

CHAPTER 6.

“SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT”: REIMAGINING TA ORIENTATION AS MEANINGFUL THRESHOLD BOUNDARIES

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It's only 10:00 am but the air conditioning unit in the room is already working at maximum capacity in the one hundred seat auditorium, its gentle hum more felt than heard. The room seems to stretch off into eternity, the eggshell-colored walls blending into the beige linoleum, and the only things that give me a sense of perspective in the space are the thirty or forty bodies scattered around the room. It's the fall orientation meetings for new and returning adjuncts at my new institution and, as a new faculty member, a colleague had recommended that I attend even if it's not required for me. "It'll help you get the lay of the land," she had said brightly, "and afterward, we can get lunch together."

Forty-five minutes into the meeting, however, I wish I had suggested we get lunch and skip the non-required meeting. Because even though I'm at a new institution, I have quickly learned that the lay of the land isn't entirely different from what I've seen in the past. Or, rather, while the land itself (the student body, the region in which my institution is situated, etc.) is vastly different, the ways in which the presenters are laying the land (the orientation) is no different than what I've heard in the past. My phone sits inches from my hand and, as the speaker demonstrates how to leave student feedback for essays submitted through the learning management system, the phone beckons me to pick it up and illuminate its LED screen.

I'm a little disappointed to realize that the only notification on my lock screen is one from Timehop, a social media app that shows you posts you created on that day in years past, enticing me to open the app with a click bait worthy message: "See if you can remember 11 years ago. . ." Even though I don't want to be, I'm tempted. I divert my attention back to the speaker but the little devil on my shoulder tells me that this learning management system is not significantly different than what I've seen in the past. I'm not missing anything. I look up and down the rows of instructors to see if anybody is looking my way and, picking up my cellphone, I turn it back

over, so we are again face to face. There sits the notification and, now without hesitation, I click the bar, show my iPhone my face and, voila! My memories sit before me.

I scroll absentmindedly at first. A picture of my niece and I that makes me smile. A Twitter post asking my followers for book recommendations. Lodged between these memories—though much of the content hardly qualifies as such—I come to a picture I had taken exactly five years ago. It is a close-up image of a legal notepad, scrawled with my nearly illegible handwriting. The picture shows the notes coming to the bottom of the page. With the black and white filter that I've laid on the digital photo, the memory takes on a kind of archival quality that leaves me with an odd tingle of *déjà vu*. Five years ago, to the day, I was sitting in room much like the one in which I was currently sitting in a nearly identical orientation. It takes me a moment to make out the words I've written: a recommendation about how many pages of reading I should assign my first-year writing students, a point about the benefits of student-facilitated class discussions, and a note about how to encourage students to put their voices first and use sources to amplify their points, not the other way around. Below these seemingly useful reminders, I've quoted one of my orientation leaders as saying something I'm sure nobody wants me to have recorded: "welcome to hell."

The original intent of this orientation's leader most-likely off-the-cuff comment is long lost to history. She could have meant that being a graduate student was its own form of hell. She could have imagined it was the first-year writing class that belonged in Dante's *Inferno*. But here, in 2019, in another orientation, I begin to imagine that it is orientation, or the process of being oriented to a new institution or program, that is particularly hellish. Because even though I am at a new institution, as a new type of employee (now a tenure-track employee, not a graduate student), and armed with a new orientation schedule, I suddenly notice how two things never seem to change from one orientation program to another.

One of these consistencies is the mode of learning. In every orientation I have attended, most of the time is spent in short classroom like sessions. Facilitators stand in front of those being oriented and disseminate knowledge. Sometimes facilitators have handouts. Sometimes they organize time for the audience to work collaboratively among themselves in ways that replicate a teacher organizing students into group activities. The other commonality among orientation programs is that the focus is on the *I*—rather than the *hows*—of teaching. TAs are taught that they should offer students opportunities to be discussion leaders, for example, but they aren't properly prepared in organizing this kind of learning environment. And while the easy explanation for these less than ideal commonalities has to do with the temporal limitations of many orientation programs (which may range from only a few hours, to a few days, to potentially a few weeks before teaching begins) or the financial constraints of universities in a neoliberal world, this predicament

underscores how TA orientation programs operate under the premise of functional survivalism, a point Joanne Addison underscores when she remarks that her program’s “first-year practicum is based on surviving” (310).

Even though survival is often the goal of TA orientations, you don’t need to be a Trekkie to know that, as Seven of Nine once proclaimed: “survival is insufficient” (“Survival Instinct”). The problem, of course, is that focusing on the mere survival of TAs and the programs that house them flattens the liminal space new TAs inhabit. While they are no longer students, they are not yet instructors. And while TA orientations are meant to inform new TAs about the policies, practices, and procedures—the ways of moving—that are central to their new identity, the mode of instruction stymies new TA’s ability to recognize the complex negotiations they are making, thus inhibiting their growth as new teachers, as graduate students, and as members of an academic community. In other words, orientation programs often function more as a stopgap to maintain the structural integrity of first-year writing courses and programs and, while such an aim is important from a university and programmatic level, it does little to serve the TAs whose institutional identities are situated on unstable ground. This chapter begins with a discussion of how TA orientation programs function as threshold boundaries. Next, I draw on my experiences as a TA to demonstrate how orientations tend to reinforce a student-oriented identity (rather than a teacherly one) and argue that such approaches insufficiently locate TAs as liminal beings at threshold boundaries. I conclude with a discussion of how orientation programs might be reframed to articulate meaningful threshold boundaries that encourage a stronger awareness of TA’s liminal positions and prepare them to leverage that space and identity in their classrooms.

TA ORIENTATIONS AS THRESHOLD BOUNDARIES

This collection argues that TAs experience unique states of liminality as they move through their graduate programs and their professionalization activities, such as designing, implementing, and writing up research, presenting and networking at professional conferences, and most importantly (for this collection), as they move through their classroom spaces as newly minted instructors-of-record. Their liminality is connected with the intensive identity *re/*formation they experience as they wrestle with threshold concepts that are “crucial for epistemological participation” in the teaching of writing (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 3).

Liminality, when conceptualized through the lens of threshold concepts, is necessarily bounded by threshold boundaries: ontological, conceptual, and experiential markers that define the limits of a community of practice and community membership. As Jan Meyer and Ray Land suggest, the metaphor of threshold boundaries “conjures the architectural space of the doorway, a transitional point

or intersection rather than a space” (379). TA orientations can be a useful demarcation between students-as-students and students entering a liminal space from which they will emerge as community members. But these boundaries can sometimes be arbitrary, marked by chronicity rather than meaningful engagement with a community of practice: a student taking an introduction course in the major, for example, or a required TA orientation in order to receive a stipend and work experience. Instead, I want to consider what it would be mean for threshold boundaries to be meaningful spaces. In this chapter, I will argue that for TA orientations to be meaningful threshold boundaries, orientations must model the types of knowledge construction that are foundational to writing studies rather than operating on models of teaching that function as stopgaps that temporarily attempt to prepare underprepared instructors for the classroom.

TA orientations are not the only threshold boundary graduate students will experience and they may not even seem like the most significant threshold boundary. Writing program administrators may even resist putting significant weight on orientations’ impact on TAs’ identity formation given that orientations are significantly constrained by the availability of financial, material, and human resources, which may be a moving target year-to-year. Nonetheless, TA orientations function as an essential component of a TA’s development. As Michael Stancliff and Maureen Daly Goggin’s study of their TA training program emphasizes, TA orientations can be “disorienting” experiences (16). As they describe it, the TA orientation functions as “an immersion theory of teaching” in which soon-to-be-TAs “confront the complex set of procedures and expectations that make up any large writing program” (Stancliff and Goggin 16). Further disorientation for future TAs include the complex sociomaterial considerations: moving and relocating, navigating new cities, and acclimating to new environments. These very real disorientations are only compounded by the emotional and mental disorientations of identity formation as students prepare to inhabit the role of graduate student and teacher when, just months prior, many wore the hat of undergraduate students. These significant shifts, while they begin and occur within the compressed time of an orientation, are worth investigating as part of TAs’ overall liminal experiences as they move through professional and academic development. Viewed in this light, the lack of research on TA orientations presents an important area of underdeveloped terrain if we are to more fully understand how TAs navigate their liminality and how programmatic development might better support them.

A PORTRAIT OF TA ORIENTATION

As Rachel Gramer has suggested in this collection, much of the scholarship on new writing teachers focuses on the program structures rather than beginning

with new teachers’ identities and their learning. While this piece certainly locates a program structure as a central site of research, my goal here is to illuminate how my own identity, goals, and learning inform how orientation programs can impact TAs’ ongoing growth and development. To accomplish this goal, in this section I sketch out my own experiences as a TA in an orientation program, from which I will—in the following section—analyze how the structure of the orientation impacted my own liminality.

I have had the opportunity to be a TA at two institutions: once, as a master’s degree student and once as a doctoral student. Out of respect for both these institutions, the portrait that I will draw here intentionally has identifying names and details removed or altered. I’ll call the institution at which this orientation program takes place Western University. The program ran for two weeks prior to the start of classes in August. Approximately a month and a half before orientation began, we—the new TAs—received a copy of the required textbook, a required syllabus that we were to use during our first semester, and a faculty handbook. Armed with these resources, we were asked to select the essay assignments from the models provided that we would assign our students, then prepare a draft syllabus—it should be noted that our work was primarily focused on the course calendar as the syllabus policies were mandated in the required syllabus—and be ready to workshop those items throughout orientation. Unless a TA in our program had previously taken a course on composition theory and/or pedagogy, a TA would walk into that orientation with no idea of how to make these choices and how such choices might be informed by theories and pedagogies. As an undergraduate student, I loved receiving the syllabus during that first week. I spent a great deal of time marking important policies—like attendance policies and grade breakdowns—and would quickly take the course calendars and copy them onto my own planners. But my study of these documents as an undergraduate student did not help me understand how to suddenly create these documents as an instructor, or, if they did, I did not recognize how to recognize or operationalize that knowledge into action.

Even though attendance was mandatory, the timing of the orientation fell before our semester start date, which meant that we were not paid for attending. This soured many TAs’ feelings—including my own—toward the orientation more broadly. For me, the timing of the orientation meant increased financial obligations: I would need to quit my current job a couple of weeks earlier to move and set up my home weeks before I would see a paycheck or receive financial aid that is typically disbursed at the start of the school semester. As a way of “making it up to us,” snacks and coffee flowed from tables on one side of the classroom we met in and several lunches were provided for us.

For two weeks, from 9 am until 4 pm, we met in the same classroom. sitting at the same rectangular tables our students would occupy in just two weeks' time. Our cohort of twelve TAs, along with two new non-tenure track instructors, dutifully took our places in the audience and listened to the presentations. The day was divided into one-hour blocks during which various presenters taught us about the teacher's life. In one such presentation, for example, several advanced graduate students presented on integrating readings into the writing classroom. Such presentations tended toward anecdotal training: the presenters might give a rationale for the topic. In the case of the presentation on incorporating reading, for example, presenters would advise us that incoming freshman often do not take the readings seriously or, when they do, they don't know how to read for anything except plot points, regardless of genre. These conclusions, while pronounced as facts, reflected little more than the presenters' generalized experiences while teaching. Not all presenters provided rationales. These facilitators typically launched directly into a presentation on "best practices": explanations about how much reading to offer, suggestions on differing the types of readings assigned, and reminders that, if you assign it, you need to cover it in class and use it toward larger projects in some way. In the latter portion of these presentations, TAs would often receive a copy of a handout used by the facilitators in their classrooms for us to use as templates in our classes, should we desire. And yes, I so desired. I gobbled those handouts up like final meal rations on a desert island. These handouts offered me a sense of security: an idea of how to do something that would be in line with what I imagined was acceptable in the program. Replicating these activities, in my mind, would keep me in line and out of trouble, while hopefully giving my students the kinds of experiences their peers had.

After their presentations, the facilitators would then open up the session for questions and answers. For as much as our cohort complained amongst ourselves of feeling lost and confused, these Q&A moments tended along three general trajectories. Some sessions were filled with questions that mostly ran along logistical and practical lines. In the Q&A on reading, TAs asked questions about whether they should give reading quizzes and, if so, for how many points. Some questions were answered, and others were not. A second direction our Q&As would go resulted in a relatively silent fifteen minutes. I sometimes found myself unable to ask questions in these moments in part because I still processing the presentation and trying to imagine what questions I should ask about the presentations. I often feared that I would ask the wrong questions, which in my mind would reveal how underprepared I was to be a TA. Other times, I was still trying to imagine what questions I should ask: I was trying to figure out what I still needed to know, but with little experiences as a teacher, it was difficult to

project the kinds of questions that would help me prepare for my work.

A third direction that our Q&As would take involved TAs asking for information or guidance about how to make choices as new TAs. As new TAs, for example, we were required to use a new custom reader that the department would be using, yet none of our presenters had used the textbook or were required to use it. When our questions interrogated teaching from our specific location as new TAs, required to use a text we were still unacquainted with, our presenters did their best but often fell woefully short. Many times, they could not answer our questions and would just tell us to ask the orientation coordinators or the WPA. On their way out of the room, our facilitators would leave their emails on the whiteboard with promises of answering any more questions and, with a casual smile on their face, they wished us good luck.

Day in and day out, for two weeks this was our life. We sat. We listened. We furiously wrote notes and, when we left for the day and congregated in bars or commiserated over a refrigerated package of Nestle Tollhouse cookie dough, my thoughts often devolved into ruminations that I had no idea what I needed to know about teaching and what I didn't realize that I still needed to know. In our conversations, we would wonder what from the day had just been one possible way of doing something—an instructor's individual inclination; what was “good teaching?”; and, perhaps most pressing, what did our department expect, want, or require of us? Mostly, we asked each other questions of *how to* and *why*, and these questions burrowed deep into minds. How do we teach reading? Beyond our recollections of classroom life, a student reader, and a smattering of hand-outs from other teachers, we were left with no answer. Sometimes we realized, in retrospect, what we needed, but nowhere on the orientation schedule was there a block of time dedicated to answering the questions we realized only too late we had. Tomorrow, reading wouldn't even be on the schedule.

It is only by reflecting on these experiences that I have come to see how reparatet these nagging and sometimes oppressive questions were to me, my fellow TAs, and for all teachers. Some of those questions, especially about who we would be—and become—in the classroom could only be answered over time as I learned, grew, tried new things, and then tried others. These bigger questions seemingly cannot be answered or perhaps even articulated in the short span of a pre-semester orientation and may appear, from the outset, as better left for the TA practicum course or for the conversations TAs have in the privacy of their advisors' offices, yet I would argue that orientations can nonetheless better prime TAs to grapple with these questions and transitions as unavoidable and, in fact, generative features of their lives as liminal beings in the academy. In the moment, these questions smelled of fear, not of growth. They made me feel like an outsider, not someone already on a path through a liminal space.

TA ORIENTATIONS' LORE-FOCUSED MODEL OF TRAINING

In the preceding section, I have tried to emphasize some of the features of my orientation experiences that have felt most salient for me. Perhaps the single most prominent feature in my memories is how much time I spent in silence. In these moments, I feel Freire's argument that "banking education anesthetizes and inhibits creative power" (62). In my dutiful silence, it is easy to assume the position of student-as-sponge, meticulously converting what I'm told into lists of dos and don'ts. I don't know—nor did I believe back then—that my orientation leaders desired my cohort to assume an obedient, studently identity, but the pedagogical choices that framed the orientation encourage such performances and, by my recollection, none of the leaders that presented during orientation resisted these relationships. This type of TA preparation illustrates a functional approach to TA training, in which the day-to-day, nuts and bolts of teaching (Roen et al.). In other words, a functional approach to TA preparation emphasizes survival while delaying reflection, growth, and development for some later point in TA training.

Beyond the nature of some TA orientations, which reaffirms a student-as-sponge identity, orientations can also function as an ineffective threshold boundary when they place an over-emphasis on lore. Orientations build upon lore's educational tradition by focusing on a logic of pragmatism, or a logic that "is concerned with what has worked, is working, or might work in teaching, doing, or learning writing" (North 23). Stephen North has likened the building of composition to the building of a "rambling. . . delightful old manse," (27) one that bears a striking resemblance to the Winchester Mystery House in northern California. As North describes it, lore is passed on from generation to generation, but once knowledge has been inducted as lore, it can "never be dropped from it either" (North 24). Because of this, lore can be imagined as a mansion with "wing branching off from wing, addition tacked to addition, in all sorts of materials. . . with turrets and gables, minarets and spires, spiral staircases, rope ladders, pitons, dungeons, secret passageways—all seemingly random, yet all connected" (North 27). Each new generation of practitioners inherits lore in the same haphazard way: they are "ushered around some of what there is, and then, in its turn, [a new generation] adds on its own touches" (North 27).

Orientations teach by lore in two distinct ways. One way that the orientations I have attended do so is in how they are organized and run. As described previously, these sessions typically focused on what to do, and such proclamations tended to carry considerable weight among TAs, especially when the TAs had no previous teaching experiences. Returning to North's metaphorical House of Lore, the ushers that take the new cohort of TAs around the house pick and choose based either on their own whim or that of the orientation coordinator.

These decisions are largely built into the larger logic of pragmatism: of filling the TA with as much information to help them survive their first time in the classroom. This is not necessarily a bad thing: much of what they have to offer can be useful in some circumstances. But while compositionists may recognize that orientations provide TAs with ideas to implement, modify, or later discard, in the eyes of a new TA, this seems to be a tour of the Word of God: of proclamations from on high to be obeyed. Freire may take an even more severe reproach to such a practice for, in this moment, facilitators enact the paternalistic instincts of a banking model of education, turning TAs into “welfare recipients” (55).

A second way that orientations further function as learning by lore is apparent when we consider who organizes and under what circumstances. At Western University, for example, orientation was organized and run by a coordinator and this coordinator was typically selected from two groups: the first being graduate students who applied for the position. These facilitators were typically interested in composition and who were paid a modest stipend to do this work. The second group of coordinators consisted of lecturers within the department who also served as associate directors of the first-year writing program. These lecturers also applied for the position and received at least a course release to serve as an associate director (it’s unknown if they received a further stipend for coordinating orientation). What this meant was that each year new coordinator(s) created their own idea of what orientation should include. This involved reviewing past orientation schedules, receiving direct instructions and feedback from the department’s director of the writing program, and then using their own intuition, training, and experiences to fill in the gaps. In the language of the House of Lore, our “ushers” are selected not necessarily because they make good tour guides, but because of an individual’s availability, willingness, or who they know.

Following a model of learning that bears uncomfortable similarities to Freire’s banking model of education reinforces what Brian K. Bly has observed to be one the crucial components of the liminal space of graduate teaching assistantships, “[B]alancing the role of the teacher with the role of the student” (2). This balancing act, according to Bly, raises a conflict within graduate instructors between the authority they possess as instructors and the authority they lack as students in graduate programs (2). The lack of balance between TAs’ conflicting identities leaves many TAs less than satisfied. As Bly’s study into TAs’ perception of their training has revealed, many TAs experience a pre-semester training course “helpful ‘as far as assignments and the syllabus, but not much as far as how to act in front of the class or how to do daily work’” (4). In other words, some common models of TA training give TAs the materials to support the complex identity formation they are caught up in but do little to support the day-in and day-out ways of being that scaffold and creating a teacherly identity.

REIMAGINING TA ORIENTATIONS AS A MEANINGFUL THRESHOLD BOUNDARY

Thus far, this chapter has critiqued TA orientation programs for how they stymie TAs' growth from a former undergraduate student to inhabiting multiple identities including college instructor. While this dilemma is in part constructed by the demands of teacher training within neoliberal institutional spaces that are not within a WPA's power to ameliorate (if only), my goal with the remainder of this chapter is to locate areas of orientation programs that WPAs do have the power to transform. Rather than attempt to boil these complex questions down to a narrowly defined checklist, in this section I explore how a re-examination of the role and use of listening in TA orientations may cultivate more meaningful experiences for TAs who are negotiating murky liminal waters.

While it would be easy to define listening as a process that begins in the ear and ends in the mind when aural sounds are converted into meaningful symbols, listening is far more complicated than that. Jacqueline Jones Royster has called for listening that is "awake" and that:

operat[es] deliberately on codes of better conduct in the interest of keeping our boundaries fluid, our discourse invigorated with multiple perspectives, and our policies and practices well-tuned toward a clearer respect for human potential and achievement from whatever their source and a clearer understanding that voicing at its best is not just well-spoken but also well-heard. (40)

Krista Ratcliffe, building on Royster's work, has argued that listening is better understood as a "trope for interpretive invention," and as such it "signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (1). This stance of openness is embedded with multiple cultural logics, ones that for Ratcliffe are also embedded in logics of whiteness and gender. Gender and whiteness, as tropes, "signif[y] socially constructed 'common-sense' attitudes and actions" associated with gender and race (Ratcliffe 9).

Because listening is a socially constructed practice, WPAs and orientation leaders should consider the assumptions embedded in the listening practices that make up orientation learning spaces. For example, as members of an academic discipline, it can be easy to assume that listening to presentations during orientation is a similar learning and listening act that we experience as speakers and audience members at academic conferences. In those spaces, audience members are listening attentively and while they are silent, they are often busy taking and making sense of what the speaker says by measuring it against their own experience

or interpretations of texts and concepts or applying the presentation to their own set of constraints. In these spaces, silence is often a productive time when listeners prepare to engage in dialog with speakers. It is an enactment of Kenneth Burke’s parlor: a time when listeners are catching “the tenor of the argument” which prepares them to “put in their oar” and enter the conversation (110).

But this is not necessarily how TAs use listening during orientations; and it most certainly was not how I experienced listening in this space. When I was a TA, I was deep within a liminal space but without a vocabulary to articulate that fact or much of what I was experiencing. In retrospect, I see how I used listening more like I did when I was an undergraduate student and in ways that mirror the banking model of education. I did my best to absorb what I was being told. I did not imagine that I was really supposed to engage in dialog with the facilitators and I assumed that they asked for questions to allow for clarification of what they had said. But I also assumed that to admit that I needed clarification would have been tantamount to admitting I couldn’t do the job I had been offered.

That I—or any TA—would fall back on our listening practices that served us during times in which we identified as students can be understood as a phenomenon related to our liminality. Liminality is about the acquisition of “troublesome” threshold concepts that are foundational to our target profession or community of practice. As Meyer and Land describe it, learners in the midst of liminal spaces experience an oscillation between their former ways of being and the new states of being (376). But unfortunately, what sometimes happens in states of liminality is that learners can experience an inability to acquire the new identity, a space called “stuck places,” in which learners are presented with “‘epistemological obstacles’ that block any transformed perspective” (377). These epistemological obstacles—like understanding how to be an instructor when you’ve never taught before—not only cause learners to lean back on prior experiences and identities rather than continue toward their transformational identity, a process that seems to be highlighted when I engaged with TA orientation. In other words, the vast uncertainty that I felt about becoming a teacher presented challenges to which I responded by returning to “student mode” rather than engaging as a participant.

All of this is to say that the dutiful student listening that echoes banking models of learning may, in fact, be a marker of TAs’ liminality within their writing programs. When orientations and training sessions maintain new TAs as the listeners and program directors, WPAs, continuing faculty, and others as the speakers, the mandate to listen reinforces their marginalized position. To help TAs negotiate their liminality while also preparing them for the job they are about to assume, TAs must be taught in ways that draw on their vast experiences as student participants in the classrooms and in ways that complicate listening beyond the lecture and listen model. What might benefit TAs more

in an orientation setting would be to help them begin activating their existing knowledge of teaching and learning and transferring that knowledge to their new positions as teachers. As is pointed out by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Rob Cole, Amanda May, and Katelyn Stark in this collection, TAs do not come to their orientation as *tabula rasa*. E. Shelley Reid sharply reinforces this notion: “[composition] TAs are not blank slates . . . they have spent many years in classrooms developing theories about writing, learning, and teaching.”

Allow me to illustrate this point with an example. At the orientation I attended at the fictitious Western University, all TAs were required to review the textbook our students would use, review the faculty handbook, the syllabus we were expected to use as a template, and to select from a series of options the major writing assignments we would assign that semester before orientation began. This preparation invited us as TAs to act like the teachers we would be within a matter of weeks. In this moment, the Western University engaged us as teachers-in-training and, no doubt, they expected that (as liminal beings that were not yet teachers) our attempts to carve out the beginnings of our course would be uneven, our processes would be frustrating, and our ability to invent a curriculum for first-year writing rudimentary. In other words, I think that WU knew we would struggle and saw that struggle as a learning process and that through the orientation process we would revise our curriculum, rehearse our assignments, and reinvent our classrooms.

But this second half—the revision, the rehearsal, and the reinvention—did not come for me or for many in my cohort—if our conversations are any indication—and I think that part of the reason this never came about is because when orientation began, we reverted to our student identities. Imagine, for example, if orientation had started with a day of reflection and conversation initiated by the TAs about what they had experienced while trying to prepare their course materials. What would it have been like to ask them to write, talk, and listen to each other articulate their struggles and triumphs. If their voices dominated those first interactions and, in those first few hours, they had a chance to name the space they were in—liminality—it could help TAs feel seen and understood as a liminal being. To give over some of the orientation space to the TAs themselves, to make orientation about, if only partly, understanding what it means to be a TA—not quite a student and not quite a teacher—would engage a new set of relationships among TAs, their mentors, and the programs in which they live through new listening practices.

It might seem like the likely response to the banking model of TA orientations is to simply replace it with a model that is based on popular models of collaborative learning. And while collaborative learning can be a powerful learning tool, it should not be deployed unreflexively. It's important to recognize that collaborative models of learning in composition studies gained traction during roughly the same time that critical pedagogy—with its commitment to democratizing learning

spaces—also began in earnest (Bruffee; Holt; Jackson and Clark). Because of this relationship, compositionists maintain that by situating knowledge as the product of co-production among knowledgeable peers, teachers and students would constantly share speaking and listening roles among themselves (Bruffee). Even in such collaborative moments, however, we can still see how speaking and listening are part of larger systems of power. By choosing to intentionally resist making the facilitators the authority (and, thus, the speaker), we still acknowledge that those who are routinely asked to listen instead of being asked to speak are marginalized.

The democratization of learning by sharing power through discourse has been critiqued as a reductivist model for how learning and power work in the context of writing. Andrea Lunsford has argued that the notion of collaboration has been appropriated by some scholars and practitioners reflexively; and in our attempts to get on the “collaboration bandwagon,” it often becomes a tool for “the same old authoritarian control” rather than for democratic learning (3-4). This is partly because when collaboration is used uncritically, instructors may fail to address some of the biggest forms of resistance to collaboration. Lunsford claims that this occurs due to our inherited concept of the Romantic genius in his/her garret (4). The belief in the Romantic genius is just as engrained in students as it has been in teaching practices. Many students simply believe that they lack any form of “genius,” and would prefer, instead, that the master—the teacher—tell the apprentice how to write.

Collaborative learning pedagogies have also been critiqued for the ways in which it can flatten difference and replicate dominant power structures that disenfranchise marginalized groups. John Trimbur’s seminal critique of collaborative learning argued that collaboration’s ultimate goal of coming to consensus has a tendency to “[suppress] differences and [enforce] conformity” (602). This inclination toward consensus is significant, given that consensus can reinforce political and social hierarchies that perpetuate racism and sexism and by extension, ableism, heteronormativity, ageism, classism, gender binarism, and other oppressive ideologies (Fox; Leverenz). Christina V. Cedillo argues “Bodies are the academy’s dirty secrets.” In collaborative group environments, the voices that hold the floor are the voices that are most at home asserting domination and leadership, even when it seems as though such voices are acting on behalf of the group or in the interest of the group’s tasks.

These critiques can be extended to TA orientations. As Lunsford states, “Creating a collaborative environment and truly collaborative tasks is damnably difficult” (6). This is partly because group collaborations can have a tendency toward “the kind of homogeneity that squelches diversity, that waters down ideas to the lowest common denominator, that erases rather than values differences” (7). I experienced this “damnable difficulty” recently when I had the opportunity

to facilitate part of a TA orientation that focused on designing activities and assignments. As part of this presentation, we broke participants out to work on brainstorming in-class activities that would help them teach to the student learning outcomes of the course. In so doing, I hoped to engage the TAs as beings within meaningful threshold boundaries. By drawing on their collective experience as students and teachers—if they had such experience—the goal was to invite them to re-imagine classroom activities as actions that help students and teachers move toward meeting student learning outcomes, which the TAs had learned about in reading required orientation materials and preparing for orientation. I wanted to engage them as teachers-in-training.

During this time, I tried to engage with the groups, to listen to their ideas and promote dialogue and discussion while also helping them ask each other questions about meeting FYC students' needs. When I approached one group in particular, two of the group members were quick to volunteer the idea offered by a third group member I will pseudonymously call Norma. Norma's idea was, indeed, a nice activity that would help FYC students, but as I asked the other group members what other ideas they had discussed, they indicated that they liked Norma's idea so much they really didn't think their own ideas were worth mentioning and, as a result, the group did not generate any other activities. As the four of us collaborated, it soon became apparent that Norma had previous teaching experience—something the other group members already knew.

Reflecting on this experience, it seems like a classic example of the kinds of failed collaboration described in the critiques previously outlined. Because two of the group members were fresh out of their undergraduate degrees, they looked to Norma for the good idea that the group would later report out but, because of this, all group members lost out. Norma didn't have a chance to hear ideas that may have taken fresh approaches to student learning outcomes with which she was already familiar, and the two other group members lost out on opportunities to try applying their own experiences to their new roles as educators. Their loss is ultimately a failure of collaboration brought about by listening. Norma and her group members were listening for agreement, for the bright idea that would help them get by during the group discussion that was to follow. Instead of finding ways to listen to each other's ideas about teaching, the group's impulse to find consensus quickly, in order to move on to the next activity, stifled their ability to really take something useful from the activity.

So, if lecture-based models of orientation are insufficient because they focus on functional survivalism; and collaboration-based models of orientation run the risk of marginalizing some participants, how should WPAs and orientation facilitators design orientations? If the goal of a TA orientation program is to introduce TAs to their new institutions and to offer some preparation prior to

their first day in the classroom, then orientation programs should help TAs activate their existing knowledge about teaching while helping them recognize their liminality and, ultimately, leverage that liminality in their own classrooms. Such endeavors—marked by two distinct features—would create a TA orientation that facilitates a pedagogy of vulnerability that is informed by listening.

One way to rethink TA training is to rethink “risk” and “safety.” Much of what I experienced in my TA orientation at Western University, I believe, was meant to help minimize the riskiness of the classroom. By sharing the tried-and-true techniques that made up the lore around first-year writing at our institution, it seems obvious that the goal was to help TAs be “successful” in the classroom. The act of replicating these taught practices in our classrooms, a move of safety that protects the teacher and provides a sense of uniformity to the classroom, is a move that forecloses vulnerability and invention as a natural part of our discipline for the TAs. For Shari Stenberg, “To stand over a text, or another’s voice, to assume that it is immediately knowable (and thus dismiss-able), is to remain squarely in the familiar. It is to remain safe. To listen. . . is to take a risk” (262). Teachers committed to developing pedagogies of listening must be open to stepping outside the safety of tried-and-true approaches to FYC and risk “open[ing] our classrooms to different kinds of interactions, potentially allowing that which is typically deemed ‘excess’ to enter in” (262).

For Wendy Wolters Hinshaw, this kind of risk is situated within allowing for teachers to experience vulnerability as well as creating learning spaces where vulnerability can be experienced by learners. To experience vulnerability as teachers in FYC would require instructors to confront the emotional experiences and reactions of FYC students differently, especially student resistance. While Hinshaw observes that student resistance and conflict are a natural response to “introducing new frameworks for thinking about relationships between identity and power,” TAs often approach student resistance as a negative experience (268). Bringing listening to the center of classroom life enables instructors to present resistance and vulnerability as characteristics of academic life that can be utilized for productive purposes as opposed to negative experiences that must be shunned, ignored, or dealt with outside the classroom. In this way, the emotional “excess” that academia has long closed its doors to can be imaged as moments for invention and reflection and as productive spaces for engaging readings and student writing.

A pedagogy of listening based on vulnerability may at once be very attractive and outright horrifying for TAs. Because TAs subjectivities are so fraught with their own liminality, the idea of exposing themselves—and their students—to risky classroom moments may seem like the least attractive option. Given their often lacking teaching experience, it might be tempting to believe that new TAs

are not prepared to grapple with resistance, vulnerability, and disorderliness in pursuit of developing listening. However, actively cultivating listening as vulnerability may actually result in the exact opposite. For example, many who teach first-year writing at some point experience tense moments in the classroom. This may come in the form of a student saying something borderline or outright sexist or racist. Instead of TAs being blindsided by FYC students' emotional reaction, resistance, or even to group discussions that may bring forth student opinions that can be threatening for other students and teachers, an overt attention to TAs' liminality and vulnerability during orientation can prepare them for such moments. But rather than *tell* TAs simply that such moments must be handled, orientation can leverage TAs' liminality by helping them to begin negotiating these moments. In Wendy Swyt's study of a TA training session related to diversity issues, for example, one of the TAs explains what she wants from these trainings: "Rather than questioning 'what are my goals, how does my presence as a white woman from an upper middle-class background, a lesbian and a Jew produce a specific teaching environment?', I was supposed to solve the problem" (27). Swyt's work reveals that some TAs are aware of their liminality, even if they don't have the language to talk about it and they want to interrogate the classroom in relation to their emergent and evolving sense of identity.

What we can learn from Swyt's research is that in order to harness TAs' vulnerability, WPAs, mentors, and TAs themselves must learn to reimagine TAs' statuses as novice instructors not as a secret to be hidden away but instead as a source of invention and power, and this reimagining can begin with the orientation schedule. I can distinctly remember my first days as a TA. I was so afraid to go into the classroom and felt nearly paralyzed with fear at the thought that my students would find out it was the first time I had ever taught a college course. As that first semester rolled on, I found myself always feeling so frustrated at my missteps in the classroom and excessively worried that I wouldn't be able to earn my students' respect. In hindsight, it seems more than likely that my students never even registered my awkward moments as a teacher and, if they did, it was more likely the result of trying to overcompensate for my miscues, in my attempt to cover up the evidence of my inexperience.

I suspect that I am not the only current or former TA to experience these frightening moments, yet I never discussed these feelings with my cohort of new TAs nor mentioned them to my mentor. I suffered with them silently, believing them to be my own emotional toll to be disciplined and suppressed. Those who work with TAs, however, can work to undo this kind of culture. Rather than positioning these kinds of TA emotions as the necessary consequence of difficult situations, as the excessive and unorderly experiences that don't belong in our scholarly conversation, or even as merely the objects of our sympathy, TA

mentors, orientation facilitators, and faculty could anticipate these experiences and build orientations reframed around TAs’ liminality.

CONCLUSION: THRIVING RATHER THAN SURVIVING

In this chapter, I have argued that models of TA training that replicate banking models of education and that focus on disseminating lore miss out on other opportunities to foster TA growth. This approach appears strongly connected to the institutional constraints within which WPAs work rather than a lack of care or attention on the part of those who facilitate orientation sessions. Thus, the institutional contexts, the reliance on lore, and the use of educational settings that mirror banking coalesce into learning environments that operate on a logic of pragmatism—of surviving—that prevents orientations from operating on alternate logics of thriving. Despite the financial, temporal, and institutional limitations within which we build orientations, altering the learning models upon which orientations are organized can better focus on TAs’ growth rather than mere survival.

What we need are orientation programs that embrace multiple needs: the need to introduce TAs to institutional expectations, best practices, and standard or uniform approaches to first-year writing as well as the need to help TAs recognize their liminality as a source of strength and as a site of invention as they develop their identities as instructors. To thrive as a TA is not to avoid mistakes, frustration, confusion, or heartache. Rather, to thrive as a TA is to be able to articulate the challenges we face, to recognize how and why things in the classroom did not work out the way we had hoped, and to see that our experiences are similar to many that have come before and will come after us. In other words, to flourish as a TA is to have our vulnerability listened to, accepted, and encouraged.

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