

Review of *Standing at the Threshold: Working Through Liminality in the Composition and Rhetoric TAs*

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Macauley, William J., Leslie R. Anglesey, Brady Edwards, Kathryn M. Lambrecht, and Phillip Lovas, editors. *Standing at the Threshold: Working Through Liminality in the Composition and Rhetoric TAs*. Utah State UP, 2021. 206 pages.

Interest in the education of graduate students in rhetoric and composition has resulted in increased scholarship, study, and publications on how the field teaches graduate students to write and teach. With publications such as Claire Lutkewitte, Juliette C. Kitchens, and Molly J. Scanlon's edited collection, *Stories of Becoming* and Cecile Badenhorst, Brittany Amell, and James Burford's edited collection, *Re-Imagining Doctoral Writing*, there's growing concern over how the field educates graduate students to prepare them to enter the field and a resurgence of interest in discussions around the education of graduate TAs and the ways graduate students embody the various roles they are expected to perform. Edited by William J. Macauley, Leslie Anglesey, Brady Edwards, Kathryn M. Lambrecht, and Phillip Lovas, *Standing at the Threshold: Working through Liminality in the Composition and Rhetoric TAs* entered the field in 2021, raising questions about the liminal position born out of TAs' institutional role. This collection offers recommendations articulated by former and current TAs for how to approach the TA practicum in ways that are attentive to the needs of TAs. The book is important for WPAs to consider as they construct TA practica because it speaks directly to the roles and duties of those most impacted by TA practica. In turn, the collection offers ways for WPAs to approach the TA practicum and create effective and generative spaces for TAs to grapple with and negotiate liminality and the various positions they are expected to hold.

Written by (former) TAs for current TAs, this collection hopes to do two things: (1) it hopes to engage in productive questioning about the roles TAs are expected to hold and how they embody those roles and (2) it looks to create space for dialogue around how the field trains TAs in ways that address TA concerns, anxieties, and questions. Stressing the importance of TA-driven practica, the authors offer various ways of exploring the idea of

teacher communities to negotiate with the dissonances caused by the liminal position TAs occupy. Within these communities, TAs can discuss how the liminal position they occupy can be used as a tool that allows them to reframe their successes and failures in generative and productive ways. Arguing that liminality “refers to TAs working between roles and responsibilities rather than the process of crossing a threshold or accessing what is on the other side of a threshold,” the collection explores how TAs negotiate their roles as teachers and graduate students primarily but also other roles that TAs take on like tutor and mentor to other TAs (4). The collection argues for sustained attention to the experience of embodying a liminal position because it allows for a focus on how TAs navigate the experience of jumping between roles, which enables TAs to reflect on the learning and development process as they encounter new knowledge about pedagogical and composition theory.

The collection focuses on four concepts defined by Macauley in the introduction. The authors hope to expand on how the field views the TA practicum by exploring who speaks, liminality, thresholds, and misinformation. Keeping in mind other scholarship on TA practica, the authors posit that the field has not included the voice of TAs enough when thinking through the rhetoric and composition TAship. To counter this deficit, the collection takes up the concept of “who speaks,” arguing that the field needs to include TAs in discussions around the construction of practica. Given the collection’s focused attention on how TAs occupy liminal positions and consistently jump back and forth among different roles, the collection explores threshold concepts “as repeated experiences rather than singular locations, as ongoing transformations rather than distinct exigencies” (5). The authors in the collection view liminality as a threshold concept, articulating the importance of highlighting how TAs experience liminality when considering the ways TAs construct their teaching identities. Finally, Macaulay writes that the collection will counter popular myths about TA practica and the information conveyed during the TA practica, highlighting misinformation to consider the field’s misconceptions and misunderstandings regarding TA practica. The remainder of the review will turn to look at how individual chapters in the collection provide insight into various ways WPAs can approach the practica to develop TA self-efficacy and navigate liminality.

Looking to Cicero and Quintilian to define imitation and consider how mimesis informs pedagogical choices, the first chapter in the collection, written by Lew Caccia, examines what TAs transfer from previous experiences and contexts to how they approach the first-year writing classroom. Arguing for a view of imitation that functions as a generative, emulative

practice, Caccia differentiates between binary assumptions about imitation that view it as antithetical to creativity and agency, instead positing that calling attention to imitation allows TAs to negotiate how they hope to identify and locate themselves as an instructor in the classroom. Caccia contends that TA practica should view imitation on a continuum that moves between imitation and innovation through critical reflective practice that asks TAs to consider the practices they do and do not want to emulate alongside considerations of how they reproduce ideological perspectives in the classroom. For Caccia, calling attention to what TAs emulate and why allows for a reflective consideration of how TAs wish to locate themselves in the classroom and what theories they wish to position themselves alongside. Caccia's chapter is rightfully positioned as the first chapter in the collection as it opens up space for considering where TAs draw knowledge from as they craft and construct their identities in the classroom. Using this chapter as a frame for the collection asks WPAs to consider how imitation and improvisation can be used as assets in the TA practicum to help TAs craft their teaching identity.

In the second chapter, "Multimodal Analysis and the Composition TAs' Journey," Lillian Campbell and Jaelyn Fiscus-Cannaday argue for increased attention to embodiment and performance when analyzing processes of identity negotiation in TAs. Specifically, the pair argue for different ways of using information gleaned from recorded videos of TAs while teaching to evaluate the ways they negotiate their liminal positions. This chapter provides ways to engage TAs in multimodal work that can illuminate different perspectives about how TAs construct their identity in the classroom and negotiate liminality. Campbell and Fiscus-Cannaday argue that recorded videos provide information on how TAs' embodied performances enact certain kinds of disciplinary values that demonstrate the liminality TAs negotiate. Reflecting on their study, they provide various insights into how recorded videos can be used to help TAs reflect on how they negotiate their liminal positions. The pair argue that this chapter can also help to provide ways for TAs to reflect on their self-efficacy and imitation by using the teaching videos as an analytical tool for helping TAs to reflect on their performances in the classroom.

The third chapter, "Disciplinary, Enculturation, and Teaching Identities: How Composition and Literature TAs Respond to TA Training" by Jennifer K. Johnson, provides WPAs with an instructive view on how literature students negotiate the liminal spaces they embody as not only TAs moving between teacher and student roles but also as literature students enculturated to different disciplinary values from those they learn through the writing TA practicum. Johnson argues that literature students,

especially given the differences between how literature and composition each approach teaching, can find it difficult and challenging to negotiate and navigate between the different disciplinary and institutional roles they are expected to fulfill. Contrasting the teacher-as-scholar model, where teachers are expected to be naturally good at teaching because of their scholarship and composition's focused attention on pedagogy, Johnson traces the tension between these different ideologies around teaching to posit that literature students may feel a stronger sense of liminality in the TA practicum because they are also negotiating between disciplinary ideologies. Given the insight Johnson gleaned from their study, they conclude their chapter by asserting the importance of drawing attention to disciplinary paradigms and how those paradigms influence the ways that instructors approach the first-year writing classroom.

With a view towards liminality as a generative and productive space for TAs to learn how to engage in critical thinking, develop an open-minded perspective, and refine creative approaches to navigating problematic situations, the authors of "The Graduate Teaching Assistant as Assistant WPA," Kylee Thacker Maurer and Faith Matzker with Ronda Leathers Dively, explore their navigation of the liminal space between being an assistant director to the WPA, TA, and graduate student. Maurer and Matzker argue for approaching liminality as a threshold concept, stating that they could not have progressed in their roles as assistant WPAs without navigating and negotiating between the liminal positions they held. The chapter offers advice for assistant-director (AD) WPAs and WPAs reflecting on the creation of mentee roles in TA practica. Concerned with navigating and negotiating with the power they hold, Maurer and Matzker posit that viewing liminality as a threshold allows for consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of embodying liminal positions. Maurer and Matzker argue that AD WPAs and those in service roles within TA practica should engage in pre-reflection before interacting with other faculty and mentees to consider what roles they should embody in a given context.

In "The Invisible TA," Rachel Donegan considers the lack of scholarship about graduate TAs' experiences with disability and accessibility to argue for a repositioning of disability. Focusing on how disabled graduate TAs navigate and negotiate with disclosure within a liminal role, Donegan considers how disclosure functions as a communicative act for graduate TAs that causes anxiety because of ableist assumptions about disabled graduate students and accommodations. While on the one hand, Donegan articulates the institutional ableism and uneven power dynamics that can occur when graduate students choose to disclose or request accommodations, Donegan also makes space to consider how graduate TAs use disclosure to

build community with their own students. Donegan ends the chapter by arguing that rhetoric and composition TA practica need to consider and engage with disability studies to enable the field and graduate TAs to better grapple with disability and access in the classroom. Donegan's chapter is especially important for WPAs because of the necessity of creating TA practica that are attentive to the needs of disabled graduate students. Additionally, given increasing mental health concerns about undergraduate students, WPAs must consider how their TA practica prepare TAs to approach disability in the first-year writing classroom.

Calling attention to feelings of imposter syndrome, especially during graduate school, Kathryn M. Lambrecht, author of "From Imposter to 'Double Agent,'" argues that liminality and the feelings that emerge from liminal positions should be viewed as an asset. Positing that the process of learning expertise can be a "potential source of agency," Lambrecht argues that liminality and the experience of embodying a liminal position develops its own kind of expertise, efficacy, and agentive possibility (135). Lambrecht posits that instructors must pay attention to and embrace the liminal process of learning expertise because it can function as a way to better engage students as they undergo the process of learning information. In other words, graduate TAs especially should use the knowledge they glean as students to relate to their students as they also engage in the learning process and development of new knowledge. Lambrecht makes clear that we must reimagine how we approach agency in the classroom, creating more space to consider how to develop efficacy both in the TA practicum and first-year writing classroom, especially as a means of negotiating with imposter syndrome in the academy. To build this sense of efficacy, Lambrecht argues that graduate TAs must feel mastery over the content. To accomplish this, Lambrecht stipulates that the TA practicum and first-year writing classroom should consider language norms in specific discourse communities, share experiences about writing, and build community.

Like Lambrecht, in "Beyond 'Good Teacher' / 'Bad Teacher,'" Megan Schoettler and Elizabeth Saur argue that attention to building self-efficacy can be generative for aiding TAs' understanding of themselves and their role in the classroom. Paying particular attention to how graduate TAs produce either generative or disruptive framings around their teaching ability contributes to how graduate students develop a sense of self-efficacy in the classroom that demonstrably eases their comfort in the classroom. Moving beyond a binary frame that situates teachers as good or bad, Schoettler and Saur push for an affective rendering of self-efficacy in the classroom to consider how instructors approach confidence and a belief in their abilities as an instructor. Arguing that TA practica must reframe how they approach

shame, failure, and community, the authors posit the importance of building affective TA communities where TAs feel comfortable sharing both successes and failures in their classes. Like other authors in the collection, Schoettler and Sauer also emphasize the importance of self-reflection in the form of teaching journals as another way of creating space for generative framings of teacher ability, especially if these journals are read by secondary audiences who can mentor graduate TAs and attest to their efficacy. Specifically, the authors argue that WPAs who lead TA practica should also read and provide affirming and generative feedback to TAs as they navigate their first semesters of teaching to develop their self-efficacy and confidence.

In the collection's afterword, Jessica Restaino reflects on the first book she published, *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground*. Crafted from her dissertation, Restaino's book explores graduate TAs and the first-year writing classroom. Restaino, like others in the collection, argues for the importance of not forgetting graduate experiences as students who embody and occupy liminal spaces, positions, and roles in the academy. Arguing for a view of this liminality as a threshold concept that graduate TAs consistently navigate and negotiate, Restaino promotes a productive and generative conception of how liminality can help graduate TAs as they move forward in their teaching and academic careers. All of the authors in the collection look to liminality as an asset and tool that graduate TAs can use to foster their development as writing instructors. The collection's focus on liminality is helpful for TAs experiencing anxiety as they navigate a liminal position, as well as for WPAs hoping to develop TA self-efficacy and agency.

Overall, readers of *WPA: Writing Program Administration* will find the collection to be helpful for its overall message around constructions of teacher identity and approaching graduate student TAs. As a former assistant director of a teaching assistant education program, the collection highlights, for me, the importance of working alongside TAs to construct effective and generative practica. Addressing concerns around engaging with the differences between TAs entering the practica from literature programs and those entering from rhetoric and composition, as well as engaging alongside debates around theory and pedagogical practice, the collection offers both TAs and WPAs insight into how liminality can be used as an asset when crafting teaching identities as a TA. WPAs should use the collection to better understand the necessity of creating spaces where TAs feel comfortable discussing feelings of shame, failure, and inadequacy. Viewing liminality as a productive space to engage TAs can help address TAs' feelings of inadequacy or a lack of confidence.

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