition. As a result, in some terms there were no Composition students at all in the 501A course; yet there were Literature students enrolled in each of the eight terms included in this study.

Moreover, the English Department at this university requires all of its graduate students to apply for teaching assistantships in the writing unit as a means of supporting a portion of their graduate study. And given that many graduate students in Literature will teach at least some Composition classes once they graduate and pursue careers as English professors (Leverenz

& Goodburn, 1998), this arrangement offers an opportunity for these students to gain some experience teaching Composition and to begin to prepare themselves for that eventuality. Also, because the English department at this university offers no formal TA preparation program of its own, the writing unit's TA preparation program offers a valuable experience not otherwise available for the Literature graduate students to develop their pedagogies and consider the relationship between theory and practice.

While these considerations are note-worthy, there are some critics of the English Department's policy who see the requirement as being based less on the importance of English graduates having the experience of teaching Composition as part of their training, and more on the need for providing the funding necessary for them to complete their graduate programs. And despite the funding it provides, there is a perception in the writing unit that many of the TAs from Literature experience a sense of resistance at being required to apply for a TAship outside of their home department.<sup>35</sup> This institution-specific policy thus has the effect of not only setting up a potential resistance for some TAs to teaching for the writing unit, but it also results in a disproportionate number of Literature graduate students in the TA preparation program.<sup>36</sup>

Further complicating the situation and contributing to the disparity in numbers between TAs from Composition and TAs from Literature is the fact that there is an issue of under-providing TAships and therefore funding to graduate students outside of the university division

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<sup>35</sup> As the self-study conducted by the writing unit notes, "in spite of careful screening, we always wind up with a few TAs each year who feel coerced into teaching writing, who resent the required graduate seminars in theory and praxis, and who feel that the teaching of writing is beneath them."

<sup>36</sup> While virtually all of the graduate students in Composition also apply for TAships in the writing unit, the Composition graduate program at this University is much smaller than its graduate program in Literature, and this fact further affects the disparity in the numbers of Literature vs. Composition TAs.

in which the writing unit and thus the TA program is housed. As noted in the program's 2006-2007 self-study,

Because our TA funding comes from the Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts, the Dean understandably wishes us to use that funding only for graduate students in his division. This puts us in a difficult position, since we have an interdisciplinary curriculum and benefit from having students from disciplines outside the humanities.

The fact that the university's Composition TAs are students of the school of Education and therefore they are outside of the division of Humanities and Fine Arts makes it especially difficult for these students to be hired as TAs in the writing unit. The self-study laments this situation, noting,

The graduate students from Education are among our best instructors; their career path is clearly one that is in concert with teaching in the program, and since (unlike other graduate students) they can stay with the program more than one year, they provide us with much-needed experience and continuity among the ranks of the TAs. We have dealt with this conflict between our interdisciplinary mandate and the source of our funding by using the funding we get from the College of Engineering to fund TAs from Education, but this is a stop-gap measure. It would be easier for us to comply with the recommendations of the last review, as well as with our stated mission with regard to training graduate students from across the disciplines to teach writing, if there were central funding for our TAs. (Writing Program Self Study, 2006-2007)

These institutional idiosyncrasies factor into the attitudes and responses of TAs from both Literature and Composition, and thus they are important to keep in mind when reading the results of the survey in the following section.

*Analysis of Responses to the 2006 Survey*

In 2006, the writing unit developed and conducted a survey that was disseminated to all TAs who had taught in the program from 2000 through 2006. Respondents were given two open-ended prompts:

- How can the Writing Program improve its training and supervision of TAs so as to increase teaching effectiveness in the writing classroom?
- Please use the space below to make additional comments about any aspect of your experience as a TA in the Writing Program.

It should be noted that while the first question focuses on the preparation to become a TA, the second considers all aspects of the TA program, from the program's application process to the preparation courses and extending to teaching the FYC class. Nevertheless, responses to these two questions will be collapsed below into categories reflecting the most prevalent themes and patterns in the responses overall.

Although 90% of the TAs queried indicated that they would recommend serving as a TA for the writing unit to other graduate students in their department, the answers to the two questions above revealed an intriguing bi-modality in regard to at least two areas. While many of the 28 respondents praised the merits of the two-course preparation sequence, others saw one or both of the courses as a waste of precious time. Similarly, while some of the TAs indicated that they had been mentored and supported effectively by the writing unit's faculty and staff, others complained that they did not get neither the pedagogical nor administrative support that they felt they needed and/or deserved.

In addition to the above-mentioned bimodal responses, the surveys revealed another prevalent theme in regard to the emphasis on theory vs. practice in the preparation courses, with

several TAs calling for more “nuts and bolts” practical advice. But perhaps most tellingly for the goals of this study, several of the survey’s respondents pointed to a tension between the factions of Literature and Composition within the TA preparation program, with members of each group speaking to a sense of marginalization they felt had been initiated by various factions and/or policies. Yet the surveys themselves did not ask for respondents’ disciplinary affiliations, so there is no way to determine whether or not the responses in the surveys fall along disciplinary lines.

#### *Use Value or Lack Thereof*

Perhaps the most intriguing point of contention was over the value of the TA preparation experience. While several TAs responded that they had found the experience to be very rewarding for a variety of reasons, others reported that some or all of the experience had felt like a waste of their time due to what they considered to be a heavy workload for little thanks and/or compensation.

Many of the TAs who responded to the two open-ended prompts indicated that they felt very positive about their experience as TAs. One respondent commented, “It was a good experience: strong preparation, excellent support, and great freedom in shaping my own writing class.” And another noted, “It was a good experience overall, and I am grateful for having had the opportunity to teach in the Writing Program.”

One key theme that arose among the positive comments was in regard to the powerful impact that many TAs felt the program had had on their growth as teachers and professionals. As one respondent noted, “The Writing Program has offered me a chance to seriously think about teaching and learning in a university setting. It has had a tremendous positive effect on my teaching and has also helped me shape my career goals.” Another commented, “The Writing

Program was really fantastic for me because it really made me aware of my own pedagogical propensities. I was at the perfect time to learn how to construct a class and execute it successfully. Teaching in the Writing Program was challenging, but extremely helpful. While writing isn't necessarily what I'm getting my graduate degree in, teaching it has enabled me to be a more effective communicator."

Several respondents also seemed to feel that what they had learned in TA preparation was useful for work in their own disciplines. As one respondent stated, "I am truly grateful for the training I received as a teacher in the Writing Program. I learned a lot about myself as a teacher and the importance of teaching writing. I've brought approaches that I learned in the Writing Program back to classes I teach in my home department." Similarly, another commented, "This has been such a successful experience for me that I have already urged other people from my department to apply for the program. Writing is a crucial component to History, so learning to teach writing will help History grads on the job market and in their future jobs."

Yet despite these positive responses about participating in the TA program, there were several other respondents who felt that at least some of the two-course preparation they had experienced to become TAs had been unnecessary. Four respondents referred to at least some aspect of the preparation program as a "waste of time." As one noted,

I think some of the preparatory work should be eliminated—much of it is repetitive. I thought the beginning-of-the-year orientation was more useful and efficient than 501A—it was mostly the same information, but in a smaller amount of time. People who go through 501A shouldn't have to attend orientation.

Another noted, "Teaching Writing 2 is a lot of work and time, and it is a thankless job. As someone who tested out of the equivalent of freshman Comp. in college and took an honors

writing course instead, I felt unprepared to teach freshman Comp. 501A and B felt mostly like a waste of time, except when we were doing concrete work towards our classes.” Another respondent stated bluntly, “Get rid of 501A—it’s well intended but a waste of time” while another echoed, “I thought the 501 sequence was mostly a waste of time,” and yet another stated, “I think one seminar of 501 is all that TAs need for preparation.”

### *Faculty and Staff Support*

While some of the respondents emphasized the support they had received from the faculty and staff in the program, others felt as though support was lacking and noted that they felt some administrative staff were rude and unreasonable.

On the positive side, one respondent noted, “I’ve really enjoyed my experience as a TA in the Writing Program. It is now my preferred teaching assignment because of the support and respect that are given to TAs. In the Writing Program, I feel like I am actually part of the teaching staff.” Another stated, “I’ve been very impressed by the Writing Program’s commitment to TA training and support. Overall, I’ve found the program very hospitable and professional.” Another appreciated the sense that “the faculty and staff of the program are so eager to share their knowledge and talk about teaching and learning.”

However, a number of respondents indicated that they had not felt welcomed by the program nor as though they had received the desired level of support. One respondent commented, “I have not felt like part of the program or a community, largely because we are treated like temporary employees (which, to be fair, we are). Unfortunately, this often makes for an unpleasant or unwelcome climate.”

Other respondents noted that while they found the teaching itself enjoyable, they had trouble interacting with the program staff: “The teaching of writing is fine; it’s dealing with the



staff that often makes this experience so trying. (Some, not all, are shockingly impolite and unhelpful.)” Similarly, another respondent noted that although the students were:

great to work with, most of the staff and the few faculty I dealt with were antagonistic and haughty. Any question I had was dealt with as a bother and the general climate I experienced was unfriendly and suspicious (i.e. threatening emails, why do you want colored paper, what are you using those copies for, don’t do this, watch out for that, etc., etc.) I recommend the Writing Program only because it is really fun to teach students how to voice their own opinions in a persuasive manner, fun, that is, if you can get past the nightmare attitudes of faculty and staff.

*Supervisors.* A number of respondents focused on the relationship they had with their assigned supervisor(s), with some indicating that their supervisor(s) had been greatly supportive and others feeling as though their supervisor(s) was highly disengaged.

As one respondent commented, “The most supportive and helpful resource I had for my time in the Writing Program was my supervisor, who I cannot praise enough.” This respondent went on to say that, “While I found the broader departmental support sometimes lacking or confusing to navigate, my supervisor was always available and always willing to take the time to help work out specific ways of addressing problems or concerns.” Another stated, “My experience with supervision was fantastic. I felt like both of my supervisors provided excellent support for teaching assistants.” Similarly, another respondent noted, “I felt that my supervisor was very helpful and approachable.”

At the same time, a number of respondents reported that they had not felt at all supported by their supervisors. As one TA stated, “I never received feedback of any kind from a supervisor. One of two supervisors I had across three years in fact never visited my classroom, and the other

visited but provided no feedback besides “doing great!” Another commented, “I thought all of the training and supervision was effective with the exception of my supervisor’s evaluation of my teaching, which didn’t really say much about ideas for improvement or to clarify my strengths as an instructor.”

Two respondents indicated suggestions for improving the supervisor/TA relationship, with one respondent conceding that at least in part, the supervisors’ interaction with the TAs was a matter of personal predisposition:

My experience was that training and supervision is covering all bases. Perhaps the only thing that could be improved would be supervisors sitting in as early in the quarter as possible, so that feedback can be incorporated early. Otherwise it all comes down not to programmatic changes—the program in place is excellent—but variation in qualitative engagement, individual chemistry and dynamics, etc.

Another respondent suggested remedying this issue by calling for the program to “Standardize supervision: ensure that every supervisor assesses her or his students at least once during the first two quarters.”

### *Call for More Practical Information*

A key concern reflected by several of the TAs surveyed was in regard to the amount of practical information that was introduced in the preparation courses. A majority of the TAs called for “more specific class handling pedagogy.” For example, one TA stated,

The 501B class should concentrate more on the demonstration of explicit lessons for ready use in the classroom. When I took it, it was mostly theoretical. For overloaded grads with dissertations and classes of their own in their respective fields, a teacher training course that is concurrent with the teaching itself should be far more practical.”

Another respondent called for “more hands-on assignment and classroom activity ideas; less theory.”

Several respondents called for more practical input into developing their classes. One TA felt it would be useful to “Overhaul the training seminar from a snooze-fest to a useful nuts and bolts workshop (i.e. syllabus, handouts, assignment construction and developing useful and realistic lesson plans),” and another suggested that the preparation classes should “Focus more on the actual curriculum and textbook we are first required to use, instead of more general discussions about pedagogy. Spend 501A/b reading the textbook, writing the syllabus, and creating lesson plans, rather than doing it all on our own or not until the very end of those trainings.”

Yet another would have liked the program to be very specific in its preparation, calling for it to, “Provide practical, applicable suggestions for the teaching of writing, rather than vague pedagogical pronouncements. A template syllabus for Writing 2 [FYC] would help a great deal and save a lot of time and energy while the TA develops his/her own material.” Similarly, another TA suggested that, “since the first time you teach the class is ‘pre-canned,’<sup>37</sup> the writing department should go ahead and provide a pre-canned syllabus as well as the readings.”

### *Authority Issues*

Several of the respondents pointed to the lack of authority that they experienced in their role as TAs. A major complaint that arose within this overall theme was in regard to TAs’ titles, which were *Teaching Assistants* rather than *Teaching Associates*. As one respondent noted,

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<sup>37</sup> This term is referring to the fact that the first time the TAs teach the FYC course they are expected to use a common textbook as well as to choose essay topics from a common set of possible assignments. However, they must design their own syllabi.

I liked having my own class to teach and taking responsibility for developing course materials. The only downside to that of course is that my status is that of TA and not a Teaching Associate and I believe that the latter is really more accurate when one considers the amount of effort the TAs in the Writing Program put into individually developing their courses and overseeing their students.

Another respondent strongly opposed the title of Teaching Assistant and thus forfeiting the role of Instructor of Record, stating, “Not getting credit as the instructor of record is clearly exploitation, given how much we do versus the supervisor. If one designs the course, runs every section, grades all the work, deals with all the students—one really deserves to be the teacher of record.”

In addition to the issue of title, the survey data also reflected some TAs’ sense that they were not given the respect that they deserved:

“Teaching effectiveness” could be improved if it were easier for us to take care of the administrative tasks for which we are responsible. This is hard to do when the TAs are treated like children. For example, we are not allowed to deal with plagiarism on our own or with our supervisor, but we must talk to the director of the program before we can take action.

Similarly, another respondent argued that the “Writing Program is so used to dealing with 18 year olds that they treat the TAs as is if they are also this age,” adding, “They should provide more support than surveillance.”

### *Marginalization*

Several respondents indicated that they had experienced a sense of marginalization as TAs in the program, and they cited various reasons as the cause. A few respondents suggested

that the relationship between their home department and the writing unit was to blame. As one respondent noted,

I believe one of the biggest obstacles for new TAs in the Writing Program lies not in any unwillingness on the part of new TAs to learn how to teach outside of their home department, but rather in long-standing and pre-existing animosity between the faculty/administration in their home department and the Writing Program. And, while some TAs do seem genuinely resentful that their home departments expect or require them to teach in the Writing Program, most incoming Writing TAs are not ungrateful or un-enthusiastic about the experience, yet are nonetheless perceived and treated as such. Another noted that “The worst thing about the Writing Program is that it takes you out of your department and doesn’t really mind that disconnect.” This respondent requested that the program, “Attempt to have better climate for connections between the student’s home department and the Writing Program.”

At the same time, another respondent requested that the program “Continue to work against English students’ sometimes dismissive attitude toward Education students and others,” suggesting that it was not departmental issues, but rather disciplinary ones that were responsible for creating a sense of marginalization from the other TAs.

Yet another respondent indicated a sense of marginalization as a result of the writing unit’s teaching philosophy, stating, “I felt that Writing Program faculty teaching the 501 series were sometimes overly invested in one particular pedagogic model, pushing it too hard and assuming that their views on pedagogy were the superior (or the only reasonable) views.”

*Timing.* The timing of the preparation program proved to be an issue for some of those TAs who had to juggle TA preparation with preparing for and taking their comprehensive exams in their home departments. As one respondent argued,

The 501A and 501B series needs increased flexibility in terms of its timing. For instance, in my experience, it was held only during the spring and fall quarter consecutively. I think there should be some sort of summer option between the two so that graduate students with comprehensive exams can plan around them. It was extremely difficult to get as much out of the pedagogy classes with the stresses of graduate school life in general. I work hard to make sure that I meet the demands necessitated by the departments I am involved in and work for, but I remember those particular quarters as some of the most stressful in my ENTIRE LIFE. As it is, I would implore the Writing Program to take into account the psychic states of graduate students by including optional summer scheduling for the 501A-501B series.

Along these same lines, another respondent requested that the program “Understand incoming TAs are also taking exams, and if they reference their worries/concerns in the interview or elsewhere, not to report back to the home department that the student doesn’t seem enthused enough to teach in the Writing Program.” Moreover, this same respondent asked the program to “Be sympathetic to grad student pressures.”

*Hiring Practices.* A few of the respondents referred directly to the program’s hiring practices and indicated that they felt that these practices contributed to the marginalization of the program’s TAs:

There needs to be better communication every year between the administration and the TAs about future TA positions. Each year, graduate students feel slighted, ignored, and

unrecognized when they must reapply for TAships and then receive little to no information about how, when, and why decisions are made about whether or not they will have a teaching position the following year. This leads to bad feelings, competition among graduate students, and unnecessary speculation about the process.

Also referring to the program's hiring practices, another respondent noted that "few schools humiliate grad students in such a way that they must re-audition" each year in order to gain TAships.

One respondent pointed to the issue detailed previously in this chapter, whereby graduate students from English are expected to apply for TAships while those from Composition are outside of the division and thus have to compete each year for limited spaces:

A high degree of tension is created when of one department—not writing specialists—are TAing as a matter of course (historical agreement between departments) while others—who are writing specialists who will go on to direct writing programs—have to compete year after year. I would love to see a formal relationship between the Writing Program and the Composition specialization in Education that would allow for better ease of hiring Education Students.

#### *Writing Unit's Response to the Survey*

The writing unit provided an explanation in its subsequently released self study for some of the bi-modality demonstrated above by suggesting that those who were most resistant to the program were the TAs from Literature:

The surveys of the graduate TAs reflect this fact in the bi-modal narrative responses: those TAs from other departments who are in the Program voluntarily are positive about the experience; but a few from English [Literature] are vocal about the graduate seminars

being a waste of time. We worry about this group of TAs, since it compromises the quality of our writing courses to have them taught by TAs who do not want to be there. It would be a great improvement if all our TAs applied on a voluntary basis, so that we did not have to deal with this resistance. (Writing Program Self Study, 2006-2007).

Yet as tempting as it may have been for the program's leaders to pin the resistance demonstrated in the survey to the Literature students who were queried, there is no way to know for sure if the comments reflecting resistance were in fact made by that group of students, as the data from the study was only disseminated in an aggregate form, and moreover, as the surveys did not ask respondents for their disciplinary affiliation(s). While there are some indications that certain comments came from students in Literature—including those regarding historical agreements between departments about guaranteed TAs and the references to the concurrent M.A. exams—the conclusion that all or most of the resistance demonstrated in the survey is coming from the Literature students is unsubstantiated without further evidence.

Still, the survey responses do point to a number of institutional policies and practices that help explain some of the reasons for individual TAs' resistance toward the TA preparation program, such as those mentioned above. Moreover, the handbooks made available to TAs in the two departments also indicate a clashing of cultures between Literature and Composition. Indeed, this thick description reveals many institutional policies and nuances that might uniquely influence student perceptions of the TA preparation experience in this program, but also indicates that even many of the nuances appear to stem from and reinforce differences in disciplinary approaches.

The narrative evaluations analyzed in the following section are much more revealing in terms of determining if the levels of resistance fall along disciplinary lines. Because the narrative



evaluations asked the students to indicate their disciplinary affiliation on the form along with their comments, they are useful in examining to what extent disciplinarity played a role in the TAs' resistance or lack thereof.

### Analysis of Student Narrative Course Evaluations

The responses of the student evaluators are included below with the Composition TAs' responses in the first section followed by the Literature TAs' responses. Each participant is identified by disciplinary affiliation (Literature or Composition) as well as by participants' respective year in graduate school (ranging from first through seventh for the Literature participants; the Composition participants were all first or second-year graduate students). While study participants are identified by pseudonyms in the interview portion of this chapter, these already-anonymous responses are labeled only by the criteria set forth above.

#### *Composition TAs' Responses*

Of the nine Composition TAs who completed narrative evaluations in this data set, six were asked to respond to one set of prompts and the other three were given another set of prompts.<sup>38</sup> Although the smaller of the two groups answered prompts that were more specific to one particular class, most of the responses from that group nevertheless correlated with the themes established within the larger group. Those responses have been integrated with the themes established by the larger group.

Overall, the responses of the Composition TAs illustrate that these students responded positively to the TA preparation course(s), with an appreciation for the Composition theory presented in the class, an appreciation for the course instructor(s), and a desire and willingness for connections with other TAs, more experienced TAs, and TA supervisors. This consensus is

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<sup>38</sup> Although there were four different sets of prompts for the narrative evaluations in the data set, not all of the sections included students from Composition.

further evidenced by the fact that even their responses to the prompt asking what they felt could have been improved in the course reflected their engagement with the course and the course content. Moreover, when asked for additional commentary in the interest of improving the course, all of the Composition TAs queried indicated that the course could be improved via providing more emphasis of the activities offered in the course; none of them indicated that they felt the course was too long or met too often, etc.

### *Appreciation for Composition Theory*

The most common theme among the group of nine Composition TAs queried was an appreciation for the Composition theory that was presented and discussed in the TA preparation courses. In answering the prompt that asked what in the course the TAs found useful, one second-year Composition student responded, “Discussion of seminal works in the teaching of writing, as it applied to our own teaching and brought up new questions.” Along these same lines, two of the first-year Composition graduate students noted their appreciation for the text in the class, with one responding to the prompt about what could be improved in the class by saying: “The text, *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (Lindemann, 2001), was very helpful. In fact I think it should be used more.”

Indeed, the Composition TAs not only noted their appreciation for Composition theory, but also in response to Prompt 2: “How might the course be improved?,” three of the six Composition TAs indicated that they would have liked more of a focus on theory in the class, which they all viewed as an important basis for their pedagogy. As one first-year graduate student in Composition noted, “I would have liked to focus on some of the theoretical underpinnings of teaching Composition. The book provides these, but more value given to the book would have been helpful to me.” Another first-year Composition graduate student agreed,

noting that, “More focus on extensive discussions of the articles on writing” would have improved the course.

*Admiration for the TA Preparation Facilitator*

Another related theme among these same six TAs centered around their deep admiration for the TA preparation facilitator, who they all referred to by first name and who three of the nine Composition TAs indicated that they would have liked to have heard more from in regard to Composition theory and practice.<sup>39</sup> As one first-year Composition graduate student stated, the course would be improved if, “[The TA preparation facilitator] could lecture. I know that she has a lot she could say that would be helpful.” A similar comment was made from a second-year graduate student from Composition: “Just hearing [the TA preparation facilitator’s] perspectives was useful; I especially liked her presentations on grading.” Another first-year Composition student stated simply, “[The TA preparation facilitator] is fabulous!”

This same appreciation for the facilitator was revealed in the second set of prompts. The second prompt in this set focused on the instructor as it asked students to: “Please comment on the teacher’s effectiveness in modeling good Composition teaching practices in the course itself (e.g. leading discussions, use of small groups for brainstorming and peer critique, use of handouts, etc.)” All three of the Composition students given this prompt responded with effusive praise for the instructor.

One first-year Composition participant was full of admiration for the instructor of the course, writing,

Excellent. [The TA preparation facilitator] is a non-judgmental listener who meets TAs at their individual points of needs and understanding. She offers insight and information in a

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<sup>39</sup> All nine of the Composition students who responded to the narrative evaluations had the same TA preparation facilitator.

way that incorporates and advances students' contributions, rather than replacing them. (If that makes sense.) [The TA preparation facilitator's] constructivist leanings show in her teaching. She also balances on-the-ground practical concerns with the very important theoretical concerns or principles that new teachers can easily lose sight of.

Another first-year Composition participant echoed the above sentiments by answering, [The TA preparation facilitator] is the best of models. She is fair, open, and accepting of diverse approaches and ideas. The class work was divided into enough and varied activities to keep us all "there," even on a Wednesday afternoon! The peer critique exercises were helpful in thinking about how peer work may be facilitated in my own classroom and what impacts it may have on my students.

Similarly, a first-year Composition graduate student responded that the instructor's modeling was: "Very effective. I think that because we're all grad students, we didn't need as much direction as freshmen would need, but the peer review sessions were helpful as were the presentations."

### *Importance of Collaboration and Sharing of Best Practices and Concerns*

When asked, "What in the course was useful to you?" one idea in particular was especially prevalent among three of the six Composition students who responded to it by pointing to the importance of sharing their ideas and assignments with others. As one first-year graduate student from Composition noted: "This course was useful as a resource for my first quarter teaching in the Writing Program because it kept me on track academically and supported me emotionally. I really liked being accountable for the assignments, as well as having the opportunity to share assignments with others." Another first-year Composition student referred to the course as "a sounding board for comments/questions" and appreciated the opportunity to

“see others’ work... worksheets, handouts, etc.” A third first-year Composition student also indicated an appreciation for the “Sharing of assignments, small group work on lesson plans, [and] building relationships with other TAs.” This same theme was prevalent in the other set of prompts as well, even though it was embedded within queries particular to the other section of the course, which therefore will be discussed later in this section.

This sentiment was also reflected in responses to the first prompt in the second set, which focused on the varied experience levels the program’s TAs had and queried the students about how effectively they felt the course provided support for all of its participants: “There is a wide variation in the prior teaching experience Writing Program TAs have. Because of this variation, the main objective of 501B is to provide as much support as possible for those new to teaching writing, while at the same time providing freedom within the curricular guidelines to make the course your own. Please comment on how well you feel this objective was met.”

One of the first-year Composition students responded to this prompt very positively by writing:

501B handily meets the objective. Information discussed was timely and appropriate to the material we were teaching in all our W2 classrooms. The supervisors were most available, helpful and supportive. Everyone’s experiences were honored and the sharing of assignments and ideas helped me to stay on track and gave me ideas for my own classroom.

In light of the themes of sharing reported by several of the Composition TAs, it is worth noting that one Composition TA who was a second-year graduate student expressed being overwhelmed by the class listserv of more than 20 people. In response to the question of what was useful in the course, “The listserv serves a useful function, but with about 20 people, it gets

overwhelming (especially when I'm in 2 other classes that are doing the same thing!).” This individual suggested another way of maintaining the listserv community, but in a perhaps more manageable way: “maybe we could have ‘listserv communities’ of 3-4 people who respond to each other and then report to the larger group, or something like that.” It appears, then, that the issue this student was responding to was more of a critique of the system for sharing than of the actual act of sharing itself.

The fourth and final prompt in the other set invited students to make any additional comments they might have in the interest of improving the course: “Please add any other comments you feel would help the instructor improve the course.” Interestingly, all three of the Composition students who answered this prompt expressed a desire for getting more out of the class, whether in terms of interacting more with seasoned instructors, with more opportunities for observing classrooms, more focus on the theoretical readings rather than the readings that would be assigned to the first-year Composition students, and more timely discussion of issues pertaining to TAs’ classroom preparation.

One first-year Composition TA responded to this fourth prompt by noting that while the sharing of assignments with other TAs was useful, this individual would have preferred also hearing about the assignments used by more experienced instructors:

While it is very helpful to share assignments with first-year TA peers, I would appreciate even more exposure to “proven” lesson plans. Perhaps having seasoned Writing 2 instructors or each of the supervisors present and share a lesson that has been successful for them would be helpful. Some topics might include; Peer Review Strategies, Thesis Workshop, Intro and Conclusions, Organization & Structure, any mini lesson techniques

w/ small groups that teach effective reading strategies for students, syllabus sharing by unit.

Similarly, another first-year Composition TA responded to this same prompt by stating that:

Since I wasn't in 501A, I'm not sure what went on or was covered, so I hesitate to make any substantive comments. But, I wonder if it might be possible to incorporate an element where we observe each other? I know that TAs probably observe lecturers and other experienced TAs in 501A, and I know that peer observation is something we can do on our own, and many TAs would possibly balk at having required observations, so this may not be a welcome idea... And overall, I enjoyed meeting weekly to discuss teaching and Writing 2, because it fascinates me!

*Desire for More Advanced Engagement with Composition Theory*

Another first-year Composition graduate student responded to this prompt positively, albeit couched with a desire for more curricular freedom, reflecting the fact that all first-time TAs were required to follow a common textbook and set of essay prompts:

To a certain extent, [this objective] was met, because no matter how long you've taught writing, meeting with fellow writing teachers is always helpful. As far as curricular freedom, I did feel a bit constrained by having to use a book, (required) and sequence the units in a particular way. On the other hand, being new to [this university] and the [writing unit], having something spelled out for me was helpful. But perhaps in the future the TAs can maybe do all the same first unit and then choose how to sequence the other two?

Another first-year Composition TA indicated some frustration with the course, but as evidenced with the Composition students' answers to the previous set of prompts, this student was looking for more of what the course could offer, rather than less:

Fairly well—and better toward the end of the quarter, as the less experienced people got more confident. I tried to take an attitude of “take what you like and leave the rest,” and I often found that I had much to learn from less experienced people. That said, I was often frustrated in conversations about topics that were part of my undergraduate training and experience, and long familiar—such as rubrics, assignment design, etc. I think that my frustration was exacerbated that the study of teaching is my area, not just a practice. I’m not sure, still, how to modify the course accordingly or whether that would even be appropriate. I just know that I usually felt like I could have used my time better on something else rather than reviewing basic concepts, listening to others’ work and anxieties that I just didn’t share.

Also for Prompt #4, a first-year Composition TA responded by focusing on the students in the class and their particular interests:

I also think this particular population of TAs loved to focus on the readings, and thought up interesting ways of presenting those readings and discussing their finer points. I think a lot of that energy would have been better spent looking at writing skill concerns, like organization, invention, revision strategies, etc. it’s a writing course, not a course in this particular set of articles/content.

One first-year Composition TA responded to this prompt by indicating that the class felt like it moved too slowly and that it felt like a review, although this individual acknowledged that the other TAs in the class seemed content with the slower pace: “I would’ve liked the preparing



for and discussion of units and assignments to speed up a bit—we wound up talking about things I’d just done in class rather than developing them in 501B for me to take into the classroom. I was always one week and sometimes two or more weeks ahead of this course in terms of prep.”

#### *Appreciation of Efficiency of Integrating Meetings*

The third prompt in this set (of four prompts) was concerned with a practice that was new to the course, which involved utilizing class time in 501B for TAs to meet with their supervisors, which is a requirement for successful completion of the course.

All three of the Composition graduate students who were asked this prompt responded favorably to it by emphasizing their appreciation of the time savings involved via integrating their meetings with class time. One first-year Composition graduate student referred to the integration of meetings into the class as, “A stroke of scheduling genius. I appreciate not having to book another meeting on the side. Ours were informal rap sessions, which I enjoyed.” Another first-year Composition student commented on the system by deeming it, “Great! It was nice to have it scheduled on the same day/time as class. It may seem like a small thing, but with the hectic schedule of a grad student, it gave us one less thing to worry about.” Similarly, another first-year Composition TA also appreciated this plan, stating, “TA supervisors’ attendance in 501B meetings was a good opportunity to ‘touch base’ and effectively used everyone’s time to schedule observations and meetings. I would continue the practice.”

#### *Snacks*

One Composition graduate student responded to the question about what was useful in the course by expressing appreciation for the snacks brought to class by the TA preparation facilitators. While this may not seem relevant to the above discussion, several of the TAs from

Literature commented on it as well, suggesting that snacks were an important component of the course, at least for some of the students.<sup>40</sup>

### *Literature TAs' Responses*

Because there were TAs from Literature in each of the eight classes under study, all four sets of prompts listed in Chapter Three<sup>41</sup> were posed to the group overall. The Literature TAs' responses to all four sets of prompts are reported together below, as similar themes and patterns were common across the four sets.

The most common theme among the group of 50 Literature TAs queried was an appreciation of and a desire for further discussion of classroom management concerns and issues, or what they often referred to as “practical” as opposed to theoretical information. An outgrowth of this same theme is that this group of TAs also appreciated the opportunity to share activities developed for use in the FYC classroom with one another as they worked to develop their syllabi and a set of assignments and activities for their classrooms. Like the TAs from Composition, the Literature TAs also appreciated their TA Program facilitator(s), and a number of them also noted their appreciation for the snacks that their facilitator brought to the class meetings. However, unlike the Composition TAs, many of the Literature TAs noted their dissatisfaction with the time commitment that the TA preparation program required, with many of this group of TAs calling for fewer class meetings, shorter class periods, and the like.

### *Importance of Collaboration and Sharing of Best Practices and Concerns*

Many of the Literature students were quite appreciative of the opportunity to collaborate with their peers and to share ideas for classroom activities as they worked to develop their syllabi

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<sup>40</sup> The snacks in the class were also commented on in the interviews with both sets of TAs, and these responses will be reported in Chapters Five and Six.

<sup>41</sup> See Appendix E for a list of these prompts and the quarters in which they were used.

for teaching FYC. In response to the question “what in the course was useful to you,” one second-year Literature student noted, “Surprisingly so, I found that the use of pedagogical examples and work-shopping to be the most helpful. Conceptualizing new approaches to teaching is difficult without outside input.” To the same question, a second-year Literature student noted that the course was “useful for thinking about assignments for next year” and also that it was “useful to get to know my fellow TAs and the professor.” And a third-year Literature student responded to the same question by saying, “I liked the interactive component of the class – getting to hear from other Writing 2 instructors and share ideas with them. Posting assignment to the web also provides all of us with a rich teaching resource.”

In response to the prompt that focused on whether respondents felt that there was enough support in the class without restricting the TAs’ curricular freedom, another third-year Literature student stated, “I think it was helpful having a support network of other TAs new to teaching writing. The most helpful element was seeing actual examples of things teachers were doing in their classrooms, assignments and rubrics they were using, etc.” Similarly, a second-year graduate student responded to what was useful by saying, “I also enjoyed having discussions with other new and experienced instructors about teaching tips and how to run a discussion.”

A fifth-year Literature student noted that what was most useful in the class was the individual’s sense that, “The class does successfully create a “culture” of dialogue about teaching writing. The exchange between students and faculty members is really useful and has helped me to understand the goals of the Writing Program and how I can best meet them through my teaching. I also appreciate the sharing of materials such as syllabi and lesson plans.”

### *Student Presentations*

In response to the prompt asking about the balance between providing support and offering curricular freedom, one third-year Literature student noted, “I got wonderful new ideas from hearing about how other teachers conduct their classrooms. I think the presentations were the best part for accomplishing this objective.” To the same question, a second-year Literature student noted, “The presentations were often helpful and I found my peers to be inspiring and very well-trained as teachers.”

A fourth-year Literature student responded to the same question by saying, “The current writing instructors’ presentations and question/answer periods were the most helpful of all as they gave very concrete ideas of activities and response criteria from the real world. The observations also really helped.” To the question of what was most useful in the class, a third-year Literature student noted, “The presentations were very helpful. I really appreciated being able to take other instructors’ ideas and assignments.” And to the same question, another third-year Literature student said, “I really enjoyed the individual presentations about teaching activities. It was nice to see what other instructors were doing.” Another third-year Literature student responded to the same question by noting, “I luvved [sic] the presentations: getting other people’s ideas was useful toward creating my own assignments.”

### *Desire for More Emphasis on “Practical” Issues: Practice vs. Theory*

While a few of the Literature students indicated their appreciation for the Composition/pedagogical theory that was presented in the class, most of them indicated that they preferred an emphasis on practical concerns over theory. Nevertheless, in response to the prompt asking students to “assess the effectiveness of 501A in preparing you for the instructional challenges of Writing 2,” a second-year Literature student stated, “I felt that it was excellent; I

really liked the Lindemann (2001) text and I feel very well prepared for the fall because of it.”

Similarly, in response to the same question, another second-year Literature student wrote:

“Outstanding. I feel like our time was very well utilized. The material we covered has served to answer questions I would never have even thought to ask. I feel very prepared to walk into a Writing 2 classroom next quarter. The reading, discussion, and assignments worked together well.”

However, in answer to this same prompt, a second-year graduate student in Literature responded in what was a more typical way by saying, “I think more practical applications may have been helpful, e.g. mock classroom activities rather than reading chapters of a book and responding to them.” Indeed, in answer to this same question, another second-year Literature student responded, “Heavier on nuts and bolts, lighter (to no) philosophy discussion, fewer meetings would have been a better use of time for me. Like, establish a syllabus. Plan a course. I’d rather have read the rest of the stuff over the summer and used web resources, including forum/email listserv, for dealing with problems, tips, etc.”

Similarly, a third-year Literature student stated, “I would appreciate more specific tips, examples of handouts, etc. If I could have a stack of grammar usage handouts or different peer review assignments, I’d use them much more than my stack of Unit 1 assignments. The more specific our work was in 501B, the better it was in supporting my teaching this quarter.” Another third-year Literature student noted, “I would have liked a sample day-by-day calendar from an instructor who had taught the units previously.” Yet to the same question, a third-year Literature student stated, “I also took 501A, and I was a little worried that this would be a repeat of spring quarter; however, I think pairing the readings with application (turning in unit assignments, etc.) was very useful.”

A first-year Literature student responded to what in the class was most useful by stating, “Practical tasks for responding to student writing” and said that the course could be improved by offering “more practical tasks regarding running class to class practical lesson plans perhaps? That however might have been too taxing for this class.” Similarly, a third-year Literature responded to this question and noted that “Lindemann (2001) is not so helpful. I’d like more practical advice for the course itself—structuring assignments etc.—and not the abstracted rhetoric theory of Lindemann.”

However, responding to the same question, another second-year Literature student seemed to appreciate the balance of theory and practice, noting, “The course did a good job of introducing the material we will be teaching and anticipating possible problems. It was also useful to think about writing from a theoretical standpoint and compare different approaches.

*Grammar.* While concerns about teaching or addressing grammar issues did not come up at all among the Composition TAs, a few of the Literature TAs emphasized their appreciation for discussions about handling grammar in the FYC classroom, and/or indicated that they would have liked more input on this topic. One second-year Literature student responded to the prompt asking what was most useful in the class by responding,

I think the most helpful part of the course was the grammar presentations. It was interesting to see the various means and manners we could institute to teach something like grammar. In my experience, such lessons have a tendency to be dry, but I really enjoyed seeing how it could be made fun and interactive. I also found the course observations to be extremely useful.

A third-year Literature student responded similarly to the same question, pointing to a desire for more “Practical advice about grading and teaching grammar, especially advice about how to make grammar lessons relevant to individual cases.”

*Condensing the TA Preparation Program/Classes*

A prevalent theme among the group of Literature TAs was the call for a shortened or condensed version of the TA preparation classes. As one second-year graduate student in Literature stated in response to the prompt asking what about the course could be improved, “Overall, I felt this course could have been shorter and more useful. It could have met for one hour (it is, after all, only 2 units).” Another second-year Literature student answered the same question with this suggestion: “Could be condensed into a five-week course.” A third-year student answered the same prompt by stating that the course could be improved by making it have, “Shorter class periods, or a bi-weekly schedule.” Yet another third-year Literature student noted, “I think both 501A and 501B could be streamlined to meet 1 time every two weeks. I don’t think so much seminar time is necessary.” A second-year student also answered this prompt by saying, “Shorter class periods—15 hours is plenty.” As another third-year Literature student put it,

Dropping the last three weeks, for there is no point. The Lindemann (2001) was of limited usefulness; it seemed an hour of filler. This course works best as a networking session of about an hour twenty that forces those first assignments out of us, gives a forum—but everything else? Filler.”

In response to the prompt that asked respondents to assess the usefulness of the course in preparing them to teach Writing 2, one first-year Literature student wrote,

My feelings about this course are conflicted. In theory, I believe it's absolutely essential, and much of the information should be things all teachers should know, not just writing teachers. College professors need some sort of teacher training! Yet I feel that the goals of 501A could best be met in a week long workshop setting, perhaps, rather than an entire semester. Then 501 B could act as a more hands on practicum/workshop.

Responding to the same prompt, a third-year Literature student noted, "I very much appreciate the group sharing we did, but I feel I'd have gotten as much out of the course if it were 1 hour a week, with more active online discussions." When asked to "Please add any other comments you feel would help the instructor improve the course," a second-year Literature student wrote,

As I said during the TA training in summer—I'm an advocate of restructuring the 501A/B etc. sequence—not because I find the content bad, but because the timing is not as well-suited as it could be. All I can think of now is a sort of condensed version of 501A/B and the summer TA training. In general, the material and experience was good, but too time consuming. I do, however, firmly believe in strong TA training and think courses like this, in theory, are necessary.

*Concerns about Balancing the Program with Other Responsibilities.* While the Composition students indicated no such concerns, the Literature students placed a great deal of emphasis on trying to balance their involvement with the TA preparation program along with their other responsibilities as graduate students. In response to the prompt about assessing the effectiveness of the class in preparing for the instructional challenges, one second-year graduate student in Literature responded, "Especially considering the workload graduate students have, keeping the two hour time to hands-on training without any "homework" would have been more beneficial."



In addition to coursework, many of the Literature students were also in the process of preparing for their Master's comprehensive exams at the same time that they were participating in the TA preparation program. This conflict also seemed to play a role in the common theme of calling for decreased engagement with the TA preparation courses. As one second-year Literature student responded to what could be improved in the course, "It is almost impossible to maintain focus during exam quarter. Either making this an intensive half-hour hour course or putting in another quarter would help immeasurably." Similarly, another second-year Literature student answered this same prompt by stating, "Perhaps the work could be due later on so as to not interfere with our exam schedule. I really value this class and I'd like to devote more time than I am able to because of the dreaded MA exam. However, I look forward to revising my syllabus this summer!" And to this same question, another third-year Literature student stated, "Although I think this class has been really helpful pedagogically, I don't know if we need to meet every week. We're all so busy that I think it would be easier for us to focus if the class met slightly less often, especially since we have to wait all summer before putting the good ideas we've gotten from this class into practice."

Along these same lines, one second-year Literature student responded to the prompt asking respondents to "Please offer any comments you may upon the training you have so far received and upon the training process more generally" by stating,

I think this class had very bad timing for me, since this is my examination quarter. I haven't been able to devote myself to the class as much as I would have liked, and now that it's the end of the quarter I feel like this class can't really be a priority. I would like it if it were offered at other times of the year, especially since many of us are in the English department and we know we will be teaching writing eventually.

The above response is particularly interesting, as it reflects the student's recognition that being prepared to teach Composition is indeed necessary for those pursuing a career as a professor of English, but it also reflects the juggling of priorities that many graduate students experience as they make their way through graduate school.

*Appreciation of Efficiency of Integrating Meetings.* In the fall of 2002, a new policy was implemented by which TAs' mandatory meetings with their supervisors was integrated into the class time. The third prompt that quarter asked for the TAs' response to this policy change; the Literature students unanimously praised it, just as did the group of Composition TAs. Sample responses from the Literature students included one from a third-year student who stated, "Good—I really appreciated having the supervisor meetings included in the 501B meetings," while another third-year student wrote, "That was great. I especially liked that it consolidated the training time." A second-year student wrote, "This is good—this should definitely be a part of 501B as opposed to a separate meeting time."

Two third-year Literature student seemed to appreciate the opportunity this policy afforded for having small group meetings, stating, "[Having the meetings with TA supervisors in 501B] was great, enabling above small discussions with experienced teachers" and "The meetings with TA supervisors worked well integrated with 501B because certain issues that came up during 501B could be discussed among a smaller group of cohorts."

One third-year Literature student somewhat begrudgingly noted, "This has been fine. I'm not sure that these meetings are necessary, but they do foster a better relationship with the supervisors."

*Appreciation for the TA Preparation Program Facilitator*

As was the case with the Composition TAs, there was consensus among the Literature TAs in regard to their appreciation for the TA preparation course facilitator(s).<sup>42</sup> As one second-year Literature student wrote in response to the prompt asking respondents to, “Assess the effectiveness of 501B in assisting you with the instructional challenges of Writing 2”:

[TA preparation facilitator 1]—thank you so much for beefing up this training class. I feel lucky to have received this training and I think it will improve the quality of Writing 2 courses. I especially enjoyed witnessing your teaching style. You are a truly gifted teacher and an inspiring example. Thank you!

In response to a completely different prompt, i.e. “Please comment on the teacher’s effectiveness in modeling good Composition teaching practices in the course itself (e.g. leading discussions, use of small groups for brainstorming and peer critique, use of handouts, etc.):” a third-year Literature student commented, “Overall, [TA preparation facilitator 1] did an excellent job. She has so much to share with this group, and I always sense that she is trying to empower us as first-time writing instructors.” In response to this same prompt, another third-year Literature student responded, “[TA preparation facilitator 1] was always very personable and clear about her expectations. I think she modeled Comp. teaching practices well.” Also in response to the above question, another third-year Literature student wrote: “[TA preparation facilitator 1] is an excellent teacher and a wonderful model. Discussions were open, all perspectives appreciated, yet we stayed on topic and moved through the daily tasks smoothly.”

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<sup>42</sup> Two different TA preparation facilitators served this group of TAs. When the respondents indicated which facilitator they were referring to by name, for the sake of clarity they will be referred to as “TA preparation facilitator 1” and “TA preparation facilitator 2” in this section.

In response to the prompt asking what in the course was useful, a second-year Literature student wrote, “I felt like I learned a lot about classroom management from [TA preparation facilitator 1’s] teaching.” In response to this same question, a third-year Literature graduate student noted, “She is an excellent facilitator: she has a nice energy, is very informative, and is flexible to her students’ needs and desires.” Also to this prompt, a third-year Literature student responded, “The [TA preparation facilitator 1’s] ongoing reminders that she is here to help and support us in our teaching was also very helpful.”

These positive responses were not confined to just one instructor. Also in response to the question of what was useful, one second-year graduate student from Literature responded, “Having [TA preparation facilitator 2] as a teacher and mentor was the best part of this class—she is so accommodating and understanding and we learned a lot from her.” Another first-year graduate student from Literature answered this same question similarly by writing, “I also greatly appreciated the instructor’s availability and responsiveness to questions and suggestions; [TA preparation facilitator 2] was readily available to address issues and concerns I had with assignments and with materials for use in Writing 2.” Another third-year Literature student in this same section responded to the same prompt simply by saying “Instructor is very good!”

*Sense of Disconnect from the Instructor and other TAs*

There was one category that did not come up among the Composition TAs but which a few of the Literature TAs alluded to. Although the majority of the TAs from Literature responded favorably to the course facilitator(s), three of the Literature TAs indicated that they felt as if there was a disconnect or divide either between them and the rest of the TAs and/or with the course facilitator. In response to how the course might be improved, a third-year Literature student wrote,

Sometimes the instructor assumed a needlessly adversarial attitude toward us. We aren't invested in diagramming sentences or copy-editing our students' papers, so there's no need to disabuse us of these ideas. What helps are specific suggestions about how to teach writing and grammar effectively—much earlier than week six in the second quarter of a two-quarter course.

A similar theme came up twice in response to the prompt asking students to, "Please comment on the teacher's effectiveness in modeling good Composition teaching practices in the course itself (e.g. leading discussions, use of small groups for brainstorming and peer critique, use of handouts, etc.)" One third-year Literature student responded, "I thought the modeling was OK, but there should be a recognition that we are not Writing 2 students. Some flexibility in approach I think is necessary so that TAs do not feel like children. Observing actual Writing 2 classrooms is a more effective method of observing models." Similarly, and in response to this same question, another third-year Literature student responded, "Small group discussion was always more helpful than class-wide discussion; when it felt like modeling, I and some of my peers felt insulted."

In response to what in the course could be improved, a third-year Literature student stated,

I feel as though there is a divide between the English grads and Education grads in the class. Although we all care so much about teaching our students, I feel that at some times there wasn't enough information exchanged between the two groups to 1) understand our respective (and similar) methodologies and 2) learn from each other. I think more communication and understanding is needed in this area.

Although this idea of a “divide” between the Literature and Composition TAs only came up once in the narrative evaluations, it was referred to in the interviews several times, and thus it will be considered at more length in the following section.

### *Snacks*

When asked what is the course the students found useful, seven of the 50 Literature TAs responded by noting their appreciation for the cookies—or the snacks—that were brought to class by the course facilitator. While four of the seven simply listed the cookies/snacks in answering this prompt, (albeit in conjunction with other things they found useful in the course), one second-year Literature student not only noted an appreciation for the “SNACKS!” but also explained that, “This is a yucky time of day and they were great to keep us going.” Another third-year Literature student pointed out that, “The food was a plus—food can never be over-rated,” while yet another second-year Literature student simply noted, “Also, FOOD is good. ☺”

## CHAPTER 5: COMPOSITION TAS' INTERVIEW RESULTS

This chapter and the next report on the results of ten two-part stimulated recall interviews conducted with five TAs from Composition and five TAs from Literature several years after they participated in the TA preparation program.<sup>43</sup> Specifically, these interviews focused on how the TAs responded to the practicum and what they took away from it in terms of their pedagogy and teaching practices, as well as on how much resistance, if any, members of the two groups demonstrated in response to the preparation program and the teaching of first-year Composition (FYC). The interview responses also shed some light onto the extent to which disciplinary differences as well as program distinctions played a role in the TAs' attitudes and perceptions about the TA preparation program.

While the first interview focused on questions about interviewees' backgrounds and their memories of as well as their responses to their TA preparation program, the second interview was designed to focus on participants' current teaching practices in an effort to try and determine to what extent these practices were consistent with what was promoted in the TA preparation. But because the interviewees' responses fell into themes and patterns that cut across the two interview sessions, for ease of reading, this chapter and the next are organized according the study's research questions rather than according to the structure inherent in the interview sequence.

### Composition TAs' Background

Brief background information about each of the Composition participants is provided below, including an overview of their previous educational experiences, their reasons for

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<sup>43</sup> While some of these interviewees may have also participated as survey respondents—the responses of whom were reported in the previous chapter—there is no way to know where there might be overlap, since the survey responses were anonymous.

pursuing doctoral work, and the extent of their prior teaching experiences. This information serves as useful context for the opinions expressed within the interviews, for the participants' individual experiences serve to color their attitudes and perceptions about both TA preparation and teaching Composition. Once this context has been established, the remainder of this chapter focuses on the reporting of the Composition participants' responses to the interview questions.

All five of the Composition TAs interviewed for this study came into the graduate program in Composition with M.A. degrees; four had earned M.A.s in English, and one had earned an M.A. in Education after completing a B.A. in English. All five of the Composition TAs had had some experience teaching writing before becoming a TA; three had been Composition TAs elsewhere, one had been a high school English teacher, and one had taught creative writing in middle school. Because of the teaching experience that these graduate students already had when they entered the graduate program, four out of five of them were immediately eligible to teach FYC, and thus they were TAs as first-year graduate students.

All of the Composition interviewees noted that they selected this particular graduate program in part because they were interested in working with the graduate program's "big names"—i.e. those faculty with a national reputation—and all of them also indicated that they were looking forward to teaching writing in a college or university setting upon completing the program and earning their Ph.D.s.

### *Nick*

When asked why he had chosen this particular doctoral program, Nick responded that he had made the choice largely because he wanted to study with the well-known scholar who heads the University's Composition program. Nick had recently completed an M.A. Degree in English with an emphasis in teaching writing from a California State University where he had served as a



Composition TA for a year and where he had completed a TA preparation course. His undergraduate degree is in Speech Communication.

*Jackie*

Prior to joining the graduate program in Composition, Jackie had been a high school English teacher in California who in her first year of teaching determined she had a lot of questions about education and research and how to teach writing effectively in the classroom. After her second-year teaching high school she applied to this graduate Composition program because she hoped to work with the scholars who were associated with it. Her goal was to earn a Composition Ph.D. and to teach at a state university and conduct research. Her undergraduate degree is in English, with an emphasis in Language and Literature, and she also has an M.A. in Education from a California state school.

*Piper*

Piper did her undergrad work in Literature at the study site and then moved on to a state university to earn an M.A. in English with an emphasis in creative writing. It was there that she first taught Composition as a TA and she discovered that she “loved it.” She was working in the university’s writing center when she came across a posting about the Ph.D. program in Composition at her undergraduate institution. Because her interest in teaching Composition had grown and also because of her familiarity with the university, she felt like the program was a good match for her. Piper’s goal was to earn a Ph.D. in the program and then obtain a faculty position at a community college where she could teach Composition. In her words, “I wanted to teach Comp.; I didn’t want to teach Literature ever.”

*Kelly*

Kelly was working toward earning her Master’s degree in “English and Rhetoric and the

Teaching of Writing” at a California State University when she heard about the graduate program in Education at the study site. She had been a TA and completed TA preparation at the university where she was doing her MA work. While there she had also worked in an advanced position in the university’s writing center. Her undergraduate degree was in Literature, and she obtained it from another state university in California. Kelly’s career goal was to be a “compositionist at the university level and possibly direct a writing center.” Kelly was a very successful TA, so much so that she was promoted in her second-year to a Teaching Associate, a position of leadership over the other TAs. As such, she attended the TA practicum not only in her first year as a TA, but for the next two years as well.

#### *Anna*

Before joining the graduate program in Education, Anna had spent four years teaching high school English classes, including both Composition and Literature courses. Prior to that, she had taught creative writing in a middle school. Her MA was in creative writing and she had also earned a teaching credential. Anna came to this university with the goal of earning a Ph.D. and teaching at the college-level. She was hoping to gain experience in and ultimately be able to market herself as either a Composition professor, a Teacher Education professor, or an English Education professor. Because she had been awarded a fellowship in her first year of graduate study at this university, Anna became a TA for the writing unit in her second year rather than in her first year as all the other Composition TAs did, and so despite her prior teaching experience she was required to take both 501A and 501B, whereas all of the other Composition interviewees only took 501B. Moreover, in her first year as a graduate student, she took a class in Teaching Technical Writing. So when she became a TA, it was for Writing 2E, rather than Writing 2, which the rest of her cohort taught initially.

### How Did the Composition TAs Respond to TA Preparation in an Independent Writing Unit?

Overall, the Composition TAs embraced their TA preparation. They aligned themselves with the program's facilitator, they acculturated themselves to the TA preparation and to the writing unit itself, they viewed both the theory and practice as useful, and they engaged with the text for the class. They also indicated that they felt supported and welcomed not only in the TA preparation program but also in the writing unit overall.

#### *They Embraced It*

In response to the question of how they felt about being hired as TAs for the writing unit, all five of the Composition TAs interviewed indicated that they were excited about the opportunity to be a part of the writing unit and to teach FYC. As Jackie recalled, "I was so excited! I love teaching and I remember feeling really sad about having to leave that part of my life behind [to go back to graduate school]. And I was really excited to have an opportunity to continue teaching and to teach at the college level." Piper expressed a similar sentiment, noting, "I was excited about everything at graduate school, so that was just one more thing I was excited about."

Nick also saw being a TA for the writing unit as an opportunity for his own growth and development. As he stated, "It was a chance to use it for my own of benefit, partly because of the way it was set up: you design your units, talk about what you do about in class. Doing TA training gave me a chance to be with [the TA preparation facilitator] a little bit. I wanted to do well. I wanted the TAs—this is my career, and I wanted to shine. I wanted to learn." Indeed, when Nick was shown the syllabus for the 501B class during a stimulated recall interview several years after he took the class, his immediate response was, "Oh, this is great to see this! Because this was my first quarter here and I can't tell you how excited I was to be here and study

with [the TA preparation facilitator]. The truth was I just had so much respect for her. Yeah, this is great.”

Kelly also recalled her excitement, and at the same time she indicated that this excitement was not shared by the Literature students in the class: “I was totally excited. And I was totally prepared and not at all frightened. Anna was in my class. I think she was the only other Education person so everyone else was from English and they were all terrified [of teaching FYC].”

When asked how she felt about her TA experience, Anna pointed to the ways in which she availed herself to as many teaching opportunities as possible within the program:

It was a lot of work but that’s because I taught four different classes in a year, which was great and which made me more marketable, but was a lot of work. I enjoyed doing it, though. I enjoyed the students and I enjoyed teaching writing and I enjoyed getting to do different types of writing and different types of research.

Piper was similarly enthusiastic about the opportunity to teach for the writing unit, stating, “having the experience of teaching while you’re studying teaching is really important.”

When asked if there was anything on the practicum that he had rejected, Nick said no, although he mentioned the program’s requirement that TA follow its curricular model during their first quarter. But according to him,

[The TA preparation facilitator] was super reasonable. I think asking me to follow the program’s text choice, for one quarter of the year, to teach those lessons before having to design my own courses from the ground up could have been a source of some kind of an offense where I felt insulted before I understood the purpose of it. They were good lessons after all. There was a bit of structure and they were asking for only one quarter of

that; it seems reasonable, seems supportive. So no, I wouldn't say I rejected anything in there.

*They Aligned Themselves with the Program Facilitator*

Some of the Composition TAs viewed the practicum as a prime opportunity to interact with the program's facilitator, who they deeply admired from the start. When asked how he felt about taking the practicum with her, Nick noted, "I would only say that [the TA preparation facilitator] is a class act from A to Z, and she's just such a professional. I think working with her in any capacity is a privilege. Being in a class with her was a great experience." Kelly had similar feelings, stating in answer to the same question, "[The TA preparation facilitator] was teaching the practicum, and she was also my adviser. I was just excited to be around her."

In fact, the Composition interviewees were unanimous in their appreciation for the TA preparation facilitator, seeing her as a model and as a strong supporter of their endeavors. As far as Nick was concerned, observing the TA program facilitator in action was the most instructive part of the practicum:

[The TA preparation facilitator] herself was an exemplary model on how to conduct oneself in class, from her demeanor, to her presence, to the way she carried herself. She was professional, organized, informal—maybe not informal—but conversational, interested, and available outside of class. I think she was a model herself—and I was really keen to that; I mean, she was director of the program. For me, I was looking at her and saying, "Here are the embodied values of the program in a person." That probably influenced me more than any other specifics as far as reading chapters, reporting out, talking about lessons. People had very good ideas in terms of the writing and pedagogical stuff. Somebody would say, "I'm doing this, showing this film." That class was a

practical, conducive atmosphere for improving current teaching. But as far as more specific principle things, I was getting more from observing [the TA preparation facilitator].

Similarly, when asked what she considered to be the best part of TA preparation, Jackie responded succinctly, “[The TA preparation facilitator]. She makes you feel like you can do anything. [She makes you feel like], ‘You are smart, you are capable, you can do this. You’re going to be great at it.’” Jackie went on to describe the characteristics of the facilitator that she wanted to be able to emulate: “I have so much respect for her and think that she’s great. I want to be her when I grow up. She’s such a professional. She can balance that caring motherly, womanly side with the hard-assed academic. She’s a force to be reckoned with. Being around her has shaped me in ways I can’t really articulate.”

In response to whether there was anything in TA preparation that at the time he found unworkable but that he might have embraced later on, Nick flatly stated, “No. I mean [the TA preparation facilitator] is such a scholar in Writing across the Curriculum. I came in knowing how she worked. She wrote those books. She was a senior scholar. She was totally fair. I embraced everything she was bringing.”

When asked if there was anything from the TA preparation that she had initially tried but later rejected or found unworkable, Jackie said emphatically, “No. I can’t imagine that [the TA preparation facilitator] would say something that wouldn’t work with my philosophy or the way I approach anything.” When the question was reversed, by asking if there was anything she might have initially felt unsure about but then later embraced, her answer was again emphatic:

No. I think we have really similar philosophies about teaching. I remember she would talk about things that she considered to be an issue and I would nod my head like, “Oh,

yeah, I would never do that,” or, “I can’t believe that jerk is doing that.” I remember she would introduce certain ideas and say, “It’s OK to do this or it’s OK to do that,” that I hadn’t thought about. But I can’t remember ever thinking, “Nah, that’s not a good idea.” Reflecting the depth of her respect for the TA preparation facilitator, Jackie went on to say, “My thought was that anything that came out of her mouth was gold, and I still continue to think so.”

In answer to the same question about initially rejecting something that she later embraced, Kelly said, “No, I can’t think of anything,” and upon probing she responded, “I can’t remember ever thinking that she’d say anything foolish ever.”

*They Acculturated Themselves to the TA Preparation Program and the Writing Unit*

As the literature in Chapter Two revealed, enculturation is an important aspect of being a successful graduate student, and the interview data in this study reflected a desire for enculturation on the part of the Composition TAs. Several of the Composition participants reflected on their drive to acculturate themselves to both their graduate program and the writing unit. However, they also made clear that this was not a difficult task, as they felt that their respective philosophies were well aligned with both. Moreover, because they saw themselves already as compositionists and all but one had taught Composition elsewhere, the process of becoming a Composition TA was not an especially big leap for them to make.

As Piper recalled,

Even though I was definitely not as good of a teacher as I am now, I’d been surrounded by Comp. people, I’d been teaching Comp. I had been a TA already at community college and at another university. Although I’ve improved because of all the [training], I still wasn’t totally fresh. I wasn’t totally new going, “What do I do in the class?” I was going, “Give me the stuff so I can create stuff to do.”

Nick also pointed to the Composition TAs' relative experience when he recalled how he and his colleagues felt about the possibility of their obtaining TAships for the program: "There were no guarantees, but I think we felt that we were the best writing teachers and we were fine in the sense that we were trained, we were interested, and we were down with the program. So we felt like we had a good shot. [The TA preparation facilitator] was a part of our Ph.D. program in Language, Literacy and Composition so we felt an affinity with her. Whereas she wasn't a part of the Ph.D. program in English and Literature. So for us, she was like one of our leaders."

Yet despite the Composition TAs' prior teaching experience, the practicum did provide further opportunities for them to become acquainted with the program's culture and its values. When asked whether she felt the TA preparation was beneficial to her, Jackie focused on this particular aspect of it, stating, "Yeah, because I had never taught at the college level and it introduced me to the Writing Program and what the philosophies were and what drills were available. And there were a lot." In fact, Jackie referred to the practicum as "absolutely necessary" and noted,

I understand how people can come in and think, 'I don't need this. I've been teaching at a community college for over five years.' But it's an absolutely necessary class. Even if you've been teaching writing, you haven't been trained to teach writing. I think you have to have at least one class that sits you down and says, "This is what our program focuses on, this is what our practices and policies are about. This is what we honor as a profession, this is what we honor at the school, this is how we'd like our classes to go, so you have to be on board with that." If we hadn't had that class, who knows what we would have been doing, lollygagging around, teaching one thing and another, running grammar ditto sheets; it could happen. It still may well happen in spite of that course.



Similarly, when asked about what she considered to be the best part of the practicum, Kelly pointed to the importance of becoming familiar with the writing unit's culture:

For me personally, [the best part] was probably just becoming more familiar with the culture of the Writing Program because it was a lot to begin teaching and begin as a graduate student at the same time. Because, for some of us in Education, the Writing Program is a lot more instrumental in our studies and in our, you know, everything, than the actual Graduate School of Education because it's so big. You affiliate more with the Writing Program. Even though you're not a lecturer and you're still a student, they treat you like you're a member of their department. So that was really instrumental for me.

Anna also felt that TA preparation was useful in acculturating herself to the job at hand, stating, "It was useful to get an idea of this is what college Composition is and this is what it does." Nick agreed and pointed out that the TA preparation program was an effective means of working to try and normalize instruction across the FYC classes: "I think that it's right for the Writing Program to try to create some sort of induction method so you wouldn't just get in there and teach your dissertation, or teach your literary approach to everything. They had a plan [to try and prevent that]."

Yet despite the writing unit's plan, Nick noted that not everyone in the practicum was on board with the program's goals: "There was this one character—he was a great guy, a lot of fun—a third-year, a very advanced kind of doctorate student, kind of just your classic kind of Literature guy with patches on the coat, the whole thing, and I remember being in this session with the TA supervisor sitting there and you could see this guy was just totally doing his own thing in his classes." Nick went on to note that "It was an uphill climb for the Writing Program to try to normalize instruction across the board to get what they wanted."

Still, it seems that the TA preparation facilitator was up to the task. According to Jackie:

[The TA preparation facilitator] handled the relational issues that we had in the class really well. She put people in their spots; she told them what was OK and what wasn't OK. She told them, "If you want to teach like that you cannot teach in the Writing Program because we have a certain set of standards." Like that one person who was really pushing the line, who had, I think, inappropriate teaching practices. Not like buying beer for the kids, but as far as writing is concerned, his process or practice did not honor what we honor as writing people. And she would just come right out and say, "I think I understand where you're coming from, but that is not is going to work here."

*They Viewed Both the Theory and Practical Information as Useful*

The Composition TAs seemed comfortable with the balance of theory and practical information that the practicum offered. When asked about this balance, Jackie said, "I think it was masterfully balanced between theory and practice and bringing in your own experiences and expectations. I don't remember it being heavy one way or the other, and I can tell you about several classes I've had that were. It was just right, like porridge. But that, again, is probably just my love for [the TA preparation facilitator]." Anna responded to the same question by indicating that she felt there was a good balance of theory and practical information in the class, particularly given that she had already had experience in the classroom.

Nevertheless, while for the most part the Composition TAs felt as though they were getting enough theory from the practicum, some of the Composition interviewees made clear that they thought the Literature people could have used more theory and/or practical advice. For example, when asked if he thought there was enough theory in the practicum, Nick stated,

If I was a Literature person and this was my introduction to Composition theory, the answer to that question would be no, it was not enough at all because half the class was workshop. In your workshop you had your syllabi, your units and your lesson plans. You're not theoretically thinking about teaching writing. There was a little bit of that in the Lindemann (2001) book. But it was very surface-y. More like if you were interested you could go deeper. Maybe half the class was theory where we would have presentations on the chapter. And we only had ten weeks. Not enough as a full-blown Composition theory course.

Yet according to Kelly, what the Literature students needed was more practical information:

I remember there were three really young women from Literature, and they all sat together. So they probably wanted more practical advice. But there's a certain extent where you could give them all the practical advice in the world and it wouldn't have made a difference. That type of student who's young and maybe not 100% confident in their abilities; they want more practical advice and even some reassurance. But they're also learning about being a member of a community. So I think that those people kinda benefited from that aspect.

### *Theory*

The Composition TAs had a lot to say about the Composition theory that had been presented in the TA preparation class, and most of them saw it as a very positive thing. For example, when asked how she felt about the Composition theory presented in the practicum, Jackie indicated that she had embraced it, noting that,

I came out of a teacher education program and I don't remember hearing anything about Composition theory. The only writing we ever talked about was when I had a methods course where we talked about writing just briefly. And it was more writing, unfortunately, the five paragraph essay and writing to show knowledge base. So it was, "Read Shakespeare, now write an essay about Shakespeare." So, yeah, I do remember some of the Comp. theory coming from the class and that was a whole new thing for me.

To some extent, it seems that the Composition interviewees felt as though they were getting enough theory in part because while they were taking the practicum they were also being steeped in Composition theory in their graduate classes. When asked if he felt there had been enough theory in the practicum, Nick said, "Sure. I think since this is a two-unit class, you've got to be reasonable about you what expect out of it. And besides, I was devouring writing-related theory all over the place so there was no lack of that in my life. The practicum was not my primary source of where I was getting that information."

Interestingly, when asked about their take on the amount of theory vs. the amount of practical information provided by the preparation program, a couple of the Composition TAs responded from a pedagogical perspective, rather than from their personal recollections. For instance, Kelly stated, "When there's too much in an anthology, people have a hard time making that transition of how to implement theory into practice. And I think, just based on this, looking at the syllabus, it looks like [the TA preparation facilitator] put the practice first and then theory."

Along these same lines, Anna also noted that she thought the practicum was particularly useful, especially given that,

In Teacher Ed. we tend to have this idea that you train people then you send them into the classroom. But I think people need ongoing support if they start teaching. That's really when you can kind of help shape a person's practice the most. And I think that's when people appreciate it the most because then you could talk about what they're doing now and give them resources they can use right now. And those are the ones that are most likely to stick.

In fact, Piper recalled that at times she was frustrated with the practicum because it did not offer enough theory. She explained that occasionally, some of the TAs in the class would suggest classroom activities for their FYC classes that were in conflict with what the body of research in Composition says<sup>44</sup> and at these times she wished that the TA preparation facilitator would have more directly invoked the research in the profession. While Piper recognized that the TA preparation facilitator would try to mitigate the situation by referring back to the outcomes for the FYC class—which of course focused on broader concerns that were more in keeping with the standards in the field—Piper recalled her sense that a reference to theory and research would have been a more effective approach: “I felt like people in a Ph.D. program might be more apt to listen to the research and the theory than listen to the TA preparation facilitator and Piper and Nick and Jackie. They would possibly see how they were incorrect if they were able to see an academic paper that said so.”

### *Practice*

Yet despite the fact that the Composition TAs embraced the theory in the course, they also saw the practical information that was discussed in the class as very useful. Jackie appreciated the practical information offered in the practicum, recalling,

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<sup>44</sup> The example she used was in reference to grammar drills.

There were lots of binders, sample syllabi, different activities and assignments that were made available to us in the Writing Program office. And in class people would bring ideas and we'd talk about what we were doing in class. And [the TA preparation facilitator] was always saying, "I can make copies of that for you." I think that practical information was really important to us. Especially at the beginning, a lot of us were struggling with, "We're starting this class next week and we don't know our heads from our rears." So, those practical bits were really helpful.

When asked about the best part of the practicum, Piper responded, "Probably the collaborative nature. If you were engaged in something and you had a question you're not emailing someone randomly and asking them. The TA preparation facilitator was there and you had your peers to bounce stuff off of." Attesting to the collaborative nature of the class, Jackie recalled, "It's like an introduction to the Writing Program and if you're going to be here, this is what you need to be about, and here are 101 samples of how you can be about this. Just change this person's name at the top of the paper to your name; it was beg, borrow, and steal. Nobody made any beefs about that."

Anna said, "What I remember from the class was discussing what we were doing and getting really applied ideas. And the class was a little less theoretical [than the 501A class] which makes sense because that class was more like doing the theory. And then this was more like, "Okay, you're TAs now. Let's talk about what's going on and give you some resources you can use." Still focusing on the practical nature of the practicum, Anna went onto say, "By then we were all teaching. So we were kind of in the same boat and so it was a little more equitable. And [the TA preparation facilitator] was a wonderful professor and was just very pragmatic about, "Here's what you need." Nick also emphasized the practical nature of the class, noting that it

was, “Much more about practice than developing big picture philosophies. So the impact was much more in the sense of hands-on kind of helping you get into the classroom, do things, feel supported while you’re doing it. That’s very helpful.”

Piper also appreciated this type of collaboration for practical advice, noting, “Another thing I remember as being useful was bringing the drafts of the wording of the assignments in terms of having a practical activity. But I do think it’s useful for people who don’t know what they’re doing to bring their assignments and talk about them and collaborate that way. That’s something concrete.”

The Composition TAs mentioned several types of practical advice that they got from the TA preparation facilitator, ranging from what do if a parent called regarding a student’s progress to how to approach the counseling center to alert them about a troubled student. Also, Jackie mentioned that a lot of the practicum was dedicated to conversations about how to handle the paper load and the grading that they were required to do TAs.

*Lindemann Text.* When shown the syllabus and specifically the part referring to the text that was used in the practicum, several of the Composition TAs responded favorably. According to Nick, “This Lindemann (2001) book, it was a terrific book. Great book.”

While Jackie was not as much in favor of the readings overall as the rest of the Composition TAs were, she still saw the Lindemann (2001) text as a useful resource both during and after the class: “I remember I liked *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, but I also remember thinking that that’s just one more book I have to read. Still, I would be a liar if I told you that I did not go back and look through that text afterward.” When asked how she felt about the theoretical text used in the class, Piper noted, “I remember thinking this text is pretty good. For someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing, this is a good text pick.”

*They Felt Supported and Welcomed by the Writing Program*

Perhaps as a result of the ways in which they embraced the TA preparation and all it had to offer, the Composition TAs reported that they felt supported and welcomed by the Writing Program. Both Kelly and Anna emphasized the sense of collegiality that they experienced as TAs in the writing unit. As Kelly noted, “I really felt like the Writing Program treated me like a colleague from day one. I never felt like a graduate student or like I was in training or anything like that. And I don’t know if everyone feels like that but maybe it was because of all of the responsibility that was given.”

Anna made a similar point:

I think it speaks a lot to the department that there are permanent people but you don’t get this rift between the permanent people and the TAs. The people in the department have made a real effort to constantly bring in the TAs and nurture the TAs and train the TAs and say, “Oh, I’ll sit down with you and work with you on this” and there’s that kind of openness that you don’t always get everywhere.” And it’s not like, “You guys are the TAs and you teach those classes but we don’t really have time to talk to you because you’re just a revolving door anyway.” I don’t think the faculty has ever let that happen. That’s beneficial for both the permanent people and the temporary people. But it’s particularly beneficial for the temporary people to be in a department where you’re welcomed, where you’re treated as a member of that department and where you get to collaborate with permanent people.

Anna also talked about various projects and activities where she was able to collaborate with specific individuals in the writing unit:



Where I learned the most was from my collaborations with faculty in the department. So it was really extending for me, from the teaching to the collaboration to the research on teaching and then working with them on that. There's a whole lot of feedback that's happening there and a whole lot of ways to work together that break down barriers. And it helps you think critically about what you're doing. It's exciting as a graduate student to be included in all that and to get to learn all that from the ground up. Where you really learn is through the collaborations, through the projects, through being on committees. I just feel so fortunate I had that experience.

*They Felt Welcomed into the Practicum and Viewed It as a Supportive Environment*

The Composition interviewees were unanimous in saying that they felt the practicum provided them with helpful support in their first quarter of teaching for the program. According to Nick, the practicum gave the TAs a place where they could test out their lesson plans and their assignments:

I think the best part of the TA training was the opportunity to work on your work, to have a structured place where you were going to bring an assignment, where it was okay to bring a work in progress. It wasn't like you will have it all the first day you show up and you're going to have everything flawless. Instead it was like okay, you're at your first unit, you're working on your third, and everybody is talking and everybody is tweaking, everybody's learning and so there was a sense of patience about the process that you weren't expected to just shoot out of the box and be a rock star. I think that was very valuable in the way that it set you up to grow, as opposed to setting you up to perform flawlessly your first time.

Jackie experienced a similar feeling of support, saying, “After I took it I remember thinking, ‘That was really helpful because it gave me an idea of what other people were doing in their classes and whether or not I was meeting [the TA preparation facilitator’s] expectations.’” Jackie also brought up the program’s requirement that all TAs use a common textbook and set of assignments during their first quarter teaching. She said that the program’s facilitator “talked a lot about how, ‘your first quarter, we want you to do this. Don’t start cooking up your own curriculum without mastering this first.’ It was an opportunity to hear that and to get her thumbs up on things like, ‘Here’s our syllabus, and listen to this fun lesson that I did in class.’ And getting that reinforcement was really important.” Kelly felt as though she got this same type of support from her TA supervisor, with whom she met often and who gave her feedback on her teaching and lesson plans.

Nick also felt comfortable with the common textbook and common set of assignments. He saw this as generous and supportive, rather than in any way stifling. As he puts it, there was, “nice communication from the department. They told us, ‘The first quarter you’re going to use our textbox, first quarter we’re all going to do the same assignments. After that you’re going to do what you’re able to do within the context of your TA supervisor. But for now, we want you to do this.’ That showed a lot of generosity towards us. [It gave us a] chance to get our legs, we were not expected to do it right away.”

#### Did the Composition TAs Display Resistance to their TA Preparation and If So, How?

While some of the Composition TAs initially felt resistant to participating in the TA preparation classes due to their prior experience teaching writing, that sense of resistance quickly dissipated once the class began. However, two of them did continue to resist what they perceived as the curricular constraints of having a common text and set of assignments because they

wanted to do more in their classes than these guidelines allowed. But the most prevalent form of resistance was in fact a form of counter-resistance, as they resisted what they perceived to be resistance by the Literature students in the class. This was in part due to disciplinary differences, but the Composition TAs also reported their frustration at what they considered to be an offensive attitude and set of assumptions held by the Literature TAs about first-year students and their writing abilities.

*They Felt Some Initial Resistance that Quickly Dissipated*

Despite their unanimous embracing of teaching FYC as TAs, upon probing it became clear that there was at least an initial sense of resistance on the part of some of the Composition students to taking the practicum class while they were teaching FYC, largely as a result of the experience they already had with teaching writing.

While Kelly said she “felt good about the practicum,” she also noted that she had been used to taking a practicum while teaching because she had been expected to do the same thing at the university where she obtained her MA and where she had first been a Composition TA. She recalled that at that time she was working mostly full time off campus and having trouble getting to the practicum consistently. But, she said, her “teacher there really made the point of why practicums are so important. So by the time I’d gotten to this university, I realized it was important to be in the practicum.” Moreover, Kelly stated that at this point she “loved being a member of professional development” and despite her prior experience teaching FYC and completing a previous TA training course, she felt like “you can always learn more.”

When asked about the attitudes of the other two Composition TAs in the practicum, Kelly indicated that it seemed to her that they were as on board with taking the course as she was: “I think we all operated on the same level just that, you know, none of us probably needed to be

there but we clearly had been participants in other kinds of professional development. I mean, all of us are involved in the Writing Project, too. So nobody threw a stink. Everybody was present. Everyone was active.”

Nevertheless, when asked how she and her Composition cohort responded to the TA practicum, Jackie indicated that there was indeed some initial resistance. As she recalled it,

The honest answer—and I hope that other people were being honest, because I remember talking with my [Composition] colleagues in that class—we were like, “We have experience, we have taught. Why do we have to take this class?” Now in retrospect, thank God they made us take that class. From my perspective, teaching high school English and teaching college writing are two very different things. But [at the time] it kind of seemed to me that the way it was presented was, “A lot of this is going to be how to teach.” Maybe I just read into it, but I felt like, “I’ve been teaching, I know how to do this.” But it was more content-based than actual teaching things. And once we were in the class, we figured it out, like, “I’m glad I’m reading Lindemann’s (2001) piece right now because I hadn’t really heard or thought about any of these things.”

When probed about whether or not all of the Composition students were resentful about being required to take the practicum, Jackie clarified that some of the other TAs shared her concerns:

I remember having conversations with at least one other person and where we were kind of like, “Why are we taking this class? We both have extensive teaching experience, more than a year’s worth of teaching experience.” So, not resentful, but more like, “This is just confusing to us. Let’s see what it’s going to be all about when we get in there.” But

then after the second or third meeting, we were like, “Oh, totally! We love the TA program facilitator, we love this class!”

*They Resisted the Constraints*

Two of the five Composition TAs interviewed referred to the curricular guidelines that they were expected to follow during the first quarter they taught FYC. Anna and Piper were somewhat resistant to what they perceived as constraints placed on their teaching in regard to using a common text and set of assignments in their first quarter of teaching. Both Piper and Anna found ways around these constraints, but Piper ended up feeling as though she was being subversive, whereas Anna felt as though she was given the room she needed to explore and develop her own curriculum.

When asked about the curricular model the TAs were expected to follow in their first quarter, Piper said, “I brought in stuff and I complicated it because I was not comfortable with the format. Like, ‘This is the way you have to do it; this is the way the assignments have to be.’ I kind of thought a little bit of that was constraining.” Piper went on say,

And it was like, “OK, let’s talk about summary for 150 pages. Let’s read the textbook.” I wasn’t into reading the textbook. We did the readings, but I brought in other readings and more readings and less...I never taught from a textbook where it was like, “This is how you do paragraphs, this is how you do summary;” it was more like, “I have these organic materials and we do it from there.” We would see the examples in the students’ papers. It wasn’t straight out of a textbook, because I was uncomfortable with that.

For Piper anyway, this sense of constraint seems at least in part due to the fact that she, along with three of the other Composition TAs, was given the materials to teach the FYC course when she arrived to begin her graduate studies.<sup>45</sup> As a result, Piper said that over the summer,

I was calling [the TA preparation facilitator] going, “What is the textbook?” I was calling in a panic, like I know I need a month to plan this class out and you’re not giving me any information. What do you mean we have two days before school starts?” If I’d had it for a couple of months I could have figured out how to use it, but it felt like a scripted...since I didn’t have enough time to figure out how to not make it scripted, I felt like I needed to bring other stuff in so it wouldn’t feel like a computer.

Anna had a different experience with the guidelines, in that she was given the freedom to break away from the curricular model and develop some of her own assignments: “They actually gave me permission to do some different units and not follow the book as much as they wanted some Writing 2 people to do.” It seems likely that this extra measure of freedom was granted to her in part because she took 501A in her first year before she started teaching, unlike the other interviewees from Composition, all of whom were exempted from 501A and instead took only 501B as they taught the FYC course in their first year of graduate school.

As Anna explained, “It was useful to get the foundation of Writing 2 [in 501A]. The classes gave me the basis to see what the department was trying to do.” And then, when it came time for her to teach the FYC course the next fall, “They gave me leeway, as long as I could show how [what I was doing] fit within what Writing 2 did, which is what I learned in the 501A and 501B courses. Then they were totally fine with it.” When asked if she felt the TA preparation facilitator was supportive of her desire for more freedom, she answered, “Yeah, she

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<sup>45</sup> 501A had been waived for her, and she served as a TA in her first year as Composition graduate student.

was very open to that and she would say, ‘Well, what are the real goals? Does this meet the goals? Okay, great.’ Maybe that was her influence, but I think the department really approached things that way. You know, the goal is to learn these three styles of writing for Writing 2. So if you can do that with teaching this other thing, then that’s fine.”

*They Counter-Resisted Others’ Resistance*

An unanticipated form of resistance was revealed in the interviews with the Composition TAs, which in fact is perhaps better characterized as a form of counter-resistance. As noted in the past few pages, some of the Composition TAs were initially resistant to the required practicum course based on their previous experience teaching FYC, even though, for the most part, they soon decided that the course was worthwhile and subsequently embraced it. But interestingly, it seems that at least some of their buy-in was a response to their perception that some of the inexperienced TAs (i.e. those from Literature) were also resistant to the course. As Jackie recalled: “I remember thinking at first, ‘I don’t need a class to show me how to teach because I already know how to teach.’ But then when I realized it was more about content, then I had the buy-in. And then I especially had the buy-in when I saw the reactions of the Literature people.”

Piper made a similar point, stating, “I remember thinking that the Lit. people came in there with a lot of confidence that they knew what they were doing. They gave off the image that they didn’t need to be there and they didn’t want to be there, which was definitely frustrating. ‘Cause I was like, “Really? You don’t know anything and you’re really, really arrogant about it.”

As Jackie put it, “There was this sense of, ‘We’re English people, we don’t need to be teaching writing, why are we teaching writing, this has nothing to do with what we want to do. I’m insulted and bothered by this.’ Even the fact that it’s a TAs hip and it’s supposed to be helping out financially, they even seemed bothered by that. Like, ‘I would rather take out student loans

than have a TA ship in the Writing Program.’ Which got us in the Ed. department all hot and bothered about that because we loved what we were doing and felt that writing was so important.”

*They Resisted Others’ Assumptions about Student Writing*

But it was not simply resistance to the Literature TAs’ resistance, but also a resistance to some of the perspectives that the Literature TAs held about students and the teaching of writing. Nick noted that the two groups were “just so different culturally.” Piper felt this way too, noting, “It was really frustrating to have those Lit. people in there. They said things that were really off-base. They didn’t know what they were doing at all.” When asked what she meant by this, Piper went on to say that she had a problem with “the assumptions people have about students that limit the students.”

Nick explained this sentiment further, by describing how the students from Literature seemed to perceive student writing:

There were some Lit. people that really had a different sense of culture, of understanding how writing instruction fits into this. I don’t want to stereotype and conflate with all the other experiences I’ve had along these lines but I do remember there was a sense of people just kind of looking down on student writing. It wasn’t a sense of we’re here to help your development. It was more like, why can’t these students write? And it would kind of rock my world for people to think lightly of student writing like that. That really bothered me.

Jackie invoked the metaphor of S.E. Hinton’s (1967) “Socs” and “Greasers” from the novel *The Outsiders* when she recalled the different attitudes in the class about student writing. Referring to the Composition TAs as the Greasers and the Literature TAs as the Socs, Jackie



explained that the Literature students were focused on correctness in student writing, much like the Socs in Hinton's (1967) text were depicted as being more concerned with surface appearances rather than on people's character beneath the surface. She stated, "There was so much in class discussion about, 'Your writing needs to be right. Your writing needs to be correct. I'm going to focus on grammar and help you become a better writing through correctness.' And it seemed like that was such a concern of the people in the English department."

Jackie explained that this aspect of the Soc/Greaser divide between the two cultures in the class had a far-reaching impact on the dynamics in the class:

It would have been really interesting to get a visual recording of the body language in that class. I can remember times when I just was sitting back in my chair with my arms crossed like, "I don't even want to be associated with these people." And these people were my colleagues in the Writing Program! I found myself thinking, "Don't even talk to me in the copy room; you're a jackass." I consider myself a scholar in Education and a scholar in Composition, and I was just really angry with...how can you think that? You're an educated individual, how can you berate your students for having poor grammar skills? Does it need to be fixed? Do we need to work on that? Is that something you want to help them with? Yes. Or are we going to sit there and tease them because they misused a certain word? I just felt like the intentions were so different.

When asked if she could explain how the "Soc" and "Greaser" metaphor applied to the situation, Jackie explained that she was "rooting for the underdog, here," and said that in the class she often felt like saying,

We're just as good as you guys. Just because we chose to do things differently doesn't mean we're any less than you are... We don't worship the literature or the canon. We are

saying to our students, “Let's get dirty. Let's get down to business, let's get in groups and talk about our writing together.”

She added that it “seemed like there was so much more of a sense of being traditional coming from this [Literature] group.”

Piper was also deeply bothered by the negative attitude that she felt the Literature TAs had about student writing, and she recalled a specific example where that tension came to a head between her and one of the Literature students: “I got into a fight with one of them in class. He did some kind of presentation and in it he was talking really poorly about students and about how they can't do anything, and I said something like, “Well, it's your job to teach them,” and some other Lit. person defended him, and there was a really clear divide.” Piper was quick to point out that this conflict was not personal, but rather borne of different assumptions about teaching and student writing: “I think he's a nice person, I don't have anything against him. I just think he's a Lit. person. He's very steeped in Lit. Really good at teaching Lit. Maybe he's better now, but at the time, his assumptions about students were really in conflict with everything I knew and all of my assumptions.”

Piper explained that these conflicting assumptions about student writing were a significant issue for her and the rest of the Composition TAs: “We were all thinking, “These people are so arrogant and they're just sitting here talking badly about students and I don't want to sit in a class and talk badly about students.”

When pressed to discuss the reasons why she thought the Literature TAs viewed their students' writing so disparagingly, Piper offered the following philosophy. Noting that the Literature TAs' resistance to the class was quite evident, Piper explained that “It was manifested in their arrogance. That was the idea, like, “We're too good for this, students are stupid, we're so

great.” Yet she went on to point out that at the same time “They were a student in the class, and [they were feeling like] why do they need to be a student in the class; students are stupid, but they’re grad students and they’re smart, and so they shouldn’t have to be there.”

At the same time, according to Piper, the TA preparation facilitator did not work to disabuse the Literature TAs from this kind of negative talk: “And the TA preparation facilitator would not say anything. I wanted her to say, ‘OK, the way you’re talking about students is inappropriate. Students are not stupid, you shouldn’t have that assumption.’” It would just go under the radar, I don’t know why. I assume she didn’t want to cause conflict, she wanted to create community, but it wasn’t working for me.”

On the other hand, Kelly recalls that in the practicum class that she took (which was two years after the class that Piper was referring to in the previous paragraph), the TA program facilitator was very proactive in preventing any sort of negative talk about students or anyone else. As Kelly recalled it, “She shuts down any kind of complaints. So it was not a space for people to talk about how terrible students were or how bad their grammar was, how bad their writing was.” In response, Kelly went on to give the example of a Literature student who “wanted to talk about grammar all the time and wanted to talk about why these papers were terrible and [the TA preparation facilitator] was always like, ‘That’s not why we’re here. Let’s focus on...,’ and we really focused on process rather than product.”

The way Jackie saw it, the TA program facilitator was “great about saying ‘Let’s talk about how that might be working, or how that might not be working,’ instead of saying, ‘No, no, that’s bad pedagogy.’ And especially she was so great about not letting people attack each other in the class, which was a very important thing for her to do because there was a lot of potential for attacking in that class.” Jackie went on to say that “What I loved about how she presented it

is she was like, ‘There are all these different ideas,’ and she would even talk about one person's work and say, ‘I don't necessarily agree with this person, but I think that what they do works and is grounded in good theory and ideas, but it doesn't work for me.’ So, she was really good about offering up some things like, ‘This might work for you. We all run our classrooms differently and you're allowed to think differently about writing as long as it's pretty much along the general idea [of what we are asking you to do].’”

But again, Kelly saw this dynamic in a more black and white way. When asked if the TA preparation facilitator had to push back hard to disabuse the Literature students of the idea that grammar instruction wasn't a welcome activity in the FYC classroom, Kelly said, “Yes. I remember her being, like, ‘No.’ You know, she doesn't put up with any kind of like, ‘Well, you could do it that way.’ She's like, ‘Nope. That's not how we do it.’”

Because of the discrepancy between reports, Kelly was told in the interview that someone from the class two years ahead of her felt as though the TA preparation facilitator had not pushed back hard enough against problematic pedagogical stances, Kelly said, “I would have to disagree with that person. I heard [the facilitator] say it on more than one occasion. And anyone who knows her would know that doesn't sound like her at all. So I would say that person was mistaken.”

#### What Pedagogical Practices and Principles Do the Composition TAs Still Use that Reflect Their TA Preparation?

The Composition TAs pointed to several practices and principles that they still use and which are consistent with their TA preparation. They were unanimous in the commitment to developing student-centered classrooms, which they approached in several different ways. They were also unanimous in their adherence to a process-based model. Moreover, several of the

Composition TAs were committed to focusing on higher order concerns when responding to and assessing their students' work as well and also to using a WAC/WID approach in their classes.

### *Developing Student-Centered Classrooms*

All of the Composition interviewees referenced their commitment to using a student-centered model in the classroom, and they described various different strategies that they used as they worked to develop this type of environment. These included seeing writing as a mode of inquiry, using student texts in the classroom, promoting collaboration, and working to develop a sense of community in the class.

Kelly's statement of teaching philosophy emphasizes her commitment to developing and maintaining a student-centered classroom. When asked why this approach was so important to her, she shared her belief that, "As a theory of pedagogy, the student-centered approach to teaching is the most effective in every discipline but I think in Composition in particular. That's based on everything I have read and on my experiences in the classroom. I think that students want to make a real connection with their lives. They feel like they're the most important thing in this curriculum."

### *Seeing Writing as a Mode of Inquiry*

The idea that writing can and even should be used as a mode of inquiry came up with several of the Composition TAs. Piper's teaching philosophy statement argues that students make certain assumptions about writing, among them that correctness is paramount and also that writing is a performance rather than a mode of inquiry. When asked to speak further about this idea, she said, I think in that paragraph I'm trying to talk about confronting student's assumptions. I'm assuming that everyone in the field already knows that, but that it's a problem that students don't know that writing can be for inquiry, writing is not performance." And when

asked to clarify what she meant by “a performance,” Piper explained, “I think students assume that writing is a performance in terms of making something pretty on the page—having the correct punctuation, grammar. But writing is really an opportunity to find something out about yourself, to find out about a topic and to say something.”

Moreover, Piper explained that “Writing can be an inquiry into a topic that you’re invested in and ultimately it will help you find out something about yourself and about where you position yourself in relationship to other people. Or it can be an inquiry into knowledge. It’s *for* the student so the student can own something at the end, and not just write something for the teacher that looks nice because they think that’s what the teacher wants.” Or, as Anna put it, “To me, a lot of the purpose of writing is to make sense of information for oneself, and then to share that information with others. Writing is kind of like a discussion on paper.”

Jackie also noted that she works to create an inquiry-based classroom as opposed to using a transmittal model of teaching: “I say to my students, ‘Here is a general structure. But I want you to come up with your own questions. What’s bugging you about the world, for example? You go and try to figure that out. Answer that.’”

### *Emphasizing Reflection*

For Kelly, reflection is a key component of her classes. In her teaching philosophy, Kelly discussed the use of students’ meta-reflection as a means of assessing their own learning. Moreover, her syllabi included assignments asking students to do metacognitive work. When asked to talk a little bit about those assignments and how they work, Kelly described the portfolio letter assignment, which consists of a business-like cover letter that reflects on the work included in the portfolio. She explained that there is also a “final reflection that is longer and where they talk about the class on the whole. And then I have them talk about the different

genres that they've covered and then we talk about the actual content." When asked if she feels the students benefit from these activities, Kelly said emphatically, "Oh, yeah. I think it really solidifies how much they've learned and how far that they've come."

### *Having Students Choose Their own Topics*

Several of the Composition TAs indicated that they believe it is important for students to have the opportunity to choose their own topics.

Piper said that one of the ways she works to make her class student-centered is by allowing students to choose their own topics to write about: "I still think that the teachers choosing the topics takes away from the inquiry. Being really invested in what they want to write about, or what angle they want to see it from, or how it relates to them, is helpful to students' writing process and to the ownership and their inquiry. It's not *your* inquiry, it's *their* inquiry. I think it's absolutely necessary that there's choice about what they're writing about."

Kelly offered a similar perspective: "I think that student-centeredness really comes into play in terms of what their goals are for the semester and what they want to write about. I have them select topics that interest them and have them make real connections between skills that are covered in class and skills that they're going to use as undergraduates or even beyond in their career."

Anna reported that she asks her students to choose their own books to do projects on as well as their own research topics. She sees this as resisting a top-down model and instead as a way of keeping her class student-centered. At the end of the class, "every person gives a presentation where they go over their topic, how they got interested in it, what they know about it, and what they found out about it. So they're all sharing their work with each other. And then that informs our discussions throughout the whole term based on what people are researching."

### *Using Student Texts in the Classroom*

The idea of using students' texts as class texts came up in at least one interview as a way of helping to create a student-centered classroom. While Piper does believe that it is sometimes important to have "models to show students how arguments are written outside of and how they get used" she also focuses "on using what they had written as part of the knowledge creation of the class. Because what they had written was worthy of time and discussion. We could learn from each other, and not just from a top-down model. Students' work can be a model and you don't always have to have something from an outside writer who's a professional."

### *Promoting Collaboration*

Both Kelly and Piper talked about the ways in which they strive to promote collaboration in their classes. In answer to how she goes about creating a student-centered environment, Kelly said that working in small groups plays a big role in her classes as does collaborative learning and peer review: "I think a lot of it has to do with working together. I would never call my class a lecture class. I have them share with one another almost every day." Piper uses a similar approach, as she also strives to make her classroom student centered:

We do tons of group work, with the groups presenting to the class. So, especially toward the end of the semester, I'm more in the background facilitating, "OK we're going to do this and you all will present it to each other." So they're deconstructing the texts together. They're creating knowledge on the overheads for each other and looking at it. I'm guiding it, but they're doing the work.



*Creating a Community*

Three of the Composition TAs spoke explicitly about the importance of creating a sense of community in the classroom. Nick, in particular, emphasized the importance of this, although Anna and Kelly discussed it as well.

Nick's teaching philosophy emphasizes attending to "the growth and development of an individual writer through establishing rapport with him or her and creating a community of writers." In asking him to explain more about that approach, he responded,

The idea of rapport with students really comes out of my own research on student writers and developing student writers, and what I found in reviewing longitudinal research at a college level from students' point of view is that the most significant contributor to their growth as writers is when they get ongoing performance-specific feedback, which requires an ongoing type of relationship where the responder/leader can refer back to previous conversations, previous pieces of writing—I'm talking about dialogue, interactions, communication and relationship. Students say that's what helps them grow the most. That's my teaching philosophy because students identify people talking to them about their writing as the most important growth contributor.

When asked to discuss his position further, Nick went on to explain that developing a community of writers is also about providing lots of opportunity to get feedback on your writing. I see writing as a type of performance. Feedback can't be general. General instruction is really not that helpful. If you're a gym coach for a gymnast, you're teaching everyone how to do a particular thing on the balance beam or whatever, you give your general instruction, but you have to get down to the individual performer and say, "tuck your toes, bend your knees, raise your hips, look over here." Each individual person is

slightly different; each individual person needs a lot of feedback. The community is important. The more response you can get as a writer the better you'll be. It doesn't have to come from the teacher.

In Nick's opinion, "fostering that kind of community where people write and respond to each other, that's what's really the best chance to give a student the chance to grow as a writer."

Anna also talked about the importance of developing a "community of practice" within the writing classroom, with students working together to develop texts and critique them with one another.

As also evidenced in the narrative evaluations, the TA program facilitator brought cookies to the practicum class each week, and this had made an impression on several of the students, not only because the cookies were enjoyable, but also because they felt that this act modeled a community-building strategy that they could then use in their own classrooms.

According to Kelly, the cookies "made the class more congenial." Similarly, Nick mentioned the cookies a couple of times in the interviews, as he felt they went a long way toward fostering a sense of community in the class. Nick also indicated that he adopted this approach in his FYC class:

[The TA preparation facilitator] always brought cookies to class, which was kind of funny because I think she was modeling teaching, and she was modeling bringing food to class. You wonder what's good pedagogy? Bringing cookies to class? Who knew? It gave me permission to think about that. My first quarter at this university, I had an 8 o'clock class and I brought orange juice to class. At first the students were suspicious, but eventually it was gone every class. I think that [the TA preparation facilitator] was countering certain types of expectations.

*Encouraging Scaffolding and the Writing Process*

All of the Composition TAs who were interviewed indicated that they emphasized the process model and/or viewed the scaffolding of assignments as an important strategy in the FYC classroom.

Piper pointed to the need for transparency in the writing process and advocates the scaffolding of assignments in her statement of teaching philosophy. When asked to further explain her reasoning behind these ideas, she stated,

I think people give students readings and they then give an assignment and they do nothing in between, and students have to figure out all the things that need to be done to get to the end product by themselves. So the scaffolding helps because you're teaching them explicitly so that later they can do it by themselves. You're showing them the stuff they have to do. You're basically making explicit all the things that writers do implicitly, and that we know students need to get from one step to the other.

As she explained further, using scaffolding and the process model is like "saying to students, OK, well this is the secret you don't know. This is what writers do even if they don't know they're doing it. These are the things you do to get where you want to go. So let me show you how to do it." As Nick explained it,

I started out thinking about the scaffold straight out of Vygotsky. The term comes from Bruner but it's really Vygotsky and the zone of proximal development. It's all rooted up in that idea. So you look at what the student can do on [his or her] own and what the student can do with help of an experienced other. The difference is between what the students can do by themselves and what they can do with the help of an experienced other. That's the zone of proximal development. What the experienced person brings into

that space, into that zone, that's scaffolding. It helps you do things you can't do on your own but with the help of the other you can. You put a scaffold on the side of a building until the building can stand on its own until you take scaffold away and the building still stands. And once students see that they can do it, then the scaffold goes from outside to inside. Now the scaffold is present inside an individual to help them do that task on their own.

Kelly's teaching philosophy statement uses an excerpt from Elbow's (1973) *Writing without Teachers* to give her students guidelines for their journal writing activities. When asked about this, she indicated that had begun using Elbow's model for journaling when she was a TA. She said that she wanted them to free-write and also to write responses to the readings and her students were having trouble understanding how these tasks were different. She had participated in a research project which found that "a lot of teachers use the jargon of "free-write" or "revise" or, "pre-write" even or "peer review" and they don't enact the practice of it in the way that the National Writing Project or someone like Peter Elbow would have sanctioned it or described it." She went on to explain that Jackie gave her a sample of how to respond to a text and so she started asking her students to read Elbow's model for what a free-write might look like.

In her teaching philosophy statement, Jackie wrote, "I approach each course and group of students with clear objectives and a structured teaching plan to help scaffold learning while bringing enthusiasm to the topic of discussion." When asked to explain this idea further, she said,

I'm trying to kind of leave a trail of crumbs toward the bigger piece. I really want to set it up in small doses. We are talking about a freshman writing course. These kids come from all over the place. Some of them have had AP English with Composition, some of them are coming out of the other end of that, whatever you want to call it. I don't like using

negative terminology. So they're coming from all over the place so some of them need more guidance and some of them need less guidance. But regardless of how strong a writer you are, unless you've taken a college class at some point, nobody coming out of high school, to my knowledge, really knows what is expected out of a college Composition course. Especially because each college is different and has different standards. So I try to make my assignments, my grading, my assessment, I try to make it as transparent a process as possible. When I say, "scaffolding" I really try to put together all these pieces.

Jackie then offered an example of how she goes about this in the classroom:

Instead of saying, "Here's your assignment, write an essay, go. Check you later." I say, "Here's your assignment, now let's throw out some ideas. What comes to your head?" "Nothing" "Well, write it down. Write down the word 'nothing.'" You know, like literally get little pieces. Let's do a little brainstorming. Let's do a little free-writing. Let's talk in groups. Let's just see what happens, let's have a group discussion about it. Even something as simple as why you may or may not like this assignment. You know, that gets you thinking. Just get the juices flowing in the brain. So now we've brainstormed some ideas, so what do you think we should do next? What's the next piece? Are you going to sit down at the computer and start typing? For some people that makes sense, and for some people you do a couple more steps. So I try to give them as many options as possible in a structured way. In my class I really honor the process, and I try to honor that there are many different types of processes to get to the final draft. The way I write is very different than the way other people write, and I get that. I think scaffolding helps people feel more comfortable, especially for the very first assignment.

They don't really know what the expectations are and I try to put that together and make clear the process. What I try to do with my scaffolding is, "Here are the steps, now I'm going to take it away. You guys are pros, you know how to do this, you made it through the first assignment. The next assignment is going to be similar with a different focus. Now you're experts, just go."

*Embracing the Guide on the Side vs. the Sage on the Stage*

One of the things that came out of discussion about the Composition TAs' reliance on a collaborative model and their use of scaffolding on the classroom was the metaphor of the "sage on the stage vs. the guide on the side." This metaphor came up several times, both as the Composition TAs described their own guide-like approach and also when they established that some of the Literature TAs seemed to embrace a more lecture-based approach.

For example, when Piper was asked which of these two models appealed to her more, she responded emphatically, "guide on the side, for sure." Yet Nick referred to the presentations the TAs were required to do in 501B to illustrate an example of the opposite approach:

In the presentations you saw the people, their personality got out, so you could see these literary types who were lecture-oriented and they would do their thing. They just came out and turned on that...what is it, the guide on the side of the stage, vs. the sage on the stage? It was the sage on the stage that was their model of teaching: just get up and turn on your brilliance and shine it on everyone. It was funny to watch. It was like, "Wow."

In keeping with the guide on the side approach, Jackie explained that,

I try to think of myself like, 'Hey, I'm just here to facilitate this process, and sure, I happen to know a thing or two, but I'm learning and you're leaning, and you have to step up or you're going to get left behind.' It's important to me as an instructor to really

emphasize that I'm not the all-knowing person where you open your brain and I put information in. I want my students to be proactive in their learning. I want them to be responsible for their learning. I think reflection is a big part of that.

Jackie went on to explain that,

A lot of people don't ask their students to reflect. Students are just used to being students, and they're good at being students. And they do what they do. It's rare that somebody says, "What kind of grade do you think you should get on this paper? I'm not talking about effort, don't give me the, 'I stayed up really late working on it.' Tell me about the steps that you went through to do this. Are you proud of your work? What would you do differently the next time around?" Before any student turned in their portfolio of written work, on the back of the final draft of their essay, I would ask them to answer three questions: "What do you think you've learned on this? Why?" And, "If you had two more days to work on it what would you do and why?" And I think that encourages them to be proactive and forces them to think about what they're doing, to be present in the moment, and to also show that it's not just about me assigning a grade.

Jackie also noted that norming is an essential part of her teaching:

We look at different samples and we norm. So hopefully by the first major portfolio they turn in, they know what an "A" looks like what a "B" looks like and they know what a "C" looks like. So they're able to engage in that process a little more and take responsibility for their own learning.

Nevertheless, despite the Composition TAs' adherence to guiding their students rather than lecturing them, Anna emphasized the importance of a balanced approach, saying,

I think you need a combination of both [the sage on the stage and the guide on the side], though. I call myself a constructivist educator. But, there's a time and a place.

Constructivism is great, but it takes a lot of time, and sometimes you don't have that time. And then there's certain information people just need to know and so you do need to impart that knowledge. So where true constructivists would be, like, explore everything. I'm like, you want to really identify where that time and that process is really useful. And that's what I did different from, say, Atwell, who's all process writing and all expressivist writing. And for real dyed-in-the-wool constructivists where everything is discussed and collaborated on and the students define the purpose. I'm kind of like, "Well, you need more guidance than that." You need to be shown how to do it.

Otherwise, you're just kind of rehashing through what you already know what to do. But that's where to me it's that philosophy of constructing learning situations where I'm showing you how to do something new. And we're all doing it together and we're all doing something with it, hopefully. I'm guiding you through the process of doing it more than a constructivist educator might. But then, I'm having you work into being able to do that yourself.

Part of the balance Anna called for comes from recognizing that even when it is necessary to lecture as a means of providing information to students, the students must also be encouraged to do something with that information in order for it to be retained.

Jackie identified herself as a social constructionist in her teaching philosophy statement while also stating that she is "careful in her planning and mindful of my teaching objectives."

When asked how she balances those principles, she stated that she doesn't want it to



sound like I'm willy-nilly and just let the learning go wherever it is. I'm too much of a control freak as a teacher to let time be wasted because we have so little time. But I want to structure that time to where they're allowed to bring up the ideas. So I come into class with an objective. I come in and say, "Here is the schedule; this is what we're doing today. But you guys organically come up with your ideas on your own and the learning happens, and if we need to switch it around, we switch it around. I come in with an idea and clear objectives and to me it's really important that, again it goes back to taking an active role in their learning. Just seeing what happens, being flexible.

*Focusing on Higher Order Concerns*

Several of the Composition TAs mentioned their commitment to encouraging students to focus on higher order concerns before worrying about issues of grammar and style, a principle that several of them also traced back to their TA preparation. As Anna explained,

So I got from [the TA preparation facilitator] the idea that maybe you don't need to worry about every little detail. You know, like maybe you can focus on the bigger picture. And I'm definitely using that in one of my classes this summer. Right now I have a class with a lot of second language learners and people with non-standard English. I'm having to ask myself, "Okay, is the point to write a grammatically perfect paper or is the point to go through these ideas? Is the point to present them in an understandable way?" And then I need to think through these questions, and if it's a paper they're going to be working on over time, maybe they could come back to some of the correcting stuff later.

Anna went on to say that,

What's in a grammar book often isn't that helpful for people in terms of fixing their own grammar. And so I try to do more of a ground-up perspective. I've gotten away from

using textbooks for grammar and more towards using students' actual work and then building off of what they already know and tailoring things more to them. And that's what research shows, too, which I learned at [the study site] about teaching grammar in the context of people's writing rather than trying to teach grammar for its own sake.

Besides, she said, by focusing on students' grammar from the beginning, "You just get caught up in that and it's frustrating and I'd rather that right now, they get their research, say something about it, start making meaning with it. And that's hard enough for a lot of people in that class, without worrying about that other side of it.

Kelly also mentioned this idea, although she said that she had embraced it before joining the TA program at this university: "Definitely it got reinforced by people like [the TA preparation facilitator] to focus on higher order concerns and not to focus on grammar." In fact, Kelly noted that "they spend so much time in those 501 classes telling students not to teach grammar because that's what a lot of the TAs think it's going to be. And I didn't do that anyway, but it kind of reinforced any of qualms I might have had about [the need to teach grammar]." When asked how the TAs responded to the idea of focusing on higher order concerns over grammar, Kelly said that the discussions were mostly directed at the students from Literature, who, she said, "were, like, ecstatic about teaching grammar."

### *Appreciating the WAC/WID Approach*

When asked about some of the teaching practices that they had adopted via the TA preparation, Nick and Kelly specifically pointed to the WAC/WID approach used in the University's FYC course, which both of them found quite useful. As Kelly stated, "I appreciated teaching in the disciplines. I think it's easier and more relevant. So if I had a choice, I would

always teach FYC as a WAC course. So that's one thing I got from my experience as a TA."

And Nick noted,

I was really taken with the Writing in the Disciplines approach here. I felt that that was something that would be really be beneficial to me, to be thinking about the different genre requirements, the different disciplines. I liked the way that Writing 2 was set up and how it allowed me think about disciplinary writing and the way we were framing the Composition class.

Piper credited the WAC/WID model with helping her recognize the importance of making genre conventions explicit for students, and thereby helping them understand the assumptions that are implicitly made within disciplinary contexts: "One of things I did as a TA that I hadn't done before because it was a WAC class was to say, 'OK, let's talk about the assumptions writers have in social sciences, let's talk about the assumptions they have in science.' So maybe that became more explicit because of the text and the curriculum and discussions in TA training."

While Jackie did not refer to the WAC/WID model specifically, she did provide an example of how she enacted it in the FYC class. Her syllabus mentioned a "mystery object" and its relationship to the three disciplines. When asked to explain what the mystery object was and its relevance to the class, she said,

I had this really cool thing. It was an Absolut Vodka bottle that I found in the fire pit one year when I was camping. And the heat of the fire had melted the glass so it looked like it had kind of melted and was crunched to the side. So, I took it in and washed it off, and I use it at the beginning of every quarter. And I said, "OK I want you to look at this object and write about it from one of three different perspectives. So, choose the perspective you

feel most comfortable with.” So, if they’re an English major they’re going to go with Humanities. They might say, “Oh, it’s clear and it’s wavy and what was its story and maybe I’ll write a poem.” Then I’d say, “All right, how would somebody in the hard sciences write about this?” Well, it looks like it weighs approximately this amount. I’m like, “Think back to the science reports you did in science class. Like facts only, no creativity.” So that was what I had them do, go through and give an example of what you think writing in the humanities looks like. What you think writing in the sciences and the social sciences looks like. So maybe the social sciences majors might say, “Maybe there was an alcoholic drinking that, he was angry and threw into the fire.” So they’re thinking of it from a psychological perspective, or something like that. So that was the mystery object and they were stoked because it was an empty alcohol bottle. And it always brought up interesting discussions, and we shared our writing with each other and talked about how it’s interesting that we think we know what writing in the sciences might be, but maybe that’s not what it is.

#### To What Extent Did the Composition TAs Perceive a Disciplinary Divide in Their Preparation Program Experience and to What Did They Attribute It?

The Composition TAs definitely perceived a disciplinary divide within their TA preparation, and they posed a number of reasons for it. They all were candid about the divide that they perceived between themselves and the Literature TAs in the class. There was, however, some discussion about the exceptions to the rule, in that several of the TAs noted that it was not a straight binary but more of a continuum of attitudes that seemed to fall along disciplinary lines. The Composition TAs were also quite conscious of what they perceived as a divide between Literature and Composition within the field of English Studies at large. In addition to these

issues, the Composition TAs recognized that at least to some extent, institutional policies played a role in perpetuating the divide. In particular, the Composition TAs cited the different amounts and types of teaching experience held by TAs from the two groups as well as the English department requirement that the Literature graduate students apply to be TAs in order to fulfill the obligations of their funding contracts.

### *Disciplinary Affiliations*

Both Anna and Nick directly invoked disciplinary affiliations to explain why the TAs from Composition and the TAs from Literature viewed the TA preparation program in such a different light.

As Nick described it, “I think there was a pressure on people to represent for their culture, to represent for that department. Even if you wanted to go along with [the TA preparation facilitator] and go along with what she was teaching you had to do it from a place where you were keeping disciplinary identity first,” said Nick, whereas, “for me, the training was like, ‘Sweet, this is a great book, I love this book.’ It was great, I was learning and immersed in it. This was my field. For me, there was no sense of being outside of any kind of line.”

When asked about her perceptions of the Literature TAs’ feelings about being in the class, Anna also pointed to disciplinary affiliation, saying, “I think Education people really like teaching more, although that’s a sweeping generalization. In Education, we look at the teaching as part of the work. It is part of the theory. It is part of our scholarship. And we saw the two bridging more, which makes sense because we’re studying Education and how to teach people. We are more involved in the teaching side of it, by definition.”

When asked how she thought the Literature TAs perceived it, Anna said, “It’s hard for me to say what someone in a Master’s or Ph.D. program in Literature might be taking away. I

think some are looking at it more like, “Oh, this is this class that I have to teach so that I could go back to my real work of studying, you know, Shakespeare or whatever... Which is also fine but, I think some M.A. in English people have more of the idea that this is just this other thing they have to do to pay their bills. And I have an M.A. in English so I’ve been there.” At the same time though, Anna conceded, “Although, we were all there because we had to be in order to be TAs. And I was teaching Writing for Engineers for kind of the same reasons. So it’s not like we’re any more pure. But we like the teaching theory aspect of it.”

Nick made a similar observation:

I think the Lit./Comp. division that emerged in that class was problematic for me as Composition person. As a student in the class there were definitely times when my own sense of pride and my own disciplinary orientations that really value Composition and sort of think of the grooming in super star Literature people as a task where...it’s a limited, it’s a very narrow kind of field and its relationship to Composition is quite different as opposed to somebody who really cares about Composition and this is what you do and this is your profession in life. When you see people kind of looking down on that, that’s kind of a problem. You sort of feel a little like, “I’m ready to rumble.” In that sense there’s a little bit like aggressiveness or argument. I’m willing to put my disciplinary differences out and I’m willing to challenge you, call you out, and argue with you or try to make a point. We probably chewed on them and had a little “us and them” as time went on.

### *The Divide in the Classes*

All five of the Composition participants referred directly to what they considered a split in the TA preparation between themselves and the TAs from Literature. In fact, several of the

Composition TAs indicated that even the students' body language was representative of it in that TAs from the two groups tended to separate themselves from one another and even to cross their arms. According to Jackie, "It was unfortunate because it was, 'They sit on this side, we sit on this side.' It was very divided. And there were also some heated discussions—professional discussions—but heated nonetheless." Piper concurred, recalling, "Yeah, the class was totally divided."

As Nick described it, "I think there were two cultures in the class. There was a clearly a division between people from English department and people from Education. You had a group of people who were really committed to Composition and you had people...I think that it was part of their culture to look at Composition differently. For a lot of different reasons."

When asked about what he thought some of these reasons might be, Nick pointed to the idea that the Literature students were being prepared for a different career trajectory than one including the teaching of Composition: "And I think that when it came down to it, there was a sense with the Literature department they didn't even want people going out to get community college jobs or Comp. jobs. They weren't grooming them for that. I think there really were a lot of different kinds of pressures on these students from Lit." Kelly made a similar observation, stating, "I don't know what the culture's like in the English department, but sometimes it seemed kind of toxic like, 'Oh, we have to do this. We have to be there.'"

Jackie also pointed to the divisiveness in the class, noting, "The worst part [of the TA preparation] was not having that sense of community that I really had hoped I would have. The material was excellent, but what sticks out in my mind was the two or three heated discussions that we had in class between the Lit. people and the Comp. people." When asked if there was anything that she had hoped to gain from the class that she didn't get out of it, Jackie responded

in a similar vein: “I just wish that it hadn't been so separate. It would have been cool to have a better sense of camaraderie. I really felt that sense of camaraderie with [the TA preparation facilitator] and I felt that with my colleagues, and I think there was one person who identified as an English graduate student who felt the same way that a lot of us did. But it was too bad because I felt like everyone is so cool and we were all teaching the same thing, so it's too bad we all just can't hang out. But it was like junior high.”

As Nick stated, “So generally speaking, people stuck together: Lit. people stuck together, Comp. people stuck together. People stuck with who they knew.” When asked when she thought those factions formed, Jackie answered, “I don't want to say right away, but it kind of seemed like it was right away. Once people labeled themselves, ‘I'm an Education [Composition] student,’ it was like, ‘Oh, OK, there's my people; there's your people.’”

When asked what she thought was responsible for this divide, Jackie indicated that she thought it was coming from the other graduate students' home departments rather than from the writing unit: “I don't think that the Writing Program has any responsibility toward that because I think we have a wonderful environment here that is super supportive of everybody, whether you're from Religious Studies or Literature or wherever. I would love to be a fly on the wall and hear what the advisors are saying to their grad students.”

Kelly mentioned the sense of hostility that she observed in not only in the practicum that she took but also in the practicum classes that she observed in later years in her role as Teaching Associate. She indicated that she thought that it was a result of the community in the class rather than the instruction. When asked if she thought disciplinary affiliation played a role in developing this hostility she said, “I think it has to do 100% with it. All the hostility comes from Literature.”



When asked if he had any thoughts about how some of the tension within the TA preparation class between the two cultures might be decreased, Nick suggested that it might help to encourage the Literature students to recognize that teaching writing is an important activity in its own right, rather than something one does for funding. Yet Nick also pointed out that this would be a difficult, if not impossible task, at least until such time that the culture of the English department changed enough to support this idea. In his response, he invoked the idea of structure versus culture, explaining that “structures are the official rules written down on paper. Cultures are the unofficial rules, beliefs and practices that take place. It is much easier to change structures than it is cultures.” Nick went on to point out that in this case, “What you have are structures that are at odds with cultures. For example, in some cases, Literature faculty might look down on a student for taking a job in Composition because, “You didn’t come here to go teach Composition.” What you have, I think, with TA training is that mismatch between structure and culture. You have external structures opposed to the Writing Program that are at odds with the Literature culture program.” Nick further pointed out that,

It is very difficult to change cultures, and you can only do so from the top. You can’t do it in a TA training course; you’re not going to change the culture of the Literature program because the values and the culture that people care about is locked up in that Literature program. And that kind of change, probably without something special happening over a long period of time, is not going to happen. Structure is easier to change, you can make a 2-unit course into a 4-unit course, or make it an 8-unit course, drop the requirement all together. You can change all of that, change external things. But the beliefs of people, the attitudes, the values; those are not so easy to change. You can

change structure, which is a document. You just write a new document. But it will take years to change whole culture of the English Department.

### *Exceptions*

Despite the divide between the Literature and Composition students that was by all accounts present in the TA preparation program, there were some individuals who stood out as exceptions. According to Nick, “The class wasn't 100 percent divided. There were some really good people in class who made strong contributions and were fully engaged. At the same time, there were a couple of people who would sit down with their sunglasses, medical review, like ‘I’m here, I’ll say whatever I need to say, but I’m not with it.’”

*Literature Exceptions.* According to Anna, “You know, and there were many who were definitely into the side of looking at how students learn and of really approaching students, too. There were a lot of very committed people in the Literature program.”

As Nick pointed out more than once, “My sense was that a lot of people [from Literature] engaged in good faith.” Nick then provided several examples:

Justin is just a class act. He totally wasn’t a hater, not a person who was in there who was resisting all the time. And Diane too, she was just a really good scholar. She was just a really smart person. She wasn't a hater. She may have had her own busy-ness. She may have been an advanced student. There may have been different levels of where people were at in terms of what they were feeling or weren't feeling. Because again I think there were people who were just completely present and fully engaged. Amber too. She was totally into Lit., she was completely immersed, but she brought a lot to the class. I think there were some of these folks who were finding that having Composition knowledge

was very helpful to them in shaping their career. So I think it wasn't all just a straight split.

Despite the qualms that she shared about the Literature TAs throughout most of the interviews, even Piper conceded that “there were people in there, even the Lit. people, who were genuinely trying to do a good job.”

The TA preparation facilitator seemed to have played a role in mitigating potential resistance from some of the TAs who were not studying Composition. As Jackie noted, “[The TA preparation facilitator], to her credit, I think that's a difficult class in general just because you're bringing in these two different groups of people who, historically and traditionally, haven't seen eye to eye.” And Nick recalled, “I think people tended to treat [the TA facilitator] overall with respect. There were people from the Literature side of the house who really wanted to please her, they really cared about her, they really respected her. Even people who wanted to grumble about the class itself—you had to give her her due, she had gravitas, if you will. She was totally reasonable about what she was doing. Even if you wanted to be resistant about it, she wasn't giving anyone a place to stick that resistance to. You would have had to take it on yourself and be a hater; that's the way I look at it.”

Kelly also seems to think that the TA program facilitator was able to quell much of the potential resistance to the practicum, given her background in Literature: “[The TA preparation facilitator] has a degree in Literature, so that's street cred for those people. She has been in English departments for a really long time. So she knows how to talk about Literature to people.” Jackie made a similar point about the TA program facilitator by returning to her *Outsiders* (1967) metaphor, saying,

What is so cool about it though is that she was both a “Soc” and a “Greaser.” Her background, her dissertation, was in 16th Century Literature or something. Her bookshelves were lined with Chaucer and things like that. So she could ride both sides, which is so cool. If we'd had an instructor that was clearly one or the other, it wouldn't have worked as well.

As Nick stated, “I think that she handled that class, with its dynamics, with complete professionalism. She never ruffled a feather, never did anything; if she were disturbed you would never know it. She was a professional from top-to-bottom.”

*Composition Exceptions.* One of the most surprising findings in terms of exceptions was that in at least one case, a Composition TA became resistant to the practicum overall as a result of the resistance she witnessed from the Literature TAs. For Piper, there was not enough explicit instruction in Composition theory in the practicum, and this, coupled with the resistance displayed by the Literature students along with her perception of their arrogance, was an issue for her. “My personal bias is that I don’t think Lit. people should teach Composition unless they are taught to teach Composition. And I don’t think this particular course teaches anyone to teach Composition. It might support teachers as they do it, but it’s not teaching anyone to do it.”<sup>46</sup>

Piper went on to explain that from her perspective,

I think [TA preparation] was useful for people who have never taught before. And I think that if those differences in assumptions and experiences were made more central...I think what was useful was to sit around and talk about experiences because under the experiences are the assumptions. But if the assumptions are challenged and questioned and brought to the forefront of the discussion, like if that was part of the class, like, “So

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<sup>46</sup> Granted, Piper had been exempted from 501A, so she had only taken 501B.

tell us about your experiences and what assumptions are underlying what you're doing and saying." That would be more useful. It would at least make it more visible what was happening. But instead it was talk strategies, or talk about what you're doing, or sharing sob stories. So it ended up being therapeutic more than informative. I think there's a place for that, but if there's no instructor direction on what it all means, then it just ends up being that.

Piper felt that the anecdotal information being shared in the class was in desperate need of a theoretical basis that would make it more meaningful:

There needed to be some apparatus to make sense of all the stuff people were talking about that was really personal. And there was none. It was more of just sharing that stuff and although it was useful, I felt it would be more useful if some research that had to do with that issue was presented. Or if [the TA preparation facilitator], as a professional, would say, "OK, this is where Composition studies comes down on this; let me give you an annotated bibliography of the research on this." Everyone in the room who studies Composition studies could hear what [the Literature students] were saying and hear that it was wrong, according to Composition studies. And there was never any push for, "Let me tell you what Composition studies says about the issue that's been brought up by the class." The Comp. people already know it, but... it's really early in your career and you can't exactly cite the research, but you just know it. The teacher should have been more of a teacher and less of a facilitator of this discussion. It sort of validated all these different points of view, and half of them were wrong. Like we don't teach grammar out of context. Why can't someone say, "Here's a study from 1960 that says that doesn't

work.” Just the basics of, “Let me tell you what Composition studies knows” was not at all presented to the class. I think that’s a big problem.

Piper conceded that, “[The TA preparation facilitator] was great, but she’s very practical and she’s all about getting things done. I think this gets the task accomplished, people are teaching the course, but I do question...are they teaching Comp. according to Comp. principles? They’re not, as far as I can tell.”

Although she did appreciate the sharing of assignments in the practicum, Piper nevertheless felt that there needed to be more of an emphasis on the assumptions that were underlying the classroom activities her classmates proposed: “It wasn’t like anyone said, ‘Let’s compare what this assignment is valuing and what this other assignment is valuing and talk about what Composition studies values.’ There was never a bringing back to, ‘There is a better way to do this and a less effective way to do this.’ So, the non-judgment of the whole thing was a problem.”

### *The Divide in the Field*

All five of the Composition TAs interviewed were quite aware of—and vocal about—the divide that they perceived between the fields of Composition and Literature. Referring to both anecdote and scholarship, they considered the ways in which the divide impacted the dynamics in the class as well as its origins.

When asked how he sees the relationship between Literature and Composition, Nick responded,

I think that in the 21st century, Composition—in which I would include Literature within the idea of Composition, Literature being a form of Composition. Composition is an essential skill for participating in the economy and physics structure, so Composition is

essential today. Literature I think is very valuable for understanding the other. It's a wonderful piece of humanities, very valuable, but there's a great deal of urgency around Composition, hence its required nature. So I think that people are competing for resources in higher education and no way is it going to stop. In the English department, Composition and Literature are put at odds, competing for same departmental resources. That said, maybe we're talking about the difference between reading and writing, Literature being a little more on the reading side, it's not about writing but more about reading Literature, analyzing Literature, critiquing Literature, so yeah, I guess that's what I have to say about it, it's a complex relationship. There are no easy solutions, but we should still try to build bridges. I love Literature myself.

In response to the same question, Piper focused on the differences she sees in the teaching of classes in the two fields:

I see no relationship [between the disciplines of Literature and Composition], honestly. In my world they've totally broken from each other. I could not teach a Lit. class if you paid me a million dollars. Reading and understanding Literature is different than writing about Literature, which I haven't done since I started teaching Comp., and I never learned how to teach it; I only learned how to do it, and even that was sort of subconsciously. I don't feel qualified to teach it. And I do feel qualified to teach Composition. And I wonder how [the TAs from Literature] do not feel that way. I kept thinking, "You don't know how to do this." I know how to do this because I've been trained to do this. And I'd have to be trained to do that."

Referring to Composition as the “red-headed step-child of English Studies,” even as “English rode on the back of Composition” although “Literature has always been privileged,” Jackie noted that she was “fascinated” by the divide within the TA preparation program, because it mirrors history. In a lot of the readings I’ve done, it’s always been, “Composition’s a skill, Composition is like...” If you’re an English teacher and you do Composition you must really suck because they stuck you with that crappy class. Nobody wants to teach that class, and it seems like once you’re done serving your “time” quote, unquote, once you’re done teaching those classes, now you’re a “real” Literature teacher and you don’t deal with that crap anymore. You’re moving your way up the totem pole, you’re moving your way to the top, now you teach just Literature. And that’s how it’s been historically. If you read the literature it talks about that; you know, back in the Harvard days, you know, with Subject A and all of that stuff. And if you look at schools today, who teaches the writing courses? Graduate-level TAs, lecturers, freeway fliers, and I think some very lucky and very dedicated faculty members do it. People who are willing to buck the system, give everyone the finger, and say, “I don’t care what you value, this is something I think is important.” I’m not really surprised we had the experience we had in that class because I think it just mirrors the attitudes we’re being fed, not by [the TA preparation facilitator], not by the Writing Program, but maybe our undergraduate experiences, or some of us who came in with Master’s degrees, you know those little bugs are in our ears for a long time before coming here. I don’t know what it’s like over in the English department but I can imagine there’s that idea of you have to do your “time” and earn your keep, do the Comp. thing, and then you can come back and be a “real” English professor.



Also citing the body of literature dedicated to addressing the divide between Composition and Literature within English Studies, Piper called for an open discussion of the varying assumptions held by the two disciplines, which she believed would have been a productive way to breach the divide. She would have liked the TA preparation facilitator to have brought

the conflict into the open about the history of why there is this conflict. The theory would have been helpful, but I think you can talk about the theory without having the theory there. It wasn't even talked about or invoked. It would've helped if she had said, "You know what, there's actually a whole theory behind this discipline, there's research behind this discipline, there's reasons why these people on this side of the room think this and why these people on this side of the room think that. In Literature, this is the way things are conducted." I don't know the history of teaching Literature, but maybe that should have been part of the class too, to make it clear why there's a dichotomy.

When asked about her perspective regarding whether she sees Composition as more aligned with Literature or with Education, Kelly said, "I think that Composition is better housed in Education. I don't think I would be anywhere the kind of teacher I am had I come out of the Department of English. Because the Department of Education gave me such a better perspective on students and student learning and it's all about the students rather than all about the product."

When asked in a probing question to talk about this idea a little further, Kelly explained,

I see myself as an educator first, a teacher second, and then as a teacher of Composition. Somebody who's in Composition, in order to actually be good at teaching Composition, is going to be interested in what are the best methods and what are the best practices out there and things like that. So, yeah, I think it's a natural connection. I can't imagine being

in the Department of Literature because our focus would be so different. There's such a difference between a text that's dead and a student that's alive.

Piper made a similar observation, noting the differences between what is being valued in Composition classrooms vs. what is being valued in Literature classrooms. As far as she is concerned there is a big difference in "what's being privileged, the mode of transmission, the goal, what role students are supposed to take, what they're supposed to learn." She went on to say that

I haven't been in a Lit. class in a really long time, but from what I tell it's about showcasing what you can say about the book, that you can transmit other people's theories, and that you can be humble about it, and you can worship the professor. It's much more of a performance. Whereas in Composition I feel like, although you have to have some performance here to get a good grade, that's the last step. The idea is that the student is learning the process, things that are invisible are becoming visible, and they're taking away knowledge about the writing process and hopefully they're taking the opportunity to *get* something rather than *give* something. In Lit., my assumption is that they're giving something—it's an outward show rather than an inward growth. In Composition it's like, "I'm getting something, I'm learning how to write, I'm understanding why people write, I have this paper that I'm really proud of and I discovered a question that I now have that I want to focus on in my other classes."

When asked where she believes this philosophy originates, Piper said that she believes it can be traced,

back to the assumptions [the Literature TAs] have about students, like, "Here's the hierarchy, here's where you are." You're not really permitted to say anything or make it

your own until you get higher up on this ladder. And the writing mimics that value system. So there is not an opportunity to really do something. I feel like they're looking for more like, "I really like this paper because you used this theory that I'm interested in, you know how to do the correct citations, and you blah, blah, blah." Like "you fit into our value system rather than you created something that is going to help you."

Piper pointed to another assumption that she perceived was held by the Literature TAs and which she felt was in conflict with the assumptions underlying Composition theory:

I think that one of the tensions in the TA training class was related to the idea that being able to write well is an innate quality. The English people—and people who were generally not educated in writing studies—think, "Oh, my students can't write, my students can't write." As if it's something that people can do or can't do, and that it's not something that can be taught, as if you either know how to write or you don't.

In support of her point, Piper went on to recall her experience as an undergraduate writer in which she described how she

had no consciousness, before I started studying writing, of how you learned it. I just knew how to do it. So, I can imagine that if that's how you learned to do it, you just do it because you're doing it, and you really are being taught but you're being taught so young that you're not aware of being taught, you're just thinking that you're doing what you're supposed to do. I can see how you would come away with that assumption. Really early in my Master's program, I was in this interview study and they were asking students about their writing. And my professor asked, "What about your writing when you were in college?" And I was like, "I don't know. I got 'A's.' I just wrote these papers, it was just this thing I did. And I knew how to do it." I was an English major. So I can see how if

you were always an English major, and you had done it over and over again, you would think that it was something you were good at and you had no consciousness of how to teach it or why people didn't have it or did have it."

She went on to say that this perspective is akin to the idea that writing well is, "A gift bestowed by God. And what that really indicates is that the person has no training in Composition and has no meta-cognition about how they learned it."

### *Program Distinctions*

As evidenced by the other two data sets in this chapter, the interviews revealed that certain institutional-specific policies seemed to play a role in at least some of the resistance displayed by TAs in the program. The Composition TAs cited the different levels of graduate study between themselves and the Literature TAs as well as differing levels of teaching experience as further contributing to their senses of a divide between the two groups.

### *Different Levels of Graduate Study and Teaching Experience*

For one thing, the TAs from Literature were almost all in their third-year of graduate school and most had already served as TAs in their second-year for the English Department. According to Nick, "there were built in problems in the sense that structurally, you had these students who were advanced in degree and who were looking at this as a time-waster. They had already taught Literature for a year so they were thinking they already knew how to teach," although, as Kelly pointed out, "None of them have ever taught a course independently before. They've all been TAs for the Introduction to Literature class. They've been TAs for that but they have not been the instructor. So they're dealing with this total freedom of running their own class and being empowered by that. And then they're totally shot down by these exams that they're studying for."

Indeed, further complicating matters for the Literature TAs is the fact that because they were all in their third-year of graduate study they were in the midst of preparing for their qualifying examinations while they were taking the practicum and serving as TAs in the writing unit. As Nick noted, “A lot of them were thinking about comps and thinking about other things and had other time demands. And I think that definitely factored into [their feeling that] I have this little two-unit class and it's just a pest.” Kelly brought up the same issue, stating, “At that time, they all are studying for some big qualifying exam so they're all freaked out about that.”

At the same time, the Composition TAs were all in their first year of graduate studies at this university so there were no exams for them to face, and they had all had significant experience in teaching and in running their own classrooms. As Anna noted, being in a class with other TAs who lacked the teaching experience that she already had was “a little weird for me because I was coming in as an experienced teacher and a lot of people weren't. And it created this rift. I didn't want to seem like this know-it-all.”

Not only did the differing experience levels create a sense of discomfort within the practicum, but Piper described her anxiety at beginning to teach FYC at the same time she began her graduate studies because that meant that she had no time to prepare for her classes until the two-day orientation in the fall. As noted above, Piper had hoped to see the textbook that she would be teaching from as soon as possible but was told that “I would get it all at the orientation right before school started. And I was really uncomfortable with that. I knew how to teach and I wanted to plan my course, and I didn't want to get the textbook the day before class started. But that's how it was at that point, and I felt like I was really pestering people by calling and asking all these questions.”

As enthusiastic as she was about being a TA for the writing unit, when asked if she found the practicum useful, Kelly answered,

To be perfectly honest, no. Not for me because the people who were in it were far less experienced than I was. I felt like it was useful for me to make some relationships with those in my cohort. And I did learn things from [the TA preparation facilitator]. But I felt like I talked the entire time. It was one of those things where I felt like I was helping more than learning.

*English Dept. Requirement that Students Apply for Composition TAs*

Two of the Composition TAs spoke directly to the fact that the Literature TAs were required to apply for TAs with the writing unit. Jackie, in particular, saw this as a key factor contributing to the resistance that she observed the Literature TAs demonstrating. In her words, “Once you force somebody to do something—not that I think it’s a bad thing, I think it’s a great opportunity to come over to the Writing Program and teach over here. But I think any time you make something required, it just changes the dynamic.” Jackie also noted that the Literature students seemed to have an attitude of “Well, we’ll get hired no matter what. It’s always going to be in our third-year.” They had a very pro-forma attitude. I don’t know if it’s still like that, but I felt like that was the case in my class.”

Juxtaposed against this requirement was the fact that the Composition TAs were not guaranteed funding at all, and that these students were pleased rather than resentful for the opportunity to be TAs. According to Kelly, “I just think the people in Education were so grateful to have jobs, and our funding was not secure like the people in English, who are just like, you know, “Well I get to teach for five years no matter what.” But we were just like, “Yay!””

## CHAPTER 6: LITERATURE TAS' INTERVIEW RESULTS

### Literature TAs' Background

This chapter reports on the responses of the study's Literature participants, again by first providing brief background information about each of them as gleaned from the interviews in terms of their previous educational experiences, their reasons for pursuing doctoral work, and the extent of their prior teaching experiences. As in the previous chapter, this information serves as useful context for the opinions expressed within the interviews, for the participants' individual experiences serve to color their attitudes and perceptions both about TA preparation and teaching Composition. Once this context has been established, the remainder of this chapter will focus on the reporting of the Literature participants' responses to the interview questions.

#### *Daniel*

Daniel did his undergraduate work in English at a small liberal arts college out of state. He came to this institution to study Romantic Literature and to pursue both an M.A. and Ph.D. at least in part because he wanted to study with the professors in the English department. His career goal was to teach English Literature at a four-year university. He noted that he had always envisioned that teaching undergraduate writing would be a part of that career choice, particularly as a new assistant professor. He had not done any teaching at all before coming in to the TA preparation program.

#### *Justin*

Justin came into the university with a Master's of English and an undergraduate double major in English and History. After completing his M.A. he spent about 12 years as an adjunct professor, teaching English (mostly Composition and a little bit of Literature) as well as other writing-intensive courses. He came to this institution to earn a Ph.D. in English because his

career goal was to obtain a faculty position as an English professor in a liberal arts school that focuses on teaching over research. While he looked forward to teaching Literature courses, he clarified that that was “not to the exclusion of teaching writing.” Although he first considered the idea of pursuing a graduate degree in Anthropology and he also briefly entertained the idea of a graduate degree in Composition, that was not until late in his application process, and so when he was accepted into the Ph.D. program in English, he pursued that opportunity. Still, he noted, “I don’t think I was super-aware of how compatible my interests are with Composition programs, because they really are.”

*Diane*

Diane came to the university to earn a Ph.D. in English Literature because her goal was to become a professor of Literature. Her undergraduate degree was in English and she hadn’t had any teaching experience before beginning her graduate work. As a result, her first experience teaching was as a Literature TA in the English Department. Because she had earned a score of 5 on her AP English test, she had tested out of the otherwise required undergraduate writing class. Consequently, the first time she ever stepped into a college-level writing class was as a TA for the writing unit. In her words: “Let me tell you, I was overjoyed as a freshman not to have to take writing and be able to go right into Romantic Lit. class; it was a huge, wonderful thing for me that I could start right away on subjects that really sparked my interest.” At the time she was interviewed for this project she had decided that moving forward, she was only interested in teaching Literature, such that if she could not find a position where that was possible, she was considering leaving teaching altogether.



*Nancy*

Nancy had come to the graduate program in Literature to study with a particular professor who was a specialist in her area of interest. Having taught high school English for the previous two years before coming to graduate school, Nancy's goal was to obtain a Ph.D. and then to go on and teach Literature and publish scholarly works in Literature as a professor in a college setting. Her undergraduate degree had also been in Literature.

*Amber*

Amber enrolled in the graduate program in Literature right after earning her BA degree in English Literature. Although she had not been a TA before coming to this university, she had taught Composition to high school students in the summers at two different private schools. Her career goal was to teach Literature in a college or university upon earning her Ph.D.

How did the Literature TAs Respond to TA Preparation in an Independent Writing Unit?

Because the Literature TAs seemed to have a different response to the TA preparation program than they did to the actual teaching of FYC, their responses to this question have been grouped separately, with the first several sections below referring to their thoughts about the preparation itself and the second set of responses referring to how they felt about actually teaching first-year Composition.

*They Saw the TAs as Something They Had to Do*

The Literature TAs unanimously considered their TAs as a requirement necessary to fund their graduate studies rather than as a choice they were making of their own volition. Because the TAs' funding packages were designed by the English department, this institution-specific policy and the attitudes it engenders will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

When asked how she felt about TAing in the Writing Program, Nancy noted that, “I think that you’ll find that all of us groaned when we found out that we had to do it.” Indeed, when asked the same question, Diane said, “I think we all felt like this is something that we had to do and that was that. And [we were] just kind of pulling through it.” Amber made a similar comment, noting, “Well, I’ve always been a good student and someone who gets motivated and excited by those types of things. But I hated that I felt like it seemed like something I had to do.”

Justin’s comments help to shed some light on how and why the Literature TAs saw their TAship in this way. As he recalled it, “When I first came in to the graduate program, they framed it as ‘you had to do it, had to apply there,’ and there was some resistance among some of my colleagues.” But despite the fact that he felt compelled to apply for the TAship, Justin noted that he “took the approach that, ‘I’m going to be teaching Comp. when I get out there anyway, so it’s good to have the experience.’”

*They Had Low to No Expectations for TA Preparation*

All the Literature TAs interviewed indicated that they had low to no expectations for the TA preparation program before they became a part of it. For example, when asked if the TA preparation met her expectations, Diane said, “I don’t know that I had expectations going in. I was pretty much like, ‘This is just what I do. This is the next step.’ I think I was just like, ‘Well, it’s going to TA training.’ You don’t know what you’re in for so you don’t have any expectations.” Similarly, Nancy noted that she “didn’t really have many expectations” for the course. Justin also noted that his expectations were not very high, in large part due to the negative comments he had heard from other Literature students who participated in the TA preparation before he did: “I had heard complaints from other English grad students about 501A, that it was too theoretical, and so I didn’t have high expectations.”

Daniel also indicated that his “expectations were pretty low” and he explained that, “I don’t think anyone gets that excited about pedagogical classes. I should probably speak for myself, but I don’t remember being really excited to be there. Plus it was weird because when you become a graduate student in some ways you don’t want to be a student anymore. Or, if you’re a graduate student, you’re a graduate student in your discipline. But being a student in this classroom situation outside of our own department, it felt weird. Just because you’re back to feeling like you’re dependent on a grade, which you were.”

Amber indicated that the TA preparation program had exceeded her expectations in part because her initial expectations had been set based on the prior two-day training she had gotten from the English Department for her initial TAship. “I felt like our TA training was kind of just silly for the English Department while I thought this training [for the writing unit] was really well-organized.”

*They Felt Like the TA Preparation Could Have Been Condensed*

Although only one of the Literature interviewees directly stated that she felt as though the TA preparation program could have been condensed, she made it clear in her comments that she felt that she was speaking not only for herself, but also for her cohort of TAs from Literature. When asked about how she and her cohort felt about TAing for the writing unit, Diane emphasized the amount of time that the program required and her sense that it could have been condensed:

We were all so busy and stressed out that it did feel like a real strain on the time to have a whole quarter prepping for that. It could have been condensed more for us was I think the general consensus. I think one class a month or something like that instead of every week, which was getting to be a lot. We were all still TAing and prepping for our second

qualifying exams and I was working at [the tutoring center] too and I had a lot on my plate. I think I actually got in trouble for missing too many classes because I had so much going on that quarter. I think it would be much better to have it partially on-line and have a meeting once a month or once every other week instead of every week. I think we all felt like it was just too much.

*They Felt the TAs'hip Disconnected Them from Their Home Department*

Two of the Literature TAs directly indicated that they felt a sense of disconnection from the Department of English when serving as TAs for the writing unit.

When asked how she felt about coming over to the Writing Program to be a TA rather than continuing to TA in her own department, Diane replied,

It wasn't so much [an issue of] being pulled out of my own department, it was as an English Ph.D. student I enjoy English. I deeply missed actually being a TA in English and getting to listen to really amazing professors lecture about Literature, some of which were filling holes in my undergraduate education or just reinforcing what I had already learned or giving me a different perspective of it. I deeply enjoyed going to every lecture I went to as a Literature TA and looked forward to it every time. Whereas I can't say I deeply enjoyed every Writing 2 class I taught. And I really felt like I wasn't learning anything about Literature once I started teaching Writing 2 because that's not part of that. So that was the real drawback for me. In some ways I felt that my development in English Literature, my accumulation of knowledge and intellectual perspectives on Literature from some of the greatest minds of literature—being my professors—was stopped. It's not that I didn't learn a lot from teaching writing, but my passion is in

English Literature. So that was the hardest part was to suddenly be away from that and from interacting with my peers. That was tough.

Justin made a similar comment as he recalled,

I remember thinking at the time that I felt somewhat disconnected from my home department, like less connected to the faculty. Although I was still taking some grad classes, I just wasn't up there as much because I'd use the Writing Program room and the computer room; I'd do my copying there. So I was just in a different space than the other English TAs. That was only my second year at this university, so I had one year of TAing in English, then I went into four quarters of TAing in writing, so I did have that sense of feeling somewhat disconnected—although I felt nicely connected with the other Writing Program TAs, and I appreciated that.

In addition to these direct statements, Daniel recalled his sense that his peers in the Literature graduate program saw his continued TAship with the writing unit beyond the required period as strange and atypical. In this way, he too felt somewhat disconnected from his Literature cohort as a result of his choice to continue teaching for the writing unit.

### *They Appreciated the TA Preparation Facilitators*

Three of the Literature TA pointed to the mentoring that they received from the TA preparation facilitators, which they saw as a very positive aspect of participating in the TA preparation program. Justin stated, "I felt like I got good mentoring, continuing mentoring. [The TA preparation facilitator 2], for instance, has taken a real interest in helping me on the job market [and] it really showed that I have a strong hand in teaching Composition, that I can really bring that, so I really appreciate that. People wouldn't necessarily have to do that. In some ways,

there's been more active mentorship in reaching out than with some English professors that I'm involved with."

Nancy made a similar comment, as she noted, "I really liked [the TA preparation facilitator 2]. She was my adviser, as well. I absolutely adore her as an adviser." Nancy went on to explain that, "I really respect her professionalism, and she made me understand why somebody would want to take writing seriously as a research initiative and why pedagogy is so critical, and why writing is something, in my opinion, that should be taught as its own department. But then, those writing practices that students learn in Writing 2 should be integrated into the classes that they are taking, you know, in other disciplines too."

Daniel saw both of the TA preparation facilitators as supportive and welcoming: "I thought that both of the TA preparation facilitators created a welcoming sense of sharing what was working and what wasn't working. I thought that sense of community was helpful. And I found them very approachable and supportive personally." Similarly, Justin said, "The TA instructor was just a really bright person, super smart, and easy to respect. And yet she came across as very accessible too. She was someone I admired."

#### *They Embraced the Practical Information over the Theory in TA Preparation*

All five of the Literature TAs interviewed indicated that they embraced the practical concepts discussed in the class over the theory that was presented.

Diane indicated that she really appreciated the practical aspect of the TA preparation program, as she noted, "I really liked it when we would do practical things like working on possible assignments that we would put together and then working in groups on that. I think that was my favorite part of it." Justin said that he had "thought it would be more theory than it was, so I think in that sense, I was pleasantly surprised with how practical it was, based on what I'd

heard about 501A. So when I got there, I was like, ‘Well, sure, we’re reading some stuff and there’s a little theory in here,” but it was practical enough to be useful for me.’”

When asked what she remembered about the TA preparation classes, Amber also pointed to the practical part of the class, which she said she really appreciated:

I think parts of it were really, really valuable. And I think that the ones that were really, really good were the practical aspects, which were the most immediately applicable because it gave me a way to basically become a teacher who knew how to organize a really good syllabus and all those types of things that you need to do, and write a really good assignment. So that was really important and valuable.” As she described it, “I think 501A was probably, to me, the most valuable because it was about designing these materials. And 501B was sort of about refining it and kind of checking in with how it’s going your first semester teaching.

When asked how she felt about the Composition theories that were presented in the TA preparation, Amber responded

Well, I’m a pragmatist and I don’t like anecdotal theories. So if the ideas and theories surrounding Composition are very interesting, very thought-provoking... I don’t like reading works of theory that are based around anecdotal evidence where the success is much more indirect. And that’s my overall sense of the field, is that I’m less interested in *Comp Tales* (Haswell, 1999) or something like that than I would be in something that was a bit more based on research and study, like the Lunsford and Lunsford (2008) study [that we talked about in class], which was very applied.

When asked if she felt as though there was a lot of that anecdotal theory presented in either 501A or 501B, Amber responded,

Anytime you do a class that's around pedagogy and teaching, it becomes 'Well, this works for me and my class.' That's just the way it is. But in terms of your questions about the theories, we were getting them like a mom sneaking vegetables in. We weren't really talking about WAC directly. It was more like talking about different WAC approaches. So we were getting kind of a backdoor theory. We just had a lot of the theories about responding to student work or commenting on students' work and I think there was an oblique mention to *Errors and Expectations* (Shaughnessy, 1977) at one point. I don't think we were really given a lot of theory directly that I recall.

When asked what he recalled that was most beneficial about the TA preparation, Justin responded,

I guess I was most drawn to all the practical stuff. We did do some theory stuff in there; we did readings in *Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (Lindemann, 2001). And I should confess, I was also taking my first qualifying exams that fall and so I probably didn't get as into those readings as I might've in other circumstances. But it was interesting—we would sit in a circle, which I liked, and we'd talk about the readings and from what I had read and from what other people would bring up, it was kind of a good riff session on philosophies of teaching writing. I did enjoy that component as well, although clearly, I didn't mention it until prompted, so that's probably further down in my recollection of what the class was about.

Justin went on to concede that,

In reflecting on it, the practical aspects were most useful to me, although I'm sure the theory often percolates through things later in ways that you can't really trace back so easily, so I can't really say for sure the ways in which some of those discussions ... I



remember talking about ideas about grading and things like: “What does it mean to be a good grader? Does it mean marking everything? Does it mean being very selective? How do you handle the teaching of grammar?” Some of the theory part transferred over into practice because something you would read about, people would say, “Oh, here’s what I tried.” “I take errors out of my students’ papers and use that to teach grammar rather than doing it in a disconnected way.” Or, “I hadn’t tried that before. I tried it and it worked really well.” There was some theory behind that. I tend to remember it as, hey, someone had this idea and I copied that and I liked it.

When asked about the Composition theory that was presented in the TA preparation classes, Daniel responded that he still doesn’t understand the distinction between WAC and WID, and that moreover, he’s

not sure how necessary all that is anyway for a first-year writing teacher, but they talked a lot about WAC vs. WID and a lot of that terminology didn’t make sense to me. The theory would have come out of Lindemann (2001), and I think there was some discussion of it in the class, but 501A always came down to practicality, and the students just had a sort of “get it done” attitude. We were not entertaining theoretical ideas because also it was so vague to us as 501A-ers; what would be the value of a WAC/WID discussion when you don’t quite...you’ve never done it yet?

Along these same lines, Nancy expressed her opinion that,

Composition theory is a luxury good. You know, when you’re coming in to teaching this class, you don’t want Composition theory; you want somebody to tell you what to do.

Having taught writing for two quarters, I would’ve really appreciated Composition theory. But at the time, I was just struggling to wrap my head around the idea of teaching

what the fuck is writing that I don't care about the theoretical or didn't care about the theoretical side of that. I got really interested in sort of the more abstract picture, how students learn to write and whatnot after I got over the hurdles of figuring out what I was going to do in class.

When asked in a probing question if she felt it would've been helpful if the readings had had more of a practical application, Nancy answered,

Correct. Because we took that class in the spring before we taught it. And instead of just reading through the textbook with no real endgame other than just familiarizing ourselves with the textbook, you get a lot of students, particularly those like in the English department who had a bad attitude who were going, "C'mon, why am I just reading this now at this point?" But it seems to me that if you had had those readings accompanied by, "Okay, so everybody has to figure out how they're going to lesson plan this reading," in the spring class, then in the fall, you could've come in with everybody having already had all that stuff done. And we could have had meaningful discussions in Writing 501B where we could talk about what worked and what didn't.

*They Appreciated the Set Curriculum in the TA Preparation Program*

An outgrowth of the Literature TAs' collective opinion that the practical information in the course was more useful than the theoretical, is the fact that several of the Literature TAs saw the set curriculum that all TAs were asked to follow in their first quarter teaching as very useful.

As Daniel explained it, "There was a pre-set curriculum, using *Writing and Reading across the Curriculum* (Behrens & Rosen, 2002), and the units were already predetermined. For each unit you could choose from two options, but at least the Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences had to be there." While Daniel recalled that the set curriculum was a point of contention

for the Literature TAs, he indicated that he appreciated it, as did the other Literature TAs who were interviewed:

That was another thing that was leading to discontent amongst the English graduate students particularly. It may have led to discontent amongst other departments, I just only know from my own department, because students from the English department wanted the autonomy to devise their own curriculum, and they felt like this was The Man coming in to say, “You’re going to have to unit on blah-de-blah-blah.” I didn’t really share that sentiment, but I know that the set curriculum was another source of tension. I liked it actually because I thought it provided a little bit of a blueprint; I mean having at least the curriculum set out for me made it easier because I just sort of went along with the script for the first term. And then they allowed us to choose things of our own after we did it one time according to the program’s set curriculum. So, just the fall term typically had to be done their way, and then if you were teaching two more times you could free it up however you wanted after that. Which I didn’t do because of course once you’ve created a lesson plan for those things, I wasn’t going to chuck the whole thing. But I did try it again and it was neat because I could kind of riff on it and add on...I added a reader on, that sort of thing.

Nancy noted that she not only appreciated the set curriculum but that she would have liked even more guidelines than she was given:

I really wanted somebody to just cue me into the lesson and let me put it in action because here I am in my third-year as a graduate student, having never done anything like this before, having never taught writing before, not even knowing what I think about teaching writing. I want somebody to give me the lesson plan and let me implement it.

Along similar lines, when asked if there was anything from the TA preparation that she initially tried to do but later abandoned, Diane responded, “Not really. I don’t think so. I think I pretty much just did what they told us to.” In fact, Diane noted that when she taught at a local community college she had a much harder time designing her course in the absence of a set curriculum: “It would have been nice if there was a template already in place where we use *this* book and we do *these* units, and *these* are other assignments that people have done and *these* are their grading rubrics. So you would have some sense of what the boiler plate class looks like.”

*They Appreciated that the TA Preparation Kept Them on Track*

Several of the Literature TAs noted that the TA preparation class was useful in that it pushed them to prepare for the class they would be teaching in advance, which meant that they did not have to scramble at the last minute to develop their class materials, which some of them felt they might have done otherwise.

Justin noted that for him, one of the most practical aspects of the TA preparation classes was “the push to stay ahead in planning the class.” As he noted, “I can be a bit of a procrastinator, so it was nice to have the push to stay one or two steps ahead of the class. So I could be focusing on my teaching, but it was my first quarter of teaching this class. I had to have a plan further out rather than just making it up as I went along, so I really liked that component of it.”

Nancy also mentioned that the practicum was helpful in that way: “501B was useful in the sense that it forced me to get my units together, which is what it probably was supposed to be doing at its baseline; it was forcing me to not be in the last minute, scrambling to put together my three units.” Similarly, Diane said it was useful “doing some of the frontloading work for my

class and knowing what was going to be happening the following year was really nice instead of just getting an assignment and being stressed out because I don't know how to teach the class."

*They Enjoyed Teaching First Year Composition*

Although the Literature TAs had some reservations about the TA preparation itself, they were much more positive about teaching the FYC class. For example, while Nancy's feelings about the TA preparation overall were not especially positive, when asked how she felt about the actual teaching of writing for the Writing Program, Nancy responded, "I loved it. I like teaching writing. I think it taught me a lot. For one thing, it taught me a lot about my own writing. And I think that it's a great class, Writing 2." Similarly, when asked at the end of the interview if there was anything else that he wanted to say, Justin responded, "Just that I did enjoy teaching in the Writing Program overall."

In a conversation about the fact that due to other funding opportunities elsewhere, Nancy had only taught for three of their four quarters for which she was eligible to teach in the Writing Program, she explained that "a lot of people go back to the Writing Program over and over because it's a steady source of income. And there are people who really love [teaching in] the Writing Program." When probed to explain a little further, given all that had been said about the Literature students' resistance to TA preparation, she explained that "you're going into it and your first experiences are 501A and 501B. Then it's not until you're teaching yourself that you find that there could be value in these practicums."

*They Felt Prepared to Teach First Year Composition*

For the most part, the Literature TAs felt as though the TA preparation program effectively prepared them to teach FYC. When asked how she felt about TAing for the writing unit, Amber noted that she "felt really prepared because we'd gone through all the work."

Similarly, when asked if she felt like she had gotten enough practical information in preparation for teaching that first quarter, Diane responded, “Yeah, I think so because I don’t remember feeling once I got the course that I was lost. So I must have gotten enough because I seemed to make a successful syllabus and assignments. I think we got a lot of prep in the 501A and B. Otherwise I wouldn’t have known what to do in teaching a writing course. It would have been a nightmare just trying to teach writing with no help. So, I actually felt pretty well prepared for that.”

Daniel also indicated that he felt prepared and he noted that he expected that the preparation program would give him the tool he needed to teach the course: “I think [the TA preparation] did its job. My expectations were that it would teach me and orient me for Writing 2, and I think it did that.”

*They Bought into the Use Value of Teaching Composition*

Despite their resistance to the TA preparation program, for the most part the Literature TAs bought into the use value of teaching Composition. For example, several of the Literature TAs indicated that they felt the Composition teaching experience made them more marketable as job seekers.

Amber saw teaching in the writing unit as a very practical experience. In fact, when asked what she thought about the English Department’s policy of requiring everybody be a TA for the Writing Program, Amber responded flatly, “If they want people to get jobs, they should keep it. Also, it’s a good practice and teaching in the Writing Program gives people excellent pedagogical training and the ability to create the kind of teaching portfolio that I think would be very marketable on the job market and also sets you up to do very well in your first years on the tenure track.” Amber went on to note that, “It definitely keyed me up to really figure out what I

wanted to do with my life. And I pretty much decided that I was going to go where I could get a job, and not only did I see the value in doing this to be a better teacher, but that it was definitely going to assist me in the process of finding work.”

Nancy also viewed her experience teaching for the writing unit as very influential, noting, “being a TA in the Writing Program totally changed the way I thought about the importance of teaching writing in my English classes. And I really think that it’s an invaluable experience in and of itself. It teaches you that you have to teach writing, you have to integrate writing and the process of writing, not just assignments, but the process of writing into your classes. And it taught me how to do that in a way where there was a method to it.”

Daniel saw the TA experience as not only making him more marketable for a job that would include Composition teaching, but also that the experience exposed him to ideas and content that he would not otherwise have explored. When asked what sort of position he would be pursuing after completing his Ph.D., Daniel responded that he hoped to teach “a combination [of Literature and Composition]. I think if I had my choice, my choice would be to teach in my specialty which is 19<sup>th</sup> Century Lit, but as a graduate student, I’m quite content with a Writing 1 or a Writing 2, which blends Composition and I always put in a humanities unit where I do a novel.” Daniel noted that he felt that TAing for the writing unit “made me more socially minded in the sense that the units are explicitly about cultural, social issues which of course come up in Literature studies, but I think the Writing Program’s influence made my syllabus a lot more topical because the topics in writing tend to be Zeitgeist issues.”

Yet despite these positive perspectives and although Diane conceded that teaching Composition gave her “more employment opportunities for sure,” she also pointed out that, “you could also say that this has been distracting to my original professional goal of becoming an

English professor. And I don't think you can really deny that." When asked in a probing question if she would have chosen to apply for a TAship in Composition if she had been given a choice, she responded, "I don't think I would have."

*They Appreciated the Opportunity to Have Their own Class*

Most of the Literature TAs commented on their excitement over having the opportunity to design and oversee their own classes, given that for all but one of them this was their first opportunity to be responsible for their own class.

When asked how she felt about teaching for the Writing Program, Amber commented, "I was really excited because it was the first class I was going to teach in college as, effectively, the instructor of record. So I felt nervous and happy." Similarly, Daniel said that,

TAing for the Writing Program was a little unnerving because it was something entirely new for me. When I had TAed for Detective Fiction, I was already panicked because I was suddenly in front of a classroom for the first time. So the first two years were just sort of getting a handle on TAing, and then there was this new opportunity through the Writing Program. I think was I excited that I would have my own classroom and be out from under the wing of the professor and be essentially doing their grading for the students, and to have my own classroom. But I was also nervous about what that was.

Diane appreciated the opportunity to design her own class, particularly because once she had designed it, she could use the same curriculum the following quarter, thereby freeing up more time for her to work on her dissertation:

Teaching in the writing unit was good as far as my dissertation research because once you put in the work for the first quarter, you can repeat that structure, and then you have you have 25 students vs. 50 students in Literature classes. So, after the first quarter it's a



lot easier teaching Writing 2 than TAing for Literature time-wise. It leaves you more opportunity to do your own research and also it's two days a week vs. three or even four days a week for Literature, due to various responsibilities. So I liked that.

Did the Literature TAs Display Resistance to their TA Preparation, and If So, How?

The Literature TAs did indeed display resistance to the TA preparation program. In fact, themes and instances of resistance came up throughout the interviews with the Literature TA, both in explicit and implicit ways.

Daniel told a story about his interview with the writing unit that powerfully illustrated the concerns of both the English department and the writing unit about the Literature TAs' potential resistance to teaching in the writing unit. In his words,

We had to interview for the Writing Program. Applying involved a CV, a letter, a writing sample and your teaching philosophy. But when I had a face-to-face interview with two lecturers in the Writing Program, I innocently said something about the fact that I was so nervous about my upcoming Master's exam. It was then repeated to the liaison in the English Department that a number of the English graduate students were complaining about their exams and didn't seem enthusiastic or excited about TAing. I was then called to the English Department, to the professor who was in charge of making sure that the transition from the English Department to the Writing Program went smoothly. So, I met with her and she said, your anxieties are totally understandable, but the Writing Program is very sensitive about English students, in particular, not seeming as enthusiastic as, say, other people from other departments who are eager to get the jobs because they need the TAs. So I stepped into something that I didn't realize was there, which was this pre-existing tension between English and Writing about English graduate students that were

really more the students that were a year or two ahead of me apparently. There had been a bit of a revolt amongst the graduate students who were complaining about the timing of that. So the point is that there was this whole weird thing around English and Writing. While this story is a telling illustration of the role the M.A. exams played in the complicated relationship between the English department and the writing unit, it does not reveal the whole picture. As the responses in this chapter demonstrate, there were multiple reasons why the Literature TAs responded to the TA preparation program differently than their Composition TA counterparts.

*They Were Resistant to the Class*

While some of the Literature TAs interviewed pointed to their own resistance to the course, others referenced the resistance that they observed from other students in the Literature cohort.

Diane seemed to be the most vocal about her own resistance to the TA preparation program. When asked how she felt about being a TA for the writing unit, Diane laughed and said, “I was pretty much indifferent. It was my third-year [as a graduate student]. I was hoping that maybe it would give me more time to work on my own project because teaching the same thing three times versus always switching classes [as a TA for English], from what I’d heard, it was a lot of work the first quarter but then you were teaching from a set lesson plan.” Diane’s sense of indifference and lack of engagement with the TA preparation class was underscored when she was shown the syllabi from the two preparation courses that she had taken. She looked them over for a few minutes, commented on several of her classmates whose presentations were listed there and then handed it back, saying, “Yeah, nothing really sticks out in my memory.”

When asked whether she thought that other Literature students shared her lack of enthusiasm about being in TA preparation, Diane responded,

I think some people were more frustrated than others. I always take the attitude that if this is something I have to do I'll just do it and that's that. I don't see the point of dragging your feet on it if it's a requirement, you just need to get it done, just get through it and then you don't have to worry about it any longer. But I definitely think there was a lot of feet dragging. I don't know if that was because of the exam; I think it was just that people in general weren't really happy about having to do it.

When asked what she remembered about her Literature cohort in terms of their attitudes about the class or their responses to the class, Nancy responded,

Well, the striking thing that I remember is that the folks who were in my cohort who were coming from other departments were incredibly motivated, grateful, and excited by the opportunity to teach writing. And the folks in English were not as generous in spirit. And I think that a lot of that has to do with the fact that, in English, we have this sense of entitlement where we're owed four quarters in writing; we have to pay our dues and then the other departments where there's less money to go around, where there's a smaller pot ... those students are just happy about having some funding.

Daniel also pointed to his colleagues' resistance to the course: "A lot of people, as I recall, were saying, 'Do away with 'A,' just do it as you're starting to teach.'" But I also understand the Writing Program's view, which is, there needs to be some preparation so you're not just hitting the ground running. And I found it useful; I think it was smart to have the pairing of 501A and 501B."

Toward the close of the interview, Nancy noted, “I’d be interested to know what other people who are my cohorts said after the fact because I don’t think I was as hostile with the 501A and 501B as other people were or as hostile towards writing as other people were. But I definitely felt that bad attitude with my peers.”

*The TA Preparation Facilitator’s Role in Mitigating Resistance*

Several of the Literature TAs mentioned the TA preparation facilitator’s effort to help them see the use-value in participating in the TA preparation program and teaching FYC.

Justin saw this effort as particularly compelling, recalling that, “I bought into that line, which I heard from people in the Writing Program. [The TA preparation facilitator] also talked to us and said, ‘Look, some of you may not be excited about doing this, but here’s why it’s a really good thing.’” Similarly, when asked how she felt about taking the TA preparation classes in the writing unit, Amber said,

[The TA preparation facilitator] really hooked us... Well, she hooked me on the first day because I remember very clearly something she said was, “How many of you are planning to be an English teacher in a university? How many of you know how many of the jobs on the MLA jobs search list ask for experience in teaching Rhetoric and Composition as one of the criteria?” And it was like, the noise of crickets, you know... And I went, “I really think I want to hang out with this lady,” because she was the first person who really talked very realistically about getting a job. So she really hooked me, and then, I think after that, I could also see the value with what she was doing and what she was teaching, and why we were doing these things.

Justin described the TA preparation facilitator’s engaged role in mitigating potential resistance in the class. In his words, “I really liked her, and I think she had a unique position

because she came out of a Lit. background, and she really spoke to any sort of resistance we might have had. I don't remember being that resistant, but I remember being impressed with the way she talked about why it was important to be part of the Writing Program and the way it would help us career-wise."

Because one of the Composition TAs had expressed frustration that the TA program's facilitator had not been more direct in acknowledging the disciplinary split between Literature and Composition as a means of bringing out into the open one of the potential reasons for the Literature students' resistance, Justin was asked in a probing question if he thought that the TA program facilitator's response to the resistance was measured and fair. Justin responded, "She never struck me as arbitrary or unfair. In fact, in moments like that, if I noticed that, I would have read it as her modeling ways of handling a situation." He went on to note that

She did a lot of that. She would model in our class how you might handle arbitrary comments or approaches that might come up. And how you could let that into the dialogue, in a non-confrontational way, not affirm it, but kind of bring it in and not shut it down. I hadn't thought about this before, but putting myself into her shoes, she must have felt like she had to walk a tight-rope to a certain degree, because she was in the position of having to hire a certain number of us so if she further alienated people by having to shut us down, it would make the problem worse, not better.

Justin then went on to mention something that had not come up in any of the other interviews or data collections methods for that matter, about how the TA preparation facilitator had begun to address issues of resistance before the TA preparation class even started by making a visit to the English department:

She did meet with us separately before we came into the training. There was some sort of a group meeting for people who were having to apply to the Writing Program the next year. And she came up to the English department and met with us. And that's when she made her pitch as to why it's a good thing that you're coming to teach in the Writing Program. And that stuck with me. And I think she talked pretty explicitly about knowing that people sometimes resent coming and here's why it's a good thing. So we had that conversation and the Composition students wouldn't have been there. So maybe because of that, she didn't feel like she had to directly make the argument in 501A because she had already made that case to us separately.

Still, despite all that the TA preparation facilitator had done to try and get the buy-in from the Literature TAs, Nancy felt it had not been enough.

Generally when people justify being TAs for the Writing Program, it's because 1), you might not be able to get a job that's Literature only and they want to see that you taught writing in your CV so that you can choose that one Composition class or two Composition classes every semester that your school will require you to teach. Not a good reason for me. Or 2), you might decide that you want to teach at a community college and you might decide that you want to teach Composition. Also not a good reason for me. I really think that the reason needed to be laid out, for me anyway—which is what I so heartily bought into later on as I started teaching my own classes—is that your students can't write. And teaching Literature, you can sit around in a circle all day long and talk about the art of Rhetoric. But if your students don't know how to construct an essay (which many of them don't), then you're not doing your job as an English teacher. And in order to teach English or History or anything that requires a paper, you have to

teach your students how to write. That should be an integral part of what you do in the classroom. And you can only learn that skill set by teaching writing.

*They Were Resistant to Doing the Reading*

One of the main ways in which the Literature TAs demonstrated resistance to the TA preparation courses was in their responses to the assigned readings. For example, when asked what the worst part of the class was for her, Amber replied, “The Lindemann (2001) book,” going on to say, “I think I pretty much ended up skimming over the readings, at a certain point, which I don’t usually do.” Amber later came back to the text, as she noted, “The Lindemann, I’m sorry, I just... You know, I’ve tried to go back and read it. I still think it’s kinda dull.”

When asked about the Lindemann (2001) text that was used in the 501A and 501B, Diane said,

We just skimmed it. I don’t think we read it in depth. And rightly so. Most of the focus of the class was about practical things, so we didn’t engage too deeply into various pedagogical theories. Keeping it on the practical side vs. the theoretical side for a first-year teacher, I think that was important. Like what is a grading rubric, like let’s get to the basics. The theory of grading rubrics was less useful maybe at that point.

In regard to the Composition theory presented in the book, she said, “I think that sort of stuff you could have [the TA preparation facilitator] lecture to us about and it’s just as effective if not more. Kind of boiling it down to just the nitty-gritty.” And when asked if she felt that she had gotten enough theory to be successful in the FYC classroom, she said, “Yeah, yeah. It was not something that I was like, “Give me more.” I felt that the essentials were covered—writing as a process, scaffolding...etc.”

When asked about the theoretical readings, Nancy said, “I think that we had a theoretical textbook but that was for 501A. Yeah, I probably didn’t read any of that stuff. I mean, there was some real truculence on the part of people in my department. And most of it has to do with the fact that we’re all sort of, you know, plucky, kind of have a greater regard for self than we should, you know. It doesn’t have to do with whether or not the course was good or not. We were just so frustrated that we had to take it.”

When shown the syllabi for the two training courses, Daniel responded, “I didn’t do any of the Lindemann (2001) reading, although it still looks very interesting to me and I think I still have a copy of it somewhere.” When it was pointed out that he did seem to recall the text itself, he smiled and said, “That’s a typical graduate student, I can talk about the text, I just didn’t read it. Plus, the TA preparation facilitator didn’t do a lot of conversation about it. It was assigned, but then she would sort of summarize it briefly at the beginning of the class, so it was the sort of thing where I just took away the main ideas.”

#### What Pedagogical Practices and Principles Do the Literature TAs Still Use that Reflect Their TA Preparation?

All of the Literature TAs pointed to various practices and principles that they felt could be traced back to their TA preparation in the writing unit. For example, when asked if there was anything in her teaching that she thought reflected what she learned in the TA program, Diane responded, “Yeah: grading rubrics, setting up the grading, peer review, dividing up the units into sections, writing across the curriculum. All of those things we did in our prep classes 501A and 501B.” Indeed, while the Literature TAs referred to these practices and principles and variously indicated that they continue to be a part of their teaching today, there were only a couple of them that most or all of the Literature TAs collectively embraced, such as peer reviewing activities and



scaffolding assignments. One practice that all of the TAs referenced, however, was in relation to their continued use of texts and assignments that they had been exposed to or invited to use during their training.

*Continued Use of Texts, Assignments, Etc.*

All of the Literature TAs pointed to activities, texts, or assignments that they were exposed to as a TA and that they still use today. In fact, when asked what she felt was the best part of the TA preparation program, Amber responded, “Well, from a pragmatic standpoint, it gave me all the tools to write a really good syllabus and organize a lesson plan for college-level writing and really, any college-level course that I still use to this day. So that was very significant.”

Indeed, Amber’s syllabi listed assignments that were introduced in the TA preparation classes. When asked about these assignments, she responded that she had continued using one of them until recently when she designed all new curriculums for her classes. Still, she noted, “when I design a unit it’s the same kind of structure and the same sort of idea” as it was in 501A and 501B. Amber also noted that not only does she use what she learned in TA preparation in her classes, but she also uses this knowledge in faculty development situations, whether that means recommending texts from the TA preparation, discussing principles that inform people’s teaching, or bringing food to meetings in order to help develop a sense of community.

Yet despite the usefulness of being given assignments and units out of the box, Nancy also pointed to some of the problems that can come along with this practice. When asked about her impressions of the two-course sequence of TA preparation, Nancy replied, “Looking at the syllabus, it looks like a great class. But as I remember, it was not a class that I came away with thinking, ‘wow, I really learned something about the pedagogy of or the practical side of

teaching writing.’ The same thing is true for 501B.” When asked if she could explain why, she responded, “It’s probably to do with the fact that our first quarter a lot of us just stole syllabus, lesson plan, and units like from somebody else.” Moreover, Nancy went on to lament that,

One thing that TA training didn’t teach me—and I think that this is something that maybe it just couldn’t have, given the time restrictions—is how to move away from the models, to move away from the textbook and understand what Writing across the Curriculum is beyond the way it’s set up in the common text. I still have a hard time seeing WAC outside of the three units [we did on] cyberspace, obedience to authority and Hamlet.

Yet, Nancy indicated that she felt that being given the models in TA preparation was an effective approach: “I think that is kind of the way to go because if you try to do the first quarter, having never taught writing, knowing nothing about writing, using a book you didn’t pick... If you try to do it on your own as opposed to using something that’s worked for someone else, I think that you’ll be exasperated and your students will suffer.”

#### *Using a WAC Approach*

Amber, Nancy and Daniel all reported that they continue to use a WAC approach in their teaching today. Indeed, when asked if she could think of any principles or practices that she uses in her teaching that might be traced back to her experience in 501A or 501B or her experience as a TA, Amber emphasized,

using a WAC approach. I think that if you’re looking at the assignments and my teaching portfolio, they do a nice job of illustrating that because the way that I set them up is effectively like the template that we use in 501A and B. And to an extent, I have continued to use that template for all my assignments as I continue on. So in terms of assignment design, the structure, scaffolding, the content of an assignment, that’s all

coming from there as is the overall kind of ethos of my syllabi. It definitely draws on those courses and then I adapt them over time. And in terms of experiences as a teaching assistant, I would say that that's really when I started to be really interested in collaborative learning and the theory behind it because it seems like they go so well with the Writing courses and Comp. courses.

Also, Nancy's syllabus for the FYC course she was teaching when she was interviewed reflected a WAC approach. When asked what made her use that approach in the class, she responded, "I hadn't taught writing in like three years. I got the job and a week later, I was in the classroom. So I needed something that was really familiar for me just in order to tread water. I also like Writing Across the Curriculum as a model. I think it's really important to just introduce them to the fact that there are three main disciplines in the academy. That's basic information."

### *Empowering Students*

The notion of empowering students came up in the interviews with two of the Literature TAs, as both Amber and Justin noted in their syllabi that they strive to empower students in their classrooms.

Amber's syllabus reflects her goal of fostering students' critical thinking as a means of empowerment. When asked how she does this or why she believes it is important, she said,

The longer I teach, the more interested I am in critical thinking as an actual concrete idea rather than just abstract concepts. So I think it's about assignment design in that you want to design assignments for students where there's not a right or wrong answer and they're forced to feel comfortably uncomfortable. They might be a little bit uncomfortable but they're arguing because it's a leap of faith and they don't know for sure that it's right. But if you put them in that position, then that gives them the courage to push forward.

Amber went on to note that in her opinion, “The best thing about Composition classes is we don’t have content coverage like ‘you need to cover the history of the world in 1482.’ You obviously need to cover issues connected to Writing. But because there’s less coverage than content classes in some respects, it gives you the chance to really focus on discussions that I think can lead to critical thinking, depending on how you structure the class and what you choose to cover.”

Justin’s syllabus and teaching philosophy statement emphasize empowering students by encouraging them to be responsible for their own learning. When asked to clarify, he said that empowering students in this way is one of his main goals as a teacher, and he noted that,

I see education as having a social agenda to a certain extent, and having to do with people, especially in areas of communication, empowering themselves beyond the classroom. I think another big part of why that’s a part of my own teaching philosophy is that often education has been very *disempowering*. That’s part of why it’s important to me to help students—especially in the writing class—start to find their own voices. The other element is that when people feel like they have a voice, they get more actively engaged in the class, in what they’re writing, in what they’re learning, in what they’re thinking about. So I think it builds a strong learning community in the classroom that I enjoy being a part of. I think there are two tracks: It’s a good way for people to learn and it supports my idea of education being socially empowering.

When asked in a probing question whether he sees himself more as a sage on the stage or a guide on the side, Justin responded, “I use the phrase ‘coach.’ I think of myself as a writing coach.”

### *Utilizing Rubrics*

Diane and Justin both mentioned that they continue to use rubrics in their teaching, and both of them indicated that that practice harkened back to their experience as TAs.

When asked if he could think of any principles or practices that he used in his teaching that might be traced back to TA preparation, Justin responded that prior to participating in TA preparation, “I never had used rubrics before. Well, I may have used a very general sort of rubric in the past. But what was really different for me was developing customized rubrics to each assignment.” When asked what he meant by “customized,” Justin explained that in his own training as a student in English, there had not been clear expectations for how a paper would be assessed:

I remember getting essay prompts that were like maybe a sentence written on the board or maybe a half-page handout; the essay prompt would be fairly brief. It wouldn't be broken down into components. So, this is what often gives people the feeling in Lit. classes that there's some secret code the teacher knows that they have to figure out and guess. And that really bothers me. So that's where a rubric appeals to me, where I'm like, whoa, here's an approach where I can make really explicit, “Here's exactly what I'm expecting. When I'm reading it, here's what I'm going to be looking for.”

### *Encouraging Scaffolding and Writing as a Process*

Several of the TAs mentioned their adherence to the process model, although they invoke it in the classroom in varying degrees. Diane noted that “it's kind of structured into the course just by having assignments that lead up to what the bigger assignment is asking them to do, such as annotated bibliographies or close readings or even summaries. The course is structured around

writing as a process, and I'm pretty sure I say something to that effect on the first day; it's in my syllabus."

In her teaching philosophy statement Amber also mentioned the importance of emphasizing the writing process. When asked how she goes about that, she answered, "I would say that scaffolding is the quick answer. And students seeing the sort of incremental scaffolding towards the product can be really powerful." Amber explained that she sees the writing process as integral to students' ability to produce successful papers. She noted that she tries to help them do this by "breaking it down into smaller pieces, breaking down the whole process into smaller increments and giving students a lot of templates and support so that they can feel free to work on finding the evidence and they're not freaked out about it."

When asked if he emphasizes the writing process with his first-year students, Daniel responded, "Well, yeah, I talk about writing as a process. I teach from PowerPoint, and a lot of the things I'm talking about are in templates from *They Say, I Say* (Graff & Birkenstein, 2006) that I share with them." When asked where his ideas about process writing and revision were developed, he said,

I think understanding writing as a process came through 501A and 501B when I gave more thought to writing as a discipline and as a practice. And revision seems to be the sine qua non of that practice because the idea is that it's never finished and you're always redoing it. Plus, along the way, I had to figure out how much I would allow students to revise. Can they revise just one paper? Do I average the grades? All these questions. I also remember [the TA preparation facilitator] saying that "revision" comes from "reviso" to re-see, literally re-vision. That's one of her sort of aphorisms that stuck in my mind that I thought was a good way of seeing it.

Nancy also scaffolds her assignments because she believes that doing so increases the quality of students' papers:

I don't allow my students to have just one deadline. Because you get worse papers that way. And a lot of it is really selfish on my part because I don't like reading bad papers. It puts me in a bad mood. And I think that if you don't give students these sort of projected deadlines, they wait 'til the last minute and they don't think about it and they don't like what they've written and they're not invested in what they've written or the topic because they don't have a lot of time to search, sit around, and kind of munch on their ideas for a while. Because the kids, they don't know how to revise, even as seniors.

### *Promoting Peer Review*

For the most part, the Literature TAs use some sort of peer reviewing activity in their classes, although again, they use it to varying degrees.

Of the Literature TAs interviewed, Justin seemed to be the most dedicated to using peer reviewing activities in the classroom, as he forms writing groups in his classes, which he feels is a "much more intensive" version of peer review, since the students would "work together on different projects too, not just writing, so they really would form a tight learning group within the larger class."

Conversely, when asked about the extent to which he uses peer review in his classes, Daniel responded that when he teaches at the local city college he has "sort of dispensed with it." He explained that with a class size of 35 it "doesn't work because it's too big. And also at City College, no one is working so far ahead that they would have a rough draft." However, at the university under study here, he does "do peer review where it would be assigned, say, like you have to bring it on Wednesday and you would lose points if you come to class without the rough

draft because it's vital for the process." When asked where he developed his philosophy about peer review, Daniel answered, "Tweaking that and reworking it comes out of 501B because there was a great deal of conversation, probably in both of those classes, about what works and what doesn't with revision."

#### To What Extent Did the Literature TAs Perceive a Disciplinary Divide in Their Preparation Program Experience and To What Did They Attribute It?

The Literature TAs were unanimous in feeling that there had been a disciplinary divide within the TA preparation program between themselves and the Composition TAs. Moreover, the Literature TAs were also aware of the divide between Literature and Composition within the field of English Studies at large, and several of them pointed directly to the inter-departmental history at this university as a reflection of that divide. They also cited several institutional policies that they felt had exacerbated this schism, all of which will be discussed in the latter part of the section below.

#### *Disciplinary Divide*

Every one of the Literature TAs reported having been consciously aware of a disciplinary divide between their cohort and the cohort of Composition TAs. While the Literature TAs' attitudes and perceptions certainly fell along a continuum, their interview responses clearly indicate that disciplinarity played a role in defining that spectrum.

But when asked if there was anything else she would like to mention about the sense of division that she felt in the class, Diane pointed to the philosophical differences between the two disciplines' areas of interest:

I think that the English people have different goals. We're there to be English professors and the Education people are going in with their Rhetoric emphasis. So their goals are to



be writing teachers or doing research on writing. So that was in tow with their professional goals where in English it might be if you are going to be a professor in a smaller university that combines writing and English, but most students in that class are going for an R1 position. They're not going for positions where they will teach writing. Nancy made a similar observation: "I don't think that graduate students in the English department understand and appreciate technique and that teaching technique is just as important as teaching Formalist analysis. You can't teach upper division, even an upper division English class as well without on some level forcing your students to work on their writing. We think that, automatically, the students already are good writers. We kind of assume that. We don't understand that we're embedded in English departments."

And according to Nancy, even the undergraduate English majors are aware of this disciplinary split. As she explains it,

I do things like free-writing exercises in my upper division Lit. classes. In those classes I require peer review and require drafts. My students hate it. Because they themselves think, "This isn't a writing class, man." And some of them are appreciative and they like it because they're not writing their papers at the last minute because they had to do a draft the week before, you know. But many of them, they see the divide because there's a disciplinary divide at this university. There's writing and then there's English. Writing is seen as a pre-req and a gate-keeping class to English. And so they don't see English and writing as two sides of the same project.

### *Divide in the Class*

Several of the Literature TAs pointed explicitly to their sense of a divide between themselves and the Composition TAs in the TA program.

When asked about her perceptions of her Literature cohort and how they viewed the TA preparation, Diane said, “I think my Lit. cohort was pretty much indifferent.” After thinking for a moment, she added, “Maybe indifferent to resentful, somewhere in that spectrum. I wouldn’t say there were as many of us who were really pumped to be there and learn about writing pedagogy; I don’t think we had that level of enthusiasm. I think most of us just saw it as a job.”

When asked if she picked up on a different level of enthusiasm from any of the other students in the class, Diane responded, “You mean the other Education and writing people? Oh yeah, they seemed more into it. We all did the work and assignments and stuff, but it was different because that was part of their professional development because they were seeing themselves as writing teachers, so I think they entered into it with a higher degree of enthusiasm whereas we were contracted to do that work.”

Similarly, when asked the same question, Amber pointed to a similar sense of a divide between the two factions:

Oh, yeah. I mean, it was generally very different. And we certainly did joke about that, too, in the way that I think you’d joke about anyone who has a different disciplinary background. They seemed very, like, into it. And I think that that was something that, you know, we sort of noticed and joked about. But again, not in a mean spirit. We liked all of them. We could see that they were good hearted and hard workers. And [that they were] excited... And from my friends, well Daniel and Diane and I were just there and all three of us were pretty pragmatic.

Diane also pointed to a difference in how the Literature TAs and the Composition TAs were responding to the TA preparation class: “The people in the Education side seemed really pumped

to teach writing and the people in the English side, definitely less enthused. I'd say as a general division that's pretty fair."

When asked if he remembered any sort of confrontation between the Composition TAs and the Literature TAs, Justin responded, "Not what I'd call confrontation. I can't think of any specific examples, but what I can remember is occasionally class debate about a particular topic kind of breaking down into pro and con roughly along the Comp./Lit. lines." Justin also noted that he "always thought of that as a difference between mindset and approach more than personal tension or animosity," suggesting that the conflicts were indeed of a disciplinary nature.

When asked if he noticed the divide manifested in other ways, Justin commented on the fact that the Literature students were exhibiting negative

body language certainly, but also explicit comments in the periphery of the classroom. I was guilty of it myself occasionally. I remember one time I was studying for my first qualifying exam and I brought in notecards with me and I was sort of subtly looking at them. So, that certainly was me exhibiting a lack of interest that day in what was happening in class. But, then again, I might have done it for any appointment I had to be at. Still, I'm not remembering moments where I noticed folks from the Composition track exhibiting resistance to the class.

Yet Justin also described a sort of counter-resistance that was demonstrated by the Composition students in the class as a response to their perception that the Literature students were unenthusiastic:

The way I noticed it exhibiting itself was through what you might call 'overly enthusiastic participation.' Like, "Oh you guys are being all disconnected, I'm going to be really into it." Rather than any sort of overt negativity toward the Lit. students, it was

triangulated, like, “The more negative you are about it, the more positive I’m going to be about it. About this other thing, not that it’s this way, but we will triangulate on this third object—the class—and through our different reactions on that there could be some implied tension here, but it’s triangulated through the class. Although again I may be somewhat biased because I always felt a certain affinity with the Composition students, so I may have just missed it if there was direct animosity or confrontation.

### *Exceptions to the Rule*

Two of the Literature TAs made clear that despite the clear divide between the Literature TAs and the Composition TAs in the class, all the students were still friendly with one another. Diane indicated that for her at least, the best part of the TA preparation “was being with my cohort again because we dispersed a bit after taking our exams so it was nice to be back with the people that I started grad school with and have time to reconnect with them.” At the same time, she noted, “The negative side of that was that some people perceived us as cliquish within that because there were other disciplines. But it wasn’t like that.” Diane went on to say that, “It’s not like there was this huge division between English and Not English. I still see Nick around and we’re friendly, and Piper is great; I see her a lot and we’re friends.”

Justin was also quick to point out that despite the tensions he described throughout the interview, there were some students from Literature who were positive about the experience:

I do want to mention that that stereotype of the English grad student reaction to the Writing Program doesn’t fit in all cases. I know a fair number of students who’ve gotten into teaching in the writing unit and really enjoyed it. That’s been some of their favorite teaching, having the autonomy to really function as the instructor and feel like it’s their own class. And they appreciated the support. I guess that’s why I referred to the typical

narrative of the grumpy, sort of detached English grad who's resentful, doing it because they have to, and the Education folks who're there and excited and enthusiastic because it's their career path. While I don't think that fully encapsulates the truth of the situation, there is something to it.

*Literature Exceptions.* Among the Literature TAs, there were two notable exceptions in terms of their attitudes overall, even though they fell on opposite ends of the spectrum. Justin was an exception in regard to his generally very positive attitude toward both participating in TA preparation and teaching FYC as a TA. In his words, "When I applied, part of what my application said was, "Look, I have a lot of experience teaching, and I think I would bring that as a real strength to the program." I came in thinking of myself as a good teacher, and that that would be something I could contribute. I never felt like some people I know feel, kind of put upon, having to teach. I *like* teaching, so that was never a problem."

When asked how he felt about teaching Composition in particular, Justin responded: "I never had resistance to it. I was happy to do it." It should be noted that because Justin had had prior experience teaching Composition, he was exempted from taking 501A and therefore he only took the 501B course. About this fact, he stated, "I have to admit, based on reports I'd heard, I felt glad that I'd been able to be exempted from 501A. Although, given that I have an interest in Composition and the pedagogical theories, etc., I probably would've been someone who liked it."

Yet Justin's interest in Composition theory had the potential of pitting him against the students in his Literature cohort, which he was well aware of. In his words, "I would certainly not express overt enthusiasm about getting the pedagogical training with my Lit. colleagues because they would be more cynical about it like, "Why do we have to go through this, we know

how to teach, etc.” I think I may have been a bit more underground about liking it than I let on. Particular ideas I would talk about like, “Oh, that’s a good idea, I’m going to use that.” I would feel comfortable talking about that, but I wouldn’t say, “Man, this is a great class.”

Conversely, Diane was an exception at the other end of the spectrum. While the rest of the Literature TAs were willing to continue teaching Composition as part of their professional development, and in fact they all saw themselves as likely teaching some Composition courses throughout their respective careers, Diane stated that she was no longer willing to teach Composition on a regular basis and that she had decided that if she could not obtain a faculty position where she could teach Literature almost exclusively, that she was willing to leave academia entirely. When asked to explain her feelings further, she said,

I don’t feel this is the career path I really want. I came here to get my Ph.D. in English; I’ve always been interested in English and I don’t want to become separated from teaching Lit. for Lit.’s sake. And when you’re teaching writing, you’re not there for that. So, I’ve been asking myself, “What do I want to do?” And it’s not teaching APA format for a science unit and how to structure a science paper. Those units I’m trying to mentally get through until we can get to the humanities unit where we can talk about things that I like to talk about and read about. And it’s this way for a lot of the other writing classes as well. It’s also the overwhelming volume of responses that you have to do for a writing class. It’s a lot of work. It’s not that I don’t want to work; I would just rather that work went toward thinking about Literature. So, it’s staying true to what I enjoy and why I came to graduate school and why I went through everything I went through to get my Ph.D. At first I was pursuing, pretty avidly, a career in community college teaching writing, but I’ve had a year to think about it and I realized it’s not what I really want to

do. All barriers aside, if it were “teach writing” or “teach English,” I would teach English. So, I’m choosing to take that into account and realize that really, without any ridiculousness of cutthroat academia and competition, which way would I go if all doors were open to me, and I would go English, and I think that’s significant, so I think I should listen to that instead of teaching writing because I can and there’s jobs there. It’s valuable for the students, but not very rewarding for me in comparison to teaching Literature.

When asked in a probing question if she would consider a Literature faculty position where she taught one or two writing classes a year, Diane replied, “Yeah, that would be fine. I just feel like I’ve gotten trapped into only teaching writing through various issues of funding and availability and all these random things that just snowballed. That’s fine, but I’ve put a lot of thought into it and I’d rather teach Lit. and if I can’t teach Lit., then I’m going to find something else to do.”

### *Divide in the Field*

In the interviews, some of the Literature TAs pointed directly to the divide between Composition and Literature, as manifested both in academia at large and also within this particular university.

When asked how she sees the relationship between Composition and Literature within English Studies at large, Nancy responded, “I think Literature, at least from what I’ve seen, doesn’t invest in writing. It invests in thinking and sitting around and talking about texts and assuming that the students already have the writing under their belts. And so, why talk about it?”

A statement that Daniel made seems to support Nancy’s view: “I know that the profession is moving toward having assistant professors, new professors, take a larger load of the

freshman comp classes. So, I've always envisioned writing as part of the process of teaching Literature. I didn't realize until I began working in the Writing Program that there was such a schism; I didn't realize that writing had become its own sort of pedagogical entity. Coming into the program I didn't understand that writing would be something thought of as separate from just teaching Literature."

Diane also pointed to her sense of a divide within English Studies overall, as she stated that, "The trend within academia is a growing division between writing and English as being seen as separate disciplines. I think that's reflected in the job announcements where there's less and less job announcements that kind of mush together writing and English outside of the community colleges, which are basically writing programs anyway, with a couple of senior faculty getting to teach the coveted English class." Based on her sense of the field, she went on to argue that being required to serve as a Composition TA may not be the most effective training for a graduate student in Literature: "So, if within academia, we are seeing a division between writing and English, I think that should be reflected in our graduate experience. From what I see, the job descriptions are showing that writing people need to be trained in a graduate setting for writing, and English people need to be trained in a graduate setting for English."

#### *Inter-Departmental History*

There is a storied history between the writing unit and the English Department at this university, and indeed, the fact that the writing unit had once been a part of the English Department but was now an independent program came up in several of the interviews.

In answer to the question as to whether there was anything else he remembered about the rest of his cohort or their attitudes, Daniel responded,



I had it explained to me, and it's probably wrong, but it came through the English Department program pipeline, that ten years ago or whenever, and I had been told particular professors' names, they had tired of teaching students the basics of writing. Essentially, the English professor couldn't be bothered—as the story was explained to me—with doing the grammatical, the compositional, the “how to make an argument” stuff. And it was also said that they, of course, only wanted to entertain the idea side of that stuff, and that then the Writing Program was the result of this split off from the English program, where then they created this program. Now, again, this may be totally wrong, like it's probably wrong about the whole way in which the Writing Program came to be.

Daniel referred to the above as “our creationist explanation of how it works in the English department.” He went on to note,

So, in a sense the Writing Program was then indebted to the English department. I mean this totally denies that writing was itself has its own pedagogy, its own history, but again it was explained to me that it came about through English professors' distaste with teaching writing, then came about this program, and now you're going to go in there and humor them. And you know, I'm exaggerating, but it more or less comes out of what the mood was amongst the graduate students which was, “Humor them, and just put in your two years or so, and then come back here to do the ideas stuff.”

In fact, Daniel's continued teaching for the writing unit beyond his required TAs hip engendered some shock among his colleagues in the Literature graduate program: “I can see often when I tell graduate students in my own department, “Oh, I'm still teaching in Writing,”

this look of almost shock or disbelief like, “Oh, you’re still doing that?” Because it’s seen as sort of like a phase.”

Nancy also pointed to the relationship between the two departments as a way of explaining the reason for the Literature TAs’ negative attitude about teaching for the writing unit. When asked how she felt about doing the TA preparation program before she started, she stated: “Among English department grad students at this university, there’s a historic bad attitude towards being TAs in the Writing Program. And I think that that got mapped on to our practicum expectations, and it affected our attitude towards 501A and B.” When asked where she thought that historic bad attitude comes from, Nancy responded,

I think it comes from a lot of things. There’s the fact that you’re *required* to teach in the Writing Program. So you feel like TAing in the Writing Program is sort of a burden as opposed to being an opportunity like it is people from other departments where they actually have to compete for the slots. And part of it is when you come in, there’s already kind of a negative attitude amongst older grad students. I think a lot of people in Literature don’t understand when they’re in their second or third year of graduate school that what we do professionally, whether it’s our own writing or the writing of our students, is very much wrapped up in teaching Composition. I also think that we see ourselves as somehow above that, that we do Literature, not Comp. I mean, it’s just a lot of ignorance on the part of the department and I think that it’s the attitude that people in my cohort had that was just echoing off what is kind of a general bad attitude that people in Lit. have towards people in Comp.

When asked if there was anything else that she thought was worth noting about her experience with TA preparation, Amber recalled that she sensed that “something had happened

and it was something the people weren't comfortable with and no one really wanted to talk about it," but that instead of wanting to perpetuate a feud that "didn't seem to concern me," Amber instead strove to "negotiate the culture of being involved in the Writing Program and pretty much immediately found a lot of value in it and found myself being pretty enthusiastic about it." She expanded on this statement, saying,

I just tried to be pretty neutral because I didn't want to look like I was taking sides. I don't think anyone would have cared per se. But it seemed like a better idea to not make a big deal out of it because I didn't want to potentially cause any rifts with my adviser and I didn't want to do anything that could potentially impact my ability to get good mentoring. And I felt that that might.

When probed as to whether anybody in the English Department had ever gone so far as to speak disparagingly about the writing unit, Amber said,

No. And that's why I say, I think grad school breeds a healthy paranoia. That and I think that they're just some bad feng shui in the English Department at this university anyway. But I wasn't sure what people thought and I wasn't sure where the rift had been or what caused it. And in particular for my adviser, I just knew from much earlier on that it wasn't at all just ok that I'd pursue a career involved in writing. He had a lot of faith in me being a very successful research scholar. At one point, I had said something in passing like, "Oh, It might be sort of interesting to be a Dean of some sort at some point." I remember him saying, "How could you think that? That's terrible, because then you couldn't do your research." And so after that, I pretty much knew that that wasn't something that we were going to agree on.

When asked if she thought there is anything that can be done to mitigate the resistance that the English TA's are coming in with, given the required nature of the TAship, Nancy responded, "I think that there needs to be more of a partnership between the Writing Program and other Humanities departments. It can't come from the graduate students. It has to come from the faculty. The graduate students have to see that the English Department itself, on the faculty level, is engaged with the faculty of the Writing Program."

When asked in a probing question if she believed that increased engagement between the two departments would be useful due to the modeling that it would engender, she said,

Well, I think it would translate into better attitudes. While I've never heard of bad words from any English Department faculty, I also never saw the faculty modeling process writing in the classes that I TAed for them. And when you don't see that, when you see absolutely no connection between Writing and English as a graduate student and you're told that you have to do this in order to fulfill your fellowship contract, your kneejerk response is, like, "Well, shouldn't I be teaching Literature classes? Isn't that what I need to be doing?" And I just think the grad students have to see that what they do in Literature is an extension of what they do in writing, and what they do in writing is an extension of what they do in Literature. And they have to understand that most people are not gifted writers and they struggle with writing. And the reason they struggle with writing is because they don't know what it means to revise. They just don't get it.

### *Program Distinctions*

The interviews revealed that program distinction also played a significant role in how the Literature TAs perceived their TAships with the writing unit. In particular, as noted above, the Literature TAs pointed to the English Department's requirement that they apply to be TAs in the

writing unit, as well as the fact that they had all held prior TAs in the English department—and for which they had already participated in a two-day training session—and also they expressed their frustration with the timing of the required TAs with the writing unit, given that it coincided with their comprehensive exams.

### *English Department Requirement*

As evidenced in the early part of this chapter, none of the Literature TAs saw their TAs with the writing unit as a choice. Indeed, when asked how they decided to become TAs for the writing unit, all of the Literature TAs pointed to the English Department's requirement that they apply to be TAs as part of their funding package. There was a great deal of discussion about this topic in the interviews, suggesting that it was an important issue for this group of TAs.

When asked how he decided to pursue a TAs in the writing unit, Justin said, "I never really thought of it as a decision, to be honest. I came in through the English Department. The way the funding works is, coming in with a Master's, you get four years of guaranteed funding. And, for me, they didn't offer any fellowship years, so that was basically four years of guaranteed TAing. So it was mainly my way of working my way through the Ph.D. program."

Similarly, when asked what made her decide to become a TA for the writing unit, Nancy replied, "It was required. It's part of our package." She went on to say that, "I might have to look at my contract, but I'm pretty sure it specifically says that four quarters of TAing for the Writing Program was required. So yes, you apply in good faith and there's historically a reciprocal relationship between the graduate program in English and the employment needs of the Writing Program."

When asked the same question, Daniel also explained that,

It was required. I don't know exactly the ins and outs, but you are almost certainly guaranteed a TAship for a year or two in the Writing Program, and the English Department was very active in transitioning us from TAs in their department to then sort of handing us over to the Writing Program for a year or two. So, the Writing Program TAships were part of that five-year guaranteed funding package.

Amber responded in a similar way, noting, "I think we had to," when asked why she applied to become a TA. Upon thinking about it a little further she said,

Or, how about this, we were led to believe that it was mandatory. I don't think they could really not take away your funding but... it was basically mandatory. We'd seen someone in the year ahead of us who was an example. She hadn't done it and she was able to get work as a TA for the department of Women's Studies or whatnot, but that practice seemed much more contentious.

Justin also pointed to this same individual and how her experience served as a warning to the TAs in his cohort:

I know someone a few years ahead of me who refused to go to the Writing Program, who just said, "I'm not going to do it," and she was not able to TA English classes from there on or until she had done her stint in the Writing Program. It was considered like a breach of contract because she didn't even try. And she did that because in her Master's program she had extensive Composition training and experience and didn't think she needed it and so she took a stand. She was made an example of, I think. If you thought of not doing it, it was like, "look at her." She was forced to go to Black Studies, Asian American Studies, Film Studies, Women's Studies, and every year, every quarter she was scrambling to find

something, whereas if you just play the game you get your guaranteed funding through English and you only have to scramble after you're past that.

Justin further explained that,

Now there's this weird gray area when the Writing Program started being a more competitive process, where they had more people than they could admit or they could hire to teach. There were some people who did apply to teach there that weren't accepted, and as long as the English department had the sense that they made an honest effort, not deliberately blew off the interview or acted like a jerk, then they would be able to continue TAing in English, and I think they had to reapply the next year. They had to keep applying until they could fulfill that requirement.

When asked what she thought about the policy of requiring Literature students to TA in the Writing Program, Diane responded, "I don't think it should be a requirement, honestly. I think if you accept a graduate student in an English Department program, I think you need to provide funding for that student for the time that they are there within the department." She went on to state her opinion that,

You cannot be accepting too many graduate students, not have enough money to provide funding and then ask another department or program to kind of co-joint-fund these students. And I guess with the Writing Program they have to accept people because they don't have graduate students, so they're always going to be pulling students from different disciplines and that works with the interdisciplinary nature of the Writing Program, so that's fine. But I think the English Department needs to step up and take responsibility for funding its own graduate students and give the students the option of going to the Writing Program and doing this if they want to. I feel like instead they're

accepting too many graduate students, eventually leading to a whole slew of bigger problems in academia. So it's not that it shouldn't be a requirement for English grad students because it's not so much that it's such a burden to teach for the Writing Program; I just think that as a department you should take care of the students you admit to your program, and fund them through your own program for a reasonable time it takes for them to finish their Ph.D. And if you don't have that money, you shouldn't accept that many graduate students.

When asked the same question about the appropriateness of requiring Literature graduate students to be TAs in the writing unit, Justin said,

Well, my first thought is that it's gotten better. When I came in I was told, "You'll teach four quarters in the Writing Program. That's part of your funding package." Now the way funding packages work in the English department otherwise, is if you're on one of your quarters of funding through the English department you get assigned a class to TA. It might not be your first choice, but you'll get assigned a class. So I remember it striking me as really odd when we were told, "OK, now is the time where you have to apply to the Writing Program, and you're going to be interviewed." Because coming in it had been set up in such a way that it seemed built in, guaranteed. I remember it being explained as such: "Well you're probably going to be hired, but take it seriously, think of it as a practice run for being on the job market." Like, "We know it's a little silly that you have to go through with this."

However, Justin went on to note that,

I think a lot of that has shifted. I think—I hope—that it's not being presented as much as an entitlement but as an opportunity. But it's still problematic. I can see the advantage for



the English department. They want to be able to say, “We’re giving you four years of funding.” Really, they’re giving you four years of funding minus four quarters when hopefully you’ll get hired by the Writing Program. But then, they’d have to say, “We’re giving you three years of funding and hopefully...” I can see on the marketing side how they want to say you’re guaranteed five years. It’s a good way of recruiting students. I can see on their side why it sets up this problem later.

In response to whether he thinks that Ph.D. candidates in Literature should have some training and an opportunity to teach Composition as part of their graduate experience, Justin said, “Personally, yes, I think that. But part of why I think that is my own career goals are leading me toward a liberal arts setting, a community college setting, where English and Comp. are still together. So for me that seems essential.”

#### *Prior TAships*

Prior to becoming TAs for the Writing unit, all of the TAs from Literature had served as TAs in the English department. However, those TAships in English had not given them nearly as much academic freedom as did the TAships for the writing unit in that they were assistants to professors in large lecture courses and then they led their own discussion sections. As Amber described it,

So let’s say you are a TA for Detective Fiction, there’s 500 students in the class. You attend all the lectures that are given by the professor and then you’re responsible for two discussion sessions, each of around 35 students. And you lead discussions to kind of flesh out the points that are happening in the lecture. And you’re responsible for grading all the student papers. But in terms of actually dictating what you talk about... you have some latitude, but you pretty much have to frame it around the lectures.

In the writing unit, however, TAs were effectively in charge of their own classes, although they did have a common text that they were expected to use in their first quarter. As Amber explained, “Even though we had [a common textbook] for Writing 2, we still had a lot more creativity in order to organize the flow of what we were doing.”

As Daniel described it, “The English Department guaranteed me five years of support, and the first two years were spent in big freshman lecture hall English classes, like Detective Fiction or 20<sup>th</sup> Century Lit., with a gaggle of other TA’s. So it was only through the Writing Program that I had really my first class. Up until then it was only TAs where you have discussion sections, but you don’t create your own syllabus and you’re not the teacher on record.”

Justin had a completely different experience than the other Literature TAs, in that he had already taught classes of his own elsewhere, such that when he became a TA for the English Department he found it unnerving to serve as a professor’s teaching assistant:

I had taught before, but always as the instructor of record, and I never went to school where there were TAs. I went to smaller schools, so it was really weird for me to be a TA. I didn’t know what my role was; it took a lot to figure that out. I was really nervous at first about overstepping and I was very self-conscious about the professor, because I was used to doing my own thing. Once I got used to how it worked and the fact that I did all the grading—they basically gave the lecture and didn’t care about much else—it kind of made sense to me.

Nevertheless, Justin went on to note that, “The way it works in the Writing Program felt much more natural to me because when you TA for Writing 2, you have a supervisor, but there’s no lecture that anyone goes to. As far as the students are concerned, you’re it.”

*English Department TA Training*

The English department provided TA training for its TAs, although it was much shorter and more condensed than the TA preparation required by the Writing Program. As Daniel recalled,

It was led by two sort of senior graduate students and it wasn't very standardized because you could be TAing for Medieval Lit., you could be TAing for Detective Fiction, so there was no set curriculum or guide that they had. It was pretty general. But that whole process was very much figured out on your own, plus it varied from professor to professor. So I have to say my memory of the English TA training is totally negligible.

Justin was able to provide a little more background information about the English department's two-day training for TAs. He explained that "It was started by students. They decided, "We need TA training," so some students figured out how to do it, and there was a grant available. I don't know when it started; it was established when I got there in 2002 but it hadn't been going on all that long by then."

When asked how the English TA training compared to the Writing Program TA preparation program, Diane recalled,

The English TA training takes place over two days with a booklet; it's led by students. It's pretty thorough. I thought it was good training for what they did in the two days. I do think it could have been extended a little longer, especially for those like me who had no teaching background coming in. Other people did [have teaching experience] and I think it may not have been as useful for them, but maybe for those people who were TAing for the first time ever it might have been useful to extend that just a little bit. But then again, the professors normally take over and each professor has an individual style of how he

wants his teaching assistants to act. The TAs are kind of conditioned to what the professor thinks should happen in the discussions so I don't think more TA training would have been useful because you really kind of need to learn that from your instructor.

Amber referred to the TA training in the English Department as “just sort of silly,” particularly in comparison with the 501A and 501B sequence. When asked if she thought it was enough for the role of TAs in the English Department, Amber answered, “Probably. But it seems like we could've done so much more to plan for follow-ups afterwards. Like it would've been much better to do a session on grading papers three weeks into the semester, rather than do it all in one weekend. It just wasn't very thoughtfully planned.”

### *Timing*

Most of the TAs made it clear that the timing of their TAships with the writing unit was problematic, due to the M.A. exams that they were preparing for at that same time. However, this feeling was not unanimous, with one TA indicating that this concern seemed more like resistance to TA preparation than a genuine concern about scheduling.

When asked how he felt about the timing of his TAship, Daniel responded that he felt it was,

bad timing in terms of our own exam. There was a lot of frustration amongst graduate students in that second year because we were preparing for the Master's Exams and there was a lot of grumbling about the fact that we had to take this 501A pedagogical class at the same time that we were preparing for the exams. So it was the two coming at you at once, and I remember a lot of grief and grumbling about the simultaneity of that, but also then the lack of understanding from the Writing Program though the hiring process,

though the interviewing process, about the realities of that exam. I remember that being sort of the mood in the air, but it wasn't something I especially felt.

Diane also emphasized the impact of the qualifying exams on her experience as a TA, noting that, "The qualifying exams are not to be underestimated about how stressful they are for English grad students. And not that it's not important that we be prepared as writing teachers, but it seemed like there's only so many ways you can be pulled. And I think that was the whole time issue. Meeting once a week for those two hours and prepping for that was getting to be an issue as we prepared for this massive exam that determines whether we got our Master's or not." As Justin explained it,

That's one component of this whole story that doesn't always get told. The point at which the English grads are steered toward the Writing Program is right when a lot of them are preparing for exams. And if you come in with a B.A., you do your first two years TAing in English, but you start 501A in the spring of the second-year, and that's when you take your M.A. exams. That is bad planning! But that's how it's worked out, and I think that's been a component of the weird feelings about it, too. Right when you're feeling especially pressed for time, you feel like you're being pulled away to do something else.

Yet while Diane, Daniel and Justin saw this timing conflict as a major issue, Nancy did not. When asked if she thought that the timing of the TAships, Nancy said, "I don't have any recollection of that. Really, the Comps didn't exactly exert a lot of... It wasn't exactly like brain drain. If anybody's complaining about Comps, I think they're looking for an excuse. I'm not delegitimizing what people are saying about their exams or anything like that, but I think it was less about scheduling and more about resistance."

## CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This final chapter considers the results of the data collected for this study in light of the literature pertaining to this topic. As the previous two chapters have made clear, analysis of this data has yielded various themes and patterns pertaining to the Composition and Literature TAs' respective perceptions of their teacher preparation program and what they took away from it. This chapter also considers to what extent each of the two groups of TAs resisted what the program offered them and examines whether their responses to their TA preparation can be correlated to their affiliation with either Literature (English) or Composition (Education). In answering these questions, this final chapter offers a discussion of the data presented in the three results chapters and then draws conclusions before considering their implications. It also offers suggestions for further study and considers the limitations of the research design and its implementation.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to answer four primary research questions:

- “How did Ph.D. candidates from Composition and from Literature respond to a TA preparation program held in an independent writing unit in a large public research university in California?”
- “Did TAs from Composition and from Literature exhibit resistance to their preparation program, and if so, in what ways?”
- “What pedagogical practices and principles do TAs from Composition and from Literature still use that reflect their TA preparation?”

- “To what extent did TAs from Composition and from Literature perceive a disciplinary divide in their preparation program experience, and to what did they attribute it?”

A primary concern for this study has been developing an understanding of disciplinary differences and how they manifest within the context of a TA preparation program in an independent writing unit, separate from English. Implicit in these four questions is an interest in determining if TAs from Composition and from Literature respond differently to their TA preparation program and, if so, to what extent can these differences be attributed to disciplinary affiliations and/or program distinctions. Therefore, in reporting the findings for each of the four research questions below, this chapter compares the perceptions and experiences of the two groups in order to determine the extent to which these might reflect their disciplinary affiliation(s) and/or distinctions of this particular program.

Overall, the data collected for this study revealed a clear divide between the TAs from Literature and the TAs from Composition. This divide was manifested in various ways: TAs from the two groups responded to the programs differently, displayed different levels of engagement and resistance, and took away different teaching principles and practices in manners consistent with their respective disciplinary philosophies and affiliations. Moreover, participants reported that they themselves perceived a divide between Literature and Composition TAs in their preparation courses which they attributed to differences in disciplinary allegiances, interests and philosophies. At the same time, the results also suggest that institutional policies and practices can influence how TAs perceive and respond to their TA preparation, and in this case, certain policies and practices seemed to further exacerbate the tensions evident between the two disciplinary groups.

*Research Question 1*

- “How do Ph.D. candidates from Composition and from Literature respond to a TA preparation program held in an independent writing unit in a large public research university in California?”

The initial research question for this study was largely answered via the narrative teaching evaluations for the two courses associated with the TA preparation program, although the subsequent interviews shed further light on the reasons behind participants’ responses. The narrative evaluations clearly establish that there were definite differences in how members of the two groups responded to the TA preparation program, and that moreover, these differences both fall along, and to an extent seem to be a result of, disciplinary affiliation(s). At the same time, program distinctions—such as the requirement that the Literature students serve as TAs for the writing unit while they were also preparing for their M.A. exams and the fact that these TAs were required by the English department—also played a role in shaping participants’ perceptions.

The difference in responses to the program appear to be due in part to the respective levels of engagement with Composition theory and practice that members of the two groups demonstrated, as reflected in respondents’ comments about the practicum. Moreover, comments made by TAs from the two groups indicated that the respective groups viewed the information presented in the practicum differently, particularly in terms of how much emphasis they hoped to see placed on examining praxis versus focusing on more practical concerns like classroom management, strategies for handling the paper load, etc.

However, there were also some similarities in the responses of the two groups. For example, both groups of TAs expressed their admiration for and appreciation of the TA program



facilitator, who they all viewed as knowledgeable and supportive. Moreover, even though some of the Literature TAs saw the preparation program as tedious, all but one of them reported that they were glad to have taught Composition for the writing unit, and that furthermore, they felt the preparation program had been effective in preparing them to teach the FYC course.

The following is a brief discussion of some of the ways in which the two groups responded to their TA preparation, revealing that both disciplinarity and program distinctions played a part in why the TAs felt the ways that they did.

### *More versus Less*

The narrative evaluations revealed that while the Composition TAs were interested in more theory, more class time, more observations, etc., the TAs from Literature were suggesting that the preparation program be condensed, either by meeting less often or by dropping one of the two courses entirely. These findings suggest a stark disparity in the engagement levels of the two groups, a disparity that is more fully fleshed out by the discussion below.

While all the Composition TAs recalled that they were “excited” to become TAs for the writing unit, the TAs from Literature unanimously reported that they had viewed their TAships with the writing unit as something they “had to do” due to the stipulations in the funding packages they had accepted. Most of the Literature TAs also noted that as a result, they had “low to no expectations” for the program and also, that while they were there they felt disconnected from their home department of English. Conversely, the Composition TAs felt welcomed into the program and supported by it, seeing it as an extension of their graduate studies. This finding reveals that disciplinarity is not the only cause of the differences in perception between the two groups, but that program distinctions—such as the unique positioning of the TA program in a

department that is separate from all of the students' graduate programs<sup>47</sup>—also played a role in shaping TAs' attitudes about and experiences with the preparation program.

Differing engagement levels can also be seen in the two groups' responses to the practicum's schedule and its workload. While the Composition TAs suggested that the 501B practicum class moved too slowly, the Literature TAs indicated that they credited the practicum for keeping them up to speed as its due dates prevented them from falling behind in designing their class schedules and developing assignments. Conversely, several of the Composition TAs indicated that they were enthusiastic about working on their class schedules and assignments, sometimes finding themselves completing assignments weeks ahead of the practicum's schedule. Illustrating this point, Composition TA Piper offered an example of what she considered the ultra-slow pace set by the practicum when she reflected on her frustration with having to wait until the week before classes began to get the common text and begin to plan her FYC class. Because she had taught Composition previously, she was exempted from taking the first course in the two-course sequence—501A—and therefore she began TAing in her first quarter as a Composition graduate student. Given her prior experience, she felt ready to hit the ground running, but she was frustrated when she had to wait for the September TA meeting in order to get started.<sup>48</sup> There is a sharp contrast between this attitude and that of the majority of the Literature TAs, who indicated that they relied on the practicum's deadlines to help them engage with their FYC course planning and development.

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<sup>47</sup> Although granted, it is closely aligned with the graduate program in Education.

<sup>48</sup> Given that Piper was the most resistant of all the Composition TAs and that her resistance was largely linked to the fact that she felt the TA preparation program was not as rigorous or as theorized as she would have liked it to be, it seems likely that this incident was indicative of that position, and in fact, that this is where some of her resistance may have originated.

*Desire for More Curricular Freedom versus More Direction.* An outgrowth of the more versus less dichotomy that again suggests varying levels of engagement with the practicum is the finding that while the Composition TAs were interested in developing their own assignments and units, the TAs from Literature were far more content with the set curriculum and common textbook that the program required all TAs to use in their first quarter of teaching. While several of the Composition TAs indicated their willingness to use the set guidelines for the first quarter out of deference to the program, they made it clear that they were looking forward to having more freedom to design their own course and assignments in subsequent quarters. However, one of the Composition TAs recalled feeling “constrained” by the common text and the set curriculum, even for that first quarter. In contrast, the Literature TAs by and large embraced the set structure, and most of them reported that they were quite comfortable with using it not only in that first quarter but also beyond that required period.<sup>49</sup>

*Engagement with the Theoretical versus the Practical*

There was also a big disparity in the TAs’ responses to the theoretical and the practical information that was presented in the TA preparation classes. While the Composition TAs indicated they were equally interested in embracing both theory and practice, the Literature TAs overwhelmingly preferred the practical information, to the extent that most of them stated that they had not even read the theory-based text that had been assigned in the class (and which the Composition TAs had heartily embraced).

Given the abundant literature covering the theory/practice split in TA preparation (Dobrin, 2005; Hesse, 1993; Stenberg, 2005; Odom, Bernard-Donals, & Kerschbaum, 2005) as

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<sup>49</sup> It is only fair to point out here that the Composition TAs all had prior teaching experience and that all but one of them had previously taught Composition either in high school or college. However, most of the Literature TAs had not yet had the opportunity design and implement their own classes. Therefore, the Composition TAs had already developed a set of classroom activities that they could draw on as resources, whereas the Literature TAs had not.

well as the calls for balancing theory with practical information in TA classes (Haring-Smith, 1985; Stenberg, 2005), it is not surprising that the program under study here offered an “integrated approach” a term used by Haring-Smith (1985) to describe the practice of providing a combination of both theory and practical information. Haring-Smith (1985) noted that this approach “acknowledges that [TAs] need to study Composition before teaching it, but it also allows them to investigate the subject from a more sophisticated angle than that which they will present to their students. It treats them as teachers and thinkers, not clones or apprentices” (p. 36). It seems that this approach was better received by the Composition TAs, as they were willing to embrace both theory and information related to classroom practice, whereas the Literature TAs were mainly focused on obtaining the practical information necessary to run a classroom.

Stenberg (2005) has noted that many teacher preparation programs are one-sided in terms of the theory/practice split, and she argued that this one-sidedness may be a result of disciplinary trends “in making pedagogy either a body of knowledge or a skill” (p. 7). In this case, the Composition TAs indicated that they were willing to embrace the theory in the class as part of the body of knowledge that they were also studying in their graduate courses, while the Literature TAs seemed to view the development of their FYC pedagogies as a skill to be developed, and thus they indicated that they had rejected the theory that was presented and instead embraced the practical information that they believed would help them in the task of preparing to teach FYC. It seems apparent then, that disciplinary notions regarding the nature of pedagogy played an important role in the TAs groups’ respective perceptions. However, as noted in the opening of this section, program distinctions also played a role in how the TAs from the two groups responded to the TA preparation program.

Along these same lines, it is interesting to note that while the Composition TAs appreciated both the experience of teaching FYC *and* the preparation for entering the classroom, the Literature TAs were far more enthusiastic about actually teaching the course than they were about the experience of preparing to teach it. It was apparent from both the narrative evaluations and the interviews that part of the appeal of teaching FYC for the Literature TAs was because this was their first experience in leading a class, as the TAing experience that most of them had previously participated in was restricted to leading discussion sections for large lecture classes which were taught by a tenured faculty member. The Literature TAs were quick to point to the practical nature of gaining this more engaged teaching experience, and almost all of them indicated that they had accepted the idea that this experience would make them more desirable on the job market, as the TA preparation facilitator had told them from the start.

#### *Exceptions in Each Group*

Despite the clear disciplinary divide evidenced between the two groups by the narrative evaluations and the interviews, one TA in each of the interview groups reflected a set of attitudes and perceptions that did not fall into line with the rest of the TAs in that group.

On the Composition side, Piper indicated throughout the interviews that she continued to feel frustrated throughout the practicum because she felt that it did not do enough to promote and/or defend Composition theory and practice to the Literature students in the class. And on the Literature side, Justin represented an outlier position in that he responded overall quite positively to the TA preparation program.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted here that Justin did not feel comfortable sharing his enthusiasm for the course with his colleagues from Literature as he realized that he was alone among his Literature colleagues in embracing the course and what it had to offer.

In Piper's case, her comments reveal that her frustration can be traced to her strong identification with Composition theory and practice and to the offense that she felt when she perceived the Literature TAs were looking down on the discipline that she had embraced. So although some of her comments reflect some dissatisfaction with the preparation program, it was not Composition theory and practice that she was resisting, but rather that she was offended by others' resistance to these things. So in Piper's case, the problem was that the TA preparation classes were not Composition-oriented *enough* to satisfy her interest in the field.

As for Justin, it may be that his attitude was so different from the other Literature TAs due to the relatively extensive Composition teaching experience that he came into the program with. Due to that experience, he was similar to the Composition TAs, all of whom had prior experience teaching writing before becoming TAs in the program. Given that most of the Literature TAs indicated they could see the benefits of participating in TA preparation after having taught FYC, it stands to reason that Justin would see the benefit from the beginning, given his prior experience teaching Composition.

Piper and Justin's responses provide richness to the data collected in this study, as they illustrate that the differences between the perceptions of the two groups reflect more than simply a straight binary split between them. And indeed, individuals' opinions in the two groups fell along a continuum, rather than adhering to fixed positions. But despite the continuum of attitudes and perceptions discovered within each of the two groups, it is nevertheless clear that the attitudes and perceptions reported by individuals of the groups do fall along disciplinary lines.

### *Research Question 2*

- “Did TAs from Composition and from Literature exhibit resistance to their preparation program, and if so, in what ways?”

While this question was partially answered via the narrative teaching evaluations, the reasons for the TAs' resistance—or lack thereof—was much more fully fleshed out in the interviews. Both of these data sets revealed that there was some resistance evidenced by TAs from both Composition and Literature, although most of the resistance came from the Literature TAs and the resistance displayed by all but one of the Composition TAs was confined to the first couple of class meetings. Moreover, the data revealed that the resistance is an outgrowth of different origins for the two groups, a phenomenon that will be discussed below.

#### *Resistance from the Composition TAs*

Several of the Composition TAs reported feeling initially resistant to taking the practicum class, given their previous experience in teaching Composition. Although these feelings dissipated “after the second or third meeting” according to Composition TA Jackie, the fact that they were present at all reflects the fact that resistance to TA preparation is not purely a manifestation of disciplinary tension.

Another form of resistance unique to the Composition TAs can be traced to a form of counter-resistance that was demonstrated by several of the Composition TAs and that came up repeatedly in the interviews. As Jackie recalled, “I remember thinking at first, ‘I don't need a class to show me how to teach because I already know how to teach.’ But then when I realized it was more about content, then I had the buy-in. I especially had the buy-in when I saw the reactions of the Literature people.” Literature TA Justin also pointed to this phenomenon of counter-resistance, calling it: “overly enthusiastic participation.”

Yet for one Composition TA, this counter-resistance did not go far enough. Piper felt that the preparation program did not emphasize Composition theory and practice as much as she would have liked it to. As noted in the last section, Piper felt that the TAs from Literature were

disrespectful of Composition theory and practice and moreover, she was frustrated that the TA preparation facilitator did not defend these principles as strongly as she could have. Piper's experience not only reflects the literature indicating the resistance that some TAs demonstrate in their preparation programs (Ebest, 2005; Fischer, 2005; Hesse, 1993), but it also reflects the abundant literature chronicling the divide between Composition and Literature (Bergmann, 2006; Comley and Scholes, 1983; Goggin and Beatty, 2000; Horner, 1983; Kaufer and Young, 1983; Maid, 2006; McComiskey, 2006; North, 2000) as a result of which, some Composition scholars at times feel they must defend their discipline against those who do not recognize its inherent worth and value.<sup>51</sup>

#### *Resistance from the Literature TAs*

The Literature TAs very clearly demonstrated resistance to the preparation program, as evidenced by the repeated calls in the narrative evaluations for a "condensed" version of the class, shorter class periods, etc. This group of TAs also resisted the Composition theory presented in the class, to the extent that they avoided doing the assigned reading or engaging with it in any concrete way. These findings will be considered below in light of the relevant literature.

The resistance demonstrated by the Literature TAs is consistent with Fischer's (2005) finding that there are several reasons why TAs might resist the practicum. For one thing, Fischer (2005) noted that most of the TAs she worked with had tested out of first-year Composition as undergraduates and therefore, they were unaccustomed to considering what has made them successful and *how* they write well: "And so when they are asked to consider how writing can be taught to English 101 students, [...] TAs are being asked to be analytical about processes that

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<sup>51</sup> This idea will be further discussed later in this chapter as the findings of the fourth research question are considered.



have become a tacit part of who they are” (p. 204). Indeed, both Diane and Nancy from the Literature group noted in the interviews that writing had always come naturally to them and that therefore it is sometimes hard for them to remember that writing well does not come easily to everyone. In Nancy’s words: “We think that, automatically, the students already are good writers. We kind of assume that.” Understandably, it may be difficult for this group of TAs to get beyond their assumptions and to consider how they might best work with students to help them develop these same skills.

At the same time, at least some of the resistance shown by the Literature TAs is related to programmatic policies that engendered resistance. For one thing, the fact that they were being pulled away from their home department right at the time when they were preparing for their M.A. exams is, as Justin referred to it, “bad planning!” For another thing, the required nature of the TAship also engendered a natural sense of resistance for many of the Literature TAs. As Literature TA Diane described, “it’s a requirement, you just need to get it done, just get through it and then you don’t have to worry about it any longer. But I definitely think there was a lot of feet dragging [because the Literature] people in general weren’t really happy about having to do it.” Interestingly enough, both the timing of the TAship and the required nature of it were due to policies established by the English Department rather than by the writing unit. Nevertheless, the resistance displayed by the Literature TAs as a response to these policies ended up being directed at the writing unit rather than at their home department.

The Literature TAs also demonstrated resistance to the TA preparation program via their unwillingness to engage with the assigned texts in the class and as a result with the theory that was being offered there. Because of their overwhelming preference for practical information over theory (as discussed in the section pertaining to the first research question), the Literature

TAs viewed the reading as unnecessary, or as Literature TA Nancy referred to it, a “luxury good.” Again, this finding is consistent with the literature (Fischer, 2005; Hesse, 1993; Rankin, 1994), which suggests that many TAs resist the theory presented in their preparation programs, instead gravitating toward information that they consider to be of a more practical nature. Fischer (2005) argued that not only do many TAs resist theory because they prefer to focus on more practical classroom management concerns, but also that “[t]hey do not realize that, as a discipline whose primary aim is theorized teaching, Composition studies is a robust and valid discipline, and a course in writing pedagogy is far more than technical training” (p. 205). Indeed, as Literature TA Daniel noted, “I’ve always envisioned writing as part of the process of teaching Literature. I didn’t realize until I began working in the Writing Program that writing had become its own sort of pedagogical entity.”

Stancliff and Goggin (2007), Welch (1993) and Stenberg (2005) have also considered students’ resistance in light of the enculturation process that many claim graduate study—and by extension TA preparation—often entails. Bizzell’s (1992) recollections from when she was a student at Rutgers are relevant here. She recalled that, “To treat Composition theory and pedagogy seriously was to define oneself as more student oriented, more pedagogy oriented than those who aimed at careers in literary theory or criticism, and thus to depict oneself as somehow a less professional scholar” (p. 6). Indeed, Mattison (2003) has pointed to the “pedagogically antithetical positions” found in graduate Literature classrooms and first-year writing classrooms, which sometimes make it difficult for graduate students from Literature to embrace the theory presented in TA preparation classes.

As noted in Chapter Two, several scholars have considered the role of enculturation in the development and success of graduate students (Ackerman, 2006; Berkenkotter, Huckin &

Ackerman, 1998; Bishop, 1990; Dobrin, 2005; Roen, Goggin, & Clary-Lemon, 2007; North, 2000; Sosnoski & Burmester, 2006; Welch, 1993), as well as the idea that there is an expectation that graduate students in English will adhere to an established set of behaviors reflective of their professors (North, 2000; Sosnoski, 1994). This expectation was reflected in the interviews with the Literature TAs, as several of them indicated that they believed their professors were grooming them for faculty positions in Research 1 institutions, where ostensibly, they would not be teaching Composition but instead focusing on their own research in Literature. Amber's recollection of her advisor's dismay when she expressed an interest in an administrative position—and the fact that she never mentioned it to him again—is indicative of her sense that it was necessary for her to acculturate herself in order to maintain a successful relationship with him. In light of this finding, the notion of the “Magisterial” phenomenon (North, 2000; Sosnoski, 1994) and the top/down nature of the graduate student/English professor relationship is recalled and seemingly apropos.

Overall, the data pertaining to this research question reveal that again, both disciplinary divisions and program distinction played a powerful role in the levels of resistance demonstrated by members of the two groups of TAs.

### *Research Question 3*

- “What pedagogical practices and principles do TAs from Composition and from Literature still use that reflect their TA preparation?”

Because neither the narrative teaching evaluations nor the surveys asked the TAs about their pedagogies, the interviews were the only method that elicited information relevant to this research question. The second interview, in particular, addressed this question through querying the TAs about the teaching practices and principles they had adopted either during or after their

TA preparation. And because these interviews were conducted several years after the TAs had completed their preparation program, they had had time to establish and develop their own pedagogies and philosophical positions about their role in the classroom. The data revealed a tremendous difference in how the TAs from the two disciplines approached the teaching of writing and in how they viewed students. And again, as was found in regard to the previous two research questions, this disparity in responses can be traced to the TAs' respective disciplinary affiliations.

### *Embracing Theory versus Practice*

As has already been discussed in this chapter, one of the key differences between how the two groups of TAs responded to TA preparation was in relation to their engagement levels with the theory and/or the practical information that was covered in the practicum. Not surprisingly, as a result of this disparity, the two sets of TAs wound up taking different pedagogical practices and principles away from the preparation program. While the Composition TAs took theoretical positions with them from the TA preparation, such as the importance of empowering students and developing student-centered classrooms, the need for building a community in the classroom, etc., by and large the Literature TAs took classroom practices and activities with them, such as the set the curriculum they had been asked to use as first-time TAs—including various units and assignments—the textbooks they had been required to use, etc.

This finding suggests that because of their focus on practice over theory, the Literature TAs developed only a limited ability to design their own curriculum, given that they lacked the theoretical basis to do so. By her own admission, Literature TA Nancy is an excellent example of this phenomenon, in that she feels like she struggles to develop new assignments or to utilize a WAC approach outside of the common text that the TAs were asked to use: “The one thing that

TA training didn't teach me [...] is how to move away from the models... move away from the textbook and understand what Writing Across the Curriculum is beyond the way it's set up in the common text. I still have a hard time with seeing WAC outside of the three units [we were exposed to] on cyberspace, obedience to authority and Hamlet." And while this may be a result of the fact that "our first quarter a lot of us just stole a syllabus, lesson plan, and units from somebody else," Nancy went on to note that she not only appreciated the set curriculum but that she would have liked even more guidelines than she was given: "I wanted somebody to give me the lesson plan and let me implement it." Diane made a similar point, noting that when she taught for a local community college she had a hard time designing her course without a set curriculum or template to follow.

It seems, then, that in their eagerness to adopt a curriculum from elsewhere without developing a theoretical basis to go along with it, this group of TAs handicapped themselves in a sense as they continue to struggle with developing units and activities of their own. As a result, some of the Literature TAs continue to use many of the same activities and assignments in their classes today that they were exposed to as TAs several years ago, a phenomenon that was much less common with the Composition TAs, many of whom came *into* the TA program ready to begin designing their own assignments and units.

#### *The Sage on the Stage versus the Guide on the Side*

Another fundamental difference in the responses of the two TA groups seems to be an outgrowth of how they perceive their role in the classroom. While all of the Composition TAs indicated that they view themselves primarily as guides or coaches in the classroom, several of the Literature TAs seemed to embrace a more authoritarian approach.

The disparity in approaches is evidenced not only by their words but also by the classroom practices they have adopted and the activities they use. For example, while the Composition TAs indicated that through the TA program they had adopted a minimal marking strategy, some of the Literature TAs seemed to be more interested in helping their students learn to use grammar and mechanics more effectively. Similarly, while the Composition TAs reported on their commitment to student-centered classrooms, the Literature TAs did not indicate that student-centeredness was a consideration in their pedagogies. This difference in approaches is further discussed below.

*Minimal Marking versus Copy-Editing.* Several of the Composition TAs mentioned that they had embraced minimal marking techniques in their grading, a principle that had been discussed in TA preparation. However, this approach was not nearly as well received by the TAs from Literature, who seemed to take a more pedantic approach to grammar usage and instruction.<sup>52</sup> In fact, Literature TA Nancy indicated that one of the benefits of having taught FYC was that it made her “a more enthusiastic editor” of her students’ papers.

*Student Centeredness.* Although it did not come up at all with the Literature TAs, all of the Composition TAs who were interviewed discussed their belief in developing and maintaining student-centered classrooms through various strategies and activities. In fact, many of the classroom principles that the Composition TAs brought up in the interviews—such as seeing writing as a mode of inquiry, using student texts in the classroom, promoting collaboration, and working to develop a sense of community in the class—reflected their belief in the importance of creating this type of environment, at least in part as a means of working toward student empowerment. While Literature TAs Amber and Justin indicated that empowering students was

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<sup>52</sup> While Literature TA Justin embraced the notion of minimal marking as a grading strategy, none of the other Literature TAs mentioned it.

a key component of their teaching philosophy, there was no consensus among the Literature TAs as a group as to how one might go about empowering students in the class or why it might be a desirable goal to try and achieve.

*Scaffolding and Seeing Writing as a Process*

While both groups emphasized the scaffolding of assignments and presenting writing to their students as a process, Literature TAs Nancy and Daniel pointed out that this practice was not common in the Literature classes—either undergraduate or graduate—at the university. As a result of this lack of modeling within the English department, both Nancy and Daniel found themselves grappling with how best to introduce these activities into their classrooms, particularly when they were working with upper division students.

*What's Disciplinarity Got to Do with It?*

The purpose of the third research question in this study was to elicit data that would indicate to what extent the perspectives held by the TAs translated into their actual classroom practice. It is one thing to behave in certain ways in a TA preparation class and/or to demonstrate adherence to a particular paradigm as a TA, but when it comes to discussing teaching philosophies, a teacher's classroom persona and environment speaks volumes about what he or she believes about teaching.

Lindgren's words, cited in Chapter Two of this dissertation, are recalled: "All teachers make choices about how to relate to students and whether and how to involve students in determining course content and processes" (2002, p. 297). Moreover, it seems likely that at least to some extent, these choices reflect a teacher's notion of what makes for an effective classroom dynamic, a perspective that is very likely informed by disciplinary norms and affiliation. Yancey (2002) notes that

attention to the TA's identity, both the preconceived identity the TA brought to the experience of development and the new/revised identity developed over time, is critical. Such attention includes considerations of questions having to do with the TA's construct of teacher/faculty member. How does the new TA understand the identity of a teacher? A faculty member? (p. 72)

Based on the data elicited, it appears that the two groups of TAs in this study indeed view the act of teaching differently, given the emphasis that TAs in each group respectively placed on various approaches. This finding relates back to Stenberg (2005), who argued that there are four primary metaphors that teachers rely on as they develop their teaching identities: teacher as scholar, teacher as trainee, teacher as owner, and teacher as learner. In this case, it seems that while the Composition TAs embraced the "teacher as learner" metaphor, the Literature TAs were more inclined to adopt the "teacher as scholar" metaphor to guide their teaching practices and their interactions with students. Throughout the interviews, the idea of "teacher as scholar" was reflected by the Literature TAs, many of whom were looking forward to careers as scholars where teaching would be a secondary activity. But perhaps this should not be surprising, given that this group of TAs also reported that their graduate professors seemed to adhere to a master/apprentice model (Sosnoski 1994; North, 2000), as well as to a "traditional disciplinary dynamic" that positions "the professor as knower and the student as empty vessel" (Stenberg, 2005, p. 136).

The notion of "teacher as learner" can easily be connected to the idea of student-centeredness, an approach that has become almost synonymous with effective Composition practice. As Hurlbert (2012) has pointed out, "If the Expressivist Compositionists of the 1980's taught us anything, it is that student-centeredness is the crucial component of sound composition



instruction” (p. 60). The fact that all of the Composition TAs interviewed for this study expressed their commitment to student-centered classrooms is indicative of how entrenched the model is within the discipline.

The literature in Chapter Two (Finkel, 2000; Lindgren, 2002; Stenberg, 2005) has suggested that the fields of Composition and Literature may reflect different ideas of what it means to be an effective teacher. The interview data collected for this study seems to substantiate this idea, as the Composition participants by and large felt that the philosophies of their graduate program and the writing unit were virtually one and the same, while the Literature participants indicated that the disciplinary identity common to faculty in the English department is strikingly different in terms of philosophy about the role of teaching and scholarship, etc. According to Stenberg (2005) “the feature that most distinguishes composition from its disciplinary siblings is its primary focus on pedagogy, and, more specifically, its conception of pedagogy as a mode of knowledge production, not merely a vehicle for knowledge transmission” (p. 130).

In the interviews, Composition TA Piper touched on this topic, arguing that there is a big difference between what is being valued in Composition classrooms vs. what is being valued in Literature classrooms:

I haven’t been in a Lit. class in a really long time, but from what I can tell it’s about showcasing what you can say about the book, that you can transmit other people’s theories, and that you can be humble about it, and you can worship the professor. It’s much more of a performance. Whereas in Composition I feel like, although you have to have some performance here to get a good grade, that’s the last step. The idea is that the student is learning the process, things that are invisible are becoming visible, and they’re taking away knowledge about the writing process and hopefully they’re taking the

opportunity to *get* something rather than *give* something. In Lit., my assumption is that they're giving something—it's an outward show rather than an inward growth. In Composition it's like, "I'm getting something, I'm learning how to write, I'm understanding why people write, I have this paper that I'm really proud of and I discovered a question that I now have that I want to focus on in my other classes." departments could be alleviated.

In the quote above, Piper is characterizing Literature classes in a way that many professors of Literature would disagree with. However, her words demonstrate that at least from her perspective, the two disciplines approach teaching and student writing in very different ways, a phenomenon that Stenberg (2005) would likely attribute to the "teacher as learner" versus "the teacher as scholar" paradigms that she outlines in *Professing and Pedagogy: Learning the Teaching of English*.

*The Positioning of Students.* A comparison of the two TA handbooks—developed by the Writing Program and the English Department, respectively—also powerfully reflects the different teaching paradigms associated with the two disciplines. These handbooks, which were discussed in the thick description data set in Chapter Four, reflect quite disparate notions about what it means to be a teacher and how one should relate to students, both in person and in terms of the time that should be spent on assessing students' work. While the TA Handbook for the writing unit encourages TA to connect with students and develop a community with them both in person and by connecting with their writing, the English Department TA Handbook warns TAs against spending too much time on reading student papers, which it describes as the "most thankless and time-devouring of all TA duties." The handbook goes on to urge TAs to "Try to space your grading out so that you don't find yourself with 35 papers to grade in one night as this

can damage healthy brain tissue and reduce life expectancy” (Teaching Assistant Handbook, 2003).

The interviews also revealed fundamental differences in how the TAs from Composition and from Literature viewed students and students’ writing. Three of the Composition TAs—Nick, Jackie and Piper—all indicated that they were troubled by the disparaging way in which the Literature TAs spoke about their students and their writing. Arguably, this attitude can be traced back to the way that FYC students are positioned in the handbooks cited above.

Composition TA Piper argued that this attitude can also be traced “back to the assumptions [the Literature TAs] have about students, like, ‘Here’s the hierarchy, here’s where you are. You’re not really permitted to say anything or make it your own until you get higher up on this ladder.’ ”

Moreover, it is possible that at least some of the resistance demonstrated by the Literature TAs to the preparation program can be traced back to the notion of an established hierarchy within the classroom, and indeed, within the department overall. According to Composition TA Piper, the Literature TAs approached the preparation classes with a sense of, “We’re too good for this, students are stupid, we’re so great.” Yet she went on to point out that at the same time “They were a student in the class, and [they were feeling like] why do they need to be a student in the class; students are stupid, but they’re grad students and they’re smart, and so they shouldn’t have to be there.”

#### *Research Question 4*

- “To what extent did TAs from Composition and from Literature perceive a disciplinary divide in their preparation program experience, and to what did they attribute it?”

The answer to this question was found in all three of the data sets, as the participants indicated that there had been a divide in the class not only in the 2006 survey that was included in the thick description of Chapter Four but also in the narrative evaluations and in the interviews. Evidence of where the divide came from was also apparent in each of the three data sets.

#### *Divide in the Class*

Given the findings that have already been discussed, it likely comes as no surprise that all of the TAs from both groups referred directly to a disciplinary divide in the TA preparation class between the Composition TAs and the Literature TAs. There was a great deal of discussion about this divide within the interviews, with TAs from both groups reporting that it was manifested not only in class discussions and via students' body language and interactions during class time, but that it also was evident in the two groups' varying levels of engagement with the course and its materials. The TAs indicated that while the divide was disciplinary in nature, certain institutional policies and practices also played a role in amplifying it, a phenomenon that is discussed at the end of this section.

*Disciplinary Allegiances.* Students from both groups indicated that they felt the need to affiliate with the others from their discipline at the expense of developing what one Composition TA referred to as an "us and them" dynamic in the class.

As Composition TA Nick said, "there was a pressure on people to represent for their culture, to represent for that department. Even if you wanted to go along with [the TA preparation facilitator] and go along with what she was teaching, you had to do it from a place where you were keeping disciplinary identity first." And indeed, this was exactly the experience

that Literature TA Justin reported having when he said that he felt like he needed to temper his enthusiasm for the preparation program when speaking with his colleagues from Literature.

At least in part, this phenomenon can be explained by the enculturation process that graduate students experience as they work towards their degrees (Bishop, 1988; Welch, 1993). It stands to reason that in their efforts to acculturate, graduate students would strive to affiliate with others from their discipline as they move forward in their graduate work. Yet affiliation is only one part of enculturation, which also occurs by rejecting that which is perceived as “other.” And given this university’s unique situation where the English department is focused on the study of Literature to the exclusion of Composition since it seceded from the writing unit and thus the Composition arm of English Studies long ago, it is not at all surprising that in their attempts to acculturate themselves, the Literature students would perceive affiliation with Composition students or theory as potentially problematic. Conversely, the Composition TAs had a vested interest in affiliating with the writing unit, as it is committed to providing Composition instruction to all of the undergraduates on campus, and therefore it is where the theory that they are embracing in their graduate classes can be applied. Arguably, the enculturation process simultaneously pulls the Composition TAs toward the TA preparation experience while it repels the Literature TAs away from it.

In addition, if indeed the Literature students have been acculturated to a master/apprentice model within their own graduate classes, then the by-all-accounts collaborative approach taken in the TA preparation course could have felt much less familiar to the Literature TAs than it did to the Composition TAs who were learning in their graduate classes about the importance of developing student-centered learning communities. Here again, the paradigms associated with each of the two disciplines are invoked.

*Different Disciplinary Interests.* While these disciplinary allegiances may have been responsible for at least some of the differing engagement levels shown by the two groups, the participants indicated that different disciplinary interests also played a role. On the one hand, the Composition interviewees were clearly engaged with the TA preparation program and its requirements, with all five of them indicating they were excited to be a part of it and also that they viewed the TA preparation as support for their Composition graduate studies as much as they saw it as support for their teaching. After all, four out of the five who were interviewed had taught Composition before and all five were looking forward to a career studying and teaching Composition. This finding seemed a clear testament to the commonalities between these students' area of scholarship and their preparation to serve as Composition teachers at this university. Yet perhaps this should not be surprising, for as Bazerman et. al. (2006) notes: "... putting writing within education situates it in an academic world that values teaching and student development, and has rich traditions of thought and research on teaching and learning" (p. 311).

On the other hand, the Literature TAs indicated that they were in the TA program because they "didn't have a choice," and consequently, they were not nearly as enthusiastic about participating in it. In fact, several of the Literature students commented that the TAs from Composition were much more engaged with the subject matter and activities presented in the TA preparation classes than they themselves were, which the Literature students also chalked up to the Composition TAs' arguably more natural inclination to engage with praxis.

The Composition TAs also indicated that they were aware that the Literature TAs did not view the scholarship and teaching of writing as positively as they themselves did. And although they could understand intellectually the reasons for this difference in opinion, they reported that they still felt somewhat threatened by it at times. Particularly telling in this regard was

Composition TA Jackie's comparison of the Composition students and the Literature students to the "Greasers" and "Socs," found in Hinton's (1967) novel *The Outsiders*. As Hinton (2007) has described,

A Soc (short for "social") has money, can get away with just about anything, and has an attitude longer than a limousine. A Greaser, on the other hand, always lives on the outside and needs to watch his back.

While the tension in the book was arguably more extreme than that between the two groups of TAs,<sup>53</sup> Jackie's point seems apropos, given that the Literature students had guaranteed TAships and thus funding, whereas the Composition TAs had to compete for their positions, and the Literature TAs were perceived as having negative attitudes—which, by their own admission, several of them did. Moreover, Composition TA Jackie made it clear that she and her Composition colleagues felt that the Literature TAs looked down on the Composition TAs, a phenomenon that is in alignment with what the literature (Bizzell, 1992; Horner, 2006; McComiskey, 2006; Parker, 1967/2009) has to say about how some Literature faculty look down on those who teach and study Composition.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, several of the Composition TAs indicated that the Literature TAs appeared to see the discipline of Composition—and those who choose to study it and dedicate themselves to teaching it—as somehow inferior to those who study and teach Literature. However, Composition TA Jackie was especially vocal about her frustration with this attitude, as she

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<sup>53</sup> After all, no one got stabbed in the TA preparation program, as Bob the Soc did in Hinton's (1967) book.

<sup>54</sup> In addition, the fact that the field of Composition is so full of contingent laborers (Bousquet, 2004) is indicative of the feeling held by many Composition teachers that they are living on the outside and that in order to keep their jobs, they must watch their backs (Hinton, 1967).

pointed out that Literature has always been the “privileged” side of English Studies, whereas she argued that Composition is all too often seen as its “red-headed step-child.” Jackie went on to note that she would have liked to have told the Literature TAs that,

We're just as good as you guys. Just because we chose to do things differently doesn't mean we're any less than you are... We don't worship the literature or the canon. We are saying to our students, “Let's get dirty. Let's get down to business, let's get in groups and talk about our writing together.”

And it wasn't only Jackie who felt this way. Again recalling the world of Hinton's (1967) *Greasers and Socs*, Composition TA Nick spoke of feeling ready to “rumble” in response to his sense that the Literature TAs were looking down on the discipline of Composition and those who were dedicated to the study and teaching of it.

Moreover, it was not only the Composition TAs who were aware of this tension. According to Literature TA Nancy, “I think that we see ourselves as somehow above [teaching writing], that we do Literature, not Comp. It's just a lot of ignorance on the part of the department and I think that it's the attitude that people in my cohort had that was just echoing off what is kind of a general bad attitude that people in Lit. have towards people in Comp.” While Nancy recognized this as “a lot of ignorance on the part of the department,” still, by almost all accounts, this “bad attitude” was perpetuated in the class.

As Composition TA Jackie noted,

I'm not really surprised we had the experience we had in that class because I think it just mirrors the attitudes we're being fed, not by [the TA preparation facilitator], not by the Writing Program, but maybe by our undergraduate experiences, or some of us who came in with Master's degrees; you know those little bugs are in our ears for a long time before



coming here. I don't know what it's like over in the English department, but I can imagine there's that idea of you have to do your "time" and earn your keep, do the Comp. thing, and then you can come back and be a "real" English professor.

Indeed, as Literature TA Daniel pointed out, TAing for the writing unit is seen by Literature faculty and many Literature students "as sort of like a phase," a term that suggests teaching writing is something that normal Literature graduate students will naturally grow out of. Daniel indicated that many of the Literature TAs adopted an attitude that they should, "humor [the writing unit], and just put in your two years or so, and then come back here to do the ideas stuff."

The comments made by Jackie, Nick, Nancy and Daniel point to an established tension between the fields of Composition and Literature that extends beyond and originated outside of the TA preparation program. The literature cited throughout Chapter Two has made clear that this tension exists, and the discussion below will address the TAs' perceptions of it on a more macro level in terms of how it plays out within the field of English Studies both within and outside of this particular university setting.

### *Divide in the Field*

In addition to unanimously pointing to the divide within the preparation class(es), all of the TAs in both groups also commented on their perceptions of the divide between Composition and Literature within the larger field of English Studies. The Literature students were especially attuned to how this divide was reflected at this particular university where Literature and Composition are held in separate places, but they also pointed to it in the field at large, as did the Composition TAs.

In an interview, Literature TA Daniel talked a bit about his understanding of how the writing unit had come to be:

It came through the English Department program pipeline, that ten years ago or whenever, [particular English professors] had tired of teaching students the basics of writing. Essentially, the English professor couldn't be bothered [...] with doing the grammatical, the compositional, the "how to make an argument" stuff. And [it was said] that they, of course, only wanted to entertain the idea side of that stuff, and that then the Writing Program was the result of this split off from the English program.<sup>55</sup>

Daniel referred to the above as "our creationist explanation"<sup>56</sup> of the split, and he went on to note,

So, in a sense the Writing Program was then indebted to the English department. I mean this totally denies that writing has its own pedagogy, its own history, but again it was explained to me that it came about through English professors' distaste with teaching writing, then came about this program, and now you're going to go in there and humor them [by teaching writing for them].

So on the one hand, Daniel recognizes that this explanation of the split denies that Composition has its own disciplinary history, yet on the other hand, he seems to have bought into this ideology, even as he seems aware that he has done so. Further intriguing is the fact that Daniel indicated that he really liked teaching for the writing unit, and in fact he continued teaching for it long after his assigned TAs<sup>hip</sup> had been completed. It seems, then, that in order to be successful as both a graduate student in Literature and as a TA for the writing unit, Daniel had

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<sup>55</sup> And in fact, this is a fairly accurate account of how the writing unit came into being.

<sup>56</sup> A loaded term in itself, as it suggests that the writing unit was created by the hereby deified English Department.

to negotiate a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. And it was not only Daniel who had this experience. Literature TA Nancy's comment up above indicating that Literature people are "somehow above" teaching writing—although like Daniel, she also indicated that she had enjoyed being a TA for the writing unit—is another instance of this phenomenon. In fact, in one way or another, all of the TAs from Literature seemed to have to deal with a disconnect between what they were experiencing as TAs for the writing unit and what they felt they should be thinking and believing about their experiences, based on their disciplinary affiliation.

The divide was not only discussed in terms of this particular setting, however, as several of the TAs from both groups indicated that they see the relationship between Composition and Literature as problematic and growing even further apart.

According to Literature TA Diane, "The trend within academia is a growing division between writing and English as being seen as separate disciplines." Composition TA Piper agreed, noting that she sees "no relationship" between the disciplines of Literature and Composition. Literature TA Nancy argued that this growing divide is largely a result of the fact that, "Literature, at least from what I've seen, doesn't invest in writing. It invests in thinking and sitting around and talking about texts and assuming that the students already have the writing under their belts. And so, why talk about it?" Composition TA Nick pointed to economic realities in considering the troubled relationship between the two fields, arguing, "people are competing for resources in higher education and no way is it going to stop. In the English department, Composition and Literature are put at odds, competing for same departmental resources."

It is interesting that the TAs attributed the divide between Composition and Literature to various reasons, as discussed in the literature cited in Chapter Two (Bergmann, 2006; Comley &

Scholes, 1983; Horner, 1983; Kaufer & Young, 1983; McComiskey, 2006). However, the TAs also attributed at least some of the tension that happened within the TA preparation program as being due to certain program distinctions and policies that were in place at the university during the time this data was collected, all of which will be discussed below.

### *Program Distinctions*

The question of how program distinctions might have played a role in this story was included in this study as a means of teasing out potential lurking variables in the Literature TAs' responses. In conducting this research, it quickly became apparent that at least some of the resistance displayed by the Literature TAs to the TA preparation program was related to certain program policies such as the English department's requirement that they apply for the TAship in the writing unit, the fact that this TAship coincided with the timing of their M.A. exams, the location of the TA program outside of their graduate studies department, etc. Therefore, in an emergent design, this aspect of the question was developed and included in order to account for the extent to which these program distinctions were responsible for the TAs' varied responses. Once these issues were isolated, it was much easier to determine the extent to which disciplinarity was responsible for the TAs' responses to the program.

As indicated in the discussion of the findings related to the second research question, the data revealed that the Literature students definitely displayed a greater level of resistance than did the Composition students to the TA preparation program. However, some of this resistance seems to have had more to do with program distinctions and scheduling issues than with a natural resistance to Composition theory and teaching. For example, the policy stating that inexperienced TAs would take the full two-course preparation while others were exempted due to their prior teaching experience seemed to create a sense of resistance among those who had to

take both courses in the sequence. Although the policy was logical, well-intended, and ostensibly designed to provide extra support to those TAs who lacked experience, it seems to have backfired by creating a sense of resentment rather than a feeling of support. Below is a discussion of some of the other ways in which program distinctions played a role in engendering resistance among some of the TAs.

*English Department's Requirement.* The English department's expectation that its graduate students would both apply for and be awarded TAs in the writing unit also appears to have contributed greatly to a sense of resistance on the part of the Literature students.

In fact, the policy outlining the expectation that the Literature TAs would apply to the writing unit in their third year was especially problematic, as many of the Literature TAs had already served as TAs in their second year for Literature classes, and thus there was a tendency for some of them to view the teaching of Composition as an unwelcome interruption to their development as teachers and scholars of Literature. Coupled with the fact that the Literature students had only been required to complete a two-day training program to prepare for their TAs in Literature, the two-quarter preparation program required by the writing unit felt like an unjustified burden to many of them.

Moreover, because the Literature TAs did not view TAing with the writing unit as a choice, but rather as an obligation established via their funding package, many of these students developed a natural sense of resistance to it, given that they saw it as something they had to do. Somewhat ironically, this sense of obligation was unintentionally reified by the TA preparation facilitators' repeated claim that teaching Composition would make the TAs more marketable down the road as they applied for faculty positions in English, which would very likely entail a certain amount of teaching Composition. This potential eventuality seemed to be a source of

tension for the Literature TAs at least in part because they were enrolled in a graduate program in a Research 1 university, in which their faculty advisors were grooming them for positions in similar institutions where they could avoid teaching what were framed as dreaded Composition sections. And given that this particular English department had seceded from its Composition-teaching responsibilities about 10 years prior to the time this data was collected, the schism between Literature and Composition had been well established in this environment.

*Timing of TAs*. Another issue in regard to timing related to the third-year status of many of the Literature students, given that this was also the time when they were expected to prepare for their Comprehensive M.A. exams, which they needed to pass in order to continue their graduate studies. A TAs in the writing unit therefore pulled them away from not only their subject matter but also their home department at a critical juncture in their graduate program. As a result, this unfortunate overlap worked to set up a natural resistance to teaching and preparing to teach Composition in the writing unit as the students from Literature were in the process of establishing themselves as members of the community of Literature scholars, and it is clear that for at least some of them, anything taking away from that primary activity would have been met with resistance. Indeed, many of the Literature students said they could not give the time or energy to the TA class that they felt that they might have given otherwise due to the overlap between preparing for and taking their comprehensive examinations at the same time that they were participating in TA preparation.

All of these findings suggest that while disciplinary affiliation was largely responsible for the differences in how TAs from Composition and from Literature perceived and responded to their TA preparation, the policies and practices listed above were also an important part of the story.

## Conclusions

Inherent in the four research questions of this study is one overarching question, which, in sum, asks whether these two groups of TAs from Composition and from Literature responded differently to their TA preparation program and, if so, to what extent these differences can be attributed to disciplinary affiliations and/or program distinctions. As seen in the findings, the resounding answer to the first part of this question is yes, the TAs from Literature and Composition did indeed respond differently to their TA preparation program. The second part of the question, then, has been answered via the TAs' adherence to their disciplinary affiliations and also by considering certain program distinctions that seemed to have played a role in the TAs' respective responses.

In terms of disciplinarity, there was a clear divide between the TAs from Literature and the TAs from Composition and the ways in which they responded to the principles and practices that they were exposed to within their TA preparation. These disciplinary differences were particularly evident in terms of various teaching paradigms associated with each of the two disciplines, a schism between an interest in practical matters versus an interest in theoretical underpinnings, and quite simply, a difference in the level of engagement with the preparation program overall.

Moreover, there was also a clear difference in how TAs from the two groups approached the teaching of FYC, both philosophically and pedagogically. Philosophically, while the Composition TAs were passionate about teaching FYC and viewed it as a source of important work for themselves and their students, the Literature TAs were focused more on the experience that it gave them, since most of them were in the process of building their resumes and their teaching repertoires as they looked forward to becoming English professors.

This finding helps to explain the bimodality apparent in the surveys conducted by the writing unit in 2006, which revealed that although many of the TAs queried saw one or both of the TA preparation courses as a waste of time, 90% of the TAs surveyed indicated that they would recommend being a TA for the writing unit to other graduate students.<sup>57</sup> In addition, the same survey reflected a strong difference of opinion in terms of how supported TAs felt in the program, with one group viewing it and its staff as quite supportive while another group indicated that they felt support was lacking. The question of where this bimodality came from led to the hypothesis of this project: that TAs' disciplinary affiliations were somehow responsible for the attitudes and perceptions of TAs in the program. And indeed, the data has revealed that along with certain policies and practices adhered to by the English department and the writing unit at this university, this is very much the case.

Pedagogically speaking, the TAs from the two groups also took different things away from their preparation program, and they approached the teaching of FYC differently. Moreover, these differences seemed to be a result of their different disciplinary affiliations. For example, the main thing that the Literature TAs took from the preparation program was the activities and texts that they were asked to use in their first quarter teaching, a finding that seems to reflect their deep engagement with the practical information that the TA preparation classes offered over the theoretical information, which was much more heavily embraced by the Composition TAs. Also, there was a disparity in how the two groups viewed their FYC classrooms, with the Composition TAs subscribing to a student-centered model while the Literature seemed to rely on a more traditional—or professorial—approach to teaching.

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<sup>57</sup> Because all but one of the Literature TAs viewed teaching FYC as an important part of their professional development, it stands to reason that they would recommend this experience to a friend, even though they saw the TA preparation classes as a waste of time.



Going into this study, it seemed possible that the location of the TA preparation program within an independent writing unit, separate from English, could have mitigated the effects of the Composition/Literature divide as it often plays out within Departments of English. Because the two groups of graduate students were coming to the TA program and thus the writing unit from two different places on campus, i.e. the English Department and the Graduate School of Education, it seemed like it might be possible for the students to interact on equal footing without the specter of the historical split between Composition and Literature coming between them. However, this was not the case. It turns out that the disciplinarity divide runs deeper than mere location, and disciplinary paradigms apparently stick with us even as we participate in new venues. Nevertheless, as Composition TA Nick pointed out, when it comes to the tension between Composition and Literature, “There are no easy solutions, but we should still try to build bridges.” And yet, such bridges can be difficult to build, as they must serve to span the chasm between deeply embedded disciplinary paradigms.

This study has revealed that institutional policies and practices can also play a part in TAs’ responses to their preparation programs. As such, program advisors might want to seriously consider graduate students’ concerns when they hear them complaining about various policies. At the same time, program leaders might want to think about developing new policies that will better serve the needs of all involved. Happily, the TA preparation program under study in this dissertation has done just that in at least two key areas. In the years since this study was conducted, the TA preparation program has managed to assert more and more autonomy in its hiring practices, such that the TAships are now much more competitive and therefore the TAs from English no longer see TAing for the writing unit as a requirement and a matter of course, but more as a privilege. This simple change seems to have had a significant impact on TAs’

attitudes about participating in the program. In addition, the Literature students' TAs for the writing unit are no longer concurrent with their M.A. exam preparation, another change that has gone a long way towards mitigating frustration for these students.

In addition to these changes, the curriculum for the FYC course has recently been thoroughly redesigned. At the time this data was collected, the FYC course followed a WAC approach in which it covered three units: one from the Humanities, one from the Sciences, and one from the Social Sciences. Although the TAs did not specifically point to this approach as an issue, it is possible that it colored their feelings about teaching FYC, since many of the Literature students were understandably outside of their comfort zone when they were asked to teach the Sciences and the Social Sciences units. It is also possible that the course's approach led at least some of the TAs to embrace practice over theory in their preparation courses as they were focused on trying to meet the FYC course's goals. Happily, the new approach to teaching FYC at this university is genre-based, and therefore these issues are no longer at play, as this new approach is much more effective at bringing the two disciplines together via their mutual interest in text and textual construction/analysis.

#### Qualifications/Implications

First and foremost, let it be clear that in no way is this study attempting to vilify any of the TAs who participated in it. Despite the differences in perceptions of the two groups, all of these TAs are dedicated teachers and scholars who are committed to their students' continued growth and development. All of the participants were candid in their responses and all were willing to share their impressions of the preparation program and what they took away from it. Without their willingness and cooperation, this study would not have been possible.

Similarly, it must also be made clear that this study is not at all suggesting that the TA preparation facilitator(s) were responsible for the philosophical divide that was evident between the two groups of TAs in the program. Indeed, by all accounts, the TA preparation facilitator(s) were helpful, accommodating, and supportive of everyone in the program. And as Stenberg (2005) has reminded us,

As much as teacher-scholars in composition have worked to challenge the teaching/research binary, the conditions of teacher training often set us up to perpetuate this divide; they still require us to *train* teachers, rather than enable their lifelong pedagogical *development*. Those who prepare future faculty members and teaching assistants still do so under great time (and budget) constraints and on the margins of graduate (and first year writing) curricula. (p. 132)

Combined with entrenched disciplinary affiliations and an assortment of problematic program policies and practices dictated by those outside of the writing unit, these constraints simply further complicated the goals of the TA preparation program.

While this study may be perceived as attempting to reify the notion of a binary between the disciplines of Composition and Literature, this is not the case. For one thing, this study has revealed a continuum of attitudes and perspectives rather than two opposing poles, and also, some of the TAs in the program being studied came from disciplines other than Literature and/or Composition. Yet there *was* an explicit bi-modality in the surveys collected from 2000-2006 that suggested a certain polarity, and this, coupled with the spate of recent and not-so-recent publications addressing tensions between the fields of Composition and Literature, established the exigency for this study.

Moreover, because a teacher preparation program can indeed function as a point of contact between graduate students from Literature and from Composition, and as result, tension between the two disciplines can be observed in that arena, this particular program was an ideal place to observe it, given its independent status. Nevertheless, it seems worth noting that the fact that this program is in an independent writing unit did not allow it to escape the divide unscathed, suggesting that the divide is larger than an English Department issue, although granted, in this case, there was a natural affinity here between the Composition students and the writing unit and some of the English Department's practices and policies did help to spur it on.

Indeed, one of the main implications of this study is the tremendous role that institutional policies and practices can have on the attitudes and perceptions of the TAs enrolled in the preparation program. Those overseeing TA preparation programs would be wise to consider the real and potential ripple effects their institution's policies and practices might have on not only the attitudes of TAs participating in their programs but also on the material conditions for those TAs in terms of funding, experience, disillusionment, etc. For example, it is important to suggest that independent programs shy away from agreements suggesting that they provide Composition teaching experience to potentially unwilling Literature students, just as the program under study here has done. Nevertheless, as reflected in this study, even when an independent program does take that stand, there is a possibility that English departments will continue with their business-as-usual approaches of viewing Composition TAs as a convenient means of providing funding and support for the Literature students as, again, we have seen here and also in the literature cited in Chapter Two.

Another implication worth considering is the role that funding lines can play in how much autonomy an independent writing unit has in selecting its own TAs. While the writing unit

in this study has managed to develop more and more autonomy in this regard, that independence has been hard won, and as this study has shown, in the past the lack of programmatic independence has resulted in major implications on the program's TA demographic. As Bergmann (2006) has pointed out: "Freestanding writing programs may be able to maintain their coherence because of their separation from Literature, but writing programs in English departments are the sites of ongoing collaborations and compromises that derive from the expertise of the people who teach in them" (p. 10).

While this particular writing program has worked to maintain its coherence, at the time this data was collected it had not yet fully managed to gain complete independence, as evidenced by the fact that it had not yet freed itself from the English department's mandate that it continue serving graduate students in Literature—and the Literature graduate program—by being a source of funding for those students' education. As a result, the TA facilitator and other participants in the program were called upon to accommodate the disparate attitudes and perspectives of the TAs from Literature who temporarily become a part of the writing unit as they participated in the TA preparation program. At the same time, the TAs from Literature were required to become TAs in the writing unit for a year or two, which many of them saw as interrupting their studies in Literature.

### Limitations

One of the primary limitations of this study is that the interview sample did not include any participants who were considered unsuccessful as TAs. While this choice was intentional, it resulted in a lack of primary evidence relating to the most egregious instances of resistance to the TA preparation. However, as was reported in Chapter Four, ample secondary evidence of those

instances and the individuals who were most resistant to the class was evident via the comments of those participants who were interviewed.

Moreover, it can certainly be argued that the Composition graduate program at this university (and therefore the program's students) is atypical, given its placement in a school of Education rather than an English department. But while that does suggest an affiliation of the Composition graduate students with an interest in pedagogy and praxis, it also enables a more stark comparison between this position and the more literary affiliation evidenced by the graduate students from English Literature.

Another potential cause for concern is that this study is only documenting the situation at one institution. Moreover, as Bishop (1988) points out, there is great diversity of those who are enrolled in a given TA preparation program (i.e. some are new teachers, some have taught extensively before, etc.). Both of these facts compromise generalizability, but as Erlandson et. al. (1993) has made clear, the intent of a naturalistic study is not to make generalizable statements about the frequency of a particular phenomenon so much as it is to better understand and develop a theory about whether and why the phenomenon occurs, which has been the intent of this project.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

In further research, it would be interesting to consider how TAs from disciplines outside of Literature and Composition respond to their TA preparation, particularly given that at this university and others it is common for TAs to hail from various departments across campus. While the historical tension between Composition and Literature is at the root of this study, Composition's lower caste status on many college and university campuses suggests that it might be worthwhile to investigate the extent to which graduate students from other disciplines

perceive the teaching of Composition as a task or a chore. At the same time, while outside of the boundaries of this dissertation, the data collected here nevertheless indicated that those TAs from disciplines outside of English were some of the most enthusiastic and interested individuals in the preparation program. Indeed, several respondents noted that these students from other disciplines tended to align themselves with the TAs from Composition as they embraced both the preparation courses and the teaching of FYC. It would be worthwhile to investigate if indeed this is the case and why.

Moreover, it would be useful to talk with TAs who were considered unsuccessful in the TA program, in order to get a more accurate read on the reasons for their lack of success. To what extent, for example, did disciplinarity play a role in these cases? And to what extent can these individuals' lack of success be attributed instead to personal predispositions? Did these dispositions change and/or soften over time? Asking and answering these questions could lead to a better understanding of how and why some TAs are less successful than others, which then could translate into a blueprint for working with this group of TAs more effectively.

Given that program policies were found to have played a role in TAs' attitudes and perceptions and that some of those policies have changed since this data was collected, it would be worthwhile to replicate this study with a new group of more recent TAs in order to try and determine how their attitudes and perceptions might differ now that the Literature students are no longer required to pursue TAs in the writing unit. It seems likely that their responses would be somewhat less polar than they were in this study, although as this study has made clear, disciplinary differences and paradigms are deeply entrenched, and as such, they are a key consideration in the relationship between Composition students and Literature students. Indeed,

the results of this study suggest that this is likely to be the continued case, despite the policy changes that have taken place.

Finally, given the deeply entrenched philosophies that were revealed in this study, it seems that further research into the nature of disciplinarity would be beneficial. As the data here has shown, disciplinarity creates divisions and biases, and yet it is so powerfully entrenched within our perspectives that it is hard to break free from it even for the sake of trying to understand it and its implications. It would be useful to conduct research to help us better understand the role that disciplinarity plays in how we define ourselves as teachers, scholars, and individuals.

### Final Thoughts

The key goal for this study has been to determine the extent to which disciplinarity is manifest within TA preparation as well as the implications of TAs' adherence to disciplinary paradigms within this venue. Although the divide between Composition and Literature continues to impact TAs' perceptions of the study and teaching of Composition, TA preparation programs are uniquely situated to address the schism between the two fields. Whether they are housed in independent programs or within departments of English, TA preparation programs are poised to share the collective knowledge of our profession and to help those within it and outside of it to see the importance of developing and maintaining a strong Composition presence in the university. As this dissertation has demonstrated, that is not an easy undertaking, but it is an important one.

This study has revealed some key nuances within the divide between Composition and Literature and also illuminated some of the reasons behind the well-established resistance that is often found within TA preparation programs. Hopefully, this information can provide insights



that TA preparation facilitators can use to more effectively work with TAs from Literature and also from across campus. While there is some hope in establishing policies and practices that will lessen resistance, we must also be mindful of the disciplinary paradigms that shape many TAs' responses to TA preparation programs. At the same time, we can work with TAs to help them develop an awareness of these paradigms as well as the role they play in shaping individuals' pedagogies. In doing so, we can continue working to nurture the developing pedagogies and practices of graduate students from Composition while also providing more opportunities for those outside of our discipline, including those in Literature, to understand how rewarding the study and teaching of Composition is for so many.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Project Working Title: “What Are We Doing Here, Anyway?,” An Exploration of the Attitudes of TAs from Education and from English Regarding Their TA Preparation

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Jennifer Johnson as part of her research for her doctoral dissertation at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask. You are eligible to participate in this study because you were a student in Writing 501A and/or Writing 501B during the Spring/Fall of 2003 and/or 2005 and you are currently teaching or have recently taught a class in the Writing Program.

The primary purpose for this research project is to determine if there are disciplinary differences in the way that students from Education and from English viewed and responded to their TA preparation. This study is also being conducted to determine what students from each of these two disciplines took away from their preparation. Participation in this study will require approximately 60 minutes of your time. Participation or non-participation will not affect the evaluation of your work in the Writing Program or your academic standing in your graduate program.

Participation in this research will involve two interviews of approximately half an hour each regarding your initial reasons for becoming a TA in the Writing Program, your recollections of your TA preparation class(es), and your current or recent teaching practices in the Writing Program. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. You may find the experience enjoyable as the interviews will be based on a discussion of your teaching practices and pedagogy. The information gained from this study may help us to better understand the effectiveness of TA preparation for students from different programs and/or emphases.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or the Writing Program. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you do choose to participate, you may withdraw at any time by notifying Jennifer Johnson either by telephone or email. Upon your request to withdraw, all information pertaining to you will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all identifying information will be held in strict confidence and your responses will have no bearing on your employment, academic standing, or on any services you receive from the University. The information obtained in the study may be published in academic journals or presented at academic meetings, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please sign the statement below and return it to me when we meet, at which time I will sign it as well. Please also keep an extra unsigned copy for your records.

Thank you very much for considering participating in this research.

Jennifer Johnson  
Doctoral Candidate, IUP  
Indiana, PA 15705

Advisor: Dr. Claude M. Hurlbert  
Professor of English, IUP  
Indiana, PA 15705

Informed Consent Form (continued)

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724/357-7730).

## VOLUNTARY CONSENT FORM:

***I have read and understand the information on the form and I consent to volunteer to be a participant in this study. I understand that my identity will be kept strictly confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this informed Consent Form to keep in my possession.***

Name (PLEASE PRINT) \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number or location where you can be reached \_\_\_\_\_

Best days and times to reach you \_\_\_\_\_

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the nature and purpose, the potential benefits, and possible risks associated with participating in this research study, have answered any questions that have been raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's Signature

## Appendix B: Initial Interview Guide

### Background Questions

What brought you to this university for graduate school?

Did you have a particular career goal you were pursuing?  
If yes, what was it?

What kind of work were you doing before coming to graduate school?

What did you study as an undergraduate?

What made you decide to apply to become a TA?

Had you ever taught before?

If yes, what? Where?

If you had taught Composition, had you done TA preparation elsewhere?

What were your feelings about TA preparation before you began it?

What were your feelings about teaching writing as a TA for the Writing Program?

How did you feel about teaching writing in general at that point?

### TA Class Questions

What do you remember about your TA preparation class?

How would you describe it?

Did you find it useful?

Did you find it interesting or enjoyable?

Here is a syllabus from 501A and 501B – do these bring up any other memories?

What do you remember about your TA cohort?

What attitudes about the class did your fellow TAs seem to exhibit?

Did the class meet your expectations?

If no, was it better or worse than you expected?

How did you feel about the readings assigned for the class?

Did you find them useful?

Did you find them interesting or enjoyable?

What were your feelings about the Composition theory that was presented in the class?

Did you feel as though you got enough practical information from the class in terms of how to fill up class time with your students?

Was there anything you hoped to gain from the class that you didn't gain?

What was the best part of TA preparation, in your opinion?

What was the worst part of TA preparation, in your opinion?

Anything else you'd like to mention?

I'd like to follow up this interview with a brief conversation about your current teaching practices in the next week or so. But in the meantime, if you have a recent statement of teaching philosophy, would you be willing to share that with me, perhaps sending it via email?

## Appendix C: Sample Follow-Up Interview Guide

### Current Teaching Practices

How do you feel about teaching writing these days?

What is the most recent class that you have taught?

Can you think of any principles or practices that you use in your teaching that might be traced back to your TA preparation?

Looking back on it, do you feel that your TA preparation was beneficial to you?

If so, in what ways?

If not, why not?

Is there anything from TA preparation that you have rejected/found unworkable in your current teaching?

Was there anything from your preparation that you initially found unworkable but you now embrace?

Now that you are nearing the completion of your graduate work, what are your professional plans for the future?

Anything else you'd like to mention?

## Appendix D: Course Breakdowns by Disciplinary Affiliation

In the spring 2002 501A class, there were a total of 12 students enrolled: six from Literature and six from other disciplines; no TAs were from Composition that term. Five of the six Literature TAs enrolled in the class returned a narrative evaluation; there were six evaluations returned from students in other disciplines.

In the fall of 2002, the 501B class consisted of 20 enrolled students: ten from Literature; four from Composition and six from other disciplines. At the end of the term, 16 evaluations were returned: seven from Literature, three from Composition, four from other disciplines, and two with no affiliation.

In the spring of 2003, the 501A class consisted of 10 enrolled students; nine of the students were from Literature and one was from another discipline. No Composition students were enrolled in the class this quarter. Seven narrative evaluations were returned; all seven were from the Literature students.

In the fall of 2003, the 501B class consisted of 15 enrolled students; 12 of the students returned narrative evaluations. The majority of the TA in the class (11 of 15) were from Literature, eight of whom completed and returned a narrative evaluation. Three were from Composition, all of whom returned evaluations, and one student and subsequent evaluation was from another discipline.<sup>58</sup>

In the spring of 2004 501A class there were 12 enrolled students; seven were from Literature and five were from other disciplines. There were no students from Composition in this class. Twelve students returned narrative evaluations and six of these were from Literature.

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<sup>58</sup> One returned evaluation was labeled from "Writing," which must be from Education, since it was a first year grad student.

The fall of 2004 501B class consisted of 18 students overall. Five students were from Literature and two were from Composition. Eleven students were from other disciplines. Fourteen evaluations were returned; five of these were from English and none were from Composition.

In the spring of 2005, the 501A class consisted of 14 enrolled students; eight of the students were from Literature (seven of them returned evaluations), one student was from Composition (no evaluation was listed as being from a Composition student) and five were from other disciplines.<sup>59</sup>

In the fall of 2005, the 501B class consisted of 17 enrolled students. In this section, nine students were from Literature, three were from Composition and five students were from other disciplines. Fourteen evaluations were returned. Four were from Literature and three were from Composition.

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<sup>59</sup> While all 14 students enrolled in the class returned narrative evaluations, five of them did not indicate their disciplinary affiliation and therefore these responses could not be considered in the results.

## Appendix E: Narrative Evaluation Prompts and Quarters

Quarter	Prompt
Sp 02	Assess the effectiveness of 501A in preparing you for the instructional challenges of Writing 2.
Sp 02	Assess the effectiveness of 501B in assisting you with the instructional challenges of Writing 2.
Sp 02	Please offer any comments you may upon the training you have so far received and upon the training process more generally.
Fall 02	There is a wide variation in the prior teaching experience Writing Program TAs have. Because of this variation, the main objective of 501B is to provide as much support as possible for those new to teaching writing, while at the same time providing freedom within the curricular guidelines to make the course your own. Please comment on how well you feel this objective was met.
Fall 02	Please comment on the teacher's effectiveness in modeling good Composition teaching practices in the course itself (e.g. leading discussions, use of small groups for brainstorming and peer critique, use of handouts, etc.)
Fall 02	Please comment on the effectiveness of integrating the meetings with your TA supervisors with 501B.
Fall 02	Please add any other comments you feel would help the instructor improve the course.
Sp 03 – F 05	What in the course was useful to you?
Sp 03 – F 05	How might the course be improved?
F 04	According to the syllabus, the course's objectives are as follows: 'Writing 501B supports you as you teach Writing 2, but beyond that, introduces you to Writing Studies theories and pedagogies so that you can better position your own teaching philosophy. The course will combine reading, discussion, shared responses, writing, and observation of other teachers.' In your experience, to what extent and in what ways (if any) were these objectives met?