

# FOREWORD

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*1992, new teacher orientation, late-August, southern Ohio.* I am sweating and wondering how the admissions committee could have made such a grave error by allowing me to impersonate a writing teacher for the next ten weeks. I am an introvert. My face goes crimson at the thought of speaking in class. When called upon, I work to catch my breath between monosyllabic strivings toward words.

I had graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1991, followed by turns at waitressing, freelance writing for a trucking company, and bumming around with friends. I was not prepared or qualified to teach anyone anything.

Just as I began to imagine a quiet exit from the stuffy classroom where orientation was held, the chair of the department entered the room to welcome us and say a few words. He wasn't sweating or wearing shorts and beat-up sneakers. He wore khakis, loafers, a non-descript blue button-down shirt, a sport jacket. A tall white man with grey hair straight out of central casting—*Professor*. He greeted us, invited us to stop by his office and chat, and then said something I've never forgotten. He told us that for the past forty years he has never missed a bout of vomiting before each first class of the quarter. He had accepted this as how he copes with the terror of getting up in front of others.

The room was still. We sat with the discordant image of the serial vomiter and the Professor.

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Reading the present volume evoked this memory for me. This collection of chapters places us in the awkward, exciting, and uncertain position of new teachers. Running throughout this collection is the desire to study TAs in situ, not from an administrative remove. The latter is a more typical positionality across WPA scholarship, which makes sense because admins are trying to figure out how to do their jobs better, more equitably, more thoughtfully. This book reminds us that there's more to the story than doing the job better. In these pages, we see students as new teachers; we hear student voices; and we encounter case studies of new teachers reflecting on their liminal status as teachers, students, scholars, people with lives and emotions. Teacher-development, rather than teacher-training, is the story here. Liminality is an in-between state heightened for TAs and—why stop there—an apt description of all human experience all the time. When

nurtured and coaxed, that in-betweenness can be a source of invention and knowledge-making—a main takeaway of this collection. I'm not going out on a limb by speculating that teacher prep programs rarely, if ever, frame liminality as an organizing point. In an early draft of this collection, Brady Edwards, speaking of new GTAs, suggested that we design orientation around what will be most beneficial for *their* growth. As a former WPA who ran new TA orientations for several years, I admit that "*their* growth" was less on my mind than *our* program and its responsibility to *our* department, college, and university. What's in a pronoun? This book got me thinking about that question and sometimes made me uncomfortable. I remembered that version of myself afraid to speak in class. I remembered, too, teaching a comp class and reading a student's final reflection, written from the perspective of an angry young man who ends up killing and dismembering his first-year writing teacher. It was supposed to be funny—a parody of an angry young man. I told no one. I was not-quite teacher and not-quite student; neither affiliation helped me navigate what felt like a threat.

These essays create discomfort in other ways by exposing awkward contradictions within rhet/compr and the ethos often linked to the field. Despite the field's longstanding association with student-centered practices, contributors convincingly argue that this ethic hasn't significantly shaped approaches to teacher prep. WPAs overstuff orientation, frequently complaining that the schedule is too hectic, the amount of material impossible to cover, the days a blur, the students resistant. Teacher prep norms, these essays suggest, are a reflection of what WPAs experienced themselves when they were new GTAs. It's likely that experience looms as a dominant narrative foreclosing other ways of getting it done.

Maybe the route to subverting this narrative has been under our noses all along. By taking our own advice, we might apply what we know about comp pedagogy vertically: model attentive listening practices; resist lecture; embrace interactive, collaborative pedagogies; slow down and create time for reflection. Much like the field's late arrival to vertical writing instruction, there's a yawning gap between pedagogical best practices for undergrads and their application to graduate student learners. What to call this? Wishful thinking? Bad pedagogy? Liminality doesn't end when grad school begins. Graduate students have learning styles, writing difficulties, doubt, student-teacher-scholar tensions, and varied experiences and identities that inform their performances as students and teachers. This book argues that such knowledge is *usable* and *valuable* in teacher prep.

I could have benefited from this point several years ago when, as a WPA, I noticed that more and more students were entering the doctoral program in my department with years of teaching experience at both high school and college levels. That observation did not shape new teacher programs to any

significant degree (except to waive some applicants from the teaching college writing seminar). My thinking, not uncommon from what I can tell, has been that experience is no substitute for understanding how to teach in *our* program. Here we are with possessive pronouns again. That insistence on *our* might have been at the expense of *their* by unwittingly constructing new teachers as “blank slates” (Yancey et al, this volume) rather than as persons embodying “prior processes, dispositions, beliefs, values, experiences, and affect as well” (Yancey et al, this volume).

These authors might say that my attachment to *our* is not idiosyncratic but emblematic of a guiding WPA orientation. Teacher prep programs, they insist, frequently imagine a homogenous population, producing what Kali Mobley Finn calls “a one-size fits all approach to pre-service orientation” (this volume). I believe this prefab bent is not only a consequence of habit or bad thinking but also an effect of labor conditions and surely other factors as well—compensation, timing, program and institutional culture. Still, as these authors suggest, admins can, where possible, divide the labor with other teachers or seasoned GTAs to create more manageable work cultures. They can also shift some tasks to new teachers themselves, inviting them to leverage their experience to explore what they know and what they need to know. Strategies that could position experience as useful aren’t mind-blowing. They might include pre-orientation discussion board postings, collaborative presentations on practices relevant to comp teaching, and annotating existing syllabi as a lead-in to a discussion about the curriculum. Above all, what we should be after is a dialectic between program needs and grad student needs, program outcomes and student *incomes*, or what students bring to the teaching positions that staff *our/their* programs.

Liminality is identity work. As Jaquelyn Lugg puts it, teacher training is “where new TAs begin the complicated work of building integrated identities.” Without integration, Madelyn Pawlowski and Brad Jacobson warn (this volume), disconnection can “lead to resistance or, even worse, abandonment of a practice, affiliation, or trajectory.” Around the edges of this discussion is that teacher training programs are sites of difference. Disconnection from group identity building may be a consequence not only of program integration but also of class, race, gender, sexuality, and physical and mental health conditions. As such, integration and disconnection are mediated by social locations and cultural identifications and so are not experienced evenly. As this collection has evolved, these challenges have been acknowledged increasingly across the volume, bringing to the fore group tensions that arise within teacher training programs.

Just as GTAs embody liminality, so too do writing programs themselves. Writing programs need to be nimble, not static, in the face of changing student

populations, new knowledge, and—let's face it—tired routines. *Threshold Conscripts* offers inspiration for fulfilling this need.

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*2008, new teacher orientation, late-August, southern Ohio.* I am sweating and wondering how the hiring committee could have made such a grave error by allowing me to impersonate a writing program administrator for the next four years. What will become of this program?