

TAs and the Teaching of Writing across the Curriculum: Introduction

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Although TAs have played an important role in WAC, published accounts have almost exclusively focused on the involvement and impact of faculty and undergraduate student writers. Much scholarship has been devoted to TAs housed in English departments, composition programs, or writing programs who primarily teach general education composition courses (Dobrin, 2005; Roen, Goggin, Clary-Lemon, 2008; Bishop, 1990). Yet there is minimal scholarship on TAs who work with student writers in other disciplines, whether in writing-intensive or linked courses, and in different capacities such as graders, autonomous instructors or writing fellows who support faculty or other TAs. The scholarship that does exist primarily focuses on the nature of and need for TA professional development in WAC programs (Strenski, 1988, 1992, 2001; Hedengren, 2004; Rodrigue, 2012, 2013). While publications about composition TAs are valuable in helping us think about TAs in WAC, TAs' work with student writers in the Humanities, Social Sciences, and STEM fields needs to be explored. Such explorations will enable WAC scholars and administrators to learn more about how TAs in the disciplines work with student writers as well as how they contribute or could contribute to achieving WAC goals. This knowledge can help us determine how to best include TAs in WAC initiatives as writing fellows, writing ambassadors, and writing tutors. With the increasing number of TAs in higher education and growing number of WAC programs, such inclusion is important for building, revising, and sustaining WAC programs.

This special issue is dedicated to expanding discussions about TAs in WAC with qualitative research. On the most basic level, we aim to bring visibility to the important work that TAs across the disciplines do in teaching writing in higher education in order to (1) legitimize them as teachers and as teachers of writing in their own right; (2) call attention to the need for TAs to be supported both pedagogically and financially in WAC and other professional development programs; (3) recognize the valuable work they do with student writers and faculty engaged in WAC pedagogy; and (4) examine the roles they can and do play in helping to achieve WAC goals.

Our interest in TAs in WAC is both scholarly and practical: Tanya's doctoral research was on TA professional development in WAC and Andrea coordinates a WAC program in which disciplinary TAs play a key role. Our collaboration came about when Louise Wetherbee Phelps, Emeritus Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at Syracuse University, and visiting scholar at Old Dominion University, gave the keynote address at the Canadian Association for the Study of Discourse and Writing and saw Andrea's presentation on the role of TAs in WAC, "Teaching and Talking about Writing in the Disciplines." Louise suggested she contact Tanya, her former student, who had been conducting research in this area. We met in person at IWAC 2012 where we decided that a sustained discussion

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about the role of disciplinary TAs in WAC was overdue and that *ATD* would be an ideal forum for such scholarship.

Bringing TAs into WAC Scholarship

The lack of TA visibility in the WAC literature today echoes the invisibility of adjunct faculty in writing studies literature twenty years ago before scholars like Eileen Schell (1998) began to address the issue of contingent labor in our discipline. TAs, after all, constitute a contingent labor force, albeit one that is seldom recognized as such, particularly in the United States where few are unionized. When the academic job market was stronger, working for several years as a TA, often underpaid and overworked, was seen as paying one's dues, a form of apprenticeship that would be rewarded by a faculty job. However, in the context of the current academic job market when fewer graduate students are securing faculty appointments, the purpose and nature of teaching assistantships and the preparation TAs receive for this role deserve greater scrutiny. Yet of the over 450 presentations at the 2016 College Conference on Composition and Communication, only two addressed the role of TAs in teaching writing and six addressed the role of adjunct faculty.

It is time that we acknowledge TAs' institutional roles as teachers and teachers of writing, particularly given that with tighter university budgets, dwindling tenure-track faculty positions, and larger class sizes, the number of graduate student instructors is increasing. In fact, at some institutions, TAs outnumber faculty: in 2007, TAs at public research/doctoral granting institutions in the US comprised 41% of instructional staff while faculty made up 28.9% (US Department of Education Report, 2009). These statistics speak to the growing role TAs play in undergraduate education, including disciplinary writing instruction, and the critical role they can play in achieving the goals of the WAC movement. However, only if TAs' work as teachers of writing is recognized can WAC enlist this important constituency in achieving the movement's goals.

This issue is a contribution to securing such recognition for TAs through articles informed by qualitative and quantitative research. Our call for empirical research was intended to serve two distinct purposes: (1) to make TAs' roles, experiences, and needs visible through strong evidence-based research; and, on a larger scale, (2) to contribute to the growing body of empirical research in Writing Studies that responds to Chris Anson's (2008) call for a "robust, evidence based view of teaching writing and learning to write" (p. 24). The three articles in this issue effectively achieve these purposes. Although TAs have figured minimally in WAC scholarship, this is not because discussion about TAs in WAC does not occur. However, these discussions happen mostly informally: at conferences, in school hallways, and on phone or Skype calls between colleagues at different institutions. Many WAC scholars share certain beliefs about TAs' role in the teaching of writing, their unique pedagogical needs, and the kind of professional development and support needed to prepare them for their work with student writers and faculty. Yet, as Anson (2008) notes, there is a difference between *beliefs* based on logic, anecdote, experience or conviction, and *evidence* that emerges from research data. In addition to helping us better understand "what we know...about what we do," evidence enables us to make stronger arguments, and there are many arguments we need to make as WAC faculty and administrators (p.12). In the WAC community, we need to convince others—colleagues, administrators, and higher education at large—that TAs are indeed writing instructors who can and do play an important role in the teaching and learning of writing. We need to persuade administrators that TAs, despite their transient status, are worth investing in and supporting. In short, we need to make a case for how TAs can help us achieve WAC goals in various institutional contexts. More empirical research not only helps us better understand our work and to make stronger arguments to administrators about how our work can best be supported, but such research also provides us with a sense of community. Along with several recent major empirical research

projects underway such as The [Citation Project](#) and [The Learning Information Literacy Across the Curriculum \(LILAC\) project](#), we hope this special issue will make its own contribution to this trend and further strengthen the WAC community.

While qualitative research yields evidence-based claims, some scholars may wonder whether findings from specific institutional contexts are transferable. Although the writers in this special issue report findings from their local contexts, they also provide readers with valuable takeaways, offering questions, methods, and insights that are potentially applicable to other contexts. Readers considering their own WAC programs may find the variety of TA roles, training, and institutional settings presented in these articles helpful. In employing various methods and methodologies, the writers in this issue examine TAs' perspectives in three rather different roles and institutional contexts. In "A way to talk about the institution as opposed to just my field: WAC fellowships and graduate student professional development" Michael Cripps, Jonathan Hall, and Heather Robinson report on TAs' retrospective understanding of their role as writing ambassadors within the CUNY WAC program, exploring the benefits of an expanded TA role (which they call "TA-plus") that gives participants an understanding of the service component of faculty roles and how their work serves the institution as a whole. The authors argue that this kind of assistantship gives TAs a much richer professional experience than traditional TA appointments. Cripps et al.'s article offers a model for other institutions looking to expand the TA education and professional development they provide to graduate students. In "Using citation analysis heuristics to prepare TAs across the disciplines as teachers and writers," Tricia Serviss' study of TAs in WAC uses the protocol from the Citation Project to examine the impact of this method on both TAs' writing and teaching practices. The study explores the results of using the citation study protocol to examine TA problems with citation practices as a means of not only improving their own writing but also helping them teach research writing to undergraduate students in the disciplines. Cripps et al. and Serviss both offer potential models for conceptualizing and structuring TA training and participation in WAC. In "Brokering disciplinary writing: TAs and the teaching of writing across the disciplines," Misty Anne Winzenried compares how two TAs conceptualize their roles in teaching general education writing courses linked to disciplinary courses. Winzenried's case study looks at the surprisingly different ways that two TAs position themselves in relation to their discipline and how this positioning informs their pedagogical practices. In examining the different ways these two TAs construct their identity with respect to their discipline—one as *insider* and the other as *boundary crosser*—Winzenried enriches our understanding of the important roles TAs can play in translating disciplinary ways of thinking, knowing, and writing to undergraduate students.

Conclusion

Through this special issue, we are excited to contribute to discussions about TAs in WAC and other subfields, specifically *writing pedagogy education*. This subfield, which E. Shelley Reid has identified as an emerging scholarly field, recognizes the "increasingly specific and comprehensive efforts to educate teachers at all levels about writing-focused pedagogies" (687). Reid, drawing on Patricia Stock's formula for how fields emerge, argues that scholars have begun to respond to two of the three necessary questions to solidify *writing pedagogy education*: (1) what is composition? and (2) how is composition best taught and learned? Reid argues that we must respond to Stock's third question: how are writing teachers best prepared for their professional work? This issue speaks to this question as all three articles, drawing on qualitative research, elucidate and legitimize TAs' roles as teachers and ambassadors of writing in institutional contexts. Building on Reid's argument that organizations like CCCC and NCTE should support these teachers and their work, we aim to secure TAs' place in the emerging field of *writing pedagogy education*.

We also see this issue advocating for a new subfield: *TA education*. As we reflect on putting this special issue together, we have come to believe that the term "TA training" fails to capture the complexity of TAs' intellectual development in becoming teachers of disciplinary writing and the wide range and impact of their roles and responsibilities within programs, departments, and institutions. We believe that *TA education* better captures the kind of support that TAs need to serve as agents of change in WAC. We hope that this issue will inspire and stimulate additional research on the role of TAs in WAC, especially scholarship that situates TAs within shifting cultural, economic, international, and political contexts.

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