Making Waves with TA Training and Mentoring: The Ripple Effect of Engaging Disciplinary TAs in WAC/WID

Brock MacDonald & Andrea Williams

University of Toronto

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Goal of Study

Examine impact of participation in a WID/WAC program on disciplinary Graduate Teaching Assistants with respect to professional identity formation, career path, and ideas about teaching and writing.

Literature Review

Hedengren, B. F. (2001). TA training across the curriculum: Covert catalyst for   change. Paper presented at the National Writing Across the Curriculum conference, Bloomington, IN.

Hedengren, B. F. (2004). *A TA's guide to teaching writing in all disciplines*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's.

Rodrigue, Tanya K. (2012) "The (in)visible world of teaching assistants in the disciplines: Preparing TAs to teach writing." *Across the Disciplines: A Journal of Language, Learning, and Academic Writing.* 9 (1).

Rodrigue, Tanya K. (2013). Listening across the curriculum: What disciplinary TAs can teach us about TA professional development in the teaching of writing. *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*. 2 (2).

Zawacki, T. M. (2008). Writing fellows as WAC change agents: Changing what? Changing whom? Changing how?   [Special issue on Writing Fellows]. *Across the Disciplines*, 5.

Method

Semi-structured interviews with current and former graduate TAs who participated in University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts & Science WAC/WID program, WIT (Writing Instruction for TAs)

Context for study: WIT at U of T

- A WAC/WID program in the Faculty of Arts & Sciences at the University of Toronto, a large research intensive-university
- Launched in 2008-09 with two departments participating; 19 departments participated in 2013-14

- Who are our participants?
  - advanced disciplinary PhD students hired by their home departments to work as Lead Writing TAs
  - Supervised, trained in writing instruction, and mentored by the WAC/WID Coordinator

- What do LWTAs do?
  - Consult with *faculty* on curriculum development and assignment design
  - Train and support *course TAs* in responding to and evaluating student writing and integrating writing activities into labs and tutorials

Participants

Department	Years as LWTA	Current Role
Anthropology	2	6th-year PhD
Cell & Systems Biology	2 1	4th-year PhD 6th-year PhD
Chemistry	1	3rd-year PhD
Chemistry	2	Sessional instructor
Criminology	1	4th-year PhD
Earth Sciences	1	5th-year PhD
Ecology & Evolutionary Biology	4	LWTA and 5th-year PhD
Geography	1 1 1	LWTA & 4th-year PhD 5th-year PhD Associate Professor, U of Regina
History	2	Sessional instructor
Mathematics	3	LWTA and 5th-year PhD
Near & Middle Eastern Civilizations	1	LWTA and 3rd-year PhD
Philosophy	3	Assistant professor in US R-2 state university
Religion	3	Lecturer at an Ivey League
Women & Gender Studies	2	Faculty Developer at a research university

Interview Questions

Questions based on literature review and focus on:

- Participants' understanding/experience of writing as undergraduates
- Participants' TA training and experience before WIT
- Impact of WIT training and experience on participants'
  - Teaching
  - Teaching writing
  - Writing in discipline
  - Writing in general (including their own)
  - Professional goals

Undergraduate writing

When I got to third year I had the opportunity to write actual papers and those ended up being the courses that I enjoyed the most because they allowed me to actually make an argument about something and synthesize my knowledge and do some research and actually be able to come up with something new that I felt I had a little bit of ownership of. Writing tied in pretty closely to my reasons for going to grad school because that was how I got turned onto the idea of it . . it got me into . . . what am I trying to say . . exploring beyond what I was just told.

Chemistry LWTA 1

Undergraduate Writing

Being encouraged and in some cases being required to write like you were writing for an academic journal helped you better understand how to read and absorb the information in currently published works. My ability to use current literature to a more complete extent was directed and facilitated by being required to write like that . . . I think that you become a better reader when you write in a lot of ways.

Chemistry LWTA 2

TA Training

None! No training. It was assumed I'd have the ability to evaluate writing walking in, which my experience later has shown me is not a good assumption to make for TAs. We all come with very different backgrounds and different sets of experience so assuming that a TA can evaluate writing is not necessarily a good assumption.

Earth Sciences LWTA

None--none at all.

Math LWTA

TA Training

We weren't explicitly told to teach writing, nor were we given explicit kind of breaking down how to approach giving feedback, aside from the first time TA training that everyone gets when they first arrive, you know. Grading was kind of, something, you just gave comments, you just reacted to a student's writing, and then in terms of writing instruction, at most, an instructor might say, "can you go over the assignment when we hand it out, make sure the students understand the 12-point font, staple, put your student number, make sure there's an intro," like very kind of basic basic stuff, nothing beyond that, maybe pointing to a few websites that treated philosophical writing.

Philosophy LWTA

TA Experience

In most of our courses the students would hand in written proofs, and we had to give these some sort of grade, and some instructors had the opinion that if the proof was mathematically correct it should get full grades, other instructors felt that if it was correct but impossible to follow it should not get full grades and so assessing writing was part of the job depending on who was running the course.

Math LWTA 1

Impacts of WIT Experience

It taught me how to be a more interactive teacher and also how to use writing to reinforce learning rather than just as an evaluation tool. Like using the kind of quick free writing exercises in a lab helps reinforce learning as you go rather than just having a big research paper at the end and have that be the writing component. So to really integrate writing into the learning rather than just have it as an evaluation tool.

Earth Sciences LWTA

Impacts of WIT Experience

. . . not to say that WIT is at all a hand holding program, it's not, but WIT made me realize and this is a more holistic description: you don't have to pander to students in order to help them. So I think that the most important thing I learned is that you don't have to be cold and critical of everything just for the sake of a mark *per se*: but you can have a conversation with the student about how they can do better without doing it for them.

Chemistry LWTA 2

Impacts of WIT Experience

You don't have to make things easier, but it's very important to tell people what they're doing wrong and it's also important to tell people what they're doing right. And U of T doesn't tell you what you're doing right very often. You're lucky if they even tell you what you're doing wrong, apart from you just seeing a number (grade).

The most useful skill I took away from this is to assume the student wants to learn and tell them how they can do that if that makes any sense as opposed to just letting them make mistakes with no positive or negative conversation regarding that. And it doesn't even have to be oral: you can communicate this through comments on written work and WIT trains you on how to do that effectively.

Chemistry LWTA 2

Impacts of WIT Experience

Meeting with the other LWTAs is a great opportunity to talk to other people who take teaching seriously, which at a university like this isn't everyone.

Math LWTA 1

One of the new things I got out of WIT was working with other graduate students from different disciplines and being reminded that writing—the expectations—are very different across the sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities. And it was very refreshing to hear about some of the common struggles with other TAs.

Criminology LWTA

Impacts of WIT Experience

I stopped thinking of it as teaching and started thinking of it as helping people learn, which was so much easier. Teaching in my mind before this was "I have some knowledge and I want to have this knowledge and I just need to figure out how to express it" and then I started figuring out the skills that they're lacking and then I started to teach towards the skills and not the content and these skills go with this content. The more I teach the more time I spend pointing out how we learned a thing and how they could go off and learn other things the same way.

Math LWTA 2

Impacts of WIT Experience

I went into math thinking things were are either right or wrong but there are plenty of shades of grey [laughs] and you express things matters and matters culturally so If you express things the wrong way they'll think you're a crackpot. It might be the right math but if you don't put in the right details and the level of rigor and the wrong words then no one cares.

Math LWTA 2

Impacts of WIT Experience

I was a very meticulous type of writer all through undergrad and most of grad school . . . I was always very focused on the finished product. . . . I would spend a lot of time on sentences and paragraphs and not move on until it was really polished and quite frankly that practice needs to go out the window when you're embarking on your dissertation or a master's thesis because [laughs] you'll never get anywhere unless you're ok with the fact that you're going to break writing down into different parts, you're going to collaborate with others and get feedback and learn how to incorporate that feedback so that writing process was really valuable . . .

Criminology LWTA

Impact on career path

Because I got to be involved in high-level teaching issues such as curriculum development and course development and assignment design the program encouraged my love of teaching and made me consider a more teaching-heavy role. A lot of the time in the sciences or at least my disciplines, teaching is considered lesser than research so to actually be able to admit you want a teaching role is almost something you're ashamed to admit.

WIT convinced me that a pure research role isn't something I want. A pure research role is something we're taught to desire and work towards—kind of the holy grail of positions—but a more teaching-involved role is definitely where I'd be happiest.

Earth Sciences LWTA

Impact on career path

I came into graduate school intending to go on to be an academic and that's still true, but what might have happened is that it's changed my view of what that means, what it means to do well at that. There's sort of two things, there's the teaching and the research, and both of those, I think my view of how they can be done well has changed, by understanding writing in a broader context.

Math LWTA 1

What did you gain most from the experience?

[after a long pause] A voice, in terms of being able to talk about teaching, which is not something that is necessarily done in disciplines in which, as a profession, where there's research research research, there isn't much talk about teaching and so this really gave me the space, and the voice, to talk about teaching, and talk about making changes to, you know, assignment design, course design, curriculum design, all these things.

I always knew that I was not suited to like a big R1 institution, that was never my big goal, but this really allowed me to get a sense of where I wanted to be, and I wanted to be somewhere that would give me, that would value me for both my teaching interests and my research interests, so not solely teaching, I do have research interests, but I need to be valued for both, and I need to be able to pursue both, and I need to have a voice in both.

Philosophy LWTA

Preliminary Findings

1. Writing was the key way participants engaged with their discipline as undergraduates.
2. Pre-WIT, all LWTAs had graded writing (under intense time constraints), yet mostly without any training or guidance.
3. WIT changed their thinking about writing from being a tool for evaluation to a tool for teaching and learning.
4. Shift in teaching philosophy: from "sink or swim" to teach and support.
5. Most started graduate studies with plans to research but participation in WIT made some consider a more teaching-focused career path.

Next Steps

1. Complete interviews
2. Transcribe and code interviews
3. Compile code data and assess: preliminary findings confirmed? Additional findings or qualifications?
4. Possibility of follow-up second interviews if necessary for clarification

Thank you!