

## CHAPTER 4

# TA TRAINING IN AN INDEPENDENT WRITING PROGRAM: REVISITING THE OLD COMP./LIT. SPLIT IN A NEW VENUE

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In the spring of 2005, shortly after becoming a full-time lecturer in an independent writing program housed in a large research university, I met an old friend on campus for coffee. She and I had been composition TAs together while studying for our MA degrees at a nearby university, before I had taken this lectureship and before she had come to this university to pursue a doctorate in English literature.

As we greeted one another, I noticed that she seemed more dressed up than usual for a day of attending classes, and so I commented on how nice she looked.

“Oh, dear,” she said, to my surprise, “I hope I don’t look *too* nice!”

“Um, what?” I asked, totally perplexed.

“I have an interview later today with your department for a TA position next year,” she explained, “and, well, I am hoping that I don’t get hired.”

“What?” I sputtered, remembering what a talented composition teacher she had been when she served as a TA previously.

“Well, my department requires all of its doctoral students to apply for a TAship in your program in our third year in order to help with our funding,” she explained, “But if we’re not selected, then by default, we get to continue to be TAs for the English Department, which I would much rather do, since I’ve already taught composition and since I need more experience teaching literature.”

“Huh,” I said, trying to gather my thoughts.

The truth is, I was dumbfounded. I had never heard of the English Department’s policy requiring that its graduate students apply for TAships in the writing program, and because the writing program at this university was independent from the English Department, I had imagined that it would be immune to the divisiveness and turf wars found within English departments elsewhere. At

the same time, I was having a hard time imagining that my friend, an effective and talented composition instructor, had suddenly become resistant to teaching first-year writing (FYW). Of course, I was aware that such resistance can be common among graduate students in literature, and in fact, this same friend and I had witnessed it among several of the literature students in the TA training program that we had participated in together years before. But my friend had always seemed to be an enthusiastic teacher of composition, and she had earned a reputation in that program as being a stellar TA. I couldn't help but wonder how and why her stance toward teaching composition had changed so radically.

But the more I thought about it, the more I began to understand her—and the English Department's—point of view. For her part, it made perfect sense that she would be interested in developing her skills as a TA in literature, given that she was pursuing a degree in literature in a Research 1 university where she was being groomed to land a job as a literature scholar and professor upon completing her graduate training. Moreover, it was clear to me that my friend wanted to establish herself as a successful Ph.D. student, and as such she was working hard to demonstrate her deep and abiding interest in both the study of and the teaching of literature.

At the same time, it was also clear to me why the English Department would encourage its graduate students to secure funding via teaching for the writing unit. After all, composition TAs have historically been used as a funding source for graduate students in literature (Bergmann, 2006; Maid, 2006; North, 2000; Stenberg, 2005). And even though at this particular university the English Department had separated from the writing unit about fifteen years prior to this incident, the old and implicit agreement between the two that the writing unit would offer composition TAs to the graduate students in literature as a means of funding their graduate study had been largely maintained.

Still, I was intrigued by the notion that the composition/literature split, which has been well-documented by scholars such as Bergmann and Baker, (2006); Crowley, (1998); Elbow, (2002); Horner, (1983); Maid, (2006); McComiskey, (2006), and White (1989) could continue to be manifest in an independent writing program, as up until that point I had imagined that a writing program's independence would make it immune from symptoms of the tension between the two fields. After all, the fact that the program is separate from English clearly reflects that Writing Studies has become a recognized field in its own right with its own scholarship and pedagogical practices. I found myself wondering how the other TAs from literature were perceiving TAs in composition. Were they all as resistant—or might some of them be even more resistant—as my friend was?

About a year after my coffee date with my friend—who was hired as a TA in the writing program despite her intentions—I came across the results of a survey given to all TAs participating in the TA preparation program over the past several years. Designed and conducted in 2006 by the independent writing unit in which the TA training program is housed, the survey was developed to collect data for a self-study required by the university's administration. This survey asked TAs about their perceptions of the TA preparation program 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, in the words of several participants, as “a waste of their time.”

When I heard about the results of this study, my interest in this topic was further piqued, as it seemed that this was evidence of the composition/literature divide in action. A preliminary exploration of the narrative portion of the surveys—which asked them about their TA preparation program—revealed a similar bi-modality, as some of the TAs wrote of their great enthusiasm for the program while others displayed varying degrees of resistance to the training course and its activities. Given that the TAs in the program at the time were primarily students of either the university's composition graduate program or its literature graduate program—and thus they hailed from either the university's School of Education or from its English Department—it seemed likely that the varied responses were borne of disciplinary affiliation(s). But unfortunately, the surveys did not ask respondents to identify their home departments, so there was no way to correlate the results of the survey with this hypothesis.

The study discussed in this chapter picks up where the 2006 survey left off, and captures a moment leading to transition/reform. Specifically, this chapter examines the causes of the bi-modality found in the 2006 data and considers 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 in an independent writing program, this study examines the extent of the disciplinary differences between the two groups as well as the nature and implications of these differences, both in terms of how they play out within TA training in an independent writing program and also to what extent they can engender resistance to teaching FYW. Ultimately, this study was interested in answering the following questions: What happens when graduate students from composition and from literature come together in a TA preparation practicum within an independent program? Is the tension between literature and composition that is so often found in many traditional English departments replicated in this new environment? And if so, how does it manifest, and why does it occur?

Before considering the design, findings, and implications of this study, this chapter will further contextualize it by discussing the marginalization of composition teaching as well as the turn toward holding TA preparation within independent writing programs. A discussion of the study will follow, and this will place particular emphasis on the ways in which disciplinarity and institutional policies served to underscore and exacerbate the tension that was found between the composition and literature factions within the training program. The chapter will close with some thoughts on how TA training programs might work towards mitigating disciplinary tensions, particularly when they are held within independent writing programs.

## THE MARGINALIZATION OF COMPOSITION TEACHERS

In retrospect, perhaps I should not have been so surprised by my friend's sudden resistance to teaching composition, given that the literature on TA training is full of stories like hers. Horner has described the evolution that successful literature graduate students undergo as they work toward their degrees:

Anyone who has been associated with graduate students in English over the past twenty years can attest to the metamorphosis that takes place as they earn doctorates. They enter the graduate program as teaching assistants excited about the possibilities of teaching composition. They want very much to do well, searching the literature and questioning their colleagues about teaching methods—in the time left over from their literature studies. During their four or five years in the program, the message is gradually but firmly conveyed that the serious business of the department is not research or teaching on but research and teaching in literary studies. They are given neither the encouragement nor the time to pursue research in rhetoric or composition theory—in fact, they are actively discouraged from spending time on composition, and they learn early how to cut corners. Finally, teaching composition becomes a dreary task. They long to teach the literature courses for which their years of study have prepared them. (2006, p. 6)

My friend had no doubt been exposed to this message as she pursued her graduate degree in literature, so it was no wonder that her feelings about teaching composition had changed as a result. Both practically and philosophically, it made sense that she was gravitating toward developing teaching experience in

her chosen field—and therefore gravitating away from that which would require her to focus her attention on anything other than the study and teaching of literature. Further support for her shifting attitude toward teaching composition can be found in the literature, which has again and again revealed that the teaching of composition has been marginalized, both within and outside of English departments (Horner, 1983; McComiskey, 2006; Parker, 1967/2009; Wiederhold, 2006).

Indeed, the literature that has traced and recorded the early history of our field has made it abundantly clear that composition was originally relegated to 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). Bizzell 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. (1992, 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 FYW 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). Given composition’s lower-caste status, it is little wonder that even today, many literature students today are eager to distance themselves from teaching composition.

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 tremendous progress since those early days. But unfortunately, despite these

and other indications of the increased professionalization of composition (and of Writing Studies overall), 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).

As the chapters in this book make clear (Davies; Kearns & Turner; Thaiss et al.), 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 FYW courses, but also other writing courses pertaining to various disciplines and sometimes even writing majors or minors. In fact, a 2010 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), 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 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 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 may be separate from English, they are often not at all equal in stature with their English department counterparts.

Indeed, the complex disciplinary relationship between Composition and Literary Studies 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 training programs.

## TA TRAINING IN INDEPENDENT COMPOSITION PROGRAMS

Typically, composition TAs participate in teacher preparation courses held within English departments before they begin to teach the FYW course. 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 FYW that are offered each year (Berlin, 1996/2003; Bousquet, 2004; McComiskey, 2006; North, 2000). The relationship between TA programs and FYW thus tends to be a symbiotic one within English departments, with each entity supporting the other.

Yet this relationship is not entirely equitable, as composition TAs housed in traditional English departments tend to enable those departments to continue privileging literature instead of treating the study and teaching of composition and literature as equally important endeavors (Berlin, 1996/2003). Horner (1983), Crowley (1998), McComiskey (2006), and Bergmann (2006) have argued that by relegating the teaching of composition to TAs, part-time instructors, or even lecturers, the tenured faculty can focus on literature. Maid takes this argument a step further by arguing that the relationship between TAs and FYW allow graduate programs in literature to stay afloat: "Since English departments need cheap labor such as TAs to staff many sections of FYW, they can justify otherwise unjustifiable graduate programs. The graduate students can teach FYW while filling the graduate classes of the tenure-line [literature] faculty" (2006, p. 95). In this way, composition TA programs not only serve English departments by allowing them to maintain their focus on the teaching of literature, but they also support graduate students in literature by providing them with funding opportunities. And this phenomenon is hardly a new one. In 1939, Columbia English Professor Oscar James Campbell wrote about the teaching of English and the stratification of literature and composition faculty within English departments. In an article titled "The Failure of Freshman English," Campbell referred to the teachers of FYW: "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" (1939, p. 179). In many places, composition continues to be relegated to serving the interests of literature faculty within English departments, thereby perpetuating a culture that marginalizes composition and views it primarily as a service unit.

At the same time, given that even these traditional TA preparation programs serve not only composition graduate students but also graduate students in literature or other areas of English Studies, 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 (Hesse, 1993). 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 from composition theory and practice rather than help them embrace it.

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. 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 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. (2005, 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.

Due to the rise of independent writing programs in universities across the nation, more and more TA training programs are being housed in the independent writing departments as opposed to within the English departments where they have traditionally been placed. Yet even when composition programs gain 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 between literature and composition factions regarding graduate student funding. In other cases, it is simply a practical matter of providing graduate students in 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 requisite emphasis on pedagogical theory and practice.

Yet because these independent writing programs often recruit graduate students from the English departments they left behind to serve as TAs, there may be an even greater potential than in the past for graduate students in literature to resist preparation to teach FYW (for a different TA recruiting and training model, see MacDonald et al., this volume). In these situations, often both the teacher preparation course and FYW 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.

As the field of Composition burgeons and further establishes itself as a discipline in its own right, it is useful to consider how TA preparation impacts not only graduate students and their institutions as well as the undergraduates they serve in FYW classes, but also the development of the field itself. As Bishop (citing Neel, 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 makes a similar point as she has argued that TA preparation courses are "our greatest opportunity to instigate disciplinary and pedagogical change" (2005, p. 30) since they shape the pedagogies and practices of the newest teachers in the profession.

Moreover, 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 FYW course is Writing Studies' 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 FYW 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.

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

This role is particularly germane within the context of an independent writing program, for such programs are sometimes the primary place on campus where writing pedagogy is discussed and considered.

## THE STUDY

In this bounded case study, 10 doctoral candidates—five from literature and five from composition—were selected from two cohorts of the TA program and interviewed about their experiences with the TA preparation courses that they had taken a few years prior and what they took away from these experiences. 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. Each of the 20 interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and all of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The interviews were then coded as a means of identifying themes and patterns in the responses of the two groups.

The study also considered 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. The narrative teaching evaluations were also analyzed by a system of coding, as Seidman (2006) suggests. Again, themes and patterns were isolated in an effort to gain an understanding of how participants from each group responded to their preparation to become TAs.

Key considerations for this study included the placement of TA preparation in an independent writing program as well as the nature of the disciplinary relationship between composition and literature. At this particular university, the

disciplinary structure is atypical in that literature, composition and TA preparation/FYW are held in three completely different departments: English, education, and an independent writing unit, respectively. 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.

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. (See Lalicker, this volume, for a perspective on the Lit/Comp divide within an English department.) 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 disciplinary divide runs deeper than mere location, and disciplinary paradigms apparently stick with us even as we participate in new venues.

Ultimately, the results of this study found that the TAs from the two disciplines did indeed respond differently to their TA training and that the literature TAs were much more likely to be resistant to the training program as well as to teaching composition overall. At the same time, both groups reported being aware of this disciplinary divide within the TA training program, viewing it as a result of not only varying disciplinary perspectives but also of various institutional policies and practices that had inadvertently created and exacerbated tensions.

The findings in this study help to explain the bimodality apparent in the survey 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. 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 the staff was both unfriendly and difficult to work with. 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 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.

## DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES

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 program. 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 a difference in the level of engagement with the preparation program overall.

Interestingly, almost all of the participants pointed to these differences within the interviews, with one composition participant referring to the divide as akin to that between the Greasers and Socs within S. E. Hinton's (1967) *The Outsiders*, which paints a picture of class warfare in 1960s Tulsa, Oklahoma. Indeed, the data revealed a clear difference in how TAs from the two groups approached the teaching of FYW, both philosophically and pedagogically. While the composition TAs were passionate about teaching FYW 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.

Participants in each of the two groups indicated that at times, these differing perspectives led to clashes in the practicum, despite the fact that all of the participants were ostensibly there for the same pressing reason: to prepare themselves for teaching FYW the following semester.

## RESISTANCE

The data pertaining to resistance revealed that both disciplinary divisions and program distinctions played a powerful role in the resistance demonstrated by both of the groups of TAs, albeit the two groups demonstrated this resistance in different ways.

Somewhat surprisingly, 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 one composition TA, the fact that they were present

at all suggests 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 one composition TA 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 [negative] reactions of the literature people.” One of the literature TAs also pointed to this phenomenon of counter-resistance, referring to it as “overly enthusiastic participation.”

Yet for one composition TA, this counter-resistance did not go far enough. One of the composition participants felt that the preparation program did not emphasize composition theory and practice as much as she would have liked it to. This TA 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 might have. Her 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 & Scholes, 1983; Goggin & Beatty, 2000; Horner, 1983; Kaufer & 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.

The literature TAs very clearly demonstrated sustained 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.

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 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 have become a tacit part of who they are” (2005, p. 204). Indeed, two of the TAs from the literature group noted in the interviews that writing had always

come naturally to them and that therefore it was sometimes hard for them to remember that writing well does not come easily to everyone. In one of the TA's words: "We think that, automatically, the students already are good writers. We kind of assume that." Understandably, it may be difficult for the literature TAs to get beyond their assumptions and to consider how they might best work with students to help them develop these same skills.

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 one literature TA 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 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" (2005, p. 205). Indeed, as another literature TA noted, "I've always envisioned writing as part of the process of teaching literature. I didn't realize until I began teaching composition 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 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" (1992, 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.

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. One literature TA's recollection of her advisor's dismay when she expressed an interest in pursuing an administrative position such as a deanship—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.

At the same time, at least some of the resistance shown by the literature TAs was 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 MA exams is, as one participant from literature 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 one literature TA 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.

## **INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES AND PRACTICES**

At this point, many readers may feel as though the fact that there is continued tension between the factions of composition and literature—whether within or outside the confines of an English department—is hardly new news. Indeed, as the early part of this chapter has noted, a great deal of literature has focused on the origins and the implications of the split, and moreover, most academics in the two disciplines are aware of its presence. Yet because the development of independent writing programs has been offered up by some as a potential panacea for addressing the issues between composition and literature that are often found within English departments, this study’s finding that the split continues to be evident in this new context brings its deeply embedded nature to light. At

the same time, this study's results suggest that the split does not automatically replicate itself without fuel from some sort of external cause. In fact, 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. These policies can not only reignite the tensions between the two fields, but they can also fan the flames.

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 TAs<sup>hip</sup> in the writing unit, the fact that this TAs<sup>hip</sup> coincided with the timing of their MA exams, the location of the TA program outside of their graduate studies department, and so on. 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.

As indicated above, 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 frustration 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. 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, certain policies and practices—some of which were outside of the writing unit's control—were also an important part of the story.

### **ENGLISH DEPARTMENT'S REQUIREMENT**

The English Department's expectation that its graduate students would both apply for and be awarded TAs<sup>hips</sup> in the writing unit also appears to have contributed greatly to the resistance demonstrated by 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 literature during their second year of graduate school, and thus there was a tendency for some of them to view the teaching of composition in their third year 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 TASHIPS**

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 MA 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 it otherwise due to the overlap between preparing for and taking their comprehensive examinations at the same time that they were participating in TA preparation.

## **FUNDING LINES**

Another institution-specific consideration 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. 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 again, many of them saw as interrupting their studies in literature.

Clearly, this arrangement effectively subjugated the writing program to the English Department even though it was no longer formally attached to it. This is the sort of relationship that programs might want to try and avoid as they seek their independence. Otherwise, they will continue to be in the service of the very departments that they are trying to break free from. Indeed, it took the program in this study years to establish its autonomy in terms of choosing its own TAs, free from any expectations from English, and that goal was only achieved via strong leadership on the part of the program's director.

## **THINGS WORTH NOTING**

In the several years that have passed since the era under study here, the writing unit and its TA program have undergone a number of significant changes. For one thing, the then-director of the program retired and a new director re-shaped many aspects of it, including a complete redesign of the TA training program and the university's FYW course. As such, this study is a historical examination representing a particular moment in time that has now passed. Nevertheless, the lessons learned here may prove useful for other independent programs to consider as they design and implement their own TA training programs.

It is important to make 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 the TAs who participated in this study 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 participants' accounts, the TA preparation facilitators were helpful, accommodating, and supportive of everyone in the program, regardless of disciplinary affiliation.

## WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

In terms of future research, it would be interesting to consider how TAs from disciplines outside of literature and composition respond to their TA preparation, particularly given that it is so common for TAs in independent writing programs to hail from various departments across campus. Interestingly, the data collected here 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 FYW. It would be worthwhile to investigate if indeed this is the case and if so, why.

Given that program policies were found to have played a role in TAs' attitudes and perceptions and that many of those policies have changed since this data was collected, it would also 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 possible that their responses would be somewhat less polarized than they were in this study, although as this study has made clear, disciplinary differences and paradigms are deeply embedded, 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—at least to some extent—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 ingrained 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 further research to help us better understand the role that disciplinarity plays in how we define ourselves as teachers, scholars, and individuals.

## CONCLUSION

A key goal for this study was to determine the extent to which disciplinarity is manifest within TA preparation as well as the implications of TAs' adherence to disciplinary paradigms within the venue of an independent writing program. The data 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.

Perhaps most importantly, 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 worthwhile to suggest that independent programs shy away from agreements encouraging them to provide composition teaching experience to potentially unwilling literature students, just as the program under study here has recently 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.

Program advisors might want to also seriously consider graduate students' concerns about various policies and to work toward developing new policies that will better serve the needs of all involved. Happily, the TA preparation program under study here 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 TAs are now much more competitive than they were previously, 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 signifi-

cant impact on TAs' attitudes about participating in the program. Moreover, the literature students' TAs for the writing unit are no longer concurrent with their MA 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 FYW course has recently been thoroughly redesigned. At the time the data for this study was collected, the FYW 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 FYW, 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 FYW course's goals. Because the new approach to teaching FYW at this university is genre-based, 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.

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. With this awareness, we can work with TAs to help them develop an understanding of these paradigms as well as of 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.

Ultimately, we may need to come to terms with the fact there is no such thing as complete and total intellectual independence from English—or any other discipline on campus (see also *Thaiss et al.* regarding writing as part of the fabric of the university, this volume). After all, the centrality of writing dictates that it will cross borders within institutions, and even independent writing programs must cooperate with other factions on campus as they work to support writing across the academy. And there are still many ways in which the factions of composition and literature must continue to work together, such as in TA training, which often serves graduate students from English as well as from composition and from elsewhere on campus.

The key, then, is to approach our interactions with those in English departments with a strong awareness of both our history and our present position, along with a dedication to furthering our cause as Rhetoric and Composition

departments and specialists, even when doing so requires some measure of compromise with the English departments that our programs were once a part of. The study reported in this chapter is one small piece of a huge puzzle of interactions between the two fields, and there are many other such stories within the pages of this collection. Indeed, the literature of our field is full of studies, anecdotes, and theories about the relationship between composition and literature, and it is in our best interest to know this history and to heed its lessons, particularly when we are interacting with English.

As one of the composition TAs who participated in the study 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.” There is no doubt that such bridges can be difficult to build, as they must serve to span the chasm between deeply embedded disciplinary paradigms, but nevertheless, they are worth trying to construct and maintain.

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. And especially when TA training is held within independent writing programs, it is 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.

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