

SECTION 1.

**APPROACHING THE RHETORIC
AND COMPOSITION
TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP**

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When we discuss the idea of new graduate students approaching the RCTAship, what exactly are we talking about? It is fairly common to think about the process of approaching a TAship as a checklist to complete: the TA orientation, meetings between mentors and TAs, gathering copy codes and textbooks, checking out one's classroom, etc. While these are all meant to help transition a novice scholar/teacher into the field, they can have another impact: they can potentially separate the individual teaching assistant into a list of tasks to accomplish. This is understandable, as so many things must occur before a semester gets underway, but it can potentially have unintended consequences as well. By centering one's focus on what TAs need to accomplish prior to the commencement of a semester, WPAs can marginalize the necessary individualized education needed for each teaching assistant's professional development, instead focusing on the needs of the cohort as a whole. But what our contributors will show is that professional development is a highly individualized act and should be thought of and incorporated into curricula in that way.

As new RCTAs, these early moments of individualized training help begin the development of certain dispositions for socialization within their respective rhetoric and composition programs, and within the broader rhetoric and composition field, conditioned by their burgeoning position as they approach the RCTAship. Ultimately, the individual dispositions of the TAs will solidify into a scholarly habitus as they settle into the RCTAship and the field itself (Bourdieu). For our idea of approaching the RCTAship, these developed habitus represent how programmatic cultures and a graduate student's own history begin to shape their growth into the larger academic discipline. These new minds entering the discipline are enculturated into the field of rhetoric and composition and the

specific graduate program that they enter, and, depending on their program, will shape the attitudes, mannerisms, tastes, moral intuitions, and habits of those new to the RCTAship. So, the approaching stage of the RCTA is structured by both the individual TA's past life experiences but will also help guide the TA's future life path.

Rachel Gramer, in "Putting Learning First: Challenges and Possibilities for New Writing Teacher Research," begins our collection with an in-depth piece that focuses on the fact that New Writing Teachers (NWT) are often acclimated to new departments and curriculum, not according to what they most need to learn, but what the department needs them to know/do. Gramer, then, exposes a common issue within writing programs: their focus can be on the tasks RCTAs need to perform, but not necessarily on individualized RCTA professional development. To address this oversight, Gramer argues, through an application of Susan A. Ambrose et al.'s *How Learning Works*, that WPAs—and composition studies as a field—should shift the focus of TA professional development to learner-center—as opposed to program-centered—professional development that expands aspects of prior knowledge, motivation, mastery, and course climate to better serve NWTs.

Next, Jacqueline Lugg, in "The Gifts of Authenticity: Writing Center Pedagogy and Integrated Identity Work in TA Education," argues that instead of focusing on the dos and don'ts of becoming a teacher, graduate teaching assistants are better served by thinking about authenticity within themselves and their students in the classroom. For Lugg, this is accomplished through the application of writing center pedagogy in the teaching assistant practicum. Such an approach, as Lugg shows readers through the sharing of her own experience, could involve reading and discussing WC scholarship in the practicum along with observing writing center visits with students. This option can provide an opportunity for RCTAs to see authentic exchanges between tutor and tutee, which can be useful as RCTAs are still learning the field themselves and might benefit from viewing the give and take of writing center interactions. Lugg argues that these writerly exchanges and scholarship can then transfer to the classroom to help the RCTA continue to establish an authentic identity.

Our third contributor, Kali A. Mobley Finn, also focuses on the individual TA in "Adapting, Not Resisting: A Preliminary Understanding of TAs' Relationships with Writing Pedagogy." Mobley Finn's chapter presents its preliminary findings of a qualitative study of eight 1st-year Ph.D. students in a large research-focused English department. The findings of this study allow Mobley Finn to posit that one way to improve writing pedagogy education (WPE) among experienced teaching assistants is to transition to an adaptive transfer method of WPE (this volume). The hope of this piece is twofold. First, it affords

WPAs a more thorough comprehension of their individual TAs understanding, therefore creating better writing program communication. Second, it allows TAs to reflect upon both prior and current pedagogical knowledge in order to better adapt to various departmental and programmatic expectations.

The next section of “Approaching” is “Coming to Teaching: Moving Beyond a Blank-Slate Model of Developing Pedagogical Expertise,” by Kathleen Blake Yancey, Rob Cole, Amanda May, and Katelyn Stark. This chapter begins with the voices of the TAs, as authors Cole, May, and Stark share many of their background experiences that preceded their arrival as doctoral students in the writing program at their university. Kathleen Blake Yancey, afterwards, synthesizes those experiences, suggesting that their contact with this particular writing program can be representative of many TAs in programs across the country. Yancey et al. then, make recommendations for WPAs: it is vital to help TAs turn tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge; writing programs must help develop TAs in safe spaces; writing programs can help TAs by supporting various professional development opportunities; and bring other graduate services—such as university writing centers—on board to help develop one-on-one teaching skills among TAs. This chapter further supports the value of learning from TAs themselves as a way to strengthen their own—and a writing program’s—pedagogical diversity in the present and for the future.

The concluding chapter of this section is Emily Jo Schwaller’s “Becoming and Belonging: The Three Domains of New Teachers of Writing.” This is a valuable bookend of this section, as it shows the vulnerability of those in the RCTAships due to specific community practices, individual motivations, and role expectations. Schwaller writes, “We carry forward a variety of narratives and choices that play out in new situations as we define our roles,” reminding readers that individuality and personal history are paramount in professional development. Through her use of these three domains, she argues for the need to “facilitate more transparent and meaningful discussions” of experiences that RCTAs have both inside and outside of their graduate programs. Ultimately, her work focuses on the development of new identities for a new role that defines the RCTAs place in the broader rhetoric and composition community.

In order to better understand teaching assistants, it is vital that we as a field understand who they are, where they come from, and what knowledge they have when they arrive in our departments. In other words, we must think of them and educate—and be educated by—them in individual ways. To help commence this education, we have interspersed four narratives written by graduate teaching assistants themselves within the “Approaching” section of the collection. These four narratives—I-Hsien Lee’s “First Day of Class”; Janelle Chu Capwell’s “Locating Sound While Learning How to Teach”; Eliza Gellis’ “More Than My

Teaching”; and Matthew Schering’s “Back to the Start”—work to share their stories and are an important part of the collection because they show the depth of potential RCTAship research. These TA voices, we feel, effectively portray the feelings, contributions, and struggles that RCTAs have as they approach the field of rhetoric and composition as more than just students beginning their evolution to teachers, researchers, mentors, etc. within the field. As readers explore these narratives, it is worthwhile to contemplate their open-endedness. The narratives themselves might feel almost unfinished, incomplete. This is intentional. These accounts—with their potential lack of a complete narrative arc—underscore the lack of knowing how the story ends in regards to individual RCTA growth as students and scholars. In essence, these RCTA stories are still being written, still being revised, and we all should be excited to see how they end.

Both the academic pieces and the narratives of the “Approaching” section share with readers the vast experiences that new RCTAs have as they approach their new roles as students, researchers, and instructors. Each chapter in this section focuses on the types of early experiences that a new RCTA has and how those experiences shape their dispositions (Bourdieu), their goals, and their choices in their programs, with their own research and in their classrooms. From a programmatic view, each piece allows for a better understanding of the labor, the mentoring, and communication needs between WPAs and their RCTAs. We hope you find these selections as thought-provoking and valuable as we do.

WORKS CITED

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Translated by Richard Nice, Cambridge UP, 1970.