Brokering Disciplinary Writing: TAs and the Teaching of Writing Across the Disciplines

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Abstract: Graduate teaching assistants (TAs) and the general education yet discipline-specific courses they often teach occupy a complex peripheral position in the university. This qualitative comparative case study investigated disciplinary TAs' identities and pedagogical strategies as they taught writing courses linked with disciplinary lecture courses at a large research university in the Western United States. Drawing on Wenger's (1998) theory of communities of practice, this article examines how TAs brokered students' encounters with disciplinary genres and how they helped students negotiate the tensions inherent in a general education curriculum. Focusing on two TAs, one from political science and one from art history, this study draws on interviews, classroom observations, and course documents. Findings suggest that the TAs positioned themselves in distinct ways in relation to their fields of study and the courses they taught—one as boundary crosser and the other as insider. The TAs' identities influenced how they brokered disciplinary genres and writing practices for students as well as how they mediated the tensions between discipline-specific and general education goals and contexts.

Introduction

As emerging members of their disciplines, graduate teaching assistants (TAs) occupy complex liminal positions: neither fully inside the discipline nor fully outside, neither experts nor novices, and yet both teachers and students. In the process of developing professional identities and becoming recognized by their professors, colleagues, and undergraduate students as members of their fields, TAs must negotiate multiple and sometimes competing identities as students, scholars, and teachers (Colbeck, 2008). Yet just as TAs have varying levels of academic and professional knowledge in their fields, they also have different levels of pedagogical experience—experience that has been largely overlooked in writing across the curriculum (WAC) scholarship (Rodrigue, 2012).

The introductory courses that disciplinary TAs most frequently teach in the United States occupy a similarly complex and often contradictory position in the university curriculum (Russell, 2002). These courses frequently introduce students to discipline-specific content and practices, with the assumption that most students will not necessarily major in the discipline. When these courses are labeled "writing-intensive" or call for extensive writing, the writing tasks do not fit neatly into the categories of "general academic writing" or "discipline-specific writing." Instead, the writing genres taught in these courses, like the courses themselves, are situated within ambiguous and contested

Across the Disciplines
A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing
DOI: https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2016.13.3.11
wac.colostate.edu/atd
ISSN 554-8244

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spaces in the disciplines and in the university (Geisler, 1994; Russell & Yañez, 2003). Drawing on rhetorical genre studies, scholars have questioned the very notion that "a-disciplinary" writing tasks can be taught outside of their context (Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Devitt, 2004; Smit, 2004; Wardle, 2009). Yet whether or not writing is named or identified as disciplinary, the writing projects situated in disciplinary courses bear the marks of the discipline's ideological and epistemological assumptions and histories (Bazerman, Little, & Bethel, 2005). Examining how writing genres exist in relation to disciplines in these types of general education, yet disciplinary-focused writing courses is an interesting puzzle to examine and one with implications for how instructors teach and how students encounter and learn writing practices and processes.

The challenges that students experience when encountering writing in the disciplines are well-documented in Writing Studies scholarship (Beaufort, 2007; Carroll, 2002; McCarthy, 1987). Studies have described the influence of courses, assignments, and instructors on students' learning, yet little research has focused on the role of instructors in facilitating student encounters with disciplinary genres. Recent scholarship by Thaiss & Zawacki (2006), Nowacek (2011), and Soliday (2011)[1] has integrated both student and instructor perspectives, contributing to our understanding of instructors' identities and their disciplinary and pedagogical knowledge related to writing. However, with the exception of Yañez, Russell, & Smith (2009), studies of instructors have focused on experienced faculty members rather than the roles, identities, institutional positioning, and pedagogical practices of disciplinary TAs. Because disciplinary TAs are increasingly teaching disciplinary writing, both independently and alongside faculty, a deeper understanding of how TAs conceive of and negotiate their disciplinary identities, roles, and teaching practices is essential for the WAC agenda (Rodrigue, 2012).

To better support both TAs' professional development and student learning, it is useful to understand TAs' unique positioning with regard to their disciplines and the courses they teach. This comparative case study investigated the disciplinary identities and pedagogical strategies of two TAs as they taught writing courses linked with disciplinary lecture courses. My findings suggest that, based on their relationship to their disciplines, TAs take on a variety of roles as they mediate disciplinary writing for their students. My research participants adopted two very different roles—that of boundary crosser and insider—each of which offered distinct affordances for student learning. I argue not only that TAs can help mediate the tensions between discipline-specific and general education writing contexts, but also that they are uniquely positioned to do so.

Study Context

The context for this study was a Writing Link program at a large research university in the Western United States. The Writing Link program paired 5-credit 100- and 200-level writing courses with 5-credit general education lecture courses in the disciplines, such as Introduction to Biology, Introduction to Philosophy, and Introduction to International Studies. The writing link courses were one way for students to fulfill a 5-credit general education writing requirement. The program was housed in the English department and employed TAs from English and other disciplines. The two TAs included in the study were from disciplines outside of English. All the TAs in the program, including the two reported on here, participated in a week-long training program before the start of fall term, which addressed WAC and Writing in the Discipline (WID) theory, assignment design, peer review, and conferencing. Additionally, TAs engaged in ongoing weekly or bi-weekly group mentoring meetings with experienced full-time instructors in the program. During the quarter, students and TAs attended lecture courses taught by disciplinary faculty; the content from the lecture courses then served as the content for writing assignments in the writing links, which were taught by the TAs. Overlap between assignments in the lecture courses and those in the writing link courses varied

depending on the amount and scope of writing assigned in each lecture course. The program called for three major sequenced assignments as part of the writing link with opportunities for students to revise, conference with TAs, and engage in peer review.

As writing courses, the writing links were positioned in a liminal space; they were designed as general education courses, yet they foregrounded writing tasks embedded in disciplinary lecture content and were, in the case of this study, taught by TAs from the particular disciplines. This context provided a rich site to examine three research questions: (1) How did the disciplinary TAs navigate teaching disciplinary writing courses in a general education context? (2) How did the TAs position themselves in relation to their disciplines and to disciplinary ways of thinking and writing? (3) How did the disciplinary TAs support students' learning of disciplinary writing practices and genres?

Scholarly Context: TAs and General Education Disciplinary Writing

Research to date suggests that TAs find teaching disciplinary writing courses challenging for several reasons, including their ongoing apprenticeship to disciplinary writing practices (Casanave, 1995; Prior, 1998); the contradictions inherent in teaching general education courses in higher education (Yañez, Russell, & Smith, 2009); and their inexperience with teaching and lack of training in writing instruction (Rodrigue, 2013). Yet these TAs have an evolving sense of disciplinary identity and a diverse range of experiences both inside and outside of their disciplines on which they can draw to teach writing in the disciplines. This study seeks to explore the affordances disciplinary TAs might have as a result of their unique institutional positioning.

In contrast to the English-trained TAs in Wardle's (2004) study of writing in cross-disciplinary linked courses, the disciplinary TAs in this study taught in the discipline in which they studied. Such TAs can be considered emerging participants or apprentices in their disciplines: they are in the process of gaining familiarity with the nuances, contested spaces, and core practices of their disciplines, and thus are positioned to speak with some authority about the writing conventions and practices of their fields. Moreover, Devitt's (2004) claim that those who are "full participants in the genre" (such as faculty) may be unable to see or resist the ideological consequences of those genres suggests that TAs' liminal position in relation to their discipline may be an asset (p. 196). Because most disciplinary TAs are not yet fully enculturated insiders and are instead themselves still learning disciplinary writing conventions, genres, and ideologies, they are uniquely positioned to see and call students' attention to the ideologies that the disciplinary practices embody. This study examines the potential affordances that disciplinary TAs bring to general education writing classrooms.

Most of the genres that students write in their first two years of university exist in a liminal space between general academic writing and discipline-specific writing. The genres in general education courses that assign writing, introductory "writing-intensive" disciplinary courses, and writing courses linked to disciplinary lecture courses cannot be defined as "general academic writing," although they might have some transferable qualities. Because these genres are embedded in disciplinary contexts, are introduced by disciplinary participants, and are framed in light of disciplinary content and practices, they are inflected with disciplinary assumptions and practices, and as such embody the ideological perspectives, worldviews, and epistemologies of the disciplines (Bazerman, et al., 2005; Beaufort, 2007; Smit, 2004). Moreover, students' performance on these writing tasks is frequently assessed in light of sometimes explicit, but often tacit, disciplinary ideals about "good writing" (Russell & Yañez, 2003; Nowacek, 2011). Yet these texts are not entirely disciplinary either, as they vary in their function in the classroom and in their degree of disciplinary "authenticity." Some are framed as ambiguous school-based genres like the "essay," decontextualized from any meaningful professional genre. Others are prototypical genres[2] that have varying degrees

of alignment with professional genres. What constructs the disciplinary nature of these genres for students is not their names or their use by professionals in the discipline but rather their function in the classroom, their embeddedness in disciplinary content, their framing as disciplinary practice, and their assessment from a disciplinary perspective.

Theoretical Framework

Wenger's (1998) notion of communities of practice provides a useful lens for making sense of the ways that learning, meaning, and identity are constructed through social participation in the joint practices of a community. In seeking to understand how TAs facilitated students' early encounters with academic genres and disciplines, Wenger's (1998) related concepts of *peripheries* and *brokering* are useful for understanding what happens on the boundaries of a community of practice, such as an academic discipline. For example, while some might argue that newcomers to a discipline (especially freshmen and sophomore students in general education classes) are not participating in the authentic practices of the discipline (Petraglia, 1995), Wenger's discussion of *peripheries*—a type of connection whereby newcomers participate or observe a practice without needing to become full members—productively reframes this concern. Wenger's theory thus provides a framework for recognizing and valuing the role of disciplinary TAs and the interaction that occurs in the peripheries of the general education disciplinary writing classroom.

Through Wenger's (1998) lens, the disciplinary TAs of the writing link courses I investigated were members who were in the process of becoming full participants and whose work took place on the peripheries, between the community of practice of the discipline and the novice students in the context of general education courses. The TAs participated on the boundaries of the disciplines and played a unique role in making available or brokering (to use Wenger's term) disciplinary writing practices for newcomers. Rather than viewing the goal of the broker as indoctrinating newcomers into the core practices of the community, Wenger's theory acknowledges the mutually constitutive nature of the peripheral space and the negotiation of meaning that happens within it. This suggests that newcomers' participation in disciplinary practices also has the potential to influence the practices of the community.[3] For example, when teachers respond to student difficulties and learning needs by modifying disciplinary genres, as the TAs in this study did, teachers and students are co-constructing what it means to write in a local and peripheral disciplinary context. This experience in turn shapes TAs' practices for future courses and students and has the potential to influence the practice of others as the TA participates in his or her department, institution, and disciplinary community. Thus, Wenger's theory of *brokering* provides one response to the concern that teaching disciplinary writing is problematically disciplinary enculturation. That is, although brokering certainly has the potential to reify practices, it also provides a space and means by which to re-make and change practices (in this case writing) and "open new possibilities for meaning" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109).

According to Wenger (1998), some members are specifically (and at times institutionally) tasked with this brokering role and often must resist the tension of being pulled fully in or being pushed fully out. Their work, according to Wenger, lies "precisely in being neither in nor out. Brokering therefore requires an ability to manage carefully the coexistence of membership and non-membership, yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to" (p. 110). As I will demonstrate, the TAs teaching the writing link courses in this study negotiated their membership and non-membership in ways distinct from one another, each offering different affordances for student learning.

Methods

Using comparative case study methodology, I examined how two graduate-level instructors teaching writing courses linked with lecture courses in their respective disciplines negotiated students' encounters with the discipline, positioned themselves in relation to their disciplines, and brokered disciplinary writing practices for their novice students. To investigate how TAs who were teaching within their disciplines brokered disciplinary knowledge, I sought participants whose disciplinary homes were outside of English. Of the 32 TAs teaching in the Writing Link program that academic year, only four disciplinary TAs were teaching in their fields of study during the quarter of the research project. To recruit two participants for this cross-case analysis, I cross-referenced TAs teaching during the quarter of the research project with recommendations from the program director and full-time instructors in the program.

The two participants were selected for maximum contrast between them in terms of experience and discipline (Patton, 2002). One TA was an experienced teacher and a PhD student in the social sciences, and the other was a novice teacher and an MA student in the humanities. As they taught and were trained in a particular context, these TAs are not representative of all TAs teaching disciplinary writing in institutions of higher education. Moreover, limiting the study to two participants means that the themes that emerged do not encompass all the possible roles and positions that TAs might have. However, the differences between these two TAs' brokering approaches and their positioning of themselves in relation to their disciplines provide important insights about the roles and pedagogical strategies of disciplinary TAs.

This study is comprised of three data sets: semi-structured interviews with TAs before and mid-way through the quarter (Merriam, 2009); classroom observations during the first few weeks of the quarter; and course documents including syllabi, assignments, handouts, student writing, and TAs' written comments on student papers. The interviews and observations allowed for an investigation of TAs' thinking about their disciplines and practices in the context of their classroom teaching. I employed two rounds of qualitative coding on the data: open coding for the first round, and grounded codes based on my research questions and on theoretical and empirical literature for the second round (Saldaña, 2009). The data analysis presented in this article is primarily from interviews and classroom observations, with course documents and TAs' written comments on papers used for triangulation (Merriam, 2009).

The first participant, Tessa,[4] was a third-year PhD student in political science who described herself as having interdisciplinary experience in a variety of academic programs. She had previously earned a BA in English literature, an MA in education, and had worked in a research context and taught English abroad. In addition to her teaching experience, she was also a relatively experienced teacher of the writing link course, Introduction to Political Theory, which she had taught for five quarters when she became a research participant.

The second participant, Heather, was a second-year MA student in art history teaching a writing course linked with Introduction to Art History with a focus on modern art. She had a BA in studio art and was studying 20th-century film and photography. Heather spent time working professionally in her field at an art gallery and hoped to eventually work in a museum. The writing link course was her first teaching experience, although she had previously been an undergraduate grader for an art history course. When the research began, she was preparing for her third quarter of teaching writing links, having previously taught links with ancient art history and medieval and Renaissance art history.

Findings & Discussion

In the disciplinary writing courses they taught, Tessa and Heather each found different ways to negotiate the challenges of their disciplinary-focused general education contexts. Both TAs framed the writing genres in their courses as disciplinary in nature and highlighted the ways the writing tasks required particular disciplinary ways of thinking, conventions, and skills. At the same time, each TA brokered writing knowledge in different and sometimes surprising ways that reflected how she understood, experienced, and positioned herself within her discipline. The three core findings of this study are as follows:

- The Political Theory TA, Tessa, took up the role of *boundary crosser*, which enabled her to make cross-disciplinary connections and cue students' transfer of learning for future writing contexts.
- The Art History TA, Heather, took up the role of *insider*, which positioned her as a translator of the discipline and enabled her to introduce students to the complexity of the knowledge-construction practices in her discipline.
- Both disciplinary TAs modified disciplinary genres for use in their classrooms to mediate the tensions between general academic and discipline-specific writing in ways that paralleled their roles and brokering strategies.

Boundary Crossing: Cross-Disciplinary Connections and Transferable Writing Skills

As an instructor, Tessa positioned herself as someone who, like her students, was not an expert in political theory but rather a fellow learner and a "boundary crosser" (Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011). Although Tessa situated her scholarly identity in what she called "empirical political science," the writing course she taught was a writing link with a political theory course. In her interviews and in her classes, she distanced herself from the sub-field of political theory. For example, in class when she introduced herself and her course, she told students, "Okay, so first of all, I am not a political theorist, and I had to learn that political theorists love to read a lot of books and analyze the words." To grapple with her insider/outsider status in relation to the course she was teaching, Tessa relied on contrasts to broker the boundaries between her newcomer students, the sub-discipline of political theory, and the broader discipline of political science.

By capitalizing on what she saw as students' common assumption that the objects of study in political science were "real world" current events and politics, Tessa helped students learn the distinctions between political science and political theory. In class, she described political theory as a sub-discipline of political science, one primarily concerned with texts, textual meaning, and arguments—not "the real world" as empirical political science might be. Much of her classroom pedagogy focused on a particular writing genre in political theory: textual analysis. Her first goal was to help students understand the complicated political theory texts they were reading in the lecture course (such as Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*), and her second goal was to teach students how to write three textual analysis papers. In an interview, she described the genre of textual analysis as "exegesis…basically, interpret something…look at a piece of text and make an argument about what it's all about." The first writing assignment in Tessa's sequence required students to focus on a text by a single author; the second assignment called for a dialogue between two authors on a particular issue; and the third assignment asked students to integrate three authors' texts.

To distinguish between general writing and discipline-specific writing in her class, Tessa relied on within- and cross-disciplinary contrasts. In particular, she highlighted the similarities and differences among the kinds of writing tasks she was asking students to do and the kind of texts they might have encountered elsewhere or might encounter in the future. As a boundary crosser herself, not only from political science to political theory, but also from literature to education to research to political science, Tessa talked about the ways she tried to teach her students textual analysis in political theory by comparing the genre to literary analysis—something with which she assumed that some students might be familiar with from other general education or even high school courses. Moreover, she sometimes referred to political theory as "political philosophy," comparing the work to the thinking practices of the discipline of philosophy. Tessa used these cross-disciplinary comparisons to help students understand a particularly difficult genre—textual analysis—by encouraging them to draw on their prior knowledge about and experience in other disciplines. Studies on transfer of learning have demonstrated that this ability to see differences and similarities in genres and tasks facilitates students' transitions to new writing contexts (Nowacek, 2011; Reiff & Bawarshi, 2011; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). Even if her general education students did not have antecedent genre knowledge in the disciplines she identified, Tessa's references to ways of writing in other fields highlighted two core metacognitive concepts that had the potential to promote forward-reaching transfer of learning (Perkins & Salomon, 1992): writing varies considerably by discipline, and students can use prior knowledge in one context to make sense of new tasks in other contexts.

A possible critique of the kind of cross-disciplinary comparisons Tessa employed is that they may result in reductionist understandings of disciplinary practices or monolithic representations of disciplinary writing (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). However, for someone who is brokering practices for newcomers, such simplifications can potentially help novices learn disciplinary writing in general education courses. In this way, Tessa drew on her experience not only from within but also from outside of the discipline to broker students' first encounters with disciplinary goals and practices. Furthermore, unlike the English TAs in Wardle's (2004) study, Tessa frequently identified the discipline and sub-disciplines within which her students were learning rather than referring to writing or genres as generic or a-disciplinary. Explicitly calling attention to the disciplinarity of writing tasks demonstrates what Nowacek (2007) describes as metadisciplinary awareness, or the recognition of normally tacit assumptions about knowledge and epistemology that undergird a discipline's writing conventions. As graduate students, TAs may be well positioned for this type of metadisciplinary reflection because they themselves are in the process of learning disciplinary genres and are not yet fully insiders.

In taking up the role of boundary crosser, Tessa also positioned her students as boundary crossers and her course as one that bridged both general and discipline-specific writing tasks. Both in her class and in her interviews, Tessa explicitly distinguished general academic writing skills from skills specific to political science. Tessa addressed the tensions between disciplinary communities and undergraduate general education by explicitly distinguishing those aspects of her writing instruction that reflected discipline-specific norms from those that students could transfer to other contexts. One way Tessa made this distinction was by regularly calling students' attention to particular conventions required in political theory and political science, and in doing so, explicitly acknowledging the disciplinary context in which she and her students were writing. She described the highly prescriptive format of the introduction she taught students as being discipline-specific:

> The components of the introduction I believe are pretty political science specific, so I say that up front: "This is the norm in political science. If you are going to take more political science, this is how it is; it's not just me, I promise you. You'll find out."

This kind of metadisciplinary and rhetorical awareness, made explicit for students, helps facilitate transfer of writing knowledge both *within* and *across* disciplinary contexts (Artemeva & Fox, 2010; Devitt, 2007; Graff, 2010). Because she knew that some students would not go on to be political science majors, Tessa explained how she emphasized transferable skills in the curriculum: "Even if they wind up being economics or sociology majors…they're still going to need to know how to make an argument." This strategy helped Tessa broker the writing knowledge in her class to help her students transfer their writing knowledge across disciplinary contexts. Further, by treating her students not as entering members of her discipline in need of acculturation but rather as fellow boundary crossers, she acknowledged the institutional structures of higher education and the disciplinary boundary crossing that general education courses ask students to do. As such, she negotiated the peripheral space of the general education disciplinary writing course by distinguishing between that which was general and that which was discipline-specific.

Insider Insights: Translation, Partiality, and Disciplinary Complexity

While Tessa positioned herself as a boundary crosser, Heather, a master's student in art history, positioned herself as an "insider." Although Heather was newer to teaching, her educational and vocational experience was more consolidated in her field than Tessa's. Heather had worked professionally in the field and anticipated returning to a professional role after her studies. Her use of the pronoun "we" in many of her explanations of what art historians do indicated how she viewed herself as more of a disciplinary insider:

> I want them [students] to understand that it's a serious discipline. I think there's kind of, for some people there can kind of be this misconception that we sit around and look at slides of pretty things and talk about why they're nice, but at least from my perspective, I think that we do things that are very different from that, and we have methodologies. We take this very seriously, we, you know, are scholars, and we do things in a scholarly way.

In positioning herself as a "we" alongside professional art historians, Heather demonstrated her investment in a particular vision of the discipline as a scholarly, academic endeavor, and a view of herself as a serious scholar who employs discipline-specific methodologies. Her explanation of what art historians do also reflects her anxiety about both how the field is seen and how she is seen as a graduate student in it. While some might find her insider positioning surprising, particularly as an early-career master's student, graduate students often feel pressure to be recognized as insiders in their chosen fields (Casanave & Li, 2008). For the purposes of this study, the reason why Heather positioned herself in this way is not as important as the impact her positioning had on her teaching students disciplinary writing.

Like Tessa, Heather demonstrated metadisciplinary awareness by frequently calling attention to the disciplinarity of her context—regularly and explicitly referencing the discipline of art history and the practices of art historians. However, unlike Tessa, she situated the genres, thinking, and analysis she was asking of students exclusively in art history. Although Heather might not have had the cross-disciplinary experience to provide comparisons and contrasts among disciplines, she was able to model and illuminate the ways of thinking in her field. Heather described her primary objective in the writing link with art history as teaching her students the thinking and "looking" practices of art history, which are embodied in the genre of formal analysis. For Heather, formal analysis was much more than a genre in art history: Heather described it as "a basic skill," an "exercise," and a practice art historians "do." This language is akin to much recent thinking in WAC/WID, which suggests that disciplinary learning involves learning how to "think like a" member of the field (i.e., a philosopher,

political scientist, or art historian) (Beaufort, 2007; Carter, 2007). Heather noted that in her field, an often-repeated question of "how a work of art means" was intended to focus students' attention not merely on the interpretation of a work of art but on the process by which that interpretation was made. This process of formal analysis as "looking" involved carefully observing the details of a work of art and describing its "formal elements," such as line, composition, volume, and color. Heather described the process at length and modeled it numerous times in the first few weeks of class. Her students' first writing assignment focused on visual elements only, while the second and third assignments added components of historical and social context. Thus, her construction of formal analysis as a genre became increasingly complex and nuanced as the course progressed.

To facilitate students' legitimate participation in the practice of formal analysis, Heather brokered through a process of translation (Wenger, 1998). Throughout class, Heather translated constantly, not only explaining the discipline to students (as one might expect) but also translating students' observations into disciplinary language. As she modeled formal analysis, she would ask for students' observations about the work of art projected on the screen and would sometimes rephrase their responses in art history terminology. For example, if a student referred to "Christ" or "John the Baptist" in religious works of art, Heather would repeat their observation but use "the figure." Heather made in clear in interviews that this translating was a deliberate pedagogical strategy:

> I mean, I do try and do that. Because I want to acknowledge their observations, but I also kind of want them to see what that would look like in the language of an art historian. And also, they are not really comfortable using the terminology, which I feel like I can see into what they're saying, and I can think about what kind of terminology I might use.

Heather's translation practices were intended to help students successfully engage with the discourse as well as the thinking strategies of professionals in her field. As someone who was a relative insider, she had learned to use the appropriate language of the discipline, but as a TA, she was also peripheral enough to both recognize and translate students' emerging ideas into disciplinary language and support students' acquisition of disciplinary discourse.

By positioning herself as an insider in the field, Heather also sought to present an image of the field of art history as rigorous, complex, and contested, and to illuminate for her students some of its epistemological and ideological assumptions and debates. As such, her teaching embodied her disciplinary partiality. Wenger (1998) contends that in the process of being introduced to practices in a new community, "our knowledge of these practices inherits the partiality of those who give us peripheral access to them" (p. 111). The partiality with which Heather brokered the field of art history in fact opened up a periphery in which students could examine the constructed nature of knowledge in the discipline. For instance, Heather's first homework assignment required students to read introductory chapters of two textbooks of art history, each of which represented the discipline in a different way. In class the next day, Heather led a discussion about the two different views of the field represented by two authors: whereas one emphasized the individuality and creativity of the artist, the other emphasized the context and history of the art. By calling attention to two competing views of the field of art history with this activity, Heather brokered students' encounters with the ideologies, assumptions, and debates of the discipline, and thereby represented the discipline as fluid and contested (Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006).

Through her brokering, Heather also positioned students as fellow "insiders in the making" by inviting them into conversation with scholars and into the practices of the community. For example, she emphasized the various ways that a work of art could be interpreted. She also noted that she wanted students to see that "their own perspective is very valid because [the discipline of art history]

is kind of a collection of lots of different perspectives." As she brokered the practices of the discipline of art history from a position of "broker as insider," she invited students to participate in the knowledge construction practices of the discipline. Furthermore, by calling attention to the various and sometimes competing perspectives and ideologies in the field of art history, she opened up space for students to critically examine knowledge in the field. As Devitt (2004) noted, this critical consciousness is something that is often difficult for fully entrenched insiders such as faculty; however, it is may be more readily available for graduate TAs, for whom the ideologies undergirding a discipline's genres and writing practices have not yet become entrenched and tacit.

While Heather's positioning of herself as a disciplinary insider may have alienated students who did not see themselves as part of the discipline, her inclusive stance and invitation to students to engage with the discipline opened a space for students to participate in the practices of art history. She invited students to see the discipline as multi-voiced and, through her translation practices, to try out the various ways of seeing and discourses in art history. Moreover, she offered a flexible insider's vision of the contested and complex discipline of art history—a vision that invited critical consciousness because it called attention to the very nature of what it means to think and write in art history.

Modified Genres as Boundary Objects

Although each disciplinary TA positioned herself in distinct ways in relation to her discipline and thus to her students, the specific ways that the two TAs brokered disciplinary genres warrant discussion, particularly in light of recent scholarship in rhetorical genre studies. Both Tessa and Heather modified disciplinary genres for their students and in the process constructed *boundary objects* that facilitated newcomer students' participation in disciplinary practices. Though boundary objects exist in the boundary spaces, they are used in different ways to coordinate meaning and activity both inside and outside of the community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Such genres are like Smit's (2004) "intermediate genres," which function as boundary objects for the local contexts of their classrooms, yet are tied in some way to the professional genres used by experts in the disciplines.

Tessa and Heather both modified disciplinary genres for their newcomer students, though quite differently. As a boundary crosser, Tessa modified her disciplinary genres in flexible, hybrid ways that allowed students to access them more easily. Tessa noted that when writing textual analysis papers in political theory, students had difficulty keeping the "real world" out of their papers. In response, she allowed them to include connections to the real world in their conclusions, even though this was not part of the conventional genre of textual analysis in political theory. By allowing students to write about current events in their conclusions, Tessa helped them focus on the task of textual analysis in the remainder of the paper. In permitting students to modify the disciplinary genre and in the process construct an "intermediate" genre, Tessa's boundary crossing was intended to help her students to successfully negotiate the boundaries between political science and political theory.

In contrast, Heather's description of the relationship between the genres art history students write and the genres art historians write suggests that her course's boundary objects functioned very differently. Heather noted that the genre of formal analysis was one that students in art history wrote but professionals in art history did not: "[Formal analysis] is a tool, essentially. But it's usually not the focus. And a lot of academic art historical writing will imply a lot of formal analysis, but it's never actually explicitly stated. I mean, you know they've done it, that they've looked really carefully, but they often don't go through the whole process." As a boundary object then, formal analysis was positioned as what we might call a derivative genre—a genre derived from a professional genre, but

not one that existed as a textual practice in the professional field.[5] As a derivative genre, formal analysis allowed students to gain practice in the systematic ways of looking, interpreting, and arguing in art history. Further, Heather modified this genre over the course of the quarter by asking students to take up increasingly complex iterations over time—first focusing only on formal elements, and later integrating contextual and historical interpretations.

What is perhaps most compelling about Tessa's and Heather's modification of disciplinary genres is that they provide ways of valuing student genres—or what Wardle (2009) termed "mutt-genres"—as legitimate boundary objects that allow students access to the practices of a particular disciplinary community. The genres that were scaffolded and modified within these two writing classrooms served as compelling tools for brokering disciplinary writing practices and, I would argue, for helping students learn to navigate the tensions between general education and disciplinary writing in courses that are positioned on the peripheries of the university curriculum.

Implications

General education courses in the disciplines that employ writing and writing instruction are complex spaces that illuminate the tensions between general education and discipline-specific education in the university (Russell & Yañez, 2003). The findings of this study affirm that although these types of courses are complex and contradictory, they can also be rich sites for writing instruction. The inherent challenges of their complex institutional positioning can be mediated—though not fully resolved—in a variety of ways. For WPAs and WAC program directors, it is paramount to continue to articulate, locally, the goals of writing in general education courses and to examine how courses are positioned departmentally and institutionally. These courses—general education courses with significant writing, lower-division "writing-intensive" courses, and linked writing courses—are complicated spaces in which to teach and learn writing, and conscious attention to their peripheral positioning will make us more thoughtful about how we teach them. The "Writing in the Course" model advocated by Thaiss (2001), which privileges the *course* over the *discipline*, might be another productive way to conceive of these courses.

This comparative case study suggests that TAs position themselves in different ways with regard to their disciplines, and not always in ways we expect. I've identified two roles that TAs adopted—boundary crosser and insider—but there are likely a myriad of other ways that TAs envision and enact their roles. Disciplinary TAs have much to offer students despite being novice (and often under-supported) teachers of courses situated in some of the most complex and contradictory spaces of the university (Rodrigue, 2013; Yañez, Russell, & Smith, 2009). Because TAs are positioned institutionally in peripheral and liminal ways—neither experts nor novices but as apprentices and simultaneously teachers and students—they are uniquely situated to broker disciplinary writing practices. TAs have the potential to leverage the tensions they experience between membership and non-membership in their teaching of writing by using both their own acculturation stories and their ability to translate disciplinary practices to their students.

Although their training was not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that the TAs in this study were well-supported and well-trained. The Writing Link program provided them extended front-end training and ongoing mentoring support throughout the academic year, as well as a forum to share course materials such as syllabi, readings, and assignments for commonly taught writing links. The TAs' choice to teach in the Writing Link program and their professional development opportunities distinguish them from TAs at many institutions. Regarding the much-needed professional development of disciplinary TAs (Rodrigue, 2013), this study provides an initial framework for thinking about how professional development might be designed to promote a range

of brokering strategies that TAs and other instructors might take up. Since TAs are likely drawing on experiences from inside and outside their disciplines, professional development for TAs should encourage them to examine their roles and the ways they position their disciplines, their students, and themselves. This study suggests that TAs' professional development might also include discussions of brokering moves such as cross-disciplinary comparisons to tap into students' antecedent genre knowledge, highlighting transferable meta-disciplinary awareness, articulating disciplinary epistemologies, discussing translation strategies, and giving students opportunities to modify disciplinary genres. Moreover, much of what we have learned about what helps faculty—such as opportunities for cross-disciplinary conversations, the development of metadisciplinary and rhetorical awareness, and strategies for assignment and rubric development—would also support TAs' professional development.

Because TAs often carry the pedagogical strategies and practices they develop in their graduate school teaching experiences into their future faculty positions, it is in the best interest of WAC programs and institutions as a whole to support TAs' professional development in ways that benefit not only their current students but also future students. As the work of Tessa and Heather demonstrate, disciplinary TAs are distinctively positioned to mediate the tensions of general education and discipline-specific courses that permeate the modern university. Whether they do so by helping students become boundary crossers or insiders, TAs are well-positioned to identify and unmask for their students the disciplinary ideologies and epistemologies that undergird disciplinary genres and thus play a key role in WAC/WID.

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Notes

[1] Soliday's (2011) study includes the teacher-researcher perspectives of cross-disciplinary writing fellows, though the writing fellows are not the focus of the study.

[2] See Bawarshi & Reiff (2010) for a discussion of prototypical genres.

[3] See Artemeva (2005) for a pointed example of a novice's role in changing the writing practices of his professional community.

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

[5] Though "derivative" has negative connotations when it comes to artistic production, suggesting a kind of imitation, I intend to use it more literally and neutrally to describe one genre as a derivation of another.

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Complete APA Citation

Winzenried, Misty Anne. (2016, September 30). Brokering disciplinary writing: TAs and the teaching of writing across the disciplines [Special issue on TAs and the teaching of writing across the curriculum]. *Across the Disciplines, 13*(3). Retrieved from https://wac.colostate.edu/docs/atd/wacta/winzenreid2016.pdf