

PROGRAM PROFILE 8.

CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY: BRIDGING THE GAP WITH ACTION RESEARCH

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The graduate teaching associate (GTA) program at Chapman University was initiated in 2015 when the rhetoric contingent of the English faculty saw the opportunity to include a teaching practicum to prepare the MA and MFA graduate students in English for teaching careers in higher education. Chapman University is a mid-sized, R2, private institution in the heart of Orange County, California. The English department offers an MA in English, an MFA in Creative Writing, and a dual degree program.

Ian and Sarah are full-time rhetoric faculty members in the English Department at Chapman, and, for several years, have been involved in interviewing, hiring, and preparing GTAs who serve as instructors-of-record for Chapman's first-year composition courses, Seminar in Rhetoric and Composition. Matt, Natalie, Daniel, and Candice are recent graduates of the dual degree MA/MFA program and served as GTAs while graduate students.

In the English Department at Chapman, all graduate students are eligible to apply for positions as GTAs after they have completed a graduate seminar in teaching composition. Those who are offered and accept GTA positions take a second graduate seminar, composition pedagogy and research practicum, simultaneously with their first semester of teaching. In order to encourage GTAs to develop identities as teacher-scholars, GTAs develop IRB-approved action research projects (Buyserie; Hawkes; Hudson et al.; Souleles) as their major work in this second seminar. These action research projects allow GTAs to research a question they have about the teaching of composition, using their own students as the sources of their data. Thus, they are learning how (their own) teacher-knowledge can be a source of expertise in the fields of pedagogy and composition, and the action research project becomes a central component of and bridge between their teaching (their identities as teachers, since they initiate, shape, and undertake the research as the instructor of their first-year composition class)

and their scholarship (their identities as students, since they are learning how to undertake an action research project and are completing it as a graduate student assignment). Many GTAs have gone on to use their action research projects as the basis for MA theses and conference papers.

In addition, the action research project is designed to allow GTAs to project themselves into the future as teachers, as the vast majority continue teaching after graduation. This project helps GTAs understand how teaching should be an ongoing process of research and reinvention, enabling them to see how they may take charge of their own professional development as teachers when they no longer occupy the liminal position of GTA, without a professor to prompt them to undertake research around their teaching.

AT THE CROSSROADS OF RACISM, NATALIE

My first-year composition course focused on the rhetoric of borders, both figurative and literal, and, through that framework, I explored issues of police brutality, immigration, and homelessness with my students. As so many of the texts we examined in my course explored the dynamics of race, I decided to design my action research project around a question that had plagued me throughout my academic career, one which proved so fascinating it transformed into my MA thesis: How do students feel about discussing race in the classroom? And does a professor's race have any influence on the matter?

Having completed my undergraduate degree at Chapman as well, I went through a radical transformation concerning my own comfort and interest in discussing race within the classroom. In my first few years, I would often sit silently as classmates worked through their racist beliefs in class, too unsure of my own identity as a brown Latina to speak up in defense of myself. But as the rhetoric regarding “illegals” and police brutality grew closer to the forefront of class discussions, I found myself critical of my past inaction and of past classroom environments.

During the first week of classes of the Spring semester when I taught as a GTA, there was an incident on campus in which a White student, loudly and during a morning class, made several anti-Black statements and used racial slurs directed towards Black students. It took me back to a university-affiliated event I had attended four years prior, where I, too, had been called racial slurs by White students. Back then, I felt as though I had no power to address what had been said.

Although teaching this class felt deeply gratifying, especially as a student who had previously had professors allow racist class discussions to carry on without contest, it made my relationship towards being a graduate student and an instructor feel even more at odds. As a GTA, I had the ability to have difficult

race-centered conversations with students one on one, as opposed to subjecting my students of color to either sitting silently or fending for themselves. In graduate school, I still had professors who allowed those racist comments to be made, therefore pushing me into the very position I was working to alleviate my own students of color from. My research project, though it left me with even more questions than I had started with, allowed me to see more clearly the power dynamics and influences amongst students and instructors.

GRADED AND GRADING, MATT

While designing my syllabus for a first-year composition course, I was completing a creative writing MFA. Creative writing is centered around drafting and revision, and it is rare that an instructor assigns a grade based on the student's quality of work. Because of this, as I was considering how to assess my students' work, it didn't make sense for me to use a qualitative grading method. If, as a graduate student, I wasn't being graded on the quality of writing that might take me an entire semester to complete, it didn't seem as if there was a fair standard to hold my students to. I went with a labor-based system to solve this issue. I was only marginally familiar with Peter Elbow's assessment scholarship prior to designing my syllabus, and I had never heard of Asao Inoue. The committee who selected me to teach Fall 2019 pointed out how my assessment method was interesting, suggesting I conduct research on grading for my action research project. They pointed me to other scholars who were experimenting with contract grading, which gave me a greater theoretical framework in which to place my research.

I won't lie: the action research project was the most intimidating aspect of my first semester teaching. I had never conducted that type of research before, nor had I written a scholarly article within that genre. I don't come from an academic family. Most of my time as a grad student was spent battling imposter syndrome and working extra hard to prove that I was a valid member of the community. Once I became fully engaged with the action research project, I fell in love with that type of scholarship and it transitioned into a larger project that I used for my MA thesis. I became confident in my place as an educator and scholar, feeling as if I had joined a pedagogical conversation that was both relevant and important.

My action research project has blossomed into my biggest passion as a professional. I am obsessed with grading methodology and am pushing for a more equitable way to assess student work. My thesis inspired the director of undergraduate writing programs at Chapman University to move into contract grading, and it has caused others within our program to experiment with new grading methodologies as well. Seeing the impact my research had on colleagues has become my proudest achievement as a graduate student.

TEACHING AS LEARNING, DANIEL

In my second year of graduate school, I was given the opportunity to teach my first college class. I designed my first-year composition course around Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs's *Writing about Writing* pedagogy. The semester emphasized drafting, small group workshops, and process. I came into the semester nervous but confident that I was prepared. When starting peer group workshops, I thought I had covered all my bases: running mock workshops, emphasizing higher order concerns such as argument and evidence rather than grammar, and guiding the conversation with leading questions. Yet, as I watched students shuffle around the classroom, I started to question why I arbitrarily assigned groups. Should students remain in the same small group workshops all semester or would they benefit from a different set of eyes?

This question forced me to look at my own teaching strategies, and question what was most beneficial for my students. This led to my action research project, which later became my MA thesis, "The Efficacy of Varying Small Group Workshops in the Composition Classroom." Over the course of the semester, I began to alter my workshop strategies. I varied the groups during workshoping, I read through students' workshop feedback and examined their progress between drafts; though I never conclusively answered which strategy was more beneficial, the project provided me with more insight on how to implement these strategies in a more effective way. It kept me questioning and learning.

ACADEMIC CODE-SWITCHING, CANDICE

My academic identity is tripartite. On any given day, prior to the Coronavirus epidemic, I might teach an 8 am class, then go to my day job as marketing staff at a community college, then come back to Chapman as a student in the afternoons and evenings. This regular donning and doffing of hats, a form of academic code-switching, leaves me occasionally uncertain as to which persona to adopt at any given time.

Although my GTA experience has proved to be the most impactful part of my graduate education, when I started graduate school, I did not realize that I could or would become an instructor. I was the first person in my family to receive a bachelor's degree and had no concrete idea of what graduate school even was. I was encouraged to apply by a night school teacher and only attended because a fellowship was offered.

The teaching composition class quite literally changed my life trajectory. It offered thorough theoretical grounding along with the opportunity to put our learning to use, should we apply to become GTAs, which vaguely terrified me.

(“There’s no way I could teach,” I told my advisor. “Everybody says that,” he replied.) We each were given the opportunity to develop our own FYC course topic and syllabus from the ground up, which I now understand to be relatively rare among GTA programs; this gave us practical experience in curriculum development with the reassurance that our instructor was there to guide us. Then, when we became GTAs, a parallel practicum allowed us to discuss classroom issues while learning core threshold concepts.

I was horrified to learn later that GTAs in other departments only received a brief training—sometimes as little as a weekend “retreat”—before being sent into the classroom. My fellow GTAs and our instructors have been critical to my development as an instructor as well as a graduate student.

I had a wonderful first teaching experience, despite my initial trepidation. Given the department’s focus on multimodal composition, I created a range of such assignments including the creation of a simple video game using Google Slides or Twine, with parallel readings and discussions about topics like procedural rhetoric. That assignment became the focus of my action research project, in which I studied whether motivation and engagement increased with this multimodal assignment compared to the motivation and engagement when assigning a standard essay. Regardless of students’ prior opinions about video games, all of them said afterward that it was a more valuable experience than writing a standard essay. I submitted a paper about my project to the College English Association, expecting it to be rejected. However, it won their Outstanding Graduate Student Essay award.

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