Scarier Than It Seems: Multimodal Composition in GTA Training

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Abstract

When teachers first learn to teach multimodal composition, they often expect to experience certain challenges with the class, such as problems with their multimodal composing experience or their lack of theoretical knowledge. However, instructors new to multimodal composing may overlook more mundane problems such as issues with learning management systems or students' hesitancy to try something new. In this study, we followed eight new graduate teaching assistants as they started teaching and taking classes at Ohio University, a large Midwestern R1 institution, focusing specifically on three representative case studies. We present the challenges these new multimodal teachers expected before teaching, what they experienced while teaching, and what stood out to them upon reflection. Through these interviews, we found that the GTAs were concerned about their own multimodal experiences and knowledge early on, but during on-the-ground teaching, these issues rarely came up. Instead, student struggles with multimodality and more common day-to-day teaching issues were larger concerns. Their teaching fears shifted as they taught their first multimodal projects with students, and other more common and well-documented teaching problems took center stage during and after the semester. Based on what we learned from the interviews, we offer some suggestions to help mitigate these struggles in new multimodal teachers by setting up courses and mentoring to make multimodal teaching less of an internal and practical challenge.

When we asked Jean[1] whether she thought that she was prepared to teach multimodal composition, her answer was unambiguous: "Um, no, I don't. I'm going to be honest and say, no, I don't." Jean had taught creative writing, literacy, and composition in multiple contexts before she joined the PhD in Creative Writing at Ohio University, a large Midwestern R1 university. Her position immediately before entering the program was as an adjunct composition teacher at a local community college. She was an experienced writing teacher.

She was even an experienced multimodal composer, although she was not calling it "multimodal composition" at the time of our initial interview. Jean had a background in text-based art and used "many different means" to convey messages to her audience. She had long been incorporating

other modes of media into her creative writing as well. In the past, she had even incorporated videos to accompany written texts into her composition classes. While she did not call this "multimodal composing" either, these texts conveyed meaning through multiple modes. Jean was certainly an experienced multimodal composer and even had experience teaching multimodal composition.

So why did Jean feel so unprepared to teach multimodal composing? She was worried she did not have the theoretical backing—that is, the knowledge of what research says about multimodal teaching and practice—to justify her teaching choices. This was a fear echoed by many of the other graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in Jean's cohort. Still others were afraid that they did not have enough practical experience composing multimodal projects themselves, and a few were scared how the students might react to multimodal assignments. Many of the GTAs expressed fears about teaching multimodal projects early in the semester, and different fears came up throughout the semester and after they finished teaching. Fear—at least partially—guided their level of confidence in teaching multimodal projects.

In the last two decades, the field of composition studies has come to embrace multimodal composition as a regular part of first-year writing courses (e.g., Alexander and Rhodes; Bowen and Whithaus; Palmeri; Selfe, "Movement"; Shipka, *Toward*; and many others), to the point where multimodality is mentioned offhandedly in books like *Naming What We Know* (Adler-Kassner and Wardle) and in position statements by major organizations in writing studies (Council of Writing Program Administrators). Despite this ubiquity, not much research in the field has explored guiding new composition teachers through the process of teaching multimodal assignments. While a wealth of scholarship offers insights into training new GTAs, very few of these manuscripts mention multimodal composition at all.

In order to begin to fill this gap, the authors of this article followed new GTAs as they learned to teach multimodal projects. Through these interviews, we were able to see the real on-the-ground struggles with multimodal composition that new GTAs experienced—something not yet done in other explorations of multimodal composing or of GTA training. The GTAs in this study were interviewed before teaching, during their first semester teaching multimodal composition, and after the semester was over. The hope was to offer insights into what challenges impeded teaching multimodal projects and how WPAs can adjust training for new GTAs to mitigate these challenges. Through these interviews, we found that GTAs' attitudes about multimodal teaching changed through the course of the

semester. Before they began teaching, GTAs often experienced more fear and uncertainty about teaching multimodal composition than other areas of teaching even if they had experience with multimodal composing themselves. These fears changed as they taught and completed their first multimodal projects with students, and other more common and well-documented teaching problems took center stage during and after the semester. While anxiety about teaching is well documented, this specific anxiety hasn't been covered in previous literature—and as far as we know, the drop off of the fear offers a unique contribution to GTA training literature. In this article, we document the interview process and challenges students experienced, and we offer recommendations for how to build confidence early in new GTA training so that multimodal composition will feel less scary for first-time teachers. Helping GTAs get over that anxiety about not being good enough may help them teach multimodal composition better.

Multimodal Composition and Teacher Training

Over the last decade, multimodal composing has become more prevalent in writing classrooms, with scholars arguing for its importance (Ball; Kress; New London Group; Shipka, *Toward*), exploring how to implement multimodal pedagogies (Anderson et al.; Bowen and Whithaus; Rankins-Robertson, Bourelle, Bourelle, and Fisher; Selfe, *Multimodal*; Shipka, "Task-Based;" Sorapure; Wysocki, Johnson-Eilola, Selfe, and Sirc), investigating what students learn from multimodal composition (Delagrange; DePalma and Alexander; Alexander; Jacobs; Nelson et al.), and explaining how and why faculty can become more proficient in multimodal composing (Journet; Rankins-Robertson, Bourelle, Bourelle, and Fisher; Wood and Madden). While support for teaching multimodal composition abounds, most of the research focuses on established writing teachers who might want to make a "theoretical shift" toward multimodal literacy (Takayoshi and Selfe 3). GTAs, who might be new to teaching entirely and still in the process of building their own theoretical foundations, are left out. WPAs must account for this gap when deciding to create a curriculum focused (even partially) on multimodal composing in order to ensure that graduate students are adequately trained to teach multimodal projects.

Unfortunately, little has been written about how training in both traditional composition pedagogy and multimodal composition could take place concurrently in GTA seminars or about the particular challenges GTAs might face in training to teach multimodal projects. There is a large body of scholarship that focuses on graduate pedagogy in the form of the teaching practicum—the orientation, training sequence, or graduate course

often provided for incoming GTAs in both master's and doctoral programs. The research tends to focus primarily on theorizing the practicum and curricular development (Dively; Dobrin; Khost, Lohe, and Sweetman), teacher training and preparation (Estrem and Reid; Fedukovich and Hall; Stancliff and Goggin; Bourelle), or the identities and attitudes of GTAs themselves (Grouling; Ebest; Dryer). Multimodal composition is largely absent in this body of research. While there are many claims of a multimodal turn or calls for "multimodal curricular transformation" (Palmeri 149), multimodal composition is still frequently treated as ancillary and is often not fully integrated into TA training. This sentiment is echoed by Beth Brunk-Chavez, who notes that in many cases it is only the "lucky few students who enroll in the new-media expert's class" (281) who will receive adequate training and experience for incorporating multimodal composition into their own classrooms.

Indeed, in a 2005 survey conducted by Anderson et al., the data shows that many programs lacked thorough training in multimodal composition at the time, which left graduate students to "teach themselves how to implement multimodal pedagogy" (74). Similarly, Claire Lutkewitte, in her study of GTAs' integration of multimodality into FYW classrooms, records several GTAs' complaints about the lack of training they received in teaching multimodal composition. Even in a more recent study, Rory Lee acknowledges an imbalance of labor in many departments or programs, where "a select few individuals shoulder most of the responsibility regarding the implementation of multimodality" (266). This imbalance can certainly result in less focus on GTA training in multimodal composition, despite calls for such changes to GTA curriculum and teacher training over the past decade (Graupner, Nickoson-Massey, and Blair, for example). As such, the challenges of preparing graduate students to teach multimodal composition while also learning about composition pedagogy more broadly remain undertheorized both from the perspective of instructors and WPAs and the perspective of the new GTAs themselves.

In contrast, some of the broader challenges that GTAs face as both teachers and students have been addressed by many scholars, with Dryer noting that GTAs may find their confidence or writing competence "undermined" in their role as a student while simultaneously being positioned as "writing experts" in their own classrooms (425). More specifically, GTAs may struggle with the pedagogical application of the theoretical knowledge they are learning in the practicum or through other coursework (Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel; Bourelle) or may even resist the practicum altogether (Ebest; Dryer).

These challenges undoubtedly remain when adding multimodal composition into the mix and may be intensified or branch into new challenges. As mentioned previously, the unique benefits and challenges of multimodal composition have been discussed widely. For example, in the introduction to *Multimodal Composition: Resources for Teachers*, Pamela Takayoshi and Cynthia L. Selfe address some of the common concerns instructors might have when considering multimodal composition, such as the fear that multimodality may take away from "writing concerns" or that instructors must be technology experts in order to teach it (7). Many of these challenges and concerns still exist for instructors over a decade later, with Logan Bearden noting that many instructors resist multimodal composition because they "feel they lack expertise with the digital" or may wish to uphold the "privileged position of print" (140-1). It is for this reason it seems particularly important to address GTAs experiences of these challenges and their approaches to incorporating multimodal composition.

To better understand their approaches, Xiao Tan and Paul Kei Matsuda examine first-year writing instructors' beliefs about incorporating multimodality into their writing classrooms. In particular, Tan and Matsuda seek to address whether teachers' beliefs about incorporating multimodality align with their actual teaching practices. Ultimately, their study finds that teachers' beliefs and practices tended to align, though their approaches were influenced by various internal and external factors, such as their perception of the students (8). Tan and Matsuda's study is an important contribution in that they specifically explore how GTAs choose to incorporate multimodal composition in a first-year writing classroom based on their beliefs about multimodal pedagogy. However, the study is also limited by its data collection, which is isolated to a singular moment in time, an issue that Tan and Matsuda also note, given that teachers' beliefs are "dynamic and susceptible to changes" (10). This article aims to extend the work of Tan and Matsuda by focusing more specifically on the internal and external factors that impacted GTAs when teaching a multimodal-focused first-year writing course at our university. We also recognize the need for further research that accounts for "contextual variables," as Tan and Matsuda suggest (10). This project seeks to extend Tan and Matsuda's work, in that we conducted a longitudinal study to better understand the fears, challenges, and successes that GTAs experience when asked to teach a first-year writing course focused on multimodal composing.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study began in the summer of 2020 as new GTAs engaged in the GTA seminar and began to teach first-year writing at Ohio University (OU), a public R1 university in the Midwestern US that enrolls around 20,000 undergraduates. The authors of this piece, Ryan, Rachael, and Courtney, all worked at OU at the time data were collected. Rachael was the WPA in the English department at OU at the time of the study, and Courtney was the assistant WPA. Ryan was a tenure-track faculty member who taught rhetoric and composition graduate courses and was a member of the Composition Committee advising the WPA.

There are typically around fifteen new GTAs in the graduate program per year. These include both MA and PhD students who are enrolled in one of three different tracks: creative writing, literature, or rhetoric and composition. To prepare to teach the one-semester first-year writing course offered at OU, GTAs take a graduate seminar course in composition pedagogy. That course, College Writing, combines theory with praxis. GTAs learn about the history and theory of teaching college writing while they concurrently teach a first-year writing curriculum designed by the WPA and assistant director. The College Writing seminar is also taught by the WPA. Because the first-year writing curriculum the GTAs in this study taught was centered around multimodal composing, they were provided with a great deal of support, both through an online summer/fall orientation prior to the start of classes and in the seminar course.

In addition, it is worth noting that the GTAs in this study also taught their first-year writing course online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Because they were teaching a multimodal curriculum, because they were teaching it online, and because the GTAs varied so greatly in their teaching experience, with some of them teaching for the very first time, they were asked to participate in an online teacher orientation that began in July and met through August. The orientation, which consisted of eight Zoom meetings with assigned "homework" in between meetings, allowed GTAs to become familiar with the curriculum by reading through course materials and composing some of the materials they would be asking students to compose. For the year of this study, the online orientation replaced the two-week in-person orientation that typically occurs two weeks before classes began. Thus, the GTAs had more time to learn the curriculum they would be teaching, to ask questions about it, and to gain confidence in enacting that curriculum in an online setting. Finally, Rachael and Courtney crafted the first-year writing curriculum that was provided to GTAs, and GTAs had the entirety of this curriculum, including a full semester schedule,

copies of assigned readings, essay assignment sheets, and lesson plans. It is within this context that we collected data on these GTAs' experiences of teaching a multimodal first-year writing curriculum.

With IRB approval,[2] three sources of data were collected. The first was an initial interview that took place immediately before or soon after starting the GTA seminar. Questions in this interview focused on definitions of multimodal composing, experiences with multimodal composing, and potential challenges of teaching multimodal composing. The purpose was to gauge GTA experience with both theoretical and practical aspects of teaching multimodal composing as well as help the researchers select three candidates for case studies. Case studies took place concurrently with teaching and were designed to get a sense of challenges with the curriculum as they arose. A final round of interviews was conducted with all participants after the semester had finished during which interviewees were asked similar questions to the initial interview.

Interviews

A total of thirteen GTAs were enrolled in the GTA seminar, and of these, eleven agreed to take part in the initial interviews. Of that eleven, eight took part in the final interviews. In order to keep the data consistent, only those eight are focused on in the data presented here. Basic demographic data on these participants can be found in table 1. Readers may notice that seven of the eight interviewees were on the PhD track and five of them were in the rhetoric and composition concentration. This may be slightly misleading, as only one of the eight had a background in rhetoric and composition before entering this university. Most had a background in either creative writing or literature.

Four of the eight interviewees had taught at least one composition course in their MA program, and three had taught composition for more than two years. Most of the interviewees had taught "incidental" multimodal projects before, meaning they had not set out to teach a multimodal project but had included multimodal elements in traditional projects. For example, teachers may have taught students how to use PowerPoint for presentations or encouraged students to analyze advertising images as part of a rhetorical analysis. Only one of the eight had intentionally taught a multimodal assignment previously. Four of the eight were "novice" multimodal composers, meaning they had created relatively low-effort multimodal texts, such as posting pictures on Instagram or minimally edited videos on TikTok. One participant was "proficient," meaning they had created more complex multimodal texts, and the final three were "expert," meaning they

Table 1
Interviewees Teaching and Multimodal Experience

Pseudonym	Program	Teaching Comp Exp	Multimodal Teaching Exp	Multimodal Composing Exp	Case Study
Anna Marie	MA Literary History	None	None	Proficient	No
Kurt	PhD Rhet & Comp	At least 1 course	At least 1 multi-class project	Expert	Yes
Jean	PhD Creative Writing	At least 1 course	Incidental	Expert	Yes
Kitty	PhD Rhet & Comp	More than 2 years	Incidental	Novice	No
Laura	PhD Creative Writing	More than 2 years	Incidental	Novice	No
Ororo	PhD Rhet & Comp	More than 2 years	Incidental	Novice	Yes
Raven	PhD Rhet & Comp	At least 1 course	Incidental	Novice	No
Remy	PhD Rhet & Comp	At least 1 course	Incidental	Expert	No

created multimodal texts that required extensive knowledge and heavy editing. For example, Kurt had recorded and edited musical albums and created videos in both professional and personal contexts, and Jean had created multimedia online fiction.

Case studies followed three students chosen to reflect a variety of experience levels in terms of multimodal composing experience, theoretical learning about multimodal composing, and experience teaching multimodal composing. The three case studies selected were Kurt, Jean, and Ororo. Kurt was selected because of his extensive multimodal creation experience and high multimodal teaching experience but relatively low experience with multimodal or rhetoric and composition theory. He had extremely high scores in disposition toward multimodal creation, value of multimodal composing, and confidence in teaching multimodal composing. Jean also had extensive multimodal creation experience as well as relatively low theoretical experience. However, Jean had low multimodal teaching experience and was the lowest participant in terms of confidence at the beginning of the semester. Ororo fell somewhere in between. She had quite a bit of teaching experience, but little of it involved multimodal teaching. She also had little experience with multimodal creation. But on the other hand, she was one of the few students who had multiple rhetoric and composition courses at the graduate level before entering the program.

Case-study interviews took place roughly every two weeks over the course of the semester, with each interviewee participating in five to six case-study interview sessions in total. The questions for these interviews were simple, focusing on what multimodal activities they had taught and how the GTA felt the activities went, but case-study interviews were conducted somewhat loosely. Many interviews expanded to include general challenges with teaching and challenges with multimodal teaching specifically.

All initial, final, and case-study interviews were conducted by Ryan. He was selected to conduct the interviews because he was not directly involved in the GTA seminar teaching. Rachael led that seminar, and Courtney assisted with seminar instruction. In order to encourage students to answer more honestly, the research team felt that someone not involved directly in the teaching of the seminar should conduct the interviews. While Ryan taught graduate courses in rhetoric and composition at OU at the time of this study, he had not yet had any of the GTAs selected for case studies, and only one of the other GTAs, in his courses when he conducted the interviews.

It is worth noting that all interviews, the GTA training seminar, and all of the students' first teaching experiences at the university of this study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and were entirely conducted online.

Initial interviews took place in July 2020, the GTA seminar took place from July through December 2020, case studies and teaching took place in Fall 2020, and final interviews took place in January 2021. Obviously, this made teaching, training, and most university work especially hard on everyone involved. As former WPA editors Lori Ostergaard, Jim Nugent, and Jacob Babb put it, "we may do no more in a day than to keep our heads above water and to help our family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and students to stay afloat themselves" (9). This was certainly true for the GTAs in this study, many of whom struggled with pandemic-related issues as much or more than teaching issues. In fact, one student initially selected as a case study for this project was overwhelmed and decided to leave graduate school entirely. It is with this backdrop that the data below was collected.

Interview Analysis

Interviews were transcribed using transcription software then checked and corrected by the research team. Codes were derived inductively by the research team. As we were looking for challenges and concerns in teaching multimodal composing, we first went through the interviews simply marking the concerns. Each interview was analyzed by at least two members of the research team in order to ensure that all concerns about teaching were marked. The research team then grouped similar codes together to create a set of fourteen concerns or challenges into which all of the individual codes were grouped. The codes are presented below, and the frequency of each code is presented in table 2.

- **Lack of teaching knowledge**: The teacher feels they do not know enough about general pedagogical theories.
- **Lack of multimodal knowledge**: The teacher feels they do not know enough about the theories or practice behind multimodal composing.
- **Lack of knowledge about multimodal tools**: The teacher feels they do know enough about which tools to use to compose multimodally or how to use those tools.
- **General feelings of unpreparedness**: The teacher feels they are unprepared but does not know in what specific areas.
- **Lack of confidence in teaching**: The teacher feels they are unprepared to teach composition generally.
- **Effort to teach multimodal composition:** The teacher feels that there may not be enough time to fully teach multimodal composition, or it will require too much effort.
- **Student resistance or fear**: The teacher feels that students may resist the pedagogy.

- **Student reluctance to try new things**: The teacher feels that students will not try new modes they are not familiar with.
- **Student lack of effort**: The teacher feels students will not put forth much effort into projects because they don't take projects seriously or think they believe projects are overly easy.
- **Student inability to apply multimodal theories**: The teacher feels students will not understand multimodal theories or will not create effective multimodal projects.
- **Accessibility**: The teacher feels students will not be able to access required tools.
- **Technical problems:** The teacher feels that students may struggle with issues related to the creation of multimodal texts, such as how to save or submit drafts.
- **Online teaching**: The teacher feels tools used for general online teaching may impede learning.
- **General Teaching**: The teacher feels there is some other problem with teaching.

Table 2
Frequency of Codes

Code	Initial Interviews	Case-Study Interviews	Final Interviews
Lack of teaching knowledge	0	0	0
Lack of multimodal knowledge	6	3	5
Lack of knowledge about multimodal tools	2	0	2
General feelings of unpreparedness	0	2	0
Lack of confidence in teaching	1	3	0
Effort to teach multimodal composition	1	1	1
Student resistance or fear	1	3	5
Student reluctance to try new things	0	8	6
Student lack of effort	1	1	1
Student inability to apply multimodal theories	0	2	3
Accessibility	0	0	3
Technical problems	0	6	3
Online teaching	0	7	4
General teaching	0	14	2

The research team noticed a pattern in the data when grouping similar codes together. The first six codes could be grouped roughly into concerns about GTAs' own internal struggles as a teacher, the next four concerns could be grouped into concerns about external struggles with students, and the final four concerns could be grouped into concerns about external struggles with teaching. Internal struggles were those in which the locus of the concern came from inside the interviewee's own thoughts or feelings of preparedness. In other words, the internal struggles were not responding to an external stimulus directly. For example, internal struggles included grappling with a lack of knowledge about multimodality. External struggles were those in which the locus of the fear started outside of the interviewee initially. For example, the interviewee may have been concerned about student reactions to assignments or about tools not working correctly. While the lines between internal and external struggles were sometimes blurry, context often told us whether the fear started with the interviewee's own sense of themselves or with how they were interacting with the world beyond themselves. Codes occasionally came together, such as when a student was resistant to an assignment (external struggle with student), and this caused the interviewee to worry they didn't know enough (internal struggle). These codes are grouped into internal struggles, external struggles with students, and external struggles with teaching in table 3.

Table 3
Groupings of Codes

Code Group	Initial Interviews	Case-Study Interviews	Final Interviews
Internal struggles	10	9	8
External struggles with students	2	14	15
External struggles with teaching	0	27	12

Discussion of Interview Results

Three points reiterated elsewhere are worth noting from the data that we collected. The first is that GTAs' internal struggles—their concerns stemming from knowledge and feelings of preparedness—began before teaching, continued through teaching, and persisted after the teaching was over. These internal struggles are also reported in similar studies (Grouling; Dryer) where GTAs indicated difficulties developing their teacher-student identity. The second is that GTAs' struggles with student-related teaching problems were not really on their radar before the semester began

but became a major problem once teaching had started. This struggle is similarly reflected in Heidi Estrem and E. Shelley Reid's study where "for the majority of [GTA] respondents, a 'teaching challenge' was a 'student challenge'" (468). And the final point of note is that GTAs seemed to be completely unaware of other struggles with teaching issues besides those focused on students before the semester began, but this was the largest problem while in the middle of teaching. GTAs in Carolyn A. Wisniewski's study identified similar problems "related to inexperience organizing learning environments" (45). Each of these will be covered in the remainder of this section.

However, in addition to these findings, we also found that interviewees' internal struggles with multimodal teaching in particular were at the front of their minds before teaching—and even to a certain extent after teaching as well—but these struggles largely disappeared when they were in the middle of the semester. Instead, struggles with multimodal teaching largely shifted to focus on interactions with students and other external factors. In retrospect, this finding may not be surprising, but it does have significant impacts on how WPAs may approach helping GTAs to teach multimodal assignments for the first time.

Internal Struggles

Internal struggles over knowledge and feelings of unpreparedness were by far the most mentioned anticipated challenge among the GTAs in their initial interviews. They expected that their lack of multimodal knowledge would be an impediment to their ability to teach effectively. This is similar to the GTAs studied in Tan and Matsuda, who also had internal worries about teaching multimodal composition. However, their worries seemed to focus more on the justification of multimodal composition than on their own experience level. In contrast, many of the GTAs in our study expressed concerns that they simply did not have enough experience with multimodal composition themselves to teach it. Both Anna Marie and Remy expressed this as their primary concern going into teaching multimodal composition. Remy said he was "not very comfortable in teaching" multimodal composition yet because he did not see himself "as good enough to teach" it. He felt that he still needed "to learn how to apply it" to the students in his classes. This is particularly notable because Remy had already taken a doctoral-level multimodal composition class with Ryan before beginning as a TA.

Many others were comfortable with multimodal composing but were concerned that they did not have enough theoretical understanding of

composing multimodally to teach it effectively. For example, Raven stated that the word multimodal was scary to her and that she believed she could teach it but that "it would be easier with instruction." Kurt worried that he did not fully understand "the pedagogy behind" multimodal teaching or "what the research [was] saying about it" despite being an experienced multimodal composer and the only interviewee to have intentionally taught a multimodal assignment. Laura's and Jean's concerns were very similar to Kurt's: They worried that their lack of theoretical backing—that is, knowledge about what other scholars had written on the topic—in multimodality would hurt their ability to teach. Aubrey Schiavone also found that instructors new to teaching multimodally might find this teaching "especially daunting" because they "simultaneously encounter multimodality in theories or scholarship" as they try to "integrate multimodal composition into their instructional practices" (358-9). Early on in the interview process, many of the interviewees felt that they needed to read more theory on multimodality in order to be able to teach it effectively.

These internal concerns remained remarkably stable in the case-study and final interviews. Internal concerns were mentioned ten times in the initial interviews, nine times in the case studies, and eight times in the final interviews. However, the specific internal struggles changed after the initial interviews. During the case studies, lack of multimodal knowledge was still mentioned a few times, but a more general lack of confidence in teaching was mentioned as often. This came up most often in Jean's interviews, where she expressed concerns about her "capabilities as a teacher" and expressed that she felt "kind of in the dark" about how to teach—despite her extensive teaching experience. In other words, teaching generally became more of a concern than teaching multimodal assignments for the GTAs in the case studies once they were in the classroom. The question of theoretical backing fell away as interviewees became more concerned with the practical day-to-day aspects of teaching.

Lack of multimodal knowledge returned as the primary concern in the final interviews, accounting for five out of the eight internal struggles that interviewees expressed. Kitty said that she "didn't always have the best advice for how to approach multimodal projects that students wanted to do," and Kurt worried that he couldn't take what he had learned about multimodal composition and "make it palatable for different learning styles." Anna Marie, Jean, and Laura expressed concerns about lacking in theoretical multimodal knowledge, in visual rhetoric, or even simply in having the vocabulary to discuss multimodality. Other scholars have also found that GTAs often struggle to make this connection between theoretical knowledge and classroom practice (Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel;

Bourelle), and these after-the-fact interviews seem to bear that out—applying what other scholars have said to multimodal theory as well.

The primary take-away seems to be that the GTAs in this study remained stable in their concerns that they may lack multimodal knowledge—either theoretical or practical—before, during, and after teaching a course focused on multimodal composing. However, during teaching, this concern was as common as more regular day-to-day teaching concerns. We believe that helping to allay these fears requires two interventions. One is the more obvious one: allowing students time to expand their theoretical and practical multimodal composing knowledge before teaching may help with these fears. This follows up Tan and Matsuda's call to "help teachers gain a critical understanding of what multimodal literacy is and does" (10) and to give teachers "more opportunities to do hands-on multimodal practices" (11). In addition, it may be helpful to simply let GTAs express these fears with their peers and see that they are common. We think that GTAs may have been concerned about their lack of multimodal knowledge partially because they believed that peers knew more about or had more experience in certain areas. In other words, students may be feeling a bit of imposter syndrome. By seeing that other students are concerned and that each GTA has different assets and gaps in their multimodal knowledge, it may help students feel more confident in teaching. They were already seeing their deficits, but they were not yet seeing their assets as multimodal teachers.

Of course, this finding falls in line with previous research on teaching GTAs more generally (Bourelle; Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel; and Reid). Our study extends this research to demonstrate that not only does teaching multimodal assignments also tap into this imposter syndrome but also that it seems to be even more of a fear for GTAs than general teaching concerns. Before teaching, these GTAs were more concerned about multimodal knowledge and experience than they were about teaching experience more broadly. We recommend that GTAs grapple with the imposter syndrome endemic to being a new teacher as well as that related to multimodal teaching specifically.

These concerns about a lack of multimodal knowledge come into starker focus when we explore the external concerns—those concerns that began with a perceived problem outside of their knowledge or feelings—that the GTAs experienced throughout the semester.

External Struggles with Students

Struggles with students related to multimodal composing were not on GTAs' radars very much during the initial interviews. Remy expressed concerns that students may resist multimodal composition, and Laura worried that students would not exert much effort and just create "a glorified PowerPoint." Aside from those two points, no other interviewee mentioned concerns about students' reactions to multimodal composing—or problems with students at all—before teaching.

It is perhaps not surprising that these concerns were much more common during the case-study interviews. This mirrors Wisniewski's study in which she found that nearly half of the problems reported by GTAs were with students, such as a "lack of engagement" and "students' writing quality" (43), something that we can apply here to multimodal composing as well. Interviewees described struggles with resistance or fear, with lack of effort, and with an inability to apply what had been learned about multimodal composing. But by far the most common struggle with students was a reluctance to try new things. This ranged from students requesting to do traditional projects instead of multimodal composing to trying to do the same kind of multimodal project for each assignment. This echoes the students in Michael-John DePalma and Kara Poe Alexander's study who were "accustomed to thinking about language in specific, narrow ways" and struggled with multimodal projects because they "challenged their assumptions, understandings, and approaches to composing texts" (189). Students in Jean's class tried to avoid multimodal projects all together, instead opting to do traditional essays when multimodal projects were encouraged and later even required. Ororo's students "freaked out a little bit" when she told them about multimodal projects. She said her biggest challenge was that students were afraid of "failure" on multimodal assignments. Later in the semester, most students tried to just do PowerPoints for their multimodal projects, and she had to encourage them to try different approaches. In fact, she took this as a learning experience and said she would be giving them a "limited number of options" for multimodal projects next time around so that the students would feel less stressed about all the possible ways to approach multimodal assignments. But she also said PowerPoint would not be on that list—she wanted them to try different formats. It seems likely that this resistance might be experienced by any teacher using a multimodal curriculum for the first time, but at the same time, more experienced teachers may be able to allay student fears more easily.

After the interviewees had finished the semester, student reluctance to try new things was still GTAs' biggest student challenge. But student

reluctance or fear and student inability to apply multimodal theories came up much more often in the final interviews than they did in the case studies. Overall, struggles with students stayed relatively stable from the case studies to the final interviews. Student struggles came up fourteen times in the case studies and fifteen in the final interviews. Whereas internal struggles stayed relatively stable, student struggles were mostly absent in the beginning, went up during the case studies, and stayed up for the final interviews.

We believe this is simply because most of the GTAs had not considered student struggles with multimodal composing yet in the initial interview, but during the semester these struggles took up a lot of their energy. A good approach to this problem is dealing with sample student struggles before the semester starts, both to make the GTAs aware of them and to help them prepare for how to handle them once they do. The instructors for the GTA training class can bring in examples of their own struggles with students and ask the GTAs to work in groups to solve the issues. Then, the class can discuss them together and decide which approaches would be most appropriate.

These external struggles with student reluctance or fear demonstrate one very important point about the GTAs' apprenticeship into teaching multimodal assignments: GTAs were concerned about their own knowledge and experience early on, but during and after teaching, students' reactions caused the greater struggles. Knowing this and addressing it directly with GTAs offers two very important interventions. The first is that we can allay GTA fears earlier by pointing to the fact that their own knowledge may be less important than their students' reactions, but this also allows WPAs an opportunity to talk about those student reactions in advance. We can bring up points such as asking the GTAs what concerns they might have as a student doing one of these assignments and helping them to develop strategies to allay their students' fears and concerns.

External Struggles with Teaching

While struggles with students were somewhat on the minds of the interviewees during the initial interviews, not a single interviewee mentioned any anticipated struggles with day-to-day teaching problems such as accessibility, technical problems with software, problems with teaching online, or general teaching problems (such as grading, getting students to do homework, or other issues that any teacher would experience). But somewhat surprisingly, this became the largest category by far in the case studies. Every case study interviewee mentioned these struggles in nearly every interview,

and more than half of the struggles mentioned were with general teaching. To echo Elizabeth Saur and Jason Palmeri, "[n]o teacher, no matter how experienced, has it all figured out" (148).

In his very first case-study interview, Kurt mentioned four different problems with general teaching.[3] These included problems leading discussions, problems explaining to students how to approach homework assignments, problems producing good examples for students, and problems explaining major assignments to students. Kurt, Jean, and Ororo all expressed problems with stress and trying to keep up with work such as grading and class preparation, despite all three having taught before and all three having taught composition at least once. The problems they expressed were problems that any teacher—especially a new teacher such as many of the GTAs—would experience teaching. Likewise, because these classes were taught online during the COVID-19 pandemic, problems with software and online teaching (such as problems with video conferencing) were to be expected. What was perhaps not expected, however, was that these issues came up so much more often than issues directly related to teaching multimodal composition. During the case studies, general teaching struggles came up in twenty-seven separate interviews as opposed to the fourteen times that problems with students related to multimodal composing came up and nine times that internal struggles with multimodal teaching came up. That means these general problems accounted for more than the combined total of all issues related to multimodal teaching during the case studies.

But these external teaching struggles dropped off precipitously in the final interviews, where they came up only twelve times—less than half the times they came up in case studies. We think there is a relatively simple explanation for this: these kinds of day-to-day struggles were on the GTAs' minds a lot while the classes were happening, but they made much less of an impact on what they considered a "struggle" in retrospect. In other words, it seems likely that the GTAs largely solved these teaching struggles by the end of the semester—or at least had made progress with being more comfortable with the problem. Grading, students doing the reading, and students understanding the homework seemed much less important to them in retrospect. So, for example, general teaching struggles were mentioned fourteen times in the case-study interviews but only twice in the final interviews. The problems were just less of a problem to the GTAs by then.

How to address these external teaching struggles is a question that has been addressed elsewhere in the research (Reid; Saur and Palmeri; Wisniewski). These issues are the same issues that almost any teacher would

encounter—regardless of whether they were teaching multimodal assignments or more traditional ones.

This finding has important implications for WPAs interested in using a multimodal curriculum for GTA training. These very normal day-to-day struggles aren't really on students' minds before teaching—they're much more concerned about the multimodal aspect at that time—but when teaching, the more quotidian (non-multimodal) elements cause more problems. This seems to suggest that WPAs interested in teaching a multimodal curriculum—but who may fear it's going to be a lot of extra hassle for GTAs—need not be too concerned about the new element. The same concerns that all of us are most used to GTAs experiencing are the ones that are more likely to be a problem in the classroom. In day-to-day teaching practices, multimodality does not appear to cause much more additional struggle.

Summary Discussion

Internal issues related to knowledge and feelings about teaching were most present for GTAs early in the interview process and dropped off little by little as the interviews progressed. Issues with students and multimodal composing were mentioned rarely early on but rose in the case studies and stayed up in the final interviews. Issues with general teaching problems were completely absent early on, spiked in the case studies but then dropped in the final interviews. Based on what we are seeing here, it seems like the GTAs had a good sense of how much of a problem their own knowledge and experience would be, but less of a sense of how much problems with students or other day-to-day teaching struggles would be. One of our primary contributions is that we found that our interviewees thought early on that their own knowledge and experience with multimodal teaching would be a much bigger problem than it actually was: this could be imposter syndrome rearing its head. At least the students in our study seemed to be far more capable teachers of multimodal composition than they feared they would be. Based on these findings, we have three recommendations for future GTA training.

The first is simply support. Early on, the GTAs seemed overwhelmingly concerned with their own ability to teach multimodal composing classes. Taking an inventory of what they know and what they need to learn may help to allay some of those fears. In addition, as many scholars have argued, providing GTAs with training in teaching multimodal composition in FYW can provide these teachers with both the praxis and confidence they need to be successful in the classroom (Graupner, Nickoson-Massey, and

Blair; Lutkewitte; Rankins-Roberston, Bourelle, Bourelle, and Fisher). Building on these previous studies, we believe that reassuring students that they have or will acquire what they need to succeed at teaching multimodal composition may help as well. This provides WPAs with a map for the kind of training in multimodal composition that will be most helpful for our GTAs.

It may even be helpful to point out to GTAs that, as our interviews seem to show, their own knowledge and experiences with multimodal teaching matter less during the semester than they appear to believe. In fact, in some ways, learning about multimodal composing alongside their students may be an asset, not a deficit. Struggling together may be a good way to model good learning behavior for the GTAs' students: "I don't know how to do that, but let's find out together." All of the GTAs in this study ended the semester as competent teachers of multimodal composition—regardless of their experiences with multimodal composing or multimodal theory before the semester started. It appears that one thing that may be getting in the way of these teachers is their own self-doubt, and we can help them to calm some of those fears.

Our second recommendation is to engage in reflective activities in which GTAs think about how they might handle classroom problems before they encounter them. For example, the GTAs experienced many problems related to multimodal composing with students during the semester. And these problems stuck with them through to the final interviews. Introducing similar problems to the GTAs early on and asking them to think through how they would address them could certainly help them feel more confident when these issues arose during the semester. As we already know, this kind of before-the-fact reflection helps with the problems with general teaching concerns as well (Mapes, Jacobson, LaMance, and Vogel; Reid), and we could extend these suggestions to multimodal teaching as well. For example, Meridith Reed suggests "reflective experimentation" to help GTAs build their pedagogy (120). This kind of reflection could help GTAs consider aspects of both traditional and multimodal pedagogy. Putting on GTAs' radars that some students might resist doing multimodal assignments in favor of more traditional writing or that they may want to create similar things for multiple projects can be helpful. It is important to add these strategies to address multimodal composing problems to any reflections WPAs may already be doing as part of GTA training. These problems were not serious ones, but they were concerning to new teachers when they encountered them for the first time.

And our final recommendation is to let students be imperfect. As E. Shelley Reid says, teachers need to remind themselves that feelings of

incompetence are "a normal learning stage and one that will diminish over time" (132). This advice applies to all GTA training, of course, but it is especially true when introducing GTAs to multimodal composing assignments. Across all three of our groupings of GTA concerns, we found that the GTAs often felt stressed about how well they were handling their problems. From not knowing which multimodal tool to use to students making "glorified PowerPoints" to having the video conferencing software fail, many of the interviewees expressed regular concern that they were not doing their best. The additional element of multimodality particularly scared some GTAs. A reminder that all teachers experience problems may help allay some of this fear. And a reminder that all teachers learn from issues encountered while teaching and endeavor to do better in the next class may help as well. The three authors of this piece can all say without question that we have never had a perfect class, but in each class that we teach, we learn to be a little better. Perhaps that is a lesson that these GTAs need to learn early in order to stress less about teaching multimodal composition—and to stress less about teaching in general.

Conclusions

Jean was an experienced multimodal composer, an experienced writing teacher, and an occasional teacher of multimodal assignments before starting her PhD program. So why did she struggle with teaching multimodal composition for the first time? Our conjecture is that most of this struggle related to internal perceptions of herself: She felt she did not know enough about the subject matter even though from an objective perspective, it appeared to us that she was something of an expert. As Saur and Palmeri explain "your life as a teacher is likely to be awash in complex, messy emotions" and not without "deep moments of doubt" (147). Still, we believe a few simple interventions could have helped Jean to see her assets as a teacher and build on the areas that still needed work. A good starting point would, of course, just be support. Letting Jean take an inventory of what she already knew about multimodal composing may have helped her to feel more confident in her abilities as a multimodal composition teacher. It may also have helped to make the areas she needed to still work on more concrete—less of a nebulous gap and more of a specific area for improvement.

Getting Jean to work through the problems she may face with students in class in advance could also have helped. She was often flustered when a problem with a student came up, but helping her work through hypothetical problems with students and multimodal composing may have made those situations seem less baffling. She could have drawn on her experiences

teaching writing in other contexts to overcome those challenges and felt less like "a stranger in strange lands" (McCarthy 234).

But we think the final intervention would have been most critically important for Jean: she should have been allowed to feel as though it was okay to be imperfect when teaching multimodal composition for the first time. Not just Jean, but many interviewees struggled when things went wrong. Knowing that things going wrong is a normal part of teaching can help GTAs not only get more comfortable with challenges, but also reflect on their failures and learn from them. As Reid says, "our potential for growth often depends on our willingness to take risks and fail" (138). We should make space for those risks and failures. No matter how much we learn about a subject and no matter how many times we've taught it, we still will butt up against challenges that are new to us.

These suggestions will likely not be novel or surprising to experienced WPAs. In fact, they may appear to be often-repeated maxims for GTA training. That's true. But as WPAs, when we introduce new elements such as multimodal composition to our GTA training, we must remember to apply these maxims to the new situations as well. It is important to remember that the novelty of the curriculum largely does not change the GTAs' experiences of teaching a new curriculum for the first time. Our suggestions here for multimodal teaching would likely apply to any large curricular change.

Going forward, we hope to continue this conversation about how best to not only teach multimodally but also how best to learn to teach multimodally. We expect as we get better methods to incorporate multimodal teaching for both new and experienced teachers that we will find that our assets as teachers often more than make up for our deficits. Being inexperienced with multimodal theory may be offset by outside-of-school multimodal practice. Having never taught a multimodal assignment may be offset by having taught many traditional composition projects. We should remind ourselves of the wealth of knowledge we draw on as we teach—and learn to not focus on the gaps we may have in our experience or knowledge. That will allow us to help ourselves as teachers to be more confident, but it may also help us to instill more confidence in GTAs like Jean.

Notes

1. All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

2. Ohio University IRB Protocol Number 20-E-202

3. For the purposes of our study, we coded this as a single incident. Multiple occurrences of the same code in a single interview only counted as one occurrence.

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