

PROGRAM PROFILE 10.

**TEACHING TEACHING AS A
PROCESS: SAN JOSÉ STATE
UNIVERSITY'S TA PROGRAM
AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
PEDAGOGICAL THINKING**

**Ume Ali, Ariel Andrew, Rachel Crawford,
Steven Domingo, Julia Dunn, Jessie Fussell,
Olivia Lee, Alayna Mills, Jillian Murphy,
Alexis Rocha, Lisa Rose, Elizabeth Rosser,
Ryan Skinnell, Amber Sylva, and Claire Tromblee**

San José State University

San José State University (SJSU) is a large, urban, regional-comprehensive university in the heart of Silicon Valley. SJSU is both an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI) and a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and enrolls more than 25,000 undergraduate students each year and an additional 8,000+ graduate students, primarily at the master's level. The university is big, diverse, and complex. SJSU's first-year writing program offers four different writing courses and enrolls between 6,000-8,000 students each year. Internal research has shown that more than 75% of first-year writing students come from multilingual backgrounds. In the English department, there are graduate programs in literature and creative writing, from which the TA program recruits approximately 5-10 new TAs each year to teach first-year writing.

The characteristics that make SJSU unique—the diversity, location, size, and regional-comprehensive mission—also present challenges for people hired into SJSU's English teaching associate (TA) program. For one, most of the students hired as TAs are wholly unfamiliar with rhetoric and composition, which is the pedagogical and theoretical backbone of the writing program. That means they have to learn a whole new discipline at the same time they're pursuing their degree. But equally, if not more, important is that TAs have to learn to teach writing, teach students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and do it all well in—on average—2-3 years. It is a serious challenge, both for the

program and for the people who become TAs, to support new teachers' development under these conditions.

In this chapter, 15 co-authors—14 current and former TAs and 1 tenured-faculty TA coordinator—define and reflect on how SJSU's TA program invites new teachers into the teaching process. We contend that the primary strength of SJSU's TA program is its commitment to process—we teach teaching like we teach writing. TAs begin as graduate students who are excellent learners and writers in their own areas of study. Like a composition course, the program is designed to build on students' skills by incorporating the same recursive practices of the writing process—planning, production, revision, and reflection—to foster TAs' growth as teachers. The program also incorporates peer and faculty feedback, community-building, and professionalization through curricular, formal, and informal professionalization practices with the goal of supporting TAs' growth even beyond their time teaching at SJSU.

CURRICULAR SUPPORT

The first step for students preparing to be TAs in the SJSU English department is completing the required graduate-level course, "English 259: Seminar in Composition Studies." It is the only formal curricular requirement for aspiring SJSU TAs. Just as English 1A: First-Year Writing represents the undergraduate's first formal introduction to college-level composition, for many TAs in the SJSU English Master's program, English 259 is their first formal introduction to composition theory.

In English 259, students learn to analyze and evaluate current approaches to studying and teaching composition. In the process, they engage in productive discussions about teaching methods and how new teachers might apply different methods to the goals and objectives of first-year composition classes at SJSU and beyond. And they produce materials that will be relevant for applying to and teaching in the program.

No fewer than four faculty instructors regularly teach English 259, and while each faculty instructor takes their own approach to teaching the course, they each structure the class to represent not only diverse perspectives about the most effective approaches to teaching first-year composition, but also a diversity of voices within the field of rhetoric and composition. The result is a classroom environment that fosters healthy discussion and debate, where students can challenge and be challenged by the readings, their classmates, and their instructor. Once these students become TAs, they continue to expand and deepen that practice by supporting and challenging their TA colleagues in formal meetings and informal networking. Students who have taken English 259 under different

instructors go on to interact in different ways within the program, in ways we describe below. The result is that we exchange an even wider range of pedagogical approaches, influences, and smaller goals, which are afforded by the larger schema of the class.

As former TAs, we generally agree that learning the vocabulary and theory to enter a discussion about composition pedagogy and defend our stances has been the most lasting and important skill we learned in the program, and 259 is crucial to this process. Whether it is in the classroom or outside of it, being able to synthesize the many debates relevant to a discipline and make appropriate decisions to inform our work is invaluable. When TAs with this experience enter the first-year writing classroom, not only are we able to tell students what is expected of them, but why.

In addition, the discussions of composition pedagogy in English 259 often push students to recognize the pre-existing opinions they have formed about teaching in their decades as students. For those of us who became TAs after taking 259, many of these opinions stem from learning experiences we found constructive, but also many that seemed to us detrimental.

Given the challenges we noted in the introduction, English 259 was a vital component of our development as teachers. The seminar course encouraged us to question our opinions about teaching, consider where these opinions came from, formalize our goals as educators, and evaluate which approaches would allow us to accomplish them best. As we began to develop our own sense of being teachers, having the experiential awareness in English allowed us to recognize the importance of balancing an intellectually challenging classroom with a welcoming, supportive atmosphere.

Once we finally became TAs, we sought to replicate in our writing classrooms the process of metacognition that we learned to value in English 259. We recognized that undergraduate students enter with pre-existing opinions about writing, and we worked to give our students the theoretical framework, language, and tools to examine those opinions and make informed choices in their writing. SJSU's TA program taught us to teach like we teach writing.

To this point, we have focused on English 259 because it is the backbone of the curricular options and the only required prerequisite for TAs. But despite not being a formal program in rhetoric and composition, SJSU's English department offers other courses through which prospective and current TAs network think about pedagogy. The Professional and Technical Writing program invites graduate students to explore practical applications of rhetoric that can easily be translated to the context of a first-year writing classroom. TAs can also create independent study courses where they work closely with SJSU English professors to further explore specific areas of rhetoric and/or

composition, including L2 writing and New Media. There is also a graduate elective in the history of rhetoric that is regularly offered. Although the curricular support the department offers is mostly elective for TAs, it nevertheless demonstrates that “teaching teaching like we teach writing” means TAs, like their writing students, have multiple inroads for learning and development. And each inroad gives TAs the tools to make informed choices in the classroom and expand both their breadth of rhetorical knowledge and their network of compassionate teachers.

FORMAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

While English 259 is the only formal curricular requirement for SJSU TAs, it is not the only formal requirement. In addition, the program coordinator oversees formal professional development throughout TAs’ time in the program—trainings, mentoring and feedback, and shared assessment practices—which helps them be more effective in the classroom.

Prior to the first semester of teaching, TAs attend two mandatory training sessions. The program coordinator provides information on course requirements, teaching culture, and classroom planning. During the summer before they enter the classroom, TAs generate a course syllabus that focuses on the General Education Learning Outcomes (GELOs) and major writing assignments. In the second training session, right before the semester begins, TAs practice the writing process (particularly getting feedback and revision) by workshopping their syllabi and assignment sheets with each other and the TA coordinator. The workshop also gives TAs access to one another’s teaching methods.

Once they begin teaching, TAs attend required bi-weekly meetings that focus on just-in-time discussions about teaching practices. We discuss lesson plans, writing assignments, and real-time classroom experiences, as well as building community amongst ourselves. Even though the program coordinator facilitates these meetings, we have agency to express concerns, share teaching artifacts, and workshop our courses. This again captures the essence of the writing process. We are continuously generating ideas for lessons, implementing them, getting feedback from peers and mentors, and then revising.

Apart from bi-weekly meetings, TAs also undergo two formal observations by the program coordinators during the course of their TAship—once in their first semester teaching and once in their last (plus any additional ones we request). TAs choose the specific class session we want observed, and we provide a lesson plan, access to Canvas, and any relevant course materials to the observer. We meet before the observation to express any teaching concerns and goals with our observer, which allows for more focused observations and generative discussions.

Following the class, we meet again to discuss the observation. Our observers provide specific, intentional feedback regarding teaching practices, including class conduct, student engagement, pedagogy, or class activities. Although it was somewhat nerve-wracking to have the TA coordinator watching us, they are formative rather than evaluative. As such, we came to rely on the constructive dialogue and insights to help us adjust our ongoing teaching practices.

The observations also help the faculty/program leads who process the individual observations into the larger schema of trials and trends that they can use to support future TA classes. This cycle of information has been particularly valuable for those of us teaching during the pandemic. Because of the trust we've built and the recursive process of input and refinement, we were able to efficiently and iteratively modify our teaching practices while adapting to distance-learning. Essentially, the elaborate observation process constitutes a robust learning system between coordinators and TAs, which enables all of us to adjust and improve the strategies in our collective teaching repertoire.

Another formal aspect of the TA training is a shared assessment activity. Each semester, every student enrolled in first-year writing produces a portfolio and reflective essay about their writing progress. The TAs, along with all the other first-year writing instructors, assess whether students have effectively argued and provided strong evidence for the case that they developed as writers. During norming sessions, TAs and instructors gather to evaluate sample reflections on the rubric. From this process, (1) we are included as members of the larger teaching community, and (2) we gain insight about how to evaluate student writing with other teachers in the program. It is both a professional and pedagogical process.

At the end of each semester, the program coordinators pair instructors to assess each other's student reflections. In the process, we gain insight into what other instructors do in their classrooms. The reflections show each TA how well we taught the material to students, and we have the opportunity to revise our teaching practices in successive semesters based on information we glean from our students' reflections. The act of revising lesson plans based on student performance from one semester to the next helps us sharpen our confidence in designing assignments based on course objectives.

Finally, although not specific to the TA program, the first-year writing program also offers workshops, presentations, and other formal developmental activities on a regular basis, which all TAs have access to, and are in fact, encouraged to take advantage of alongside their faculty colleagues. The combination of training, feedback, assessment, and other formal practices in the program helps TAs view themselves as teachers and their teaching as an interactive, flexible process of growth and development over time.

INFORMAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The formal training we each received in the TA program (classes, trainings, workshops, and feedback and assessment practices) was extensive, even if we all came to it through different avenues. And while it was undoubtedly helpful for us to become writing instructors, the informal support systems we developed outside the program turned out to be just as important in our developing identities as teachers. Through brief hallway conversations in our office buildings, coffee meetups before class, and social media chat groups, we found, in one way or another, ways to connect and create community among ourselves that allowed us to explore our teaching ideas in low-stakes environments.

Some of us have come to think of these informal support structures in terms of what Robert Brooke called “underlife”: those behaviors which undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation in order for them to show that they inhabit more complex identities (141). In our informal spaces, we process in real time our experiences as TAs. As new writing instructors, every lesson planning session, class meeting, assignment, and student interaction seems to offer challenges and insights that shape our teaching identities and goals. Yet it can be hard to make time and space to articulate the feelings and non-academic identities we have in conjunction with this work. While bi-weekly TA meetings and coordinator office hours are helpful, sometimes it is through informal text messages about minor hiccups in the classroom or dinner discussions about possible writing activities that we are able to share lessons, strategies, concerns, and mistakes openly.

Analogous to our students’ drafting process, our teaching associate community creates a welcoming environment for experimentation, peer feedback, and pedagogical revision. This community-building is encouraged and supported by the program, but not facilitated or overseen by it. In addition to the tangible and practical benefits of sharing resources, we are able to model for ourselves the processes we wish to impart to our students. The “workshop” nature of our informal conversations encourages us to be collaborative and reflective; oftentimes in giving feedback to each other, we generate new ideas or we’re able to clarify issues in our own classrooms. As teaching associates negotiating between roles as students and teachers, the informal support we receive from this community helps us feel more confident in claiming our identities as teachers.

This informal space, where we are able to process, listen, learn from each other, test norms, and laugh—is a small but deeply important aspect of our experiences as TAs, where we can incorporate our new identities as teachers into our whole selves, and therein, become better instructors. In these moments, we are not just TAs in the San Jose State Writing Program scrambling to adhere to program requirements or grade papers, but individual teachers with unique voices, needs, and contributions.

CONCLUSION

While writing this chapter, we have thought together about what the SJSU TA program has contributed to our lives and careers. Among the 14 of us who are current or former SJSU TAs, we have charted success in many different directions—academic and non-academic publications, grants, awards, conference presentations, growing families, new jobs, professional promotions, leadership positions, and more. It is hard to know how directly to connect any of these successes to the TA program. But as a group, we agree the process of becoming teachers helped us learn to plan, produce, get feedback about, and revise our lives in ways that contribute to our success.

Notably, not all of us intend to go into college teaching. Some of us are still teaching in SJSU's TA program while others teach writing at community colleges or in other SJSU departments. But some of us moved into other areas of education, including student success and K-12 administration. A few of us took industry jobs, and others are pursuing Ph.D.s. A few of us have become more involved in rhetoric and composition while others of us recommitted to literary studies and/or creative writing.

To return to our “we teach teaching like we teach writing” analogy, the TA program mirrors a writing class. From the moment we enter English 259, we begin to think metacognitively about our roles as students while gradually reconciling our “teacher-student” identities. The formal elements of the program push us to think intentionally about our professional goals and decisions, build knowledge, and get our footing, just as first-year writing students in ENGL 1A build a foundation for the writing they'll do throughout their lives. Simultaneously, the informal elements are sources of validation, guidance, and moral support. Stepping into the writing classroom, TAs embark on a process of drafting and revising our work—that is, we put our philosophies into practice and make adjustments based on new knowledge and best practices we accumulate through trial and error. And when we exit the program, we are equipped with skills that help us thrive in a range of subsequent undertakings. We maintain that the central success of SJSU's TA program is that it draws upon our diverse paths and experiences and frames them as a source of strength, which helps us learn to teach and lead. Our paths will all go different directions, but we are confident that we have useful processes to draw on along the way.

WORKS CITED

Brooke, Robert. “Underlife and Writing Instruction.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1987, pp. 141-53.