

CHAPTER 8.

**GTAS AND THE WRITING STUDIO:
AN EXPERIMENTAL SPACE FOR
INCREASED LEARNING AND
PEDAGOGICAL GROWTH**

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Writing, like every other performance, requires space to practice: a space where students can be supported and critiqued by a semiprofessional that has done what they're doing before them. This is the overarching philosophy of our Studio—to provide this space.

—Dr. Alanna Frost, Director of Composition at the University of Alabama-Huntsville

Studio was a safe space for me to discover my interest and ability in teaching with fewer dire consequences.

—Lee Hibbard, former Graduate Student Teacher at the University of Alabama-Huntsville

Historically, universities with graduate programs have enlisted English graduate students as primary instructors for freshman composition and developmental writing courses. Although this practice continues to be an economically smart investment and, in some cases, a financial necessity for university budgets, it also creates significant challenges. More than half a century ago, Joseph Schwartz (1955) was already lamenting that: “For more years that I can remember, English departments have carelessly assumed that anyone can teach Freshman English,” and moreover, “for too many years we have delegated the teaching of Freshman English to people who have been unprepared for such teaching” (p. 200). Schwartz convincingly argues for the necessity of a training course for graduate students, and since his original argument, many universities have implemented training of one variety or another. In fact, according to Sally Barr Ebest’s (1999) study of over 137 WPA member universities, “77.4% of the WPAs observe their TAs teaching, 61.3% provide students with a mentor, and 57.5% hold summer workshops” (pp. 67-68).

Despite these positive figures, one wonders if this design is providing enough training for incoming graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), given that studies continue to suggest that many of these students feel ill-prepared for the task of teaching first-year composition. Indeed, Ebest's (1999) own work reveals that one-third of the respondents admitted to feeling as though their graduate students were only "somewhat" or "not very well prepared" to teach freshman composition, and this apprehension comes even with the organized teacher training programs offered at most universities (p. 70). Clearly, there is still room to strengthen and develop these programs, especially given the May 2014 Modern Language Association report on the state of doctoral study in modern language and literature, which contains an entire section recommending doctoral programs be "modified . . . [to place] greater emphasis on the development of skills in teaching" (p. 6).

One possible alternative to the instruction-based classes first championed by Schwartz, and the focus of my research here, is to adopt a mentorship practice where new GTAs function as facilitators in a writing studio environment. Research into the Studio model has made clear how this approach might be beneficial to both the students and to the structural framework of composition programs, but these accounts do not consider how this space can also be utilized as a training ground for new GTAs. In fact, while many of the other essays within this collection focus on alterations that can be made to the studio format itself, this chapter instead explores the Writing Studio as an ideal space for pedagogical exploration and growth. In what follows, I offer findings from a study which examined the experiences of GTAs who taught in the writing studio environment at the University of Alabama-Huntsville (UAH), a small, public, tier-one research institution in Northern Alabama. My findings suggest that the integration of GTAs as studio leaders first, and composition teachers second, offers a transitional method of GTA training that not only works to more adequately prepare GTAs to teach composition classes but also benefits the students enrolled in the writing studio sections at UAH. Elsewhere in this collection, Cardinal and Keown discuss the impact of transforming the narrative of writing development by emphasizing the importance of reframing the story of basic writing students from deficient to novice writers. In a similar vein, my study suggests that positioning novice GTAs in the role of studio facilitator also reframes the story how of pedagogical development takes place. Rather than assume that "just anyone can teach Freshman composition," scaffolding GTAs from studio facilitator to course instructor promotes an understanding of writing pedagogy as that which develops over time and through the process of practical teaching experiences. Moreover, such an approach gives GTAs the chance to learn from a more experienced expert *and* the opportunity to practice

methods of teaching *before* stepping out on their own. In this way, the Studio serves as a sort of support practicum experience to help ease GTAs into their role as composition teachers. I offer this method of training GTAs as a model which can both decrease the anxiety experienced by many GTAs, and help provide more confident and effective writing teachers in our field.

TEACHING ANXIETIES AND STUDIO AS A TRAINING SPACE

The prevalence of graduate student teachers in the academy has given rise to a fair amount of scholarship seeking to address how best to prepare these young professionals for teaching undergraduate courses. Ebest (1999) cites studies conducted by James Slevin, Leo Lambert, and Stacey Tice, among others, to justify the claim that “Whether graduate students are majoring or minoring in composition/rhetoric, or merely fulfilling the requirements of a teaching assistantship, they are being prepared to teach” (p. 67). Ebest’s (1999) conclusions stem from the perspective of program instructors and WPAs—not from the graduate student teachers themselves. More recent studies, which derive their data directly from past and current graduate student teachers, offer findings of a different nature. These studies reveal that despite participation in a variety of teacher training programs, many graduate students still feel underprepared to teach first-year composition courses.

For example, Tina Lavonne Good and Leanne B. Warshauer (2000) describe their experiences as GTAs at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, and their perspective fails to align with the data collected from the program instructors and WPAs in Ebest’s study. Writing from a context familiar to English GTAs across the country, they state:

Everyone in the room shared the same nervous anticipation. We were all beginning Ph.D. students, which meant in a week, many of us would be walking into our own classrooms for the first time. Although [our] professors . . . did their best to build our confidence while offering suggestions for the first few weeks of class, they could not appease our anxiety. (Good & Warshauer, 2000, p. ix)

Good and Warshauer (2000) stress that despite receiving direct mentoring by professors, informal peer support, and a solid grounding in theoretical pedagogy from their enrollment in a formal practicum, “we often found ourselves having coffee in each other’s offices, desperately struggling to create in-class activities and writing assignments that would prompt our students to produce portfolios that would meet university requirements” (p. ix). More importantly, their own

research led them to discover how many graduate students across the country find themselves in a similar situation. The persistent anxieties and struggles to teach first-year composition faced by graduate students, as documented in this study, call us to reexamine the way in which graduate students are traditionally trained in teacher preparation.

In a more recent account, *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground*, Jessica Restaino (2012) follows four graduate students at a large U.S. public university as they navigate the demands of teaching undergraduate composition courses while also beginning their own academic endeavors. Even after being put through a new teacher orientation and required to enroll in a writing pedagogy class during their first semester of graduate school, all of the study's participants were still dissatisfied with the preparation they were given prior to teaching college composition. One of the teaching assistants felt that "those of us with no teaching experience ha[d] been tossed into the deep end" and resented "the FYWP's [First-Year Writing Program's] failure to better prepare new teachers for the first day" (Restaino, 2012, p. 8). Even those with prior teaching practice expressed anxieties; one student who defined herself as an experienced teacher remained reluctant about grading: "We received handouts on grading, but we didn't really talk about it as a group. . . . I don't feel . . . that I would know the difference between an A and a B paper" (Restaino, 2012, p. 10). Although Restaino's study is limited to a handful of graduate students in an isolated university setting, the implications of her discussion register with many graduate students at other institutions.

Whether it is a crash course in teaching at the university level or concurrent enrollment in a writing pedagogy course or some other form of pedagogical instruction, the teacher preparation programs implemented by the institutions in these studies do not seem to be providing enough training to make graduate students feel adequately equipped for the task at hand. Given this problem, might graduate programs, in addition to maintaining the programs already in place, also consider giving their GTAs some practical experience teaching *before* allocating them with the responsibility of their own composition class? At first glance, this sort of modification may seem difficult to manage; however, an increasing number of universities already have a space conducive to the experimental learning that incoming GTAs need built directly into the framework of their existing composition programs—that is, the Writing Studio.

Since the early work of Rhonda C. Grego and Nancy S. Thompson on the Studio approach (1996) and especially since the culmination of that work was published in *Teaching/Writing in Thirdspaces: The Studio Approach* (2008), many studio programs have been implemented within first-year writing programs across the country. While studio programs are often designed with developmen-

tal writing students in mind, the studio space itself contains many features that make it an exceptional training ground for new GTAs. One of the most important of these features is the fact that the GTA in charge of each studio section acts as a facilitator as opposed to an instructor of record. This distinction helps to alleviate the common anxieties graduate students often bring into the program in regards to assessing student writing and establishing themselves as legitimate, authoritative figures in the eyes of their students. In addition, because the graduate students who are group facilitators are often required to sit in on their students' main course session, these GTAs are able to learn from more seasoned instructors and see pedagogy in action. These classroom observations further enable graduate students to begin to understand the external and institutional factors that can affect the interactions taking place between students and teachers. Finally, the intimate and student-driven nature of the studio class offers GTAs countless opportunities to begin developing their own unique pedagogical practices. Through an analysis of the Writing Studio program at the institution where I was an MA student, I will show how the studio space can function as an exceptional training ground for first-year GTAs; indeed, at the most basic level, by positioning GTAs as writing studio instructors, graduate programs can facilitate the development of writing and instructional pedagogies by their GTAs prior to assigning them a freshman composition class of their own.

METHODS

In order to offer a comprehensive analysis of what GTAs learned about teaching writing from their studio experiences, I reviewed program documents, from the initial proposals for the studio course to current syllabi. I also observed weekly meetings between the GTAs and the instructors of the main composition course. These meetings often served as a forum for graduate students to share ideas, ask questions, and get help from their peers and the more seasoned instructors.

In addition to analyzing course documents and observing meetings, I conducted interviews—in person and/or through email—of 10 graduate teaching assistants who taught within UAH's composition program between the fall of 2011 and the spring of 2014; the bulk of my data for this analysis came out of these interviews. Interview participants came from a variety of educational, socio-economical, and racial backgrounds, and they entered the program with varying levels of prior teaching experience. The goal of each interview was twofold: to establish the interviewee's approach to pedagogy prior to teaching Studio, and to determine if and how their studio teaching experiences may have influenced or changed that pedagogy. Along with these primary goals, my interviews with the GTAs also provide an account of the studio class as it is taught at

UAH, with particular attention paid to the opportunities and/or limitations to pedagogical practice inherent to the Studio classroom.

Finally, I conducted interviews with the Director of Composition, Professor Alanna Frost, and two other faculty members involved with the initial development and implementation of the Studio model at UAH—Professor Laurel Bollinger, who was Acting Director of Composition at the time of Studio’s creation, and Professor Andrea Word, the Director of the Intensive Language Center at UAH. These interviews helped to construct an accurate picture of the studio class from its conception through its present context.

UAH’S STUDIO APPROACH

Like many of the Writing Studio approaches discussed within this collection, our course was originally designed to replace a remedial, noncredit-bearing developmental writing class preceding the EH 101, 102 composition course sequence; however, the UAH Studio was also created with the development and training of GTAs in mind. Bollinger turned to the Studio approach out of frustration with the fact that the developmental class was burdening students by putting them a semester behind from the start of their academic career. Moreover, many of the students who did take the original developmental class were still not passing EH 101 and 102. The new Studio eliminated the developmental course and placed students directly into a credit bearing class—EH 101S. Students enrolled in EH 101S receive extra support through concurrent enrollment in the writing studio class (EH 100)—a lab-like writing course, limited to no more than 10 students, which provides supplemental instruction and one-on-one writing assistance from a more experienced writing expert. Upon successful completion of both courses, students earn credit for the first course in the composition sequence and move on to EH 102.

Although the writing studio philosophy at UAH is very similar to Grego and Thompson’s model and to many of the studio formats discussed within this collection, several variations in our approach make it an exceptional space for teacher training. Bollinger founded the Studio program because she “felt the need to do something to improve the experience of our GTAs, to give them better training at some level, and to improve the outcome for those [developmental] students.” She therefore designed studio sections so that first-semester graduate teaching assistants would be “the experienced writing experts.” This decision to have GTAs as opposed to veteran instructors facilitate the studio sections is significant. Whereas Fraizer (this volume) suggests that the challenges of teaching Studio are best tackled by veteran teachers, these same challenges are what make Studio an ideal space for pedagogical training. Just as in Grego and

Thompson's (2008) model, studio leaders serve as "facilitating experts" who "listen to what students say about their work, their class, or their assignments and, where appropriate, provide contextualizing information about the genre or the kind of assignment being asked for" (p. 10). Thus, in their role as studio leaders, new GTAs must learn to adapt to student needs, which in some cases means they have to come up with lesson plans on the fly, develop a variety of methods for teaching complex writing concepts, and find ways to help individual students overcome emotional, intellectual, and institutional boundaries to success. All the while, these pedagogical techniques are being honed in a space that exists outside but alongside the main course. Indeed, in its status as a thirdspace, the Studio offers a space for both students and the studio leader to take risks, make mistakes, and foster genuine learning experiences. In this case, studio leaders and student participants learn side-by-side, each benefiting from the unique space that the Studio provides.

However, this does not mean that hierarchy is completely eliminated within our version of the Studio approach. As facilitators, GTA are not directly responsible for evaluating student work, but they do assign students with a pass or fail grade based largely on class participation and attendance. Studio leaders are placed in control over the class and content, with their main objective being to supplement the instruction students receive in their regular composition course by designing mini-lessons, conducting writing work-shops, facilitating peer reviews, and providing other types of instructional activities to augment student learning. While our approach could be feasible in an online environment, our approach would look less like the minimally structured asynchronous meetings highlighted within this collection by Miley and by Santana, Rose and LaBarge; and more like Gray's model that emphasizes instructor-directed online activities. Whether in-person or online, it is through the development of individual lessons and writing activities that the GTA is able to foster a unique studio section and begin developing their own approach to teaching. This control over content is imperative for facilitating pedagogical development, but so is the collaborative nature of our studio model. Whereas Gray's studio facilitators are kept separate from the main course and are supervised by a senior Writing Center staff member, our instructors maintain a close collaboration with the course instructors. By attending the main course and meeting regularly with the course instructors, our GTAs are given a chance to learn from a more seasoned instructor while still maintaining their role as studio facilitator as opposed to instructor of record. This flexible course design coupled with the on-going collaboration with FYC instructors enables each facilitator to individualize his or her approach to teaching and begin developing and enacting their own instructional and writing pedagogies.

FINDINGS: PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF USING STUDIO AS A SPACE FOR GTA TRAINING

1. USING GTAs AS FACILITATORS, AS OPPOSED TO INSTRUCTORS OF RECORD, HELPS TO ALLEVIATE ANXIETIES RELATED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AUTHORITY AND TO THE ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT WRITING

Many graduate students at our institution enter the program expressing doubts and anxieties about their ability to teach writing; more specifically, they are apprehensive about assessing student writing and developing adequate classroom management techniques. In “Uneasy Transitions: The Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Composition Program,” Brian K. Bly (2000) asserts that among the difficulties faced by teaching assistants is their responsibility to “evaluate student writing from a tenuous position of authority” (p. 2). Whereas graduate students in Bly’s (2000) study complained about the difficulties they faced trying to teach regular classes while still being seen as less legitimate than fulltime faculty, GTAs in the UAH Writing Studio serve in a capacity that is conducive to their level of experience. If, as Bly (2000) asserts, GTAs will be seen as less legitimate and less authoritative than traditional instructors, one of the greatest strengths of UAH’s Writing Studio is that GTAs are not required to assume the place of authority at the front of a regular classroom.

In fact, the idea of authority in the Writing Studio is fundamentally different. In the spirit of Leanne B. Warshauer’s collaborative approach (2000), the UAH Writing Studio includes the GTA in the process of learning, widening the “locus of authority” (p. 87). This collaboration is made clear in one GTA’s assertions that “Studio gave me a more personal relationship with my students. While I still make clear that I am the instructor, I also remind them that I’m a student much like they are. I exist in a sort of middle-ground, making me feel like I’m more accessible to them and their concerns.” This GTA’s recognition of the possibilities offered to them as both student *and* instructor is an example of the potential affordances of placing GTAs as studio facilitators. GTAs are themselves positioned both inside and outside of the institutional structure and the main course setting, which makes them an ideal choice for the cultivation of what Grego and Thompson define as Studio’s greatest asset—its ability to exist as a sort of thirdspace. Whereas often this dual positionality can create difficulties and anxieties for GTAs, our studio approach recognizes the unique potential of their place within the institutional structure and encourages them to embrace their status in that “middle-ground.” The result is a thirdspace that is not only more conducive to student learning, but also one where the GTAs and students can meaningfully learn from one another. As one of the other GTAs recalled:

“My students saw me as a big sister who was there to help them in any way possible. I liked this a lot because we developed personal relationships as well as professional ones when it was time to work.” In the Writing Studio, the leaders and students learn together, and the leader develops the skills that he or she will need to teach effectively in the regular classroom.

Anxieties over the legitimacy of “classroom authority” are largely avoided in UAH’s Writing Studio by making the studio leaders function as student mentors whose goal is to support instruction rather than assess performance. This positioning of the GTA as studio leader has the potential to combat some of the challenges contributors to this collection have experienced when trying to maintain a distinction between the FYC and individual studio sections. For example, while Fraizer insists on the importance of having faculty who teach Studio also teach FYC classes so that studio discussion can arise from shared experiences teaching FYC, such dialogue can pose challenges when instructors’ beliefs about writing expectations and student learning fail to align. However, placing GTAs as studio facilitators might help to both preserve the Studio’s status as a third-space and also eliminate some of the possible barriers to constructive dialogue among FYC instructors. In our model, because the studio leader is *not* an FYC instructor, the GTA, along with the Studio itself, can exist outside but alongside the main course. The result is that GTA becomes a neutral resource for student support. Such a position empowers students to be responsible for the expectations of their own FYC instructor, but they can use studio and the GTA-facilitator to help them navigate the challenges of those expectations. Moreover, this positioning helps to alleviate the apprehension that many GTAs have about grading student work and allows them time to hone their assessment skills. As one of our GTAs put it, “If I would have had to teach a regular composition class right away, I would have been especially apprehensive about the grading component; you know, how do you set your standards for grading? What do you use as your base?” By teaching Studio first, graduate students are given a space to discover the answers to these questions. Free from the responsibility of grading, they are able to effectively embody the role of writing guide while they develop the skills necessary to become better teachers and more confident writing assessors. Embedded in this structure is time for more experienced instructors to introduce graduate students to different assessment strategies. Of this aspect of the program, one of the GTAs explained: “We [both the studio leaders and the main course instructors] did a group grading of student portfolios at the end of the semester, and this really helped me learn how to grade. . . . Now I feel much more comfortable with the grading aspect of teaching a composition class in the future.” In this way, graduate students become more comfortable with assessing student writing before they are tasked with the responsibility of evaluating

an entire composition class. By placing a GTA in the role of studio instructor instead of a veteran teacher, Studio becomes both a space for students to take control over their own learning and one for GTAs to develop their facility as new teachers in a low-stakes environment.

2. USING GTAs AS STUDIO LEADERS ALLOWS THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE STUDENTS OF TEACHING AND WRITING PEDAGOGY BY OBSERVING AND LEARNING FROM VETERAN INSTRUCTORS AND COLLEAGUES

Through required observations of the main composition class, studio leaders are able to see pedagogy in action and learn from the more experienced instructors in charge of the main composition course. Professor Word (personal communication, spring 2014) emphasized this benefit as one of the foundational principles of UAH's transition into the studio approach: "In this model of the GTA running Studio and attending [the class], [the graduate students] can actually be really conscious about what is going on pedagogically." They "can learn to see what works and what doesn't work for [the teacher they are observing]" on the way to developing their own personal pedagogy.

Studio leaders themselves often commented on this advantage to their pedagogical growth. For example, of their experience, one GTA recalled: "I was able to see how different approaches to writing worked and how I might incorporate them into my own teaching." A former GTA, who now holds a full-time lecturer position at a small, southern liberal arts college, admitted: "Honestly, I feel like I would not feel [prepared] if I had not had the experience within the Writing Studio at UAH because I would not have gotten the opportunity to engage with all the different pedagogical choices that go into teaching these writers who are at a most vulnerable position in their college career." Similarly, another studio leader found herself learning not just from the seasoned instructors, but also from her graduate student colleagues: "If I had a question about an assignment we were teaching, I would hop in on another GTA's Studio and see how she approached it. . . . For me, overcoming and learning was more about peer education and being able to observe other teachers teaching, seeing how different teachers and styles of teaching came together."

Along with regular observations of the main composition course, studio leaders were also tasked with planning for and teaching that main course at least one time in the semester's second half. This experience allowed the graduate students to get a feel for a full-length composition class and practice interacting with a group of 25 students prior to taking on a section of their own. One studio leader commented specifically on this experience, saying that "having taught the main course on a few occasions in front of these same students helped me feel

more at ease with a larger classroom.” She admitted, “The first two weeks [of the semester] were overwhelming simply because I felt unprepared and unqualified, but as things progressed, it became easier for me, and I developed a little more confidence.” Most significantly, she attributed this confidence to her time observing and teaching the main course section: “The observations helped me tremendously; [now,] if I were placed in a classroom of 25 students, I’d be prepared because of the guidance and teaching methods I received from [the main course instructor].”

Besides experiencing an increased understanding of the complexities surrounding writing instruction, the graduate students became attuned to the effect that external and institutional factors can have on the interactions between students and teachers. Just as in Grego and Thompson’s (2008) Studio approach, which encourages “studio communication both with teachers and with other group leaders,” the Writing Studio model at UAH also incorporates regular meetings between the composition instructors and studio leaders, and these meetings often reveal the communicative and institutional barriers that can affect the way students understand or misunderstand classroom expectations (p. 160). Much like the instructor blog discussed by Leach and Kuhne in this collection, these meetings provided space for the process of interactional inquiry. In these weekly meetings instructors and GTAs could share lesson plans, get feedback on different approaches to teaching, and raise concerns about individual students. For example, one of our studio leaders explained how the weekly meetings helped her formulate different approaches to teaching unfamiliar concepts: “I think collaboration helped us come up with strategies for teaching subjects that we were a little bit afraid of approaching.” Another agreed, suggesting that one of the strengths of the weekly meetings was “being able, when you weren’t sure how to approach a paper or a specific aspect of writing, to talk it through with the instructors and the GTAs who had taught it before.” These meetings helped the studio leaders solve problems but also informed the main course instructors of areas where their students were struggling. Indeed, like the constructive pedagogical exchange that Fraizer identifies as a by-product of the studio environment, in our model, these meetings also promoted collegial dialogue in a slightly different way. Because they are weekly attendees of the main FYC, the GTAs are able to be part of a dialogue between FYC instructors and FYC students. The composition students often felt more comfortable admitting to the studio leaders when they were having trouble, so by keeping regular lines of communication between studio leaders and course instructors, the course instructor could alter their lessons to address these troublesome areas. Thus, the GTAs in our model function as mediators between FYC students and instructors, carrying to the weekly meetings the voice of their students. According to one of the GTAs, this communication “could really inform the main section, the instruc-

tor's section" so "we [the studio leaders] were able to catch a lot of problems before students turned in a pile of drafts and, you know, nobody had a thesis statement." Through these interactions, the graduate students learned a lesson in evaluation and transparency, becoming aware of how much they must assess student understanding as part of their own pedagogy, and why it is important to make both their course expectations and assignment instructions as straight-forward as possible. Moreover the dialogue that takes place within these weekly meetings fosters collegiality between graduate students and faculty, offering graduate students an important role and voice within the institutional framework of the department.

3. THE INTIMATE AND STUDENT-DRIVEN NATURE OF THE STUDIO CLASS PROVIDES NEW GRADUATE STUDENTS WITH AN EXCEPTIONAL SPACE TO EXAMINE STUDENT WRITING AND EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

Because the number of students in studio groups at UAH was limited to fewer than 10, studio leaders were able to design and implement instructional plans specific to their students' writing needs without having to worry about the attention to classroom management procedures necessitated by larger classes. As Frost explained:

Part of the beauty of Studio as a mentoring program for future teachers is simply that it is pretty delightful to teach a writing class with just 8 students. Never in America is that possible, as we are constantly fighting caps. . . . Some composition classes now function at an utmost of 35 students, so one of the most beneficial aspects of the Studio program is that the GTAs get to be immersed in student writing, but in a small volume (personal communication, spring 2014).

Indeed, the small, intimate nature of the studio classroom immerses graduate students in student writing without overwhelming them. They learn from that writing how to identify the areas where their students need the most instruction and can experiment with different pedagogical practices in order to address those needs.

This process of practical application is captured in one GTA's reflection on teaching Studio:

I learned more by teaching Studio than [from] the pedagogy class I took. It's a complete hands-on experience. And your students are more than willing to learn with you. They are

fine with it, and they like it. I would bring in my own writing in class. And that was great to be able to collaborate with everybody, and learn from other people's challenges and how they overcame it. A little stressful at the time, but I think the things I learned in Studio I'll take with me, because you were forced to learn it, really learn it.

Through their teaching experience, studio leaders gain the skills and confidence needed to feel comfortable teaching a regular-sized composition class in the future. Such confidence is apparent in one studio leader's admission that "the training and mentoring of the Studio program made me adequately prepared to deal with a classroom of 25 students because it caused me to meet with the students on an interpersonal level that I might not have ever considered if I did not work with such small groups on a daily basis." Another GTA commented on how being able to comment on a small volume of student papers helped him to see student writing differently, and this impacted his grading when he moved on to teach larger composition classes. According to him, the studio classes

helped me engage with [his students'] writing on a smaller scale, which in turn helped me to learn to like what it was that my students were writing. This helped me to sharpen my skills of looking through what others might consider to be "bad" writing and find the great writers that my students could be in the midst of this. This has helped me when it comes to my larger classrooms because I shy away from that "these kids today" mentality and try to find the inner writer inside each of my students.

Clearly, the intimate setting of the Writing Studio allows GTAs the space and opportunity to really engage with and, in some cases, appreciate the approach to writing that uniquely characterizes each of their students.

4. TEACHING IN THE STUDIO ENVIRONMENT AFFORDS GTAs AN EXPERIMENTAL SPACE TO DISCOVER, REDEFINE, AND/OR DEVELOP THEIR OWN INDIVIDUAL PHILOSOPHY ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Perhaps the most obvious benefit to GTAs who participated in the UAH Writing Studio was the opportunity to refine and, in some cases, develop from scratch a unique writing pedagogy. Almost all of the GTAs came into the program without a solid grasp of how to teach writing: one admitted, "I didn't even know what a writing pedagogy was when I started teaching;" and another said, "We

had to write a pedagogy for our writing pedagogy class, but it was all theory. It was not anything that I really strongly believed in or had put into practice.” However, by the end of their studio experience, many of the GTAs shared that in addition to gaining a more confident and advanced instructional framework, their own pedagogical ideals about the teaching of writing began to take on a more definite shape. One commented on how “the theoretical and the practical merged as I taught more Studio,” insisting that “Studio definitely influenced my pedagogy. I came into the program very uninitiated. This whole idea of pedagogy and pedagogical ideas is something that I’ve only been thinking about and playing with for the past year. I can assume that my pedagogy will continue to change and develop as I gain more experience.”

Several of the graduate students realized that the only way to truly learn how to teach writing was by doing it, and Studio offered an ideal setting for this practical experience to take place. Summing up this revelation, a former GTA explained:

Since there was not a lot of formal training up front, Studio kind of stands in and acts as that training. I don’t think that you can really learn how to teach without doing it. You can read about and see great teachers, but you have to put that into practice. Emulating teachers that you’ve had in the past that you’ve liked [is] kind of how I approached the practice of teaching. You just have to practice over and over again until you find something that works, and I really think that getting that opportunity alone is what was the most beneficial. Having all of these students in a smaller setting helped to relax me and allowed me to ease into this new experience teaching.

All of the graduate students agreed that their time leading Studio taught them indispensable knowledge about instructional pedagogy. Perhaps more importantly, however, were the discoveries they made about the unique challenges that come with the teaching of writing.

One common realization among the studio leaders was that writing instruction demands a flexible approach. They talked about how they originally saw writing instruction as “teacher-centric,” “sterile,” and “formulaic,” but discovered through their experiences as GTAs that the process was in fact “messy,” “not linear,” and “pragmatic.” One graduate student in particular realized that writing is “not cut and dry . . . you have to step back as a teacher and let your students move through the writing process in whatever way they feel most comfortable.” She learned, “You kind of have to be a good coach [through the writing process] rather than a teacher.” Frost spoke to this point by referencing the studio space

as one of experimentation and discovery: “One of the strengths of the Studio program and having the GTAs in that Studio is that each GTA has to solve their students’ writing problems on the fly . . . I’ve seen people come up with creative ways to make sure that students understand the material being taught” (personal communication, spring 2014). Indeed, many of the GTAs commented on their responsibility to be flexible and “to react to the class’ needs,” a profound challenge for even seasoned instructors. One GTA noticed her teaching developing from “simply having to adjust to the dynamics of each of my different studio sections.” She went on to explain, “While I would have the same goal or idea in mind for class, the way that I approached that idea would change based on the individual section. I learned to be adaptable and creative in thinking of ways to get the students involved and interested in the ideas. This was a challenge at first, but it was something that I think I got better at as the semester evolved.” That these discoveries were made prior to the GTAs taking on the responsibilities of teaching a regular composition class is one of the great strengths of using the Writing Studio in this capacity.

Another strength of the GTA-led Writing Studio is that the small, flexible nature of the class allows studio leaders the freedom to try a range of teaching strategies. Since the studio sessions are supplemental to the regular class, GTAs are not required to stick to formulaic methods for teaching students content covered in the main class but can experiment to find out what works best for the students in their small sections. In the words of one GTA: “Studio functioned as somewhat of a testing ground to get a feel for teaching.” This was a place where he would develop “mini-lesson plans . . . to convey the material [from the regular composition course] to students in new and exciting ways.” In the process, the GTAs were constantly learning new things about how to teach writing. One noted a compelling change to her pedagogical practices:

I realized that teaching can’t be completely organized, that it can be very messy at times. Each student in your classroom is different, each classroom dynamic is different, so as I went through Studio I think I became much more student centered . . . I shifted from me being a ring leader, to pushing my students from the center.

This “student centeredness” is what now characterizes the teaching she does in her regular composition classes: “[Teaching Studio] completely changed the way I teach. From seeing teaching as this idea of professing knowledge, to asking questions, and getting them to tell you instead . . . it’s almost like a different way of just leading a conversation, to get them to think” on their own. The immense amount of pedagogical growth experienced by the studio leaders at UAH sug-

gests that this model of teacher training would also benefit the development of graduate student teachers and composition programs at other institutions.

CONCLUSION

Based on the evidence gathered from interviews with GTAs and English faculty, it is clear that the dialogue taking place within UAH's Writing Studio allows for the studio leaders to advance their writing and instructional abilities. Rather than being thrown immediately into teaching several freshman composition courses with little to no instruction or experience, the graduate students instead spend a semester acting as studio leaders before taking on the full responsibility of a composition course. This organization provides the graduate students with the opportunity to develop skills in classroom management, writing instruction, and lesson planning while not being overwhelmed with the responsibility of formally evaluating student work. Working in conjunction with a more seasoned instructor, graduate students learn strategies for teaching and assessing student writing, and also have the chance to see pedagogy in action. This unique setup allows both the students and the studio leaders to develop an academic relationship without the added pressure of strict assessments and furnishes a space for the graduate students to practice and experiment with different instructional methods. In the words of one GTA, "Studio was a safe space for me to discover my interest and ability in teaching with few dire consequences. . . . [It] functioned as something of a testing ground to get a feel for the teaching experience." Furthermore, for some graduate students, this experience helped to reinforce their own ambitions for work within the academy. Such reinforcement is clear in one GTA's revelation on the influence of the studio experience on her own scholarly development:

I would not have felt the way I do now about teaching if I didn't have the chance to teach Studio. It is such an effective way to get a feel of what will be expected in the freshman composition classes. Not only that, but after teaching Studio, it reassured me that I in fact would like to do this [teach] at a collegiate level for the rest of my life. It is so refreshing when a student is able to understand and appreciate something and know that I am the reason for this level of comprehension. Coming to UAH to do what I love each day is never referred to as a "work day." I'm just having fun.

This mode of teacher training sends the studio leaders away from their first semester of graduate school with the makings of a working writing pedagogy,

and in some cases, they leave feeling more fully solidified and confident in their individual career aspirations. Most importantly, after first facilitating a writing studio, GTAs find themselves better equipped to teach a freshman composition course of their own.

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