

Looking through Narrow Windows: Problem-Setting and Problem-Solving Strategies of Novice Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This article presents results from a qualitative study of the development of teaching knowledge among twelve novice graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) of college composition. Contributing to recent empirical research in composition studies about the processes by which GTAs learn to teach writing and adopt a professional teaching identity, this study examines how GTAs cultivate adaptive expertise through critical reflection on teaching challenges. Analysis of 30 semi-structured interviews revealed that GTAs located teaching challenges in students, curriculum, classroom management, and pedagogy. GTAs rarely used problem-solving strategies that would help them understand and avoid problems, and they rarely turned to disciplinary or programmatic resources to resolve challenges. The author recommends that writing pedagogy educators consider a detect-elect-connect model of transfer to encourage GTAs to routinize problem solving with disciplinary resources. One potential avenue for incorporating this model is to use action research in pedagogy education.

The CCCC *Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing* (CCCC) emphasizes that teaching assistantships provide emerging practitioners opportunities to cultivate a professional teaching identity by exploring and applying the principles and practices encountered in their writing pedagogy education in the classroom. The statement offers a glimpse of this professional identity: “highly competent, reflective practitioners who prioritize students’ learning needs and experiences, integrate contemporary composition theory and research into their teaching practices, and contribute their disciplinary expertise to improve their departments and institutions.” Recent studies of writing teacher development have drawn attention to the challenges of fostering this professional teaching identity, exploring

the uneven ways in which graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) incorporate composition theory and research into their teaching and the overriding influence of prior experience and institutional context on their classroom practices (Barr Ebest; Dryer; Estrem and Reid; Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir; Restaino). While composition studies is beginning to establish an empirically grounded understanding of teacher development, much remains to be learned about how GTAs acquire writing pedagogy knowledge and transfer that learning to classroom teaching.

In this article, I first review composition studies and teacher education scholarship about teacher expertise and challenges to professional growth and development. I next review theories of reflective practice and problem solving, which provide a useful lens for examining teacher growth as dissonant experiences—surprising or troubling teaching situations—prompt instructors to reflect on their beliefs, knowledge, and classroom practices. I then present data drawn from a larger qualitative study of the experiences and beliefs of novice GTAs of first-year composition (FYC) as they completed their preservice writing pedagogy education (WPE) and began independent teaching. The present piece will focus on the following research questions:

- How do novice GTAs describe—or *frame*—troubling or challenging teaching situations?
- How do GTAs make sense of and resolve those troubling situations?

TEACHER EDUCATION AND EXPERTISE

Teacher education aims to facilitate the acquisition of “adaptive expertise,” allowing instructors to balance efficiency and innovation as they develop automatized schemas for common issues and therefore an ability to address nonroutine problems without becoming overwhelmed or losing sight of important goals (Hamerness et al. 363; see also Borko and Livingston). According to teacher educators, the primary challenge to adaptive expertise is the “problem of complexity” (Hamerness et al. 359). Because teaching is characterized by multidimensionality and simultaneity, an instructor must process many different kinds of information at once, thinking across multiple domains of knowledge: disciplinary knowledge, purposes for teaching, instructional strategies, students’ learning processes, and the local curriculum, as well as knowledge of schooling and social and cognitive development (Grossman; Hamerness et al.). As the educational researchers Hilda Borko and Carol Livingston explain, perhaps *the* central cognitive task of early career teachers is to begin drawing connections among these domains of knowledge to form a conceptual framework for teaching that

will allow them to identify classroom patterns and anticipate and resolve problems that stem from these interrelationships.

While adaptive expertise is the aim of teacher education, researchers in composition studies and teacher education have begun to reveal the complex challenges instructors face as they assimilate and apply new learning to classroom practices. Studies have found that novice teachers are likely to value personal experience over other sources of knowledge and that new teachers rarely turn to disciplinary scholarship as a resource for practice (Hillocks; Rankin; Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir; Zuidema and Fredricksen). GTAs filter new knowledge through tacit assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning; in some cases, they may experience productive dissonance as these tacit assumptions come into conflict with new knowledge (Bishop; Farris; Rankin). GTAs form these tacit assumptions about how teaching and learning work through prior classroom experience and cultural influences: new teachers are most likely to teach as they were taught, extrapolating from their own experiences and assuming that what worked for them will work for all students (Barr Ebest; Grossman). Teachers' beliefs about writing and learning shape the way they perceive student behaviors; similarly, preconceived beliefs about students' capabilities shape the ways they think about and interact with learners (Hillocks; Pajares). As well, GTAs' prior writing experiences influence their receptivity to composition theory and pedagogy (Barr Ebest) and their construction of students' writing ability and agency (Dryer).

Writing pedagogy educators also confront challenges specific to the college-level teaching context. FYC has a fraught labor history, as an underpaid, underprepared, and ever-rotating population of graduate students has been charged with teaching one of the most-required courses on college campuses (Crowley; Restaino). Many writing programs continue to rely on a "one-shot" model of WPE consisting of a single pedagogy practicum or seminar (Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir), and many GTAs are expected to teach during their first semester of graduate school, concurrent with their WPE. Additionally, scholarship about resistance to composition theory (Barr Ebest; Crowley; Rankin) suggests GTAs' professional disciplinary identities and motivations may be at odds with their teaching identities. Given these challenges of institutional context, identity and motivation, and the "problem of complexity," teacher educators have studied methods, such as reflective practice, that may encourage novice teachers to reconcile competing beliefs with professional knowledge.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Reflective practice offers a productive framework for examining instructors' professional development by directing attention to the thinking processes that allow novices to develop theorized and adaptive teaching (Barr Ebest; Farris; Hillocks; Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir). Typically prompted by troubling teaching situations, practitioners may come to identify and interrogate their tacit assumptions through reflection-on and reflection-for-action. According to Donald Schön, when practitioners reflect on challenges, they compose the "window" through which they view the situation by naming and framing the problem—selecting what will be treated as the "things" of the situation. Through this problem-setting and problem-solving process, they begin to determine what is wrong and in what direction the situation needs to be changed. Schön posits that this process gives rise to a repertoire of strategies practitioners can draw upon when faced with divergent situations but cautions that this development may be constrained by practitioner knowledge and experience. He explains:

When practitioners are unaware of their frames for roles or problems, they do not experience the need to choose among them. . . . When a practitioner becomes aware of his frames, he also becomes aware of the possibility of alternative ways of framing the reality of his practice. (310)

This constraint on critical reflection has been acknowledged by many scholars in teacher education (e.g., Hillocks; Zeichner and Liston); however, the limitations imposed by inexperience and lack of knowledge have not been widely explored by WPE scholars.

Heidi Estrem and E. Shelley Reid have helped us realize how difficult identifying and responding to problems can be for novice GTAs. Their study connected the limited actions GTAs took to resolve reported problems to GTA's narrow range of explanations for tricky, difficult, or surprising teaching situations. Few of their GTAs' accounts illustrated critical reflective practices that prompted GTAs to rethink their own behaviors or pedagogies. Instead, GTAs' narrations of these situations revealed that most interpreted them in terms of individual teaching events and students (student resistance, behavior, and student-teacher relationships). Estrem and Reid found that these GTAs drew on a range of strategies for responding to difficult teaching situations (e.g., "Being there for students when they struggle" [473]), yet their accounts pointed "toward a lack of resources: new instructors simply have not yet developed a large composition pedagogy repertoire" (474). This research highlights a key challenge for writing pedagogy educators: While critical reflection is crucial to development

of expertise, GTAs appear to engage in limited reflection and struggle to explain what they learn from problematic teaching situations; the thin resources they use to address problems points to difficulty accessing and applying composition knowledge in these situations. The present study seeks to extend research such as Estrem and Reid's by investigating how GTAs frame problematic teaching situations and what those frames suggest about their development of adaptive expertise—that is, their ability to draw connections across multiple domains of teaching knowledge to understand, resolve, and avoid such situations.

METHODS

Context and Participants

This study was conducted at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, a research university that requires a two-semester FYC sequence of most incoming undergraduates.¹ New instructors follow a common sequence of units but may individually construct lessons and assignments. The writing program emphasizes preservice preparation and provides a year-long apprenticeship for master's-level GTAs before they begin independent teaching. In the fall of their first year, GTAs attend a pre-semester orientation; shadow an experienced Composition I instructor by attending all class sessions, teaching a few classes under supervision, and grading some papers; and tutor in the writing center, where they also attend biweekly tutor training meetings. In the spring, they observe an experienced Composition II instructor, continue to tutor in the writing center, and take the composition pedagogy seminar. In their second year in the program, most GTAs teach two classes each semester. They receive ongoing mentoring and professional development by attending required teaching workshops and being observed and evaluated by members of the composition office.

The twelve participants in this study were master's students specializing in literature, creative writing, or rhetoric and composition who would be teaching FYC for the first time in the fall of their second year. Participants were recruited through a brief verbal invitation in the composition pedagogy seminar and a follow-up email. In total, four women and eight men chose to participate. While not intended to be representative, this population may share characteristics with composition instructors in similar contexts.

Methodological Framework and Study Design

Social constructivist theory guided the research design of this study, as I adopted a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Denzin and Lin-

coln 32), using multiple interviews and classroom observations to investigate GTAs' teaching beliefs, knowledge, and practice. Following Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss's revision of grounded theory methodology, which they argue may be particularly useful for identifying and describing a process, this study sought to generate thick description of GTAs' processes of critical reflection, focusing on problem-setting and problem-solving patterns.

As is appropriate in grounded theory, this study adapted theoretical sampling methods, in which cycles of data collection are conducted in response to emerging conceptual trends in the data (Corbin and Strauss 144). This study originally intended to investigate the experiences of one group of GTAs during their apprenticeship and first year of independent teaching. However, during initial data analysis, I realized I needed to better understand GTAs' preservice experiences in the composition pedagogy seminar to trace how those experiences affected subsequent teaching.² I therefore extended the study for a second cycle of data collection to include participant observation of the pedagogy seminar.³ Due to limitations of time and feasibility, as well as an emerging sense of saturation, I followed the second group of participants through the pedagogy course and first semester of teaching, excluding a second semester of in-service data collection. Six GTAs participated in the first cycle of data collection and six GTAs participated in the second.

Cycle one of data collection, which took place from February 2010 to May 2011, included six, 60–120 minute semi-structured interviews with each participant, classroom observations performed during each participant's first two semesters of teaching, and classroom documents. Cycle one interviews took place twice during the preservice composition pedagogy seminar (the middle and end of the semester) and twice during the initial fall and spring semesters of teaching (near the beginning and end of each semester). Cycle two, which took place from January to December 2012, collected data from participant observation of the composition pedagogy course, reflective writing composed in that course, one 60–90 minute interview with each participant conducted near the end of their preservice year, a second 60-90 minute interview with each participant gathered during their first semester of independent teaching, classroom observations performed during each participant's first semester teaching, and classroom documents. The findings presented here are drawn primarily from the in-service interviews. The interview protocols included questions about GTAs' backgrounds (e.g., "Tell me about a teacher who helped you become a better writer."); experiences (e.g., "Tell me a story about a challenge you faced in the classroom," "What changes did you make to your teaching after

encountering that problem?,” and “How did you decide to make those changes?”); feelings (e.g., “How did you feel about that experience?”); values (e.g., “What is your goal for teaching first-year composition?”); and knowledge (e.g., “What concepts or readings from the pedagogy seminar have you returned to this semester?”). Following previous scholarship (Estrem and Reid; Farris), this study recognized that the interviews gave participants an opportunity to reflect on their teaching in a purposive manner that they might not otherwise have experienced.

Data Analysis

Using grounded theory procedures, data analysis was ongoing, inductive, and comparative. I completed open and conceptual coding for all 48 interviews (36 from cycle one and 12 from cycle two); the categories presented here arose from a secondary analysis I conducted of the 30 in-service interviews. Following Corbin and Strauss’s advice on coding data for process, I first identified and coded events that participants defined as problematic or perplexing (a total of 55 events) and then the actions they took to resolve those events. Problematic teaching situations arose in the data in response to questions about teaching challenges (I asked about surprises and successes, as well) but also arose elsewhere of the GTAs’ own accord.

As I coded the interview accounts, I attempted to use participants’ own frames for teaching problems rather than impose external interpretations. As I conceptualized and refined categories, I also turned to prior scholarship. For example, I struggled to find a connection between problems such as pacing lessons, managing the paper load, and struggling with classroom authority until I referred to Pamela Grossman’s conception of “classroom management” as a form of general pedagogic knowledge that includes scheduling, pacing, and maintaining respect, authority, and leadership (5). Throughout, I sought additional perspectives on my emergent findings, speaking with participants about the direction of the research and soliciting their verbal feedback about how my interpretations coincided with or contradicted their own sense of the phenomenon.

RESULTS

Framing Teaching Challenges

This study sought to understand how GTAs compose the “windows” through which they view troubling teaching situations—how they name and frame the things that they attend to in these situations. In total, the participants identified 55 events during their teaching that they found to be perplexing or confusing, and they used four frames to describe those

events: students (45%), the FYC curriculum (18%), classroom management (18%), and pedagogy (18%). The participants most often framed problems through the “window” of students, which accounted for nearly half of all problem-setting narratives and included experiences from all twelve GTAs.

When GTAs framed classroom challenges or surprises through students, they ascribed problems to student behavior or performance. The majority of these accounts referred to student behaviors, such as resistance to revision, refusal to complete course readings, failure to apply in-class lessons to papers, and lack of engagement, including inattentiveness, sleeping, and poor participation in discussion. For instance, Victoria reported being surprised and frustrated by her sense that students were resistant to incorporating peer and teacher feedback in revision.⁴ She explained, “I was just amazed . . . the students wouldn’t have out pen and paper when they were being reviewed. They wouldn’t even have a copy of their paper in class.” She connected this lack of engagement with peer review to students’ disinclination to take advantage of her revision policy, saying,

You tell that student “you can revise and your grade will go up,” and they don’t take advantage of that at all. You pour your heart and soul into all of these comments thinking that I’m being so specific here because this is exactly what the student needs to fix when they revise. I took that for granted in terms of *when* they revise and not *if*.

Other participants similarly reported being troubled by student behaviors that they interpreted as a lack of engagement with the course. For example, Aaron described being frustrated by students’ tendency to sleep during a morning class and his fight “to keep a portion of the students awake and attentive and really just focused on class.”

Additionally, GTAs described being challenged or surprised by student performance, such as by students’ writing quality. Several GTAs reported being surprised by students’ inability to effectively perform analysis or to make complex arguments. Edward described his frustration with finding that students are “deeply ingrained with a position-paper-type mindset,” suggesting they think “it’s either a yes or no answer; whereas, obviously, it’s not that at all.” Aaron also reported feeling disappointed with student performance on a research-based argument, explaining that he hadn’t “read too many [papers] that get to that point of synthesizing the results into an actual argument, and not getting bogged down and . . . just focusing on personal opinion.” Here, GTAs experienced dissonance between their expectations for college-level student writing and the papers they received, and they ascribed that problem to student ability, disposition, and prior preparation. Overall, in the problem-setting narratives framed through stu-

dent behavior or performance, these GTAs identified a sense that students weren't adequately engaging in the learning processes that these teachers built into their classes. In viewing these problems through the "window" of students, these GTAs distanced classroom problems from their own agency and instructional choices.

In other instances, GTAs framed problems through the "window" of the FYC curriculum, identifying problems that resulted from the rhetoric content in Composition I, the archival and qualitative research methods in Composition II, and specific units or assignments. Several GTAs framed teaching challenges through the rhetoric-based pedagogy in Composition I. Bart, for example, reported feeling challenged by his ability to teach rhetoric and worried that students were "bored" or intimidated by the rhetorical vocabulary presented in the course. Other GTAs described similar problems teaching the research methods in Composition II, framing their teaching challenges through inexperience with research methods or lack of programmatic clarity in course outcomes. For example, John explained feeling overwhelmed, stating,

I feel like we're asked to do a lot in this [course], and sometimes I feel like too much. Okay, so we're supposed to do research methods, writing—research methods, by the way, that I am not versed in, writing, and this content.

Other GTAs described feeling uncertainty about program goals or expectations for specific assignments, particularly those with which they had little prior experience. Commonly, GTAs attributed problems that fell under this category of "curriculum" to programmatic mandates perceived to be out of their control.

A third category of problem-setting occurred when GTAs described teaching challenges through the frame of classroom management. These accounts revolved around instructors' efforts to sustain a structured learning environment and included establishing authority, pacing lessons, and managing the paper load. When GTAs framed problems through the window of authority, they described instances in which they felt disrespected by students. In several interviews, Paige described experiencing a problem: "chaos reigned" in her classes as students ignored her instructions, failed to meet deadlines, and so on. At the end of her first semester, she discussed these challenges, saying,

I did not expect to have trouble with managing my classroom. I did not expect to have to fight to make myself heard. I didn't expect for them to need to be so explicit in things . . . And I didn't really, I didn't expect to have so much trouble with them hearing me.

Other GTAs also reported problems that arose from management skills, such as pacing individual lessons. David felt frustrated that his day-to-day lessons did not always go as expected, identifying as particularly problematic:

days where [students'] previous night's homework, the exercise, the things I had planned . . . that we got through them too quickly. . . . Just not having something else in my back pocket that I could apply instead of forcing them to stay in class and stare at me and me stare at them and not know what to say and fill the room with that discomfort . . . [before] letting them go.

A few participants also framed problems through the challenge of managing the paper load, particularly feeling guilty about not returning papers as quickly as they and their students would have liked. In these instances, GTAs identified problems related to inexperience organizing learning environments.

Finally, some GTAs framed problems through the “window” of pedagogy, describing issues that occurred as they adapted instructional strategies for particular concepts and individual students. A few participants recounted experiencing dissonance when an in-class activity did not work as expected. For example, Betty reported being surprised by a classroom activity about audience awareness that “just didn’t work” when students weren’t as invested in the exercise as she expected. Others reported challenges that arose from needing to create in-class activities that would meet the needs of a range of learners. Andrew, for instance, explained that he was “trying to do more writing stuff in class, but it is difficult because people are at such different levels.” Only two GTAs framed pedagogical problems through assessment, worrying about grade inflation and providing effective feedback. Bart explained:

I can see how their paper could be better, but I can't describe it. The way I grade papers is by correcting them . . . and then I look back through and see how much correction I had to make. That gauges what the grade should be. . . . Saying things like “clumsy wording” or something like that doesn't really make any sense, so I don't say things like that. . . . But in the end, I feel like I'm not saying what they need to hear to fix the problem.

In these instances, GTAs experienced troubling teaching situations—that their activities or feedback weren’t working as intended—and looked to their own pedagogical knowledge and choices to frame the problem.

In a few cases, the pedagogical problems identified by these GTAs resulted from misinterpretation of information presented in the pedagogy

seminar or other WPE experiences. For instance, Andrew believed the program expected him to teach grammar through skill-and-drill in-class exercises, although his WPE never took such a stance. This problem arose through a misperception, yet Andrew still worried that he was not living up to the program's expectations when he chose to address grammar within the context of student writing, a misperception that continued throughout his time in the program.

As described above, GTAs in this study used four frames to describe troubling teaching situations: students, curriculum, classroom management, and pedagogy. The next section describes the actions GTAs took—or did not take—to understand and resolve these problems.

Problem-Solving Actions and Resources

While GTAs' problem-setting narratives offer insight into how they perceive troubling teaching experiences, their representations of the actions they took following a problem illustrate how they used knowledge and resources to interpret and resolve those problems. In the face of the 55 separate problematic or perplexing teaching events described in our interviews, GTAs responded in four different ways: with inertia (33%), with self-approbation (33%), with experimentation (22%), or with rejection and replacement (13%).

In about one-third of the problem-setting narratives, instructors reported taking no action following a troubling teaching situation, seeming to experience a state of inertia: after reflecting on these situations, GTAs took no action because they were uncertain of what to modify and were disinclined to seek resources to help resolve the problem. For example, while David reported a persistent problem—releasing students from class early—he did not seek resources that would help him to better fill class time, such as lesson plans shared on the program's wiki. Instead, he seemed to enter a state of inertia, unable to draw on prior experience to help him manage a 75-minute class period. Paige, on the other hand, drew on her accumulating knowledge from rhetoric and composition to design a course influenced by critical pedagogy scholarship, seeking to establish a decentered, student-run classroom. However, she repeatedly experienced a sense that her class was out of control, and while she recognized “that there were some students who . . . needed something more structured,” she made no changes to her teaching practice, seemingly unsure of how to reconcile her teaching philosophy with her emergent understanding of student learning needs.

In another third of these problem-setting narratives, instructors took no action to resolve a troubling teaching situation because they appeared to

experience a state of self-approbation, a sense that what they set out to do *should have worked* and therefore a disinclination to critically examine the classroom experience. In some of these cases, the GTAs had prior experience with the instructional method as students and believed their students would have similar reactions as their own. For example, when Victoria reported being frustrated by students' lack of revision, she thought back to her own experiences as an undergraduate, saying,

Anytime I got to revise a paper, even if I'd made a 90, I would freak out, going at it. . . . It's hard, I think, for a teacher that's really young to think about [how] the undergraduates they're encountering are going to be that different from the way that they were.

While Victoria reflected on differences between herself and her students, she did not make changes to her methods for encouraging revision because she felt that her strategies should work and that students were at fault for not taking advantage of them. Similarly, Andrew experienced frustration when his students failed to apply source integration skills covered in class to their papers. He explained:

We spent a good 15 minutes, we went over each answer, everyone was in class, but they still didn't learn how to do a simple thing. It's not simple. I shouldn't say that. It's putting a quote into a paper, and they just can't grasp it, some of them. It's just laziness, I think, to be honest.

Here, Andrew's frustration that students failed to learn what seemed to him a simple task led him to blame students rather than to question his instructional methods.

In cases of inertia and self-approbation, GTAs did not turn to programmatic resources or knowledge gained through their WPE to understand or resolve problems, instead entering states of inaction that resulted from lack of prior teaching experience, reliance on their own prior experiences as learners, and lack of teaching knowledge. Inertia and self-approbation were most often associated with problem-setting narratives framed through students and management. In many of these cases, particularly those associated with feelings of self-approbation, the instructor came to blame the students much as Andrew did above.

In less than a quarter of the problem-setting narratives, GTAs' accounts indicated that they adopted a stance of flexibility and experimentation that helped them to critically reflect on and address the perplexing teaching situation. These GTAs drew on knowledge they had encountered in their WPE or turned to more experienced teachers for advice. In some of these cases, instructors began to look to their students for feedback; others were able to

draw on prior or accumulating teaching experience. All were characterized by a tendency to be critical of the instructional choice, and these accounts were most often associated with problem-setting narratives framed through pedagogy, or, in some cases, through students. For instance, when Betty encountered a problematic teaching situation—students were not producing strong analyses—she first thought about students’ prior knowledge and skills, noting, “I found writing analysis, it wasn’t that they didn’t want to; they were not sure how to. Because they come out of a summary-based system.” After reflecting on students’ prior experiences, Betty reported experimenting with her instruction by creating a worksheet on “how to do analysis in a paper.” While Betty revised her teaching strategy after thinking about students as learners, Aaron reported experimenting with in-class activities after repeatedly experiencing the challenge of keeping students awake and engaged. Midway through the first semester, he experimented with an audience-awareness activity that asked students to convince him to see a particular film. He explained that this activity was “out of the ordinary,” because earlier “I didn’t want to do stuff like that, where the risk is that they might not actually be comprehending any of it and they just see it as a game.” Here, Aaron’s developing knowledge of student reactions—and his emerging confidence as an instructor—allowed him to experiment with active learning practices.

Finally, in about 13% of these narratives, GTAs took actions that would help them to avoid problems by rejecting a programmatic component and replacing it with something more familiar. When Bart felt uncomfortable with the rhetorical concepts taught in Composition I, he decided to give students “different forms of analysis,” namely, excerpts from an introductory text to literary theory. Bart then gave students a “brief overview of these different forms of analysis—it’s criticism, it’s analysis” and was excited that “some of them got really into the literary theory ideas, especially Foucault and things like that.” In other words, Bart rejected a central aspect of the FYC curriculum—rhetoric—and replaced it with an area he was more familiar with—literary theory—in the belief that they both helped students accomplish the same thing—to analyze texts. While Bart did not explicitly set his teaching goals against those of the program, other instructors did: After describing his sense of being asked to do too much by the FYC program, John explained, “My approach at the beginning of the semester was sort of like, ‘Well, you know what, I know that’s what the institution wants but it can’t always get what it wants,’” choosing to privilege his thematic content over the course’s introduction to research methods. John had selected his philosophy-oriented course theme because “it would be comfortable” and he could “teach it confidently and have the content as

an anchor when maybe there are other parts that weren't as comfortable." In these cases, lack of knowledge about programmatic content caused instructors to reach for concepts with which they felt more familiar. These instances of rejection and replacement were associated exclusively with problem-setting narratives framed through curriculum. They were also reported only by male participants in the first cycle of data collection, while all other categories were represented among both groups of participants.

In sum, these participants did not take action to resolve or avoid a problem in most cases; others sought to better understand and resolve the problem through experimentation or to avoid it altogether by rejecting and replacing some aspect of the FYC curriculum. As indicated in the above accounts, participants primarily drew on personal experience and beliefs to help them understand troubling teaching situations, reporting this resource as their only or primary means of making sense of a problem in the majority of these narratives. This reliance on personal experience, with little attention to composition knowledge and little movement toward making connections across multiple domains of teaching knowledge, shapes how GTAs understand problems and the extent to which they're likely to reflect on such problems. In other words, belief structures about learners, learning, and writing determined the breadth and depth of the windows through which these GTAs viewed teaching situations. When GTAs like Andrew, Paige, or Victoria expected learners to be like themselves, they experienced frustration and struggled to look beyond student behavior to understand classroom events. Or, when GTAs like Andrew or Bart believed that writing is equivalent to grammatical correctness or textual analysis, they framed teaching problems in ways that reflected those beliefs. As these narratives indicate, oftentimes troubling teaching situations were not addressed because of the limited frames and resources GTAs used in their reflective processes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to better understand how GTAs frame troubling or challenging teaching situations and how they reflect across domains of teaching knowledge to understand or resolve those situations. This study contributes to our understanding of how GTAs begin to develop professional teaching identities as reflective practitioners who assimilate new learning into their pedagogical reasoning and practice. The results indicate that these GTAs used narrow frames to describe troubling teaching situations, locating problems in students, curriculum, classroom management, and pedagogy. When these GTAs—who, notably, had experienced a full appren-

ticeship year before independent teaching—discussed troubling teaching situations, they rarely turned to programmatic resources or knowledge from their WPE, instead relying on personal experience and beliefs about learners, learning, and writing. In most cases, this reliance led to inertia or self-appraisal, where instructors seemingly reflected only fleetingly on problems and did not appear to learn from them. When GTAs did take steps to resolve problems, they took one of two routes: experimenting with an instructional strategy or rejecting a component of the curriculum and replacing it with something more familiar.

The problems these GTAs reflected on during their interviews align with those reported in similar studies (Estrem and Reid; Obermark, Brewer, and Halasek; Rupiper Taggart and Lowry): maintaining classroom authority, managing the paper load and responding to student writing, and wrestling with pedagogical methods to support writers across a range of abilities. Strikingly, in many problem-setting narratives in the category of “students,” these GTAs explicitly framed problems through student faults, using phrases like “students don’t read,” “students don’t revise,” “students don’t make connections,” and “students aren’t engaged.” While Estrem and Reid were careful to point out that GTAs in their study “weren’t blaming students, . . . for the majority of respondents, a ‘teaching challenge’ was a ‘student challenge’” (468), other scholarship suggests that blaming students for problems may be more common than we would like to believe. Sally Barr Ebest suggests that “teachers with a low sense of self-efficacy” may “blame the students rather than themselves” when an instructional strategy does not work as intended (106–07), and she links blaming behaviors to teachers’ beliefs about writing: “Correlating good writing with good thinking, they assumed that those students who did not measure up were either lazy or dumb” (102). Teacher education scholarship has also found that teachers’ classroom practices are strongly entwined with their attitudes toward students; for example, Hillocks found that teachers who were not optimistic about students typically focused on writing problems and weaknesses, “without speaking to any strengths of the students” (44). While the data collected in this study demonstrates that these GTAs’ attitudes toward students were not static, most engaged in this kind of blaming pattern, particularly in moments when GTAs characterized students as most unlike themselves. This pattern raises concerns about novice instructors’ ability to critically reflect on problems identified through the frame of “students.”

Furthermore, this study found that problem-setting and problem-solving behaviors were closely linked, as GTAs were unlikely to critically reflect on problems that they perceived to be out of their own control or that resonated with their beliefs about learners, learning, and writing. This

lack of critical reflection was compounded by GTAs' reliance on personal experience to understand problematic teaching situations. Consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g., Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir; Zuidema and Fredricksen), the teachers in this study rarely turned to composition knowledge, or even programmatic resources. In some cases, their problems resulted from misinterpretations of composition theory. GTAs' reliance on viewing classroom situations through prior belief structures led most teaching problems to go unresolved due to inertia or self-appraisal. Additionally, reliance on personal experience as the primary source of teaching knowledge has been tied to teachers' likelihood to ascribe blame elsewhere and to form misleading or negative beliefs about students and teaching (Grossman).

However, most instructors in this study reported at least one teaching challenge that they addressed by drawing on their emerging teaching knowledge in a way that allowed them to critically reflect on the situation and experiment with their practices. This category of problem solving may help writing pedagogy educators to better understand under what circumstances GTAs seem best able to reflect on troubling teaching situations. In these cases, GTAs were most likely to draw on their emerging knowledge of students as learners as well as on a component of the curriculum they felt knowledgeable about, and this combination seemed to lend them the ability to critically examine instructional strategies to understand tensions. Accumulated teaching experience and increasing professional confidence may also be factors in GTAs' likelihood to experiment following a teaching challenge.

This study accentuates several emerging themes in the accumulating body of research on GTA preparation and development: (1) new instructors encounter predictable problems, and those problems revolve around student interactions; and (2) GTAs take little recourse to professional resources, especially disciplinary scholarship. In particular, this study demonstrates that some novice GTAs may experience little initial growth in their teaching knowledge and that reflection-on-practice may be constrained by a tendency to reduce complexity in the naming and framing of problems, as these GTAs typically ascribed problematic teaching situations to one factor with little reflection across multiple domains of knowledge. In other words, this study illustrates the challenges to critical reflective practice that new instructors experience and that echo Schön's warning that effective reflection hinges on knowledge and experience (310). The challenges encountered and (un)resolved in these early teaching experiences raise questions about the content of WPE as well as the goal of fostering reflective teaching

identities that integrate knowledge about rhetoric and composition, student development, and the local curriculum.

Writing pedagogy educators might productively turn to transfer of learning research for insight into the challenge of adapting formal learning for use-in-action. David Perkins and Gavriel Salomon's detect-elect-connect model of transfer usefully highlights the different "bridges" that need to be crossed, either consciously or unconsciously, for transfer of learning to happen. In this framework, learners must first *detect* a relationship to prior learning. Crossing this bridge may be hampered by challenges such as: inert knowledge, or something learned and understood but not activated in the relevant context (such as the shifting context from learner to teacher); fixedness and mental set, or an inability to see alternatives; and comfort with situations that align with existing beliefs (253–54). Next, learners must *elect* to pursue a possible connection, a process that may be impeded by entrenchment in habitual responses, indifference, or immersion in a social context that erodes learned concepts or behaviors (255). Finally, learners must *connect*, defined as "finding a relevant relationship between initial learning and the transfer situation" (252). Here, obstacles may include insufficient learning in the first place and the challenge of discerning underlying patterns or seeing beyond the surface of a problem.

Because of the challenges to successful transfer posed by each bridge, Perkins and Salomon suggest that educators must teach for a motivational or dispositional shift. To foster a mindful disposition, Perkins and Salomon propose a model of learning that "would engage learners in farther ranging and more open-ended experiences where supports are 'faded' over time" and would ask learners "to grope for potentially relevant prior knowledge (detect) and use judgment to decide on its relevance and how to proceed (elect). Such a culture would anticipate likely counterhabits and counter-motivations undermining later opportunities and prepare learners to face them" (257).

What might this model look like if applied to GTA preparation? I suggest that several experiences seem key to helping novice instructors productively transfer learning from their pedagogy education to the classroom. First, writing pedagogy educators might use the detect-elect-connect framework to structure a seminar or practicum, incorporating scenario posing and inductive problem solving that would foster the habitual use of composition theory in teaching situations, offer practice in thinking across multiple domains of teaching knowledge, and cultivate an inquiry-oriented disposition toward the writing classroom. Action research (also called classroom research or teacher research) might provide a learning experience that would encompass all of the areas above, and, indeed, Barr Ebest argues that

“engaging graduate students in action research may be the most effective means of addressing and overcoming their resistance to pedagogy” (61). Action research offers an opportunity for GTAs to investigate new pedagogies and to develop a systematic approach to identifying, understanding, and learning from classroom situations. While I am no longer involved in GTA education, later iterations of this program’s composition pedagogy seminar have required students to conduct small-scale classroom research studies that, anecdotally, have been successful in helping novice teachers to develop habits of using composition theory to experiment with and reflect on their teaching strategies.

These curricular suggestions offer directions for exploration. They also suggest several areas of needed research. First, WPE research has been spurred by a desire to help novice GTAs acquire and apply teaching knowledge and has therefore focused on initial teaching experiences; however, scholarship from composition studies and teacher education indicates that assimilation of learning is a long-term, recursive process (Bishop; Estrem, Reid, and Belcheir; Hamerness et al.). What happens after the second semester of teaching FYC? Do GTAs’ classroom practices ossify? Do GTAs become more critically reflective, flexible, and likely to incorporate composition theory after accumulating experience? How do instructors come to define their own professional teaching identities, which may extend beyond FYC? Additionally, comparative empirical studies of different models of GTA education could help us assess effective practices and develop concrete guidelines for WPE. For instance, what effect does FYC curriculum appear to have on GTAs’ teaching knowledge and classroom success? Are there curricular models or learning outcomes that are most accessible for novice GTAs? What would intervention studies that control for curricula indicate about successful models of GTA preparation? These and other questions remain to be explored. Ultimately, by better understanding processes of teacher growth we can develop strategies to more ethically and ably support our instructors along the path of expertise in the teaching of writing that would help them achieve the competencies set out in disciplinary documents like the *CCCC Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing* (CCCC).

NOTES

1. Composition I emphasizes rhetoric and argumentation; Composition II introduces archival, qualitative, and secondary-source research methods through an instructor-selected thematic inquiry topic.

2. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (IRB-14-08150 B-XP and IRB-14-09394 B-XP).

3. I had a role in each class: During the initial cycle of data collection, I served as a TA for the faculty instructor; during the second, I cotaught the class with the faculty member and received permission to engage in the research setting as a participant observer.

4. All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

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