

Enacting Bricolage: Theorizing the Teaching Practices of Graduate Writing Instructors

Meridith Reed

Drawing on empirical research on graduate student instructors (GSIs) across the US, I use the concept of bricolage to examine how GSIs act as pedagogical bricoleurs, piecing together their teaching practices from various sources like formal writing pedagogy education (WPE), scholarship, personal experience, and other teachers. I make suggestions for restructuring WPE to prepare GSIs as thoughtful bricoleurs who engage in reflective experimentation, transparency, and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

In the same month I received my BA, I began work as a graduate student instructor (GSI).¹ I arrived too early on the first day, clutching an overly scripted lesson plan and feeling unqualified. To manage my imposter syndrome, I borrowed—heavily—from the writing program’s assignment sheets, conversations in the graduate offices, and syllabi developed by more experienced GSIs. These fragments formed my pedagogical bricolage. I wanted to develop sound teaching practices, but even more pressingly, I needed to fill fifty minutes of class each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

My experience of pedagogical scrambling is not an isolated one (see Good and Warshauer; Restaino; Taylor and Holberg; Bramblett and Knoblauch; Ebest). Teaching is often a bricolage of patchworked materials; this feels obvious. But the truth is that our field does not know much about the pedagogical knowledge and resources GSIs collect, deploy, and circulate. GSIs must build their ethos and practices relatively quickly—often without a theoretical foundation—from whatever is at hand. This might lead to courses that are coherent mosaics or misshapen Frankensteins. Existing, as they do, in the liminal space between supervised student and autonomous instructor, between disciplinary newcomer (to their supervisors) and disciplinary expert (to their students), GSIs must be resourceful. Bricolage, as a theory of inventing from limited resources, is a powerful way to understand how GSIs enact resourcefulness in their pedagogical decision-making. To help GSIs become effective teachers, teacher educators must understand what resources GSIs depend on and how they select those resources.

In this article, I share empirical data from a national study of GSIs to propose bricolage as both a metaphor for how graduate students develop their teaching practices and a theory for understanding and supporting the growth of these practices. I also share the implications of teaching-as-bricolage for structuring writing pedagogy education (WPE), including the importance of reflective experimentation, transparency, and collaboration.

BRICOLAGE AND TEACHING WRITING

The concept of bricolage stems from Claude Levi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*. Levi-Strauss describes the bricoleur as "someone who works with his hands" and draws on a "heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited" (17). The bricoleur is always able to "make do with 'whatever is at hand'" (17), and, in piecing together a new collage, the bricoleur

has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider and reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it . . . to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem. (18)

The bricoleur catalogs, dialogs with, and then deploys existent materials into new configurations. Levi-Strauss contrasts the bricoleur with the engineer, a sort of pure scientist who works in an uncontaminated realm of ideas, "always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the 'bricoleur' by inclination or necessity always remains within them" (19). While the engineer employs specialized tools for specialized purposes, the bricoleur employs a closed set of heterogeneous tools that can be reimagined for many purposes (17–18).

Scholars employ Levi-Strauss's conception of bricolage as a method, a theory, and a metaphor in fields as varied as education, sociology, management, nursing, and cultural studies. Christopher Johnson, a scholar of French and critical theory, claims that the extensive use of bricolage by varied disciplines demonstrates "the status of *bricolage* as a kind of universal concept" (356). He claims bricolage is "a two-way (retroactive, feedback) process of projection and retrospection, thought and action, abstraction and application" (368), a process "no different to that of (natural) evolution itself" (368–69). Bricolage involves ongoing shaping and reshaping, influenced by context.

Bricolage resonates with theories of writing as remediation and remix (Shipka; Banks), but teaching and administrating are equally well suited to the idea of the bricolage: As teachers or administrators, composition profes-

sionals creatively make new and make do within limited contexts. In many ways, the act of teaching is an act of writing: an act of composing and remixing. Both writing and teaching involve repeated practice, revision, and reflection. Both require some “disciplining” into a discourse community. And novice teachers, like novice writers, often struggle with preconceived notions about what teaching is and how it is to be done. In fact, one could easily take the list of threshold concepts from the landmark collection *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle), and replace the word “writing” with “teaching”: “Teaching Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity,” “Teaching Involves Making Ethical Choices,” “All Teachers Have More to Learn,” and so on. Empirical research demonstrates “that instruction is a complex, paradoxical task—one that requires a savvy instructor to navigate effectively” (Thompson et al. 24). As newcomers attempt to navigate this complexity, they enact bricolage: balancing pressures, performances, skills, audiences, and expectations—all while simultaneously piecing together something that works.

Others have observed how teaching is like bricolage. Teacher education scholar Elizabeth J. Hatton uses bricolage as a metaphor for uncritical, untheorized teaching. The teacher-bricoleur, she says, may bypass theory while inventing practices to “suit his or her purposes” (“Teachers’ Work” 341). Practical concerns can lead teachers to developing strategies “to get through a planned lesson with minimum disruptions and minimum loss of face” (342) rather than focusing on larger educational objectives. Although Hatton notes that bricolage is not inherently bad, she recognizes it must be accompanied by critical self-reflection to avoid the pitfalls of atheoretical, survivalist approaches to teaching (“Teacher Educators” 246). Other researchers argue for bricolage as a positive metaphor for teachers who flexibly and artfully create learning experiences that achieve larger goals or respond to student needs (Campbell; Reilly; Scribner). Both conceptions of teaching-as-bricolage are useful in understanding how novice writing instructors develop.

METHODOLOGY

Research on GSIs of writing focuses primarily on the experience of the first semester or year of teaching, the period where WPAs are most involved in preparing new teachers. Methods employed by this research fall into several general categories: ethnographies, narratives, or case studies following small numbers of new instructors (see Bishop, *Teaching Lives*; Ebest; Farris; Rankin; Restaino); personal storytelling from GSIs (Bramblett and Knoblauch; Good and Warshauer); theory, description, and analysis of

approaches to GSI preparation (Bridges; Dobrin; Hesse; Morgan; Pytlik and Liggett; Qualley; Stenberg and Lee; Stancliff and Goggin); and survey and interview research seeking to understand GSIs' perspectives on their preparation and needs as new instructors, primarily authored by WPAs (Grouling; Estrem and Reid; Reid et al.; Taggart and Lowry; Weiser).

My study falls into this final category and builds on work by E. Shelley Reid and Heidi Estrem, although it differs somewhat in scope, participant population, and author subject position. Much previous research valuably focused on local, contextualized sites of GSI preparation. I investigate GSIs' experiences across a large section of the GSI population, including master's- and doctoral-level graduate students, first-semester and experienced teachers, and GSIs in programs across the US. At the time I conducted this research, I was a doctoral student not working in teacher preparation (although I had previously done WPA work). Participants saw me as a peer and observer to the programs in which they taught. My subject position presumably allowed them to speak openly with me about their experiences in ways they may not have done with their WPAs.

I chose a national scope for this project, partly in response to Reid et al.'s multisite, multiyear study of graduate writing instructors (Estrem and Reid; Reid et al.). Although they hypothesized institutional context and instructor experience level would influence findings, they found few significant differences between the study's two sites and two experience levels (first-year vs. second- and third-year). They argue that although local contexts do matter, the field must consider general concerns about how we prepare new instructors. They call for more data on how GSIs process their formal WPE. Examining GSIs as a national population means the loss of some context-specific data, but it offers insight into what GSIs share across the field.

I designed an eighteen-question survey and an eleven-question semi-structured interview protocol, drawing some questions from Reid et al.'s study.² Noting that "our field still does not value replication as much as originality" (4), Tricia Serviss has called for writing studies researchers to "develop our research findings together rather than striving to do alone what none have done before" (5); this includes creating research designs "that live beyond their original incarnation and evolve" (13). This methodological perspective allows for adaptation while claiming the possibility of aggregating knowledge across contexts and building on previous research. According to this transcontextual perspective, "RAD research in writing studies ought to be continuously evolving rather than simply being reproduced and verified via replication" (28). Here I build on previous research while making revisions and additions to the research design.

I distributed the survey through an email to the WPA-Listserv, a post to the WPA Graduate Organization Facebook group (WPA-GO), and individual emails to sixty-four WPAs at institutions that employ GSIs. In each distribution method, I encouraged WPAs and graduate students to share the survey with eligible GSIs in their network (GSIs were eligible if they had taught a first-year writing (FYW) course in the previous calendar year).

Participants

Survey participants totaled 132 GSIs; twenty-four participated in follow-up interviews. Table 1 shows the breakdown of participant characteristics.³ Survey participants were not asked to name their institutions. The twenty-four interview participants came from fifteen different institutions located throughout the US. Of the fifteen universities represented by interview participants, eleven are classified by the Carnegie Classification as R1, two as R2, one as R3, and one as M1.

Coding

I employed grounded theory and constant comparison to code open survey responses and interview transcripts (Glaser). Specifically, I used open coding by reading through the data multiple times, marking instances where participants named resources that influenced their teaching principles or practices, categorizing those resources by type, and assigning codes to each type. I narrowed codes into broader categories of resources, debriefed codes with a peer, and examined the data again, assigning all mentions of resources to one of four categories outlined below. I also conducted member reflections by asking all twenty-four interview participants to read preliminary results and check them for how well they resonated with their experiences. The fifteen who responded all felt the results accurately represented their individual experiences and their sense of their peers' experiences.

Below, I share the coded results of participant responses to two survey questions, drawn from Reid et al. Survey participants were asked to 1) name three to four principles that guided their teaching and 2) identify where those principles came from; the results below represent 115 responses to this second question (not all 132 survey participants answered every survey question). To expand on survey data and highlight participant voices, I also share responses from interviewees, reflecting on how and with what resources they developed their course design, assignments, and plans for daily class time.

Table 1

Participant characteristics

Participant characteristics	Survey participants (<i>N</i> = 132)	Interview participants (<i>N</i> = 24)
Age (years)	61% (81) 20–29	63% (15) 20–29
	25% (33) 30–39	16% (4) 30–39
	14% (18) 40+	21% (5) 40+
Gender	71% (93) female	67% (16) female
	27% (36) male	29% (7) male
	2% (3) other gender identity	4% (1) other gender identity
Racial/ethnic identity	85% (112) White	79% (19) White
	1.5% (2) Black or African American	4% (1) Asian
	1.5% (2) Asian	8.5% (2) Hispanic/Latino
	6% (8) Hispanic/Latino	8.5% (2) other racial/ethnic identity
	6% (8) other racial/ethnic identity	
Native language	97% (128) English	96% (23) English
	3% (4) other language	4% (1) other language
Degree type	50% (66) PhD	63% (15) PhD
	11% (14) MFA	13% (3) MFA
	36% (48) MA/MS	16% (4) MA/MS
	3% (4) other (MAT, MPP, etc.)	8% (2) other (combined MA/PhD, MPP)
Field of study	39% (51) literature	29% (7) literature
	34% (45) rhet/comp	25% (6) rhet/comp
	16% (21) creative writing	13% (3) creative writing
	11% (15) other (TESOL, tech comm, education, comparative studies, public policy, etc.)	33% (8) other (TESOL, tech comm, education, comparative studies, public policy, etc.)
Experience teaching FYW	39% (51) in first semester	41% (10) in first semester
	39% (52) taught 2–7 semesters	38% (9) taught 2–7 semesters
	22% (29) taught 8+ semesters	21% (5) taught 8+ semesters

RESULTS

GSIIs relied on resources in four categories: formal WPE; theory, readings, and coursework outside of formal WPE; individual experiences, intuition, and beliefs; and other teachers.

Formal WPE

Formal WPE included all resources structured and sponsored by the writing program, including composition theory and practicum courses; professional development workshops; summer orientations; shared electronic resource banks; learning objectives; and required or encouraged common syllabi, course design, and assignments. Forty-one survey respondents referenced formal WPE as a source for the development of their key principles as teachers (in a separate question, 126 participants overall described participating in some formal WPE).

Since many surveyed GSIs did not explicitly reference or acknowledge the formative impact of formal WPE on their key teaching principles, we might be tempted to conclude that WPE was not an important influence. All twenty-four interview participants, however, said WPE influenced their course design, assignments, and daily work in the classroom. Rosa, a PhD student in literature, said composition theory from a graduate course was “just kind of in my head,” impacting her choices as a teacher in undefined ways. Ray, an MFA student in creative writing, articulated more specific connections between his formal WPE and his theoretical approach to teaching. When his composition theory professor connected composition “to contemporary theories like queer theory and feminist theory and critical theory,” Ray saw how writing courses could help students “think about how language and writing are used in power spaces.” For Ray, WPE provided a foundation for thinking theoretically about teaching that supported his personal experiences, identity, and commitments as a teacher.

Writing programs shape the context that the teacher-as-bricoleur “always remains within” (Levi-Strauss 19), prompting creative adaptation from the bricoleur. Charles, an MFA student in creative writing, saw program objectives as “a skeleton, and it’s still up to an instructor to figure out how to breathe life into that skeleton.” Lillian, an MFA student in creative writing who taught in another writing program prior to beginning her MFA, drew on and merged elements of both programs’ assignments to design a new assignment. These GSIs demonstrated how the teacher-as-bricoleur dialogs with materials (including program resources) to create something new through integration and adaptation. Importantly, their own objectives and agency as teachers “breathed life” into those materials, but the possibilities available for “breathing life” were shaped, in part, by what the program provided.

Other Theory, Readings, and Coursework

In the survey data, forty-one participants described how materials outside of formal WPE influenced teaching principles, including concurrent or past coursework (graduate or undergraduate), readings from various academic fields, writing studies courses outside of required pedagogical courses, popular readings from non-scholarly texts, and texts used in FYW courses. (Although some participants were required to use specific textbooks, many GSIs chose their own texts. Those using required texts also still brought in their own “texts”: videos, news, poems, etc., as resources. As a result, I determined that textbooks suited this category better than formal WPE.)

Jack, a master’s student in rhetoric, “was converted” to collaborative writing after studying it in a graduate course outside WPE. He redesigned one of his FYW assignments midsemester to require students to write collaboratively. Diana, a PhD student in literature, reworked her literacy narrative to include concepts from her studies in eco-composition, requiring students to be “attentive to the geography of [their] literacy.” By participating “in a sort of dialogue with” their materials and “index[ing] the possible answers which the whole set can offer” (Levi-Strauss 18), these GSIs discovered new uses for the materials they encountered. Instructors also drew on FYW textbooks, news articles, YouTube videos, documentaries, and literature. Lucy, Ken, and Ray all described relying on textbooks or outside readings to shape their daily work in the classroom. Web sources were also important: Jessica pulled from teaching blogs; Gabrielle and Sarah used ideas found on other institutions’ FYW program websites; Frances used open educational resources, teaching blogs, and a Facebook group for writing teachers. As bricoleurs, GSIs draw from “whatever is at hand” (Levi-Strauss 17).

“Whatever is at hand” is a limited category; it includes not only what GSIs specifically seek out for a pedagogical purpose, but also what GSIs are exposed to in the course of their regular activities. Anything becomes usable material for creating pedagogy, but the possibilities are limited by what GSIs happen to encounter. The variety of sources that a bricoleur engages does not, however, indicate the quality of those sources or, even more importantly, how those sources are deployed to serve sound pedagogical objectives. What matters most is not what resources are employed (after all, the bricoleur is inventive), but *how* those resources are employed to achieve pedagogical goals.

Instructors' Experiences, Intuition, and Beliefs

Eighty survey participants said personal experiences, intuition, or beliefs influenced their key teaching principles. Twice as many participants attributed the development of their teaching principles to this category than any other. This reliance on the self is typical of the bricoleur, whose “first practical step is retrospective” (Levi-Strauss 18) and who “always puts something of” themselves into the bricolage (21).

This category included GSIs' personal theories of writing; their gut instincts; their own experiences as students, writers, and professionals; and their impressions of the students and the classroom. GSIs developed an awareness of students' needs, a sort of teacher's intuition that required bricolage-like tinkering and experimenting as a response. Ruth, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, said teaching was “kind of rolling the dice and being like, ‘Well, a lot of people think that this is working. Let's just see how it goes, and if it works horribly, I'll redesign my syllabus in the middle of the semester.’” Ruth's answer makes clear how risk and improvisation were perceived as unavoidable, perhaps desirable, elements of creating a workable pedagogical bricolage. Similarly, Anne, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, created a revision assignment because she felt her “students weren't getting an opportunity to really work through a major revision in their writing.” Frances, a PhD student in literature, designed an autoethnography assignment in response to her perceptions of students:

They come into the college setting thinking—with all these rules in their head that I want them to get away from, like, “I can't use first person,”—that everything has to be super scholarly, like their own impressions don't matter.

Frances hoped to “catch them off guard” at the beginning of the semester by beginning with “something that they're genuinely interested in writing about.” These examples demonstrate how frequently students were sources of information for shaping pedagogical bricolage.

We cannot know how accurately GSIs were analyzing students or how effective their interventions were, but their reliance on intuition is typical of a bricoleur, who continually adapts within an immediate context (Levi-Strauss 17). Bricoleurs constantly reimagine the uses of their heterogeneous tools; as they reimagine and reuse, they reduce the necessity of adding new tools. GSIs' reliance on their own intuitions and experiences may make them inventive, but it may also keep them from adopting new tools, like research and theory on teaching writing. This resistance will be discussed in further depth below.

Learning from Other Teachers

Finally, thirty-four GSIs described how learning from other teachers (both peers and mentors) influenced their teaching principles.

In the interview data, participants described regularly borrowing materials from peers. Jessica, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, shared how she “stole or borrowed or used existing assignments for a lot of what I did,” implemented “a lot of reflective practice throughout the semester, which I totally took from somebody else in the program,” and regularly talked to peers “to get ideas from them about how they do things.” Gabrielle, an MA student in rhetoric and composition, described how her cohort shared ideas and energy: “We always could go to each other, ‘Oh hey, I heard you talked about this assignment in class. Can I get that assignment sheet?’ And it was always like that. It was always very reciprocal.” Isabella, a PhD student in comparative studies, described creating teaching partnerships with peers to share lesson-planning responsibilities: “I feel like it gives me more time to write a really good lesson, as opposed to having to write three lessons and maybe not having such a . . . high-quality level lesson.” In this way, novice teachers benefitted from the ingenuity of other bricoleurs, bricoleurs with a different set of tools and materials.

GSIs also valued mentors. Isabella contacted a pedagogy professor from a past program for help. She pointed to “having a sense of community, not just in the classroom, but as instructors, as being a really critical part” of her teaching practice. Ruth, Alex, and Allison also valued mentors as resources. Jack and Anne appreciated talking with experienced teachers who were not their direct supervisors because they could be more open about their teaching concerns. Sharing may lead to useful conversations about pedagogical goals and an expansion of GSIs’ access to pedagogically sound materials or, alternatively, it may lead to the quick spread of undertheorized or ineffective lesson plans. GSIs must learn sound teacher decision-making to avoid the latter.

Discussion

These categories represent the “limited” but “extensive” materials (Levi-Strauss 17) from which GSIs create their pedagogical bricolage. In theorizing bricolage, Johnson writes that “it could be argued that it is *bricolage* which thinks, or operates, through the *bricoleur*, rather than the reverse—as we shall see, (s)he is never entirely in command of his or her means of production” (360). As employees working for a program that in some ways *thinks* and *operates* through them, GSIs do not have autonomous control over their teaching. They often enact pedagogies and course designs not of

their own making. As they navigate possibilities and constraints, GSIs may struggle to fit all these pieces together, resulting in unintended incoherence in their courses. This is in part due to GSIs deviating from the normative expectations of their program or the field. Levi-Strauss writes that the bricoleur may employ “devious means” (16) that take them on circuitous paths. The resistance GSIs sometimes show toward their formal WPE (Hesse; Ebest; Welch) may be part of their dialogue with the materials of their teaching and the assertion of their identities as emerging teachers.

Since the work of the bricoleur is always situated, GSIs’ choices are influenced both by their own agency and the constraints shaping their work, constraints that include a compressed learning context; specific programmatic mandates and philosophies; their own experiences and attitudes toward teaching and writing; the identities of themselves, their students, and their administrators (including identity markers like race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, ability, etc.); family and personal relationships; material spaces such as classrooms and offices; financial and material resources; professional and educational pressures outside of teaching; and an academic culture that identifies them as students but assigns them the labor of colleagues.

All teacher-bricoleurs deal with constraints that limit the possibilities of their bricolage, but GSIs are often more constrained and managed than other faculty. Graduate students have minimal control over what courses they teach, how they teach them, and minimal access to teaching resources (like private office spaces). These limitations on their work and environment influence what they can create as bricoleurs. GSIs may respond with compliance or resistance as they balance carrying out program objectives *and* enacting their own teaching principles. Andy, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, described it this way: “Imagine two rivers coming together and forming a single one, so on one hand I’ve got the course requirements, what I’m supposed to do in the class, and in the other hand, I have my own desires.” Diana, however, described easily adapting to and accepting her program’s philosophies:

I think if I didn’t believe in the writing-about-writing philosophy, then I might have a harder time sticking to it. But since I totally understand it and I am on board, I—anything that I’ve changed that is from my own interest or that I want to do, I definitely tried to connect it.

Other GSIs were more ambivalent about their navigation of program structures: April, an MA student in literature, appreciated her program’s efforts

to ensure all sections of FYW taught “the same things,” but also noted that “it can be, I think, a little stifling.”

Unlike Levi-Strauss’s engineer, who creates *ex nihilo* on an abstract, scientific plane, GSI bricoleurs’ innovation is limited (or “stifled”) by the contexts in which they work. In response to such “stifling,” GSIs sometimes resisted program structures as a distinct pedagogical choice. For example, Vanessa, a student pursuing a combined MA/PhD in linguistics, resisted her WPA’s recommendation that first-year students meditate on their writing because of Vanessa’s own disciplinary orientation. Although not opposed to the practice of meditation, Vanessa found the idea of incorporating it into the classroom “stressful” because of her orientation as a “social scientist,” a “very math-y” person, and “not your usual English type of student.” Vanessa felt that classroom mediation might be similarly off-putting to her students who also were not the “usual English type.” She made a deliberate choice *not* to incorporate this programmatic suggestion into her pedagogical bricolage, a choice shaped by her experiences.

Although it is easy for administrators to feel frustrated with GSIs’ resistance, we should encourage this kind of teacher-driven decision-making. Much of GSIs’ work is outside their ability to choose, and yet we are preparing them for a profession which demands sound, ethical decision-making. Eggleston argues that “decision-making is probably the central feature of the role of the teacher” (1). If bricolage works through individuals as much as individuals work through bricolage, to what extent are we preparing GSIs to exercise their agency as teachers, and on the other hand, to what extent are we imposing our own pedagogical decision-making on them? To some extent, all professionals (including WPAs) must balance meeting the objectives of larger entities (programs, departments, colleges, or universities) while maintaining their own values and integrity. When GSIs teach courses they have not designed, they are experiencing that struggle in microcosm. But if GSIs are to become effective teachers, they must also develop their agency to make judgments as teachers. Our efforts in WPE should support that opportunity.

How much should novice teachers be left to make their own inventive decisions, and how much should they be guided or supervised? Not all their decisions will best serve their students, nor will GSIs always know what to do. Although teaching-as-bricolage can be positive (flexible, inventive, purposeful), it can also be negative (undertheorized, uncritical, survivalist), as Hatton noted (“Teacher Educators”; “Teachers’ Work”). Often, the GSIs in this study fell into survivalist mode because they did not yet have the foundation to create an effective pedagogical bricolage by themselves. While April, an experienced GSI, described sometimes feeling “stifled” by

an overly structured program, several interview participants struggled with too much autonomy: Jessica, a first-time teacher, valued the freedom offered by her program but sometimes felt she was “an acrobat without a net. And sometimes it starts to really feel like you don’t know what you’re doing and you’re totally failing.” Similarly, Lucy, a master’s student in public policy, wished the program had given her a syllabus instead of asking her to write one because she “did not feel qualified to be writing that syllabus,” having never taught before. Lucy also shared that she felt “very stressed” about class time: “Like what do I literally do in the classroom?” Similarly, Vanessa said,

When I started teaching, I didn’t have an idea of what I was teaching, much less how to teach it. And so it was really not cool sort of being thrown into having to teach this thing that you don’t really know what you’re teaching.

The feeling of being “thrown into having to teach” puts pressure on GSIs to practice survivalist bricolage, either out of practicality or urgent need.

GSIs also wanted a balance of theoretical foundation and practical instruction as they found their way as new teachers. Jessica felt frustrated that her WPE was “really at a high thinking-level and not at a practical, hands-on level.” In contrast, more experienced GSIs wanted *more* theory and transparency from their programs. Anne, who had years of teaching experience, was frustrated that her program’s emphasis on multimodal composition had “no good theoretical justification.” When she asked for justification, she “didn’t really get a good justification for it,” and so started doing her “own research and reading on how [to] better incorporate multimodal composition” into writing instruction. Similarly, Ruth, teaching at a different institution, was frustrated with her program’s directions to “do more digital stuff”:

I feel like I’m pretty open, like if you can tell me why we’re doing something, you can show me some scholarship that suggests this is going to be really helpful for students, and you either tell me what we’re removing, or how this links or builds on what we’re doing, I’m pretty open to it.

Because Ruth felt her program did not theoretically justify the use of digital assignments, she was skeptical of implementing those assignments.

How can WPE respond to these tensions between autonomy and guidance, theory and practice? Reimagining the role of WPE in light of bricolage suggests ways to provide a supportive foundation for GSIs while also encouraging them to be agentive and thoughtful bricoleurs.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WPE

Recognizing GSIs as bricoleurs asks us to see new instructors not as trainees but as craftspeople, each carrying with them a toolbox of perspectives, materials, and experiences from which they will shape their work as teachers. WPE can prepare GSIs to reflectively engage with the unique materials they bring with them, question those materials in light of disciplinary knowledge, and then adopt new tools and orientations as needed to shape those materials into purposeful bricolage. This means positioning new instructors as budding pedagogical theorists and contributing insiders instead of resistant, apathetic, naive, or “managed” outsiders. I suggest three ways formal WPE might help graduate instructors engage in thoughtful bricolage: reflective experimentation, transparency, and collaboration.

Reflective Experimentation

To become agentive bricoleurs, GSIs must be able to critically select materials to create effective learning experiences for students. This requires the ability to see or imagine the possible ways materials could be used effectively in the classroom. To foster the development of this ability and invite GSIs into pedagogical knowledge-making, teacher educators might encourage proposals for experimental courses, create awards for innovative teaching, or host a resource bank of theory- and research-based lesson plans to which GSIs can contribute.

Many WPE scholars have emphasized the importance of reflection to engage GSIs in the complexities of teaching (Bishop, “Places to Stand”; Dryer; Hesse; Morgan; Reid, “Teaching Writing Teachers”; Reid, “Uncoverage”; Stancliff and Goggin; Stenberg and Lee), and reflection is also a creative tool of the bricoleur. Reid suggests one way to measure GSIs’ preparation is by “how many variables [they] can identify in a dynamic situation and how many reasonable alternate paths [they] can imagine” (“On Learning to Teach” 137). This process of identifying and imagining what can be done with a bricoleur’s “tools” might prepare GSIs with the rhetorical and pedagogical competence needed for “considering multiple possibilities rather than settling on a right answer” (137). In other words, the limited resources of the bricoleur must be opened to a more abstract plane of potentiality. If GSIs are inclined to latch on to a familiar solution to a pedagogical problem, WPE might encourage them to instead brainstorm a dozen responses and account for the affordances of each possibility. In formal courses and beyond, GSIs must engage in regular reflection that probes their reliance on various resources, encourages them to see possibilities, and strengthens their inventive muscles.

Transparency

Teacher-bricoleurs must balance creativity with accountability, becoming answerable for the choices they make within their situated context, answerable to stakeholders like administrators (within and beyond the writing program) and to undergraduate students who have a right to pedagogically sound writing instruction. We expect researchers to evaluate and account for their sources; we can ask teachers to do the same for the materials of their bricolage by answering questions like “What is your rationale for bringing this film or poem or assignment to your students?” or “What makes using this resource a good pedagogical choice?” In return, WPAs should be equally prepared to provide a transparent account of program decisions, making explicit to novice instructors the institutional, historical, and disciplinary factors that have shaped their programs’ philosophies and course designs. The GSIs discussed above who felt that their programs were either too theoretical or not theoretical enough shared one thing: both groups wanted their programs to make clear, transparent connections between theory and practice. Effective programs must help GSIs learn how to connect the tools of their bricolage—connect the theory they encounter in their formal preparation with their day-to-day work in the classroom, and vice versa. Teaching GSIs to critically evaluate their various sources will make explicit the often implicit process of pedagogical bricolage. Asking GSIs to question their choices—using questions like “Why am I using this resource? What kind of learning experience is it creating for my students?”—will show them how to theorize their bricolage.

Collaboration

Research, including this study, indicates that GSIs count their peers as valuable resources (Taggart and Lowry; Reid et al.) and that cross-tiered mentoring and communities of teaching help new teachers (Fedukovich and Hall; Stenberg and Lee). The concept of bricolage suggests these collaborations might be most effective when they prepare new GSIs as flexible teacher-bricoleurs who purposefully collect, share, and evaluate materials for teaching. WPAs might invest in creating formal and informal experiences for GSIs to learn teacher decision-making, such as pairing GSIs with mentor teachers, inviting GSIs to participate in curriculum design, creating “teaching office hours” where teachers can visit each other, designing office configurations that put teachers of varying experience levels in proximity, or inviting GSIs to observe and be observed by veteran teachers. Whatever form these collaborations take, they should focus on developing GSIs as agentive teacher-bricoleurs. Such collaborations will not only expand GSIs’

toolboxes, helping them see more possibilities as bricoleurs, it will also allow GSIs to see how their experienced colleagues practice pedagogical bricolage, often in better theorized ways than a novice instructor is ready to do.

CONCLUSION

GSIs act as bricoleurs, drawing on sources inside and outside their formal preparation. Writing pedagogy educators can play a role in determining whether this patchwork is haphazard or purposeful by understanding how GSIs practice bricolage and by helping GSI bricoleurs to experiment reflectively, design transparently, and engage collaboratively with their work as teachers. As a result, new teachers will understand teaching as dynamic, complex work requiring a bricoleur's ingenuity to master.

NOTES

1. Long et al. argue the term *teaching assistant* “misrepresents the kind of classroom work graduate students actually do” (77). “TA” implies someone assisting an authorized instructor, not someone acting as sole instructor of record. I adopt the term graduate student instructor (GSI) as more accurate.

2. This research was conducted under North Carolina State University's IRB protocol #11862.

3. GSIs studying in a field “other” than literature, rhet/comp, or creative writing are overrepresented in interview data. One key research question, reported on in an article in *Composition Forum*, was how disciplinary affiliation affected GSIs' experiences with WPE. For this reason, all willing respondents studying an “other field” were invited to be interviewed.

WORKS CITED

- Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Elizabeth Wardle, editors. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Utah State UP, 2015.
- Banks, Adam J. *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Southern Illinois UP, 2010.
- Bishop, Wendy. “Places to Stand: The Reflective Writer-Teacher-Writer in Composition.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 51, no. 1, 1999, pp. 9–31.
- . *Teaching Lives: Essays and Stories*. Utah State UP, 1997.
- Bramblett, Anne, and Alison Knoblauch, editors. *What to Expect When You're Expected to Teach: The Anxious Craft of Teaching Composition*. Boynton/Cook, 2002.
- Bridges, Charles W., editor. *Training the New Teacher of College Composition*. NCTE, 1986.

- Campbell, Louise. "Pedagogical Bricolage and Teacher Agency: Towards a Culture of Creative Professionalism." *Educational Philosophical and Theory*, vol. 51, no. 1, 2019, pp. 31–40.
- Dobrin, Sidney I., editor. *Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum*. NCTE, 2005.
- Dryer, Dylan B. "At a Mirror, Darkly: The Imagined Undergraduate Writers of Ten Novice Composition Instructors." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2012, pp. 420–52.
- Ebest, Sally Barr. *Changing the Way We Teach: Writing and Resistance in the Training of Teaching Assistants*. Southern Illinois UP, 2005.
- Eggleston, John. "Editorial Introduction: Making Decisions in the Classroom." *Teacher Decision-Making in the Classroom: A Collection of Papers*, edited by John Eggleston, Routledge, 1979, pp. 1–7.
- Estrem, Heidi, and E. Shelley Reid. "What New Teachers Talk about When They Talk about Teaching." *Pedagogy*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2012, pp. 449–80.
- Farris, Christine. *Subject to Change: New Composition Instructors' Theory and Practice*. Hampton P, 1996.
- Fedukovich, Casie, and Megan Hall. "GTA Preparation as a Model for Cross-Tier Collaboration at North Carolina State University: A Program Profile." *Composition Forum*, vol. 33, 2016.
- Glaser, Barney G. "The Constant Comparative Method of Qualitative Analysis." *Social Problems*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1965, pp. 436–45.
- Good, Tina Lavonne, and Leanne B. Warshauer, editors. *In Our Own Voices: Graduate Students Teaching Writing*. Allyn and Bacon, 2000.
- Grouling, Jennifer. "Resistance and Identity Formation: The Journey of the Graduate Student-Teacher." *Composition Forum*, vol. 32, 2015.
- Hatton, Elizabeth. "Teacher Educators and the Production of Bricoleurs: An Ethnographic Study." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, pp. 237–58.
- . "Teachers' Work as Bricolage: Implications for Teacher Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1988, pp. 337–57.
- Hesse, Douglas. "Teachers as Students, Reflecting Resistance." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1993, pp. 224–31.
- Johnson, Christopher. "Bricoleur and Bricolage: From Metaphor to Universal Concept." *Paragraph*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2012, pp. 355–72.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. U of Chicago P, 1966.
- Long, Mark C., Jennifer H. Holberg, and Marcy M. Taylor. "Beyond Apprenticeship: Graduate Students, Professional Development Programs and the Future(s) of English Studies." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 20, nos. 1–2, 1996, pp. 66–78.
- Morgan, Meg. "The GTA Experience: Grounding, Practicing, Evaluating, and Reflecting." *The Writing Program Administrator's Resource: A Guide to Reflective Institutional Practice*, edited by Stuart C. Brown and Theresa Jarnagi Enos, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2005, pp. 393–409.

- Pytlik, Betty P., and Sarah Liggett. *Preparing College Teachers of Writing: Histories, Theories, Programs, Practices*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- Qualley, Donna. "Building a Conceptual Topography of the Transfer Terrain." *Critical Transitions: Writing and the Question of Transfer*, edited by Chris M. Anson and Jessie L. Moore, WAC Clearinghouse, 2016, pp. 69–106.
- Rankin, Elizabeth. *Seeing Yourself as a Teacher: Conversations with Five New Teachers in a University Writing Program*. NCTE, 1994.
- Reid, E. Shelley. "On Learning to Teach: Letter to a New TA." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2017, pp. 129–45.
- . "Teaching Writing Teachers Writing: Difficulty, Exploration, and Critical Reflection." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2009, pp. 197–221.
- . "Uncoverage in Composition Pedagogy." *Composition Studies*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2004, pp. 15–34.
- Reid, E. Shelley, Heidi Estrem, and Marcia Belcheir. "The Effects of Writing Pedagogy Education on Graduate Teaching Assistants' Approaches to Teaching Composition." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2012, pp. 32–73.
- Reilly, Mary Ann. "Opening Spaces of Possibility: The Teacher as Bricoleur." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, vol. 52, no. 5, 2009, pp. 376–84.
- Restaino, Jessica. *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of the Middle Ground*. Southern Illinois UP, 2012.
- Scribner, Jay Paredes. "The Problems of Practice: Bricolage as a Metaphor for Teachers' Work and Learning." *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2005, pp. 295–310.
- Serviss, Tricia. "The Rise of RAD Research Methods for Writing Studies: Trans-contextual Ways Forward." *Points of Departure: Rethinking Student Source Use and Writing Studies Research Methods*, edited by Tricia Serviss and Sandra Jamieson, Utah State UP, 2018, pp. 3–22.
- Shipka, Jody. *Toward a Composition Made Whole*. U of Pittsburgh P, 2011.
- Stancliff, Michael, and Maureen Daly Goggin. "What's Theorizing Got to Do with It? Teaching Theory as Resourceful Conflict and Reflection in TA Preparation." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2007, pp. 11–28.
- Stenberg, Shari, and Amy Lee. "Developing Pedagogies: Learning the Teaching of English." *College English*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2002, pp. 326–47.
- Taggart, Amy Rupiper, and Margaret Lowry. "Cohorts, Grading, and Ethos: Listening to TAs Enhances Teacher Preparation." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2011, pp. 89–114.
- Taylor, Marcy, and Jennifer L. Holberg. "'Tales of Neglect and Sadism': Disciplinary and the Figuring of the Graduate Student in Composition." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 50, no. 4, 1999, pp. 607–25.
- Thompson, Blair, C. Kyle Rudick, Jeff Kerssen-Griep, and Kathryn Golsan. "Navigating Instructional Dialectics: Empirical Exploration of Paradox in Teaching." *Communication Education*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2018, pp. 7–30.

- Weiser, Irwin. "Surveying New Teaching Assistants: Who They Are, What They Know, and What They Want to Know." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 14, nos. 1–2, 1990, pp. 63–71.
- Welch, Nancy. "Resisting the Faith: Conversion, Resistance, and the Training of Teachers." *College English*, vol. 55, no. 4, 1993, pp. 387–401.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Jessica Restaino, the anonymous second reviewer, the editors, and my colleagues at BYU and NCSU for their valuable feedback in the development of this article.

Meridith Reed is assistant professor of English at Brigham Young University. Her research interests include writing program administration and writing pedagogy education.

APPENDIX A: GSI SURVEY QUESTIONS

Questions 1–9 asked participants to identify type of degree pursued, area of study, age, gender, racial/ethnic identity, native language, previous teaching experience, number of semesters taught, and type of training received.

10. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped **build your confidence** as a composition teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates "didn't help much at all" and 5 indicates "helped quite a lot." Use "0" for anything you haven't encountered yet.

- Experience as a writer
- Experience as a tutor
- Experience as a teacher
- Observing other teachers and/or being mentored by other teachers
- Role plays, presentations, guest- or practice-teaching
- Composition pedagogy/theory course activities or assignments
- Reading professional articles
- Reflective writing/thinking about teaching
- Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers
- Discussions/exchanges with mentors or advisors
- Orientation or professional development workshops
- Other (please specify)

11. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped build your skills as a writing teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where

1 indicates “didn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helped quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered yet.

Experience as a writer

Experience as a tutor

Experience as a teacher

Observing other teachers and/or being mentored by other teachers

Role plays, presentations, guest- or practice-teaching

Composition pedagogy/theory course activities or assignments

Reading professional articles

Reflective writing/thinking about teaching

Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers

Discussions/exchanges with mentors or advisors

Orientation or professional development workshops

Other (please specify)

12. When you face a challenge or a problem as a tutor/teacher, how well do the following help you address that problem? Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates “doesn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helps quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered or tried yet.

Drawing on my experience as a writer

Drawing on my previous experience as a tutor

Drawing on my previous experience as a teacher

Observing other teachers (or consulting their course materials)

Consulting a mentor or advisor

Remembering strategies from composition pedagogy/theory course activities and assignments

Reading and/or remembering previously read professional articles

Writing/thinking reflectively about teaching

Discussing the issue with other peer teachers

Drawing on orientation or professional development workshops

Other (please specify)

13. What do you see as 3–4 key principles for your teaching of writing? (In other words, what do you think is important for you to do as a writing teacher? What do you try always to do or not do?) (Open Response.)

14. Could you say where those principles come from, or are related to? (Were they from something you read or learned, something you

- heard of or saw someone doing, some experience you had?) (Open Response.)
15. If your graduate work is in a field outside of rhetoric and composition, what concepts (ideas, theories, scholarly literature, disciplinary practices) from your primary discipline shape the structure and content of the way you teach writing? (Open Response.)
 16. What impact, if any, has teaching writing had on your own research and writing practices as a graduate student?
 17. How do you plan to use your degree after graduation? What role, if any, do you imagine teaching playing in your career after you complete your degree? (Open Response.)
 18. What is the biggest challenge you face in your teaching? (Open Response.)

APPENDIX B: GSI SEMISTRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Could you describe your university context (size and type of school, a little about the student population, number of graduate programs and students, etc.)?
2. Could you describe a bit more about your program context? What discipline is your program in, what emphases are available, what is the population of graduate students like (MA and PhD, etc.)?
3. Describe your process for designing your first-year writing course and syllabus. Why did you design the course the way you did? What resources (people, books, websites, graduate coursework notes/lectures, etc.) did you draw on in designing this course?
4. Think of one of the assignments you created for your course this semester. What are the origins of this assignment? What resources (people, books, websites, graduate coursework notes/lectures, etc.) did you draw on in designing this assignment?
5. How do you see your course design carrying out or responding to your first-year writing program's philosophy and policies?
6. Describe your process for preparing for a typical day in class. What resources (people, books, websites, graduate coursework notes/lectures, etc.) do you rely on to prepare for class?

7. In what ways do you feel most qualified to teach this course, and in what ways do you feel least qualified to teach this course?
8. Describe the central principles or ideas you want your students to take away from your course this semester. Why do you think these principles or ideas are so important?
9. What is the most influential piece of scholarship you've read in terms of your own teaching?
10. What connections, if any, do you see between what/how you teach first-year writing and what you are learning in your coursework and research as a graduate student?
11. What are your plans for your career after graduation? What elements of your graduate experience do you feel are best preparing you for your postgraduation plans?

