

CHAPTER 11.

THE PURSUIT OF (UN)HAPPINESS  
IN COMPOSITION AND  
RHETORIC TAs' EXPERIENCES

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Helping graduate students to teach writing courses—or what Heidi Estrem and E. Shelley Reid more succinctly term “writing pedagogy education” or WPE—is a difficult charge for many WPAs. At my previous institution, every spring I taught a three-credit-hour graduate course for master’s students as they prepared to teach first-year writing the next semester or year, and each semester I taught a one-credit-hour practicum to support graduate students as they taught for their first two semesters. At my current institution, I often teach a three-credit-hour graduate course for master’s and Ph.D. students, and I lead monthly professional development workshops for new Ph.D. TAs each year. This work is rewarding but challenging, rather like attempting to teach a child how to tie their shoes while also explaining the history of shoe-tying, theories of shoe-tying (making two rabbit’s ears to fold over each other, making criss-crosses over a bridge, making a bow), different materials needed in shoe-tying, and ways to mentally and emotionally approach shoe-tying. Even a seemingly simple task such as tying one’s shoes can take on complexities when faced with this potential amount of information, and much more so a politically fraught subject such as teaching writing.

As William J. Macauley, Jr. notes in his introduction to this collection, previous scholarship has paved the way for WPAs like me who find themselves asking, “What do I teach rhetoric and composition TAs? How can I cover the broad range of theories and practices they need while helping them to intellectually engage with this work? What are the best forms of support to provide new TAs with so that they can feel empowered to teach their students?” Texts such as Betty P. Pytlik and Sarah Liggett’s *Preparing College Teachers of Writing*, which provides a broad overview of histories, theories, programs, and practices of teaching rhetoric and composition TAs, and Sidney I. Dobrin’s collection *Don’t Call It That* about the composition practicum provide instructors with avenues for thinking about how to support rhetoric and composition TAs while

engaging them in intellectual considerations of their teaching. More recent work has expanded upon WPE, the creation of the term itself indicating that scholarship about rhetoric and composition TAs has blossomed and coalesced over the past two decades, even if we have more work to do as this collection indicates. Some of these studies pay attention to the design of TA training itself, including what the format and curricula should be (Duffelmeyer; Dryer; Latterell; Reid; Stancliff and Goggin). Others examine specific issues that TAs struggle to articulate and address (Smagorinsky, Wilson, and Moore; Taggart and Lowry). Quite a few argue for the importance of reflection in the education of TAs, especially as they prepare to teach and begin exploring their teacherly identities (Brewer; Hesse; Estrem and Reid; McKinney and Chiseri-Strater; Reid; Welch). Taken together, these studies illustrate how complex designing effective WPE can be, especially when taking into account specific contexts and TA populations.

Despite this breadth of scholarship, there is a major gap in the field's research: the lived experiences of TAs teaching in our writing programs, including, as I investigate in this chapter, their emotional labor as they experience what Macauley describes in the introduction as "significant and sometimes competing changes" in TAships. Elizabeth Saur and Jason Palmeri's recent "Letter to a New TA: Affect Addendum" offers a start to this work "by turning the focus to the affective and emotional dimensions of teaching" through a series of maxims to new TAs (146). These are framed as ways TAs can think about the emotions they experience and how to fruitfully address these emotions; for example, Saur and Palmeri tell TAs, "It's not always about you" (148) and explain that students often have other things happening in their lives that can affect their reactions to TAs' classes. Thus, this short piece is set up as a sort of grounded advice column for new TAs who might struggle with the emotional work involved in teaching. However, it does not tell us from the perspective of TAs how they experience the emotional or affective labor that takes place in their lives as TAs, labor that pervades everything they do.

This chapter extends the work Saur and Palmeri began, reaching beyond advice for new TAs to delve into TAs' affectual and emotional responses to teaching as they take a practicum course and teach first-year writing for the first time. Teaching is a fraught form of labor, something that experienced teachers often forget until they encounter a particularly difficult student, class, or semester. Drawing attention to scholarship on emotions and affect, I argue that theories of happiness offer a useful heuristic through which to examine the affective and emotional support writing programs offer TAs. Applying this heuristic to actual TAs' experiences allows WPAs to view TAs' emotional labor through their own eyes and to consider how we can better address this aspect of their teaching experiences in WPE.

## EMOTIONAL LABOR IN RESEARCH ABOUT RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION TAs

Following calls from scholars such as Jenny Rice who draw connections between rhetorical studies and affect studies, this interdisciplinary body of scholarship devoted to studying the many ways our bodies interact with their environment (including people, objects, animals, etc.) has more recently been taken up in our field. As other scholars have noted, emotion has a complicated position in rhetoric and composition studies. Rhetorical studies from Aristotle to the present day often cite emotions as a weaker form of persuasion, a manipulative force with potentially devastating power (Quandahl). More recently, feminist scholars have tried to reclaim emotions as a valuable and integral facet of our lives, work that has sometimes reified the position of emotion work as women's labor. In the past two decades, however, scholars have paid more attention to emotions as they affect administrators, teachers, and students. Here, I offer a brief sketch of some of this work, including how other scholars have examined the emotions of TAs, in which to situate my discussion of happiness theory.

One of the earliest texts about emotions in composition studies is Lynn Worsham's "Going Postal: Pedagogic Violence and the Schooling of Emotion." Worsham explicates how emotions operate in pedagogy to reaffirm the hegemonic and to bolster the status quo while seeming to offer revolution. Her text offers the field a valuable starting point to thinking about emotion and affect, particularly our own roles in the social structures around us that often lead to violence. Building on this work, Laura Micciche is one of the most recognized scholars to take up Worsham's call for our field to pay more attention to the emotional and affective dimensions of our labor. First in *A Way to Move*, a collection co-edited with Dale Jacobs, Jacobs and Micciche offer the research of scholars exploring the ways that emotions influence what we teach, how we interact with others, and how we live our lives as administrators and teachers. Several years later, Micciche offers her own extended analysis of emotion work in composition studies in the book *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching*. In this text, Micciche offers "emotion as a category of analysis" (1) through which to examine writing, including writing program administration. Her chapter "Disappointment and WPA Work" draws attention to the "toxic leadership" (83) that WPAs often build their emotional lives around, and the following interchapter addresses the resistance WPAs often feel when their work or affectual states are characterized as "disappointment." Courtney Adams Wooten et al.'s *The Things We Carry* extends this attention to the affectual and emotional to interrogate what emotional labor WPAs perform and how they can effectively negotiate this labor. Several chapters in this collection speak to TA concerns, notably Carl Schlachte's

argument that WPAs should integrate responsiveness to events such as natural disasters into teacher training and/or ongoing professional development (156). My chapter builds on these affectual theorizations of WPA work by examining further WPE in particular and the emotions that TAs themselves experience as they prepare to teach and begin teaching.<sup>1</sup>

Several extended studies of graduate student TAs' experiences touch upon their emotions, even though these are not the central focus of these projects. For example, in the Afterword to Elizabeth Rankin's *Seeing Yourself as a Teacher* she explores why she resisted the thru-line of "taking it personally" that kept recurring in her study of five rhetoric and composition TAs:

What the TAs were telling me was that teaching writing is a personal act. It engaged the emotions, not just the intellect, and involved human interactions that cannot be separated from the other acts we perform as teachers of writing . . . But the fact is, we rarely talk about the personal aspects of teaching. Or if we do, we tend to talk behind closed doors. . . . (126)

But there are ways to get behind these closed doors. Sally Barr Ebest's study of TAs found that reflection is one way to address their resistance to modifying their teaching in response to graduate course content. Ebest's attention is not on theorizing these TAs' emotions, but her study reveals how these TAs experience resistance as a constellation of emotions that affect the links they make between their teaching and their WPE (for other perspectives on TA resistance, see Kali A. Mobley Finn's chapter in this collection). More recently, Jessica Restaino's study of four TAs in *First Semester* demonstrates how emotions can become central for the TAs at times, such as Tess's encounter with her student Philosophy Phil at an institutional hearing, even though their emotions are not the central focus of this study.

A recurring thread in our field, then, is the emotion work involved in teaching writing, as Micciche notes in her introduction to a recent issue of *Composition Forum* dedicated to emotion work. This scholarship, however, has not often directly intersected with studies of WPE, despite the additional emotional burden TAs often carry as teachers who are in new teaching environments with little frame of reference for the experiences they are going through. Failing to take particular account of the emotions TAs experience places them in a tenuous position where they are viewed as teachers capable of handling the emotion work of teaching but without having support in place to help them negotiate

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1 For further examples of the ways that rhetoric and composition scholars have taken up emotion and affect, see Caswell 2014; Chandler 2007; Johnson and Kruse 2012; Vogel 2009; Winans 2012.

this type of work. This study draws explicit connections between the emotions of happiness and unhappiness and TAs' experiences as they prepare to and begin teaching. While such connections are sometimes implied in previous studies of TAs, centering them offers WPAs a unique and important lens through which to consider the emotional labor TAs do and what this means for writing programs.

## HAPPINESS THEORY AND TA LIVED EXPERIENCE

Affect theory offers ways for rhetoric and composition scholars to consider the work they and other teachers do, linking emotion with a consideration of the ways that our bodies interact in minute and almost undetectable ways with the people and things around it (Hardt; Massumi; Sedgwick and Frank). I here examine in particular Sara Ahmed's theorization of happiness, which bridges affect and emotion, to sketch out a heuristic for examining some of the emotional labor of TAs. While scholars disagree about the relationship between affect and emotion,<sup>2</sup> I view emotion as affect that has risen to a conscious level and manifested in particular feelings that we can identify and often ascribe to particular events, people, etc. even as an entire affective network—one that we are largely unaware of—has contributed to those emotions. My intention here is to draw attention to the ways that Ahmed's happiness theory asks us to consider those often-hidden aspects of our reactions and to parse out how those manifest as emotions in the lives of TAs so that writing programs can more adequately prepare for and account for these.

Some of the most basic emotions people experience are happiness and unhappiness. Often, other emotions such as joy, excitement, sadness, and rage can operate conterminously with happiness and unhappiness, making happiness and unhappiness über categories for other emotions. Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* theorizes the way that happiness operates to delineate how we view our own and others' lives. She claims that happiness, rather than a state of being, is the way that social norms are seen as good and goods (11). We associate particular objects—what Ahmed calls “happy objects” (22)—and choices with happiness because they directly relate to our society's ideas about who someone should want to be or become.

According to Ahmed, happiness thus helps people determine why they desire what they do (203); in the context of WPE, this concept points to why TAs may

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2 For example, Jenny Rice distinguishes “critical emotion studies,” or “the effects of emotions . . . on various areas of everyday life” from “critical affect studies,” or “the interdisciplinary study of affect and its mediating force in everyday life” (201-202). She draws on the work of Massumi to discuss the narrativizing and cultural components of emotions that affect does not have, pointing to his argument that emotions typically have objects associated with them whereas affect does not.

want to be professors and to what end. Ahmed contends, “The science of happiness could be described as performative: by finding happiness in certain places, it generates those places as being good, as being what should be promoted as goods . . . The science of happiness hence redescribes what is already evaluated as being good as good. If we have a duty to promote what causes happiness, then happiness itself becomes a duty” (6-7). Often, this process occurs for TAs through their identification with their own professors and sociocultural conceptions of faculty that reinforce teaching (and associated activities such as course planning, grading, etc.) as a good and as good. Teaching then becomes so associated with happiness that experiencing unhappiness can be unsettling for TAs because they are not fulfilling their duty to be happy as a teacher. Those people who cause happiness by submitting to and illustrating happiness according to social standards—such as TAs and other faculty—are then viewed in Ahmed’s interpretation as “good” people with “good taste” (34) who contribute to the common good.

In constructing these ideas of happiness, Ahmed posits that happiness scripts are created that govern happiness for individuals: “Going along with happiness scripts is how we get along: to get along is to be willing and able to express happiness in proximity to the right things” (59). Such happiness scripts are dependent upon sociocultural ideas of what is “natural or good” (59) and they can vary depending on particular sociocultural contexts. In other words, happiness scripts are not universal and can vary from place-to-place, institution-to-institution, and department-to-department. Happiness scripts can also be extremely limiting: “Happiness scripts could be thought of as straightening devices, ways of aligning bodies with what is already lined up . . . To deviate from the line is to be threatened with unhappiness” (Ahmed 91). Putting together Ahmed’s ideas about what happiness is, happiness scripts can come to govern many choices individuals make if they give in to the pressure to make others happy by conforming to social norms of happiness. However, particular happiness scripts are not available to everyone all of the time. Ahmed claims that “Ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy ‘in the right way’” (13). Happiness therefore is contextual, relying on sociocultural ideas about individual bodies and whether these bodies should be happy and whether they can be happy in ways that society approves of.

In Ahmed’s conceptualization, outlined in this and her previous work, she often examines how race, gender, and sexuality figure into the happiness scripts that are constructed and who is viewed as able to be happy in the right ways. For instance, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed explores compulsory heterosexuality and how queerness can be seen not just as a failure to align with

happiness scripts built around heterosexual reproduction but also as the rejection of these scripts and the embrace of what is viewed as non-normative (146). The rejection of these scripts is not simply individual; it is seen “as a threat to the social ordering of life itself” (145) because rejecting compulsory heterosexuality means also rejecting the social norms that surround it. While I do not in this chapter specifically attend to race, gender, and sexuality, Ahmed’s explication of the reverberating effects of rejecting happiness scripts—or unhappiness—draws attention to what it means to be “happy” or “unhappy” in a particular context. In the case of TAs, this speaks to whether or not they can or want to enact particular teacherly identities that writing programs demand of them, identities that seemingly promise happiness but constrain who they are as writing teachers (and, as a result, what they do, how they present themselves, and so on).

Just as Brewer found that the TAs she studied often experienced disconnects between the views of literacy being sponsored in the program they taught in and their own views of literacy, my study finds that TAs often struggle to negotiate the affectual and emotional disconnects they experience as instructors. Although from the outside it can seem that happiness scripts for teachers are extremely positive and affirming, in reality these scripts demand extreme personal sacrifice for the common good of students coupled with the idea that teachers must experience deep fulfillment through student success. Part of TAs’ struggle, which can be seen in my research, is to reconcile what they know of this happiness script with the reality they experience as they begin teaching. When faced with contradictions between the ideal and the reality, TAs often find themselves in the position of challenging these scripts and, as a result, challenging WPAs and other instructors’ conceptions of happiness and unhappiness in relation to teaching writing. As Brewer found with regards to conceptions of literacy, TAs do not always want to align with the happiness scripts put in front of them, even as these scripts are ones WPAs and writing programs depend on in order to align TAs with their program’s philosophy, courses, and so on. When this occurs, Ahmed explains that people can become “killjoys . . . simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising” (65). While she centers on feminist killjoys as those who particularly question gender dynamics that govern happiness scripts, this concept extends to others such as TAs. They are typically operating from a less powerful position in a writing program where they are being asked to take up particular affective identities. However, when they do not want to or cannot align with these identities, their unhappiness spreads to those around them. This forces WPAs and other faculty in writing programs to confront scripts that may have previously been invisible to them and to consider whether they will ask or try to force TAs to assimilate or whether, instead of or in addition to this, they will reshape writing programs around TAs’ affective experiences.

## OASIS MOMENTS AND ANXIETY: TAS SPEAK ABOUT HAPPINESS AND UNHAPPINESS

In order to gain insights into the ways TAs experience happiness and unhappiness, I conducted a series of interviews and collected written material from five TAs during Spring 2017. These TAs were part of the first-year writing program I directed at a midsize, regional, master's-granting public institution in Texas.<sup>3</sup> My central research question was how do TAs experience happiness or unhappiness while teaching college writing for the first time and how can WPAs facilitate TAs' emotional experiences. In this chapter, I focus on three of the five TAs—Anna, Lily, and Diane<sup>4</sup>—who had completed a writing pedagogy course and were in either their first (Anna) or second (Lily and Diane) semester of teaching. While teaching, they were taking part in a graduate-level, one-hour practicum course that met once per week while TAs were teaching for their first two semesters. As Yancey, Cole, May, and Stark point out (this volume), TAs often are not blank slates when they begin teaching for us; in this group, one TA had taught high school English for one year and another had homeschooled her children. None, however, had taught college-level writing before. All were completing either literature or creative writing thesis projects in their masters' programs; none were focusing on rhetoric and composition in their studies. TAs at this institution taught two classes per semester after completing the three-hour course, were eligible for medical insurance coverage at half the employee rate, and received a modest TA stipend but no tuition reimbursement.

Seeking two different types of data, I completed two interviews with each TA—one in the first half of the semester and one near the end of the semester. These typically lasted from twenty to forty minutes (although one was as short as sixteen minutes and one was as long as forty-eight minutes) and asked TAs to think about their approaches to teaching, conceptions of happiness and unhappiness, and specific moments when they experienced these emotions. I also collected weekly reflections in which they wrote about what was happening in their classes, things they were re-thinking as they taught, etc. These ranged from philosophical and reflective to practical and grounded.<sup>5</sup> This material allowed me to see not only what TAs told me about teaching in our interviews but what was reflected back in these ongoing written products. In total, I transcribed approximately three and a quarter hours of interview material and had 123 pages of written material to analyze.

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3 I have since become the WPA at a different institution.

4 All names are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the TAs involved in the study.

5 For studies of the ways that reflective writing can positively affect student teachers and TAs, see Foehr 2000; McKinney and Chiseri-Strater 2003.

Following methods outlined in Johnny Saldaña's *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I coded the material first using in vivo coding to mirror TAs' own language to describe their emotions. Then, I used emotion coding in order to define broad categories under which their specific emotions fit. Going through this process while writing analytic memos enabled me to identify major themes in TAs' experiences that I explore further below. Because happiness and unhappiness are broadly defined terms, TAs' emotional experiences did not always fit neatly into these concepts. However, I use these as the axes around which TAs' emotions revolve in order to explain some of the positive and negative feelings they experienced as they went through the process of learning to teach and becoming teachers. By drawing largely from TAs' own language about the emotions they experienced, this project advances current considerations of TA experiences by providing a space in which TAs can speak for themselves about their emotional labor as they teach writing. This can help WPAs draw our understandings of their emotions from TAs' own experiences so that we can better account for their emotional labor without basing this work on our own assumptions about what they experience.

## DEFINING HAPPINESS AND UNHAPPINESS

While many people talk about, think about, or reference happiness on a daily basis, it is difficult to pin down exactly what happiness is. When asked directly, many people reference other people or things as components of their happiness rather than defining or describing happiness in its own terms. Thus, people more often reference Ahmed's happy objects when describing happiness instead of explicating this emotion in the abstract, which makes sense given her emphasis on how happiness is built around happy objects. Thus, it is not surprising that, when asked, TAs struggled to explain how they define happiness and unhappiness, often defaulting to descriptions of happy (or unhappy) objects, times in their lives, and so forth to explicate these concepts.

In defining happiness, several of the TAs reference a feeling of contentment, sense of accomplishment or satisfaction, and positive feelings as ways to think about happiness. These tend to reference particular happy objects, especially tasks or work that is done or recognized by others as good. For example, Lily explains, "Happiness, for me, I guess, would just be feeling content, like not feeling so anxious all of the time. And actually enjoying my days rather than living in fear of disappointing all of my professors."<sup>6</sup> Happiness in this case is constructed as an internal feeling and as a relationship to professors' reactions to her work. Similarly, Anna claims, "Basically I am the most happiest or the happiest when someone tells

6 Lily. Personal interview. 26 Jan. 2017.

me that I'm doing a good job,"<sup>7</sup> seeing this validation of her work as an important part of her feeling content in that work. Often, TAs view their work as good—or what Ahmed terms happy—only when others confirm that it is good. This supports Ahmed's view that happiness coheres to those things valued by others as good and as goods; in this case, TAs identify strongly with the ways their mentors both value their work and recognize its value.

Perhaps not surprisingly, TAs generally defined unhappiness as a feeling of anxiety or nervousness, a sense of dissatisfaction or lack of respect from others, or an overall pessimistic stance. Often, their definitions of unhappiness spring from feelings of inadequacy either originating with themselves or others. Lily, who was working on her thesis at the time, identified unhappiness with the academic environment. She talks about unhappiness for her being linked to anxiety and nervousness explicitly in relation to her academic work: ". . . the reason for that definition of mine is just because of academia and I'm trying to impress people. And so my unhappiness springs from not being able to impress those people [faculty], especially this whole thesis thing."<sup>8</sup> The time spent on her academic work also meant Lily was unable to do other things that she wanted or needed to do, such as sleep. She mentioned how her very hectic schedule, which involved taking a full course load, working on her thesis, being a TA, and working other jobs, meant she was "always on the go" and felt "so anxious."<sup>9</sup> Even though she also said she was "very content and . . . happy," it's clear that she is exhausted by the ways in which academia shapes her time, goals, and even her body's functions.

One TA, however, offers a different view of happiness. Diane struggled to define happiness because it was largely outside of her worldview. She explains, "I am the daughter of a Baptist minister and was trained all through my childhood and upbringing that happiness is an irrelevant term."<sup>10</sup> Later, she comments, "And what I had drilled into me was the opposite, that happiness is irrelevant. No one truly has happiness at the work of this existence,"<sup>11</sup> a belief in part predicated on the idea that there is a life beyond this one on Earth that is worth considering. Diane's experiences ask us to consider how those TAs who don't have a clear framework for happiness and unhappiness might characterize their teaching experiences and what effects this might have on their work and their relationships with WPAs and other mentors.

Considering happiness and unhappiness through these TAs' perspectives helps us to consider what happy or unhappy objects—such as teaching and scholarly/

7 Anna. Personal interview. 27 Jan. 2017.

8 Lily. Personal interview. 26 Jan. 2017.

9 Lily. Personal interview. 26 Jan. 2017.

10 Diane. Personal interview. 25 Jan. 2017.

11 Diane. Personal interview. 25 Jan. 2017.

creative work—are possible and why. Their definitions are perhaps not surprising, but they do illustrate how much power mentors hold over the emotional lives of TAs, whether WPAs who are assessing their teaching work or other professors who are assessing their scholarly and creative work. This highlights how important relationships with mentors can be and brings up questions about how mentors, especially WPAs, respond to TAs and any unhappiness they express, which is discussed further in the conclusion. The following sections delve more deeply into several ways TAs experience happiness and unhappiness to show how their conceptions of these emotions reverberate to other aspects of their lives as TAs.

## ENGLISH AND WRITING STUDIES AS (UN)HAPPY OBJECTS

One of the central things that TAs identify as a happy object is the subject of English itself. This conception of English ties into the popular notion that English as a subject is good because it addresses so-called literacy crises<sup>12</sup> and is a good that can be bought and sold, not the least through the teaching of English in schools. Without identifying the value of English, it is doubtful that these TAs would experience as much happiness in teaching writing, a subject that is primarily outside of their chosen fields of study.

One TA, Lily, shared how she identified English as a happy object. She claims, “I think it’s worth the time and effort because what we teach them [students] therefore continues, and they build on those skills and that knowledge for the rest of their career and if we mess up that could impact them.”<sup>13</sup> Later on, she further explains, “You’re not putting on the roof, you’re putting down the flooring or the foundation.”<sup>14</sup> Lily views English generally and writing specifically as a foundational subject, one which she finds happiness in because it is valuable, something that students will continue to build on and take with them into their future courses and careers. Later, I discuss how the weight of the responsibility of teaching such important skills can cause unhappiness in TAs if they feel that they are failing. However, their basic identification of English as a happy object can allow them an entry point into viewing teaching writing as an endeavor worthy of their time and effort that allows them to experience happiness about their work.

While Lily identified English and even writing as a foundational subject and a happy object, TAs also had more complicated relationships with rhetoric and composition as a field. Diane and Lily, who were in their second semester of

12 Such literacy crises have particularly risen up around the publications of Rudolf Flesch’s “Why Johnny Can’t Read” in 1955, Merrill Sheils’s “Why Johnny Can’t Write” in 1975, and, more recently, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa’s book *Academically Adrift* in 2011.

13 Lily. Personal interview. 15 May 2017.

14 Lily. Personal interview. 15 May 2017.

teaching, both had a stronger identification with this field than other TAs in this study including Anna. Lily in her final interview talks about how much more strongly she identifies with composition pedagogy than literature pedagogy, in part because there is not as much of a support structure for teaching literature both disciplinarily and at her institution. She says, “I guess because there’s an abundance that I’ve seen for rhet/comp, I want to read them [journals] and so I feel like through reading them and through finding them I’m learning more about this than I am my own field.”<sup>15</sup> She goes on to explain that she feels more community around writing pedagogy because of the monthly workshops and support structures in place at her institution. Because this amount of support does not exist for literature pedagogy, Lily finds it difficult to identify herself as belonging to a community of literature instructors.

Similarly, Diane highlighted the communal aspect of teaching first-year writing that helped her identify with writing studies: “I do think there’s something about sitting down with other people who are teaching first-year comp[osition] . . . it’s different. We’re being very specific, we’re talking about very specific things and it’s very focused and all of that is where I want to be. I want to be able to touch base and to get to know other faculty members.”<sup>16</sup> The community and support systems formed around teaching first-year composition offer avenues through which TAs can negotiate happiness scripts by seeing and talking about what others are doing in their classrooms and revising happiness scripts so that they make sense for themselves in their particular institutions.

Anna, however, as a newer TA in just her first semester of teaching, was more ambivalent about how rhetoric and composition might serve as a happy object and struggled to articulate how she might fit into this field. Even though Anna mentioned that first-year writing is “practical” and “useful,” she connected this with students’ work in other classes rather than an identification with writing studies. When asked about whether she felt involved in writing studies, she mentioned that creative writing “does take precedence,” although she acknowledged that she could see parallels between writing studies and creative writing.<sup>17</sup> She also identified some of the ways she transferred what she had learned as a student in creative writing classes into her role as a teacher of first-year writing because, as she mentions, she tested out of taking first-year writing herself. It was clear, however, that despite taking a semester-long course that introduced TAs to material from writing studies, Anna did not identify strongly with this field. Since I was one of only two rhetoric and composition scholars in that department and

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15 Lily. Personal interview. 15 May 2017.

16 Diane. Personal interview. 15 May 2017.

17 Anna. Personal interview. 22 May 2017.

no master's track in the field was available to students, part of this ambivalence may have come from the lack of focus on the field in the department. Given Anna's short time teaching first-year writing, this may also speak to the time needed to develop any attachment to rhetoric and composition as a happy object.

## CONFLICTED TEACHERLY IDENTITIES

Given the high esteem with which these TAs hold their professors, it is perhaps not surprising that they desire to feel as comfortable teaching as they think their professors are, even as they recognize that they need more experience to feel this particular happiness. As they struggle to develop teacherly identities, these TAs experience wildly diverse emotions, illustrating how happiness is often built on social standards that are particular to specific contexts and that have different effects on different people.

Some TAs experience moments of identity crisis that make it difficult for them to feel happiness in teaching. Anna struggled to negotiate her teacherly identity in the midst of a very difficult first semester of teaching that involved a situation with one male student that necessitated myself, the department chair, and another office on campus stepping in to mediate. Early in the semester, Anna writes, "I've felt pretty down about myself lately and I think that's probably the source of these panics, the source of my anxiety inside the classroom. I definitely put on the persona that I'm sweet but firm in front of my students, but really I'm a ball of unease just taking it a day at a time."<sup>18</sup> A combination of personal and professional anxiety as well as the need to "put on a persona" contributes to Anna's unhappiness about her teaching. About midway through the semester, Anna tries to work through some of the complaints she has about her students and her overall attitude toward teaching: ". . . I should be more appreciative of those good times that I do have direct control over and forget about instances that may or may not have anything to do with me . . . I can't see or control everything going on, so I need to let it go."<sup>19</sup> Her ruminations here revolve around what it means to be a good teacher: how much can a teacher control? How can a teacher create an ideal learning environment in every class? What does it mean if some of these things aren't possible? If following the happiness script for teachers is part of what makes TAs happy, Anna reveals how difficult it can be for TAs to understand what their version of this script might be.

There are moments of relief, however, when TAs become more comfortable in

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18 Anna. "Reflection." 31 Jan. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

19 Anna. "Reflection." 21 Mar. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

their teacherly identities and experience what Diane calls “oasis moments.”<sup>20</sup> In a semester where Diane continually returned to the question of what was and was not her responsibility as a teacher, she identifies oasis moments as those when her students respond well to her teaching. She claims, “I don’t expect every student will give my methods rave reviews . . . But if a significant part of my job is to challenge students to think about things in new ways—to think critically—then based on these discussions [with some individual students], I am doing my job.”<sup>21</sup> Diane seemingly has learned that teaching will not bring happiness every day and that not every student will respond well to her teaching. However, she has negotiated these feelings and moved toward a place of identifying student learning as a happy object that solidifies her identity as a first-year writing instructor.

Similarly, Lily’s second semester of teaching traced her becoming more comfortable and confident with her teaching identity. In her first reflection she writes, “Well, my first week went better than it did last semester, that’s for sure! I started out a little nervous with my first class, but by the time I got to my next section, all of the jitters went away.”<sup>22</sup> While she still notes potential problems, she is confident that since she “survived last semester” she can “survive this one too.”<sup>23</sup> Lily also carves out more space to think through her teaching identity. Her reflection from week six explains, “I have decided that I want to be a marshmallow teacher; however, just a little on the toasty side. . . I like this analogy because it shows that I can stand by my rules when I need, but I can also be understanding and flexible with the needs of my students. And as a student myself, I have always admired professors who are able to understand things from a perspective other than their own.”<sup>24</sup> Throughout the semester, Lily’s negotiation of her teaching identity overlapped with her need to deal with some personal situations, which led to her identifying the need to care for herself and her family as a priority. While this seems to be in conflict with the common conception that teachers should put work and their students above everything else, Lily concludes, “I know that if I do this for myself, my students will also benefit.”<sup>25</sup> Lily’s

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20 Diane. “Reflection.” 28 Mar. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

21 Diane. “Reflection.” 28 Mar. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

22 Lily. “Reflection.” 29 Jan. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

23 Lily. “Reflection.” 29 Jan. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

24 Lily. “Reflection.” 26 Feb. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

25 Lily. “Reflection.” 31 Mar. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

resistance to a happiness script demanding she sacrifice her life for teaching helps her determine what teaching identity makes sense for her given other needs she has and is unwilling to give up. This back-and-forth process can be expected of TAs, and it draws attention to the difficulties of navigating teaching identities that are affectively inflected and implicit rather than explicitly discussed.

## EXPECTATION DISCONNECTION

One of the most prevalent themes in TAs' experiences is the difficulty students have in reaching the expectations TAs have for them, which often causes TAs to feel unhappy and to question whether they are competent teachers. Although all teachers experience unhappy moments, often these are hidden from the TAs we are training because we do not necessarily want to talk about our or our students' failures.<sup>26</sup> This means that happiness scripts created around teaching tend to revolve around successes and happiness rather than failures and unhappiness. TAs have to confront the problems with this happiness script when they encounter difficulties with their students and face the prospects of their and/or their students' shortcomings.

Anna, Diane, and Lily each mentioned aspects of their students and classes that were disappointing to them. In an interview at the beginning of the semester, Anna discussed her expectations about college-level teaching she had formed in contrast to her previous experience teaching high school and how these had changed in the pedagogy course and then as she taught her own classes. When she taught in a high school, she mentions that she had been ready to quit by October because she had anxiety issues, but she had managed to finish the year. Some of the problems she notes experiencing there were dealing with parents, lack of curricular freedom, and immature students. She had expected, in contrast, for college-level students to be "better writers, better thinkers, better students" than she experienced.<sup>27</sup> She identifies looking at student writing samples in the pedagogy course as a clear moment when these expectations began changing: "And so seeing some of the samples—I just thought that they would be better writers than they were and I realized that they were still after several years having some of the same issues."<sup>28</sup> Anna had viewed the identities of high school teacher and college faculty as operating differently, even though the happiness

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26 The concept of student and/or teacher failure is understudied in our field. Jacob Babb and Steven J. Corbett's article "From Zero to Sixty: A Survey of College Writing Teachers' Grading Practices and the Affect of Failed Performance" helps to open this conversation by recounting the results of a survey of writing teachers and how they emotionally respond to student failure.

27 Lily. Personal interview. 26 Jan. 2017.

28 Lily. Personal interview. 26 Jan. 2017.

scripts for these positions are similar. While she expected her identity as a college faculty member operating and interacting with students to be different than her identity as a high school teacher, Anna is disappointed when these differences do not materialize as she had anticipated because her first-year writing students are not so different from her high school students.

The way student expectations overlapped with TAs' conceptions of themselves as faculty members and the happiness they did or didn't experience in these roles as a result also carries through Diane's reflections about what realistically she could be expected to do to support students and what students had to do themselves in order to succeed. Two weeks into the semester, she writes:

I think I must be under an afternoon curse: no class after noon will perform as anything other than zombies. Apathetic. Requiring supreme effort and sacrifice on my part: oh, wait. Not this semester. Because now I know it's not me, it's them. They don't eat, probably because they don't have the time, I realize, but still that's their choice not mine. They don't read, for the most part. They don't want to talk or move or think or. . . . But it's not me, it's them. Their choices, not mine.<sup>29</sup>

Diane's frustration and unhappiness about her student's lack of engagement is evident in this passage. However, her struggle to figure out a healthy approach to this problem is also clear. Her description seems to imply the existence of a happiness script of an ideal teacher who has engaged, prepared students even as she is working to realize that she can only do so much to influence what students do. Her struggle, as with the other TAs, is to figure out how to rewrite the happiness script so that she can enjoy teaching even when students fail to reach her expectations.

For some TAs, the disconnect between their expectations and students' work causes them to reflect anxiety back on themselves and their ability to perform the happiness scripts they identify as part of being teachers. Anna particularly struggled to fit the teacher happiness script with her experiences teaching two especially difficult classes. During our initial interview, Anna mentions feeling "terrified" about teaching, explaining, "I want to give them the proper information. And also I don't want to waste their time. And it's, I think it's hard, well it is for me at least, to find a balance between what they need to know and just how much they need to know exactly."<sup>30</sup> Part of the problem here is TAs trying to put themselves into the shoes of first-year writing students when they themselves may not have had to take similar classes or when they may have taken them long ago. In the final interview,

29 Diane. "Reflection." 31 Jan. 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

30 Anna. Personal interview. 27 Jan. 2017.

Anna comes back around to the anxiety she felt about teaching: “Mainly I wanted to make sure that I was teaching them everything that they needed to know and I was just worried I wasn’t doing that or I was teaching them something wrong or, I don’t know, I didn’t want to ruin them.”<sup>31</sup> Her unhappiness springs from feeling as if she isn’t teaching students what they need to know, even though she took a semester-long pedagogy course prior to teaching. Such unhappiness seems to originate in Anna’s uneasiness with the embodiment of the teacher role. Because this role feels uncertain for her, she is especially conflicted about the happiness script she is supposed to follow, including what to teach.

Near the end of the semester, TAs often reached a point of recognition or resignation about what they could and could not do to help their students. This is their way of integrating students’ failure into their happiness scripts. Diane comes to terms with this dilemma: “I find, having been specific with my expectations . . . I no longer feel guilty about letting students feel the pain of not meeting my expectations. It is something of a breakthrough for me. This new-found lack of guilt gives me greater confidence that I can do this. For reals.”<sup>32</sup> With the recognition that teachers cannot always keep their students on track, TAs are better able to articulate happiness outside of every student’s success. Anna similarly says in her final reflection, “I don’t understand these students, but at this point, I’ve done my job and it’s not my problem if they want to tank their own grade.”<sup>33</sup> In the rest of her reflection, Anna is careful to couch her conclusions with concern about her students, and it is clear that she is seeking to identify ways for her to move forward as a teacher who cares about her students without sacrificing her own emotional and personal wellbeing.

Examining TAs’ experiences through the lens of happiness theory helps us explore what it means at an emotional and affectual level to begin teaching first-year writing classes as TAs. While some of these reactions are positive, TAs’ negative reactions draw attention to the problems they face when the realities of teaching run against the happiness scripts about teaching they have internalized. These disconnects are often viewed by WPAs as problems that need to be addressed by aligning TAs with the teaching scripts in their programs. The conclusion offers a heuristic for considering how writing programs are taking into account and supporting the emotional needs of TAs. However, it also asks us to consider what it means to ask TAs to assimilate to our program’s scripts and what alternative responses may ultimately benefit more the TAs and writing programs they teach in.

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31 Anna. Personal interview. 22 May 2017.

32 Diane. “Reflection.” 2 May 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

33 Anna. “Reflection.” 5 May 2017. Practicum in Teaching First-Year Composition, student paper.

## WPA INTERVENTIONS IN TA HAPPINESS SCRIPTS

Viewing TAs' experiences through the lens of happiness and unhappiness allows us to identify pivotal ways that TAs construct their identities as teachers largely based on existing happiness scripts for teachers that center around particular happy objects. Conflict most often arises for TAs when they experience resistance to or ambivalence about these happiness scripts or happy objects. WPAs and other professors do not always help due to our reticence to engage in open acknowledgment of the ways that we suffer from unhappiness about teaching, or due to our insistence that teaching is always good or happy even when it is not. I begin with a heuristic to help WPAs analyze how their writing programs are supporting the emotional needs of TAs. I then ask a larger question about our approach to TAs and their affective and emotional needs in our writing programs.

Below are questions that will help WPAs assess the affective and emotional needs of TAs in writing programs and consider ways to support these needs. These are based on the results of my own study, and it would be a useful starting point for WPAs to similarly talk with TAs in their programs about their experiences of happiness and unhappiness to determine contextually-appropriate questions and support systems.

- What material conditions do TAs operate within (number of classes taught, salary, provision of benefits, etc.) and how do these affect their emotional health?
- What explicit guidance are TAs given about achieving work-life balance and structuring their work lives? What models do they have about achieving and/or maintaining their emotional health while working as TAs and/or faculty members?
- How is teacher identity development supported across TAs' first several semesters of teaching at a particular institution? What opportunities are TAs provided to reflect on and/or speak with others about their teacher identity development?
- What mentorship opportunities are provided to TAs? How are mentors prepared to support TAs' affective and emotional needs? How does mentorship explicitly address TAs' affective and emotional needs?
- What opportunities for building community and support are TAs provided, especially as they learn more about writing studies?
- What types of consistent, formative feedback are given to TAs as they begin teaching? How often is this feedback provided and by whom?
- How does the writing program recognize and publicize the work that TAs do?

Underlying many of these questions is the theme of helping TAs negotiate the responsibilities in their personal and professional lives, a difficult balance in part exacerbated by often-tenuous working conditions. Diane, who suffered a serious illness in her first semester of teaching, was especially sensitive to her personal needs and how carefully those needed to be balanced with her teaching and graduate work. She explicitly links this to feeling unhappy: “You know, at that point you lose your perspective and you go from just being dissatisfied with your performance and realizing you could do better and you have to change some things to do better in the future. Then you lose perspective and you do, I became downright unhappy. Not just with that but with all the circumstances surrounding it.”<sup>34</sup> She points out the unhappiness she feels as she tries to juggle the many happiness scripts set out for her as a teacher, student, and person struggling with illness, or as she goes through what Pawlowski and Jacobson call in this collection “the work of reconciliation.” Several TAs mentioned the importance of having validation from their mentors that they are doing their work well. Their needs speak to the importance of all mentors in a writing program and graduate program, not just WPAs, viewing themselves as people who are helping TAs adjust to the pressures of being teachers and graduate students simultaneously through emotional support.

Because writing programs are the places in which these tensions can often reside, though, they are particularly important sites for providing explicit support for the affective and emotional needs of TAs. To develop attunement to emotional labor as a central concern in teaching and being a TA, we can ask TAs to read work such as Saur and Palmeri’s to initiate conversations about the emotions they are likely to face as they teach in our programs. Other types of support could include having TAs observe different faculty teach so that they identify different types of teacherly identities that can be successfully taken on and having them work through teaching scenarios before they are in the classroom to help them think through their emotional and affectual responses to particular situations and develop action plans; structuring robust mentoring opportunities so that TAs have multiple mentors in a program; and offering ongoing professional development opportunities that are attuned to emotional labor. At a more material level, WPAs also need to recognize the ways that financial constraints can relate to TAs’ happiness and unhappiness, working with graduate directors and others around campus to argue for adequate compensation for those graduate students who teach in our writing program.

Finally, perhaps more difficult but important work would be for WPAs to confront what it means for some of our TAs to not identify with the happy objects in writing studies that make our work so valuable to us. For years, scholarship about TAs has often spoken to their supposed resistance to writing studies as Brewer

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34 Diane. Personal interview. 25 Jan. 2017.

points out. Instead of focusing on this resistance, I conclude by asking what would happen if writing programs put TAs' affective experiences at the center (or at least centered them more) of their work? A key part of these experiences often revolves around the identification of the field of English studies—and often more specifically, literature and/or creative writing—as a happy object for TAs, an entry point into their thinking about first-year writing courses. I am not arguing that writing programs must divest themselves of the knowledge built up by writing scholars about rhetoric and writing itself, teaching writing, etc. to appeal to TAs. Instead, I am arguing that we need to rethink the message we send to TAs when we communicate—explicitly or implicitly—that a happy object they identify strongly with and that drove them to graduate school must be abandoned and that another happy object (writing studies) must be taken up through particular scripts in order for them to be successful first-year writing teachers. This ignores the excellent work that so many of our TAs and colleagues who come from English fields outside of writing studies do in writing programs, and it denies TAs the importance of the field(s) with which they strongly identify and are pursuing. I don't have a clear answer to this question, but WPAs' work with TAs demands that we pay attention to their affectual and emotional experiences and, as a result, that we pay attention to what scripts we are asking them (and others) to follow in our programs, what the costs of asking them to follow these scripts are to them and to our programs, and whether those costs justify the lengths to which we try to enforce these scripts instead of allowing them to morph around those teaching in our programs.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

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