Forty Years of Resistance in TA Education

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Though this issue of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* is celebratory, the journal's archives house conversations of many tones. Discussions of TA education (TAE), in particular, can be labelled "troubled" more than "festive." E. Shelley Reid's (2016) sarcasm in *A Rhetoric for Writing Program Administrators* says it all: TAE is "Simple, really" (p. 245). Resistance is frequently blamed for such complexity. What do we mean, though, when we talk about resistance? Who is resistant? What is resisted? Why? We present, here, how ideographic criticism helped us to answer those questions with findings worth celebrating.

Following Sally Barr Ebest (2002), we adopted Henry Giroux's (1983) definition of resistance as the refusal to learn new ideas that are perceived to clash with held ideas. We followed, too, Michael Calvin McGee's (1980) conviction that though ideologies are ethereal, written words obfuscate and carry ideologies. While we did not aim to expose hidden ideologies in the journal, we did adopt the ideographic critic's methods of detecting veiled meanings. We followed a typical (albeit simplified) pattern of ideographic criticism: examining the evolution of a word as it crosses contexts. First, we searched the journal's archives for titles (and abstracts, when available) that framed TAE as the primary object of study. Second, we combed those 58 articles for invocations of resistance in word or synonym. Third, we searched the 35 articles that invoked resistance to determine who refused to learn because of a perceived clash, as well as which held and new ideas were clashing.

Most often, the resistors were TAs outside of composition and rhetoric, and the concepts most frequently resisted were composition theory and professionalization. Below, we delineate resistance to each idea. We attend, too, to McGee's (1980) call to detect contextual influences, suggesting relationships between resistance and disciplinary and academic contexts. The total of our research is worth celebrating: the journal has worked incessantly to

educate its newest constituents in the face of that continuous and complex challenge deemed resistance.

Resistance to Composition Theory

The frequency of "theory" in the articles evinces *WPA*'s history of encouraging theorization. The journal's authors, in addition to appreciating theories of pedagogy like collaborative writing (e.g., Diogenes et al., 1986; Potts & Schwalm, 1983), incorporated far-ranging theoretical lenses into their scholarship: feminism (e.g., Boardman, 1994; Meeks & Hult, 1998), queer theory (e.g., Swyt, 1996), educational theory (e.g., Cogie, 1997; Rose & Finders, 1998), and narrative theory (e.g., Anson et al., 1995; Boardman, 1994).

Because "theory" was often partnered with "resistance" and "practice," though, the journal was also responsive to TAs' taking-up (or lack thereof) of theory. Resistance in TAE, then, often involves clashing perceptions about theory's value to practice. Such clashes may signal another belief—that writing classrooms are spaces only of practice. Our review shows something different: requests for practical instruction were more varied in exigence. Ebest (2002), for example, averred that unfamiliarity "with composition pedagogy was a likely culprit" (p. 29). Amy Rupiper Taggart and Margaret Lowry (2011) noted that new TAs are possibly so bogged down in surviving their first semesters as graduate students and teachers that theory is too much to take on meaningfully. Similarly, E. Shelley Reid, Heidi Estrem, and Marcia Belcheir (2012) reported that TAs "place more value on their own experiences or those of peers than on the [theories] they are learning" (p. 42). Michael Hennessy (2003) worried that some TA educators bowed to resistance of theory, even creating textbooks that "emphasize practice at the expense of theory" (p. 93), and some scholars, like Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer (2005), adopted conversion-based pedagogies in attempts to not overwhelm TAs with a multiplicity of theories.

Two articles, though, stand out as representative explorations of TA resistance to theory. Ebest (2002) explored sources of resistance to theory, seeking to understand why new TAs refused to consider theory-informed, nontraditional, innovative pedagogies. She noted that TAs resisted theories of writing for two reasons: some had rarely, if ever, considered their own processes of learning to write; others, specifically students focused in literature or creative writing, did not believe writing, as an innate craft, could be taught at all. Maureen Daly Goggin and Michael Stancliff (2007), on the other hand, were interested in utilizing resistance. They wrote, "We experienced our share [of a] common complaint . . . that the theory isn't helpful in

the classroom and that time would be better spent on the nuts and bolts of teaching" (p. 20). However, they explained, "competing ideologies are not only present, but productive" in TAE (p. 12). With properly facilitated conversations, they suggested, TAs can learn from contention how to absorb, adapt, and critique differing views. While conversations about resistance have expanded beyond the scope of these two articles, the issues and the responses the authors articulate continue to circulate in TAE scholarship.

RESISTANCE TO PROFESSIONALIZATION

"Professionalization," like "theory," populates the journal's discussions of TAE. The journal has long considered the reasons TAs resist professionalization. In 1986, Marvin Diogenes, Duane H. Roen, and C. Jan Swearingen lamented that if composition was a service course, then TAs were "the academic equivalent of truck stop waitresses" (p. 51). In 1987, Janet Marting tracked professionalization as a concern in academia at-large back to 1930. Following the trend of foregrounding TA needs, other scholars suggested more extensive training for TAs in WPA and other administrative work (e.g., Edgington & Taylor, 2007; Elder et al., 2014; Walcher et al., 2010). Furthermore, some scholars insisted upon providing professional development opportunities for TAs after they leave TAE classrooms (e.g., Lang, 2016; Obermark et al., 2015).

As with "theory," though, "professionalization" is often met with resistance. We found that two articles represented trends in addressing TA resistance to professionalization. Thomas P. Miller (2001) noted that TAs in practicums (especially literature-focused TAs) are often presented with views of professional work that do not align with their held professional goals. The traditional English academic they envision becoming focuses on research, relegates teaching to a lackluster second, and eschews administrative work. However, the work that new TAs usually end up doing, teaching first-year writing, is always-already alienated from such perceptions of professionalization. Further, TAs are reminded by professionalization training that their goals are increasingly elusive—that they will only achieve their aspirations of traditional English academia "if they get jobs" (Miller, 2001, p. 42).

Tiffany Bourelle (2016) represented those scholars who recognize ever-increasing demands upon academic professionals and insist that TAs be prepared for them; otherwise, TAs will eventually be "hesitant" or "uneasy" in embracing new ideas and opportunities—or worse, fall victim to new methods of exploitation (p. 91). In particular, Bourelle (2016) advocated for more support in online writing instruction. TAs, she argued, must be

better prepared to "succeed as writing teachers in twenty-first century academe" (Bourelle, 2016, p. 105). In sum, the deeply seeded causes and the long-reaching effects of resistance to professionalization have been conscientiously considered by the journal's scholars.

Conclusion

We have explored how *WPA: Writing Program Administration* has expanded understandings of TAE and resistance, particularly to composition theory and to professionalization. We offer, now, one final example, one encouragingly characterized by receptivity: Reid's (2017) "Letter to a New TA" spoke directly to TAs. It invited new TAs to think about their own learning and imparted to them the importance of TAE. By treating TAs as colleagues, as stakeholders in composition, and as professionals, Reid's "letter" is a positive and preemptive confrontation of resistance, built upon 40 years of constant progress and experimentation.

We hope those invested in TAE, whether graduate students or those who prepare them to teach writing, will find the categories and articles gathered here useful when dealing with TA resistance to composition theory and professionalization. We hope, too, that we have exemplified how ideographic research methods, though typically used to track unspoken ideologies, may be used to document an impressively diverse set of inflections upon a single word. Perhaps we might deem this essay, then, an ideographic celebration.

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