

SECTION 2.

INHABITING THE RHETORIC  
AND COMPOSITION  
TEACHING ASSISTANTSHIP

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Inhabiting an RCTAship can mean many things. For us, it means the ability to perform, sometimes serially and other times simultaneously, the roles of a TA. It is about shifting from student to instructor, from instructor to mentee, from mentee to student—and everything in between—often within a matter of hours. With these shifting roles comes shifting mindsets, from being thought of as experts in writing in first-year composition classes to working as novice scholars in rhetoric and composition seminars to becoming experienced listeners and guides as writing center tutors. Put another way, TAs wear a variety of hats and become used to—if not proficient in—wardrobe changes. The mere repetition of these role changes can help TAs grow as teachers and scholars, learning to inhabit and even thrive in constantly shifting environments, even as they might be tempted to push against and question some roles. And inhabiting a RCTAship can assist those in these roles to consider their reality within the ever-changing landscape of full-time professorships on the horizon, if not the entire academic experience. Inhabiting an RCTAship, with its ever-changing roles, means that these individuals live an extremely liminal and even chaotic life. But a question that surfaces when thinking about this chaos and liminality, though, is what does this mean for them in the throes of the RCTAship and after, not to mention the profession?

This is not a new question. In fact, it simply retraces one of the arguments Nyquist and Wulff brought to the attention of rhetoric and composition scholars over twenty years ago, namely that we need to put teaching assistants in positions to succeed developmentally (49), allowing them to become “more authentic members of [the teaching] community” (Sachs, Fisher, and Cannon 82). But the fact that such questions are still being posed suggests a few possibilities: these questions

have not been answered, current answers are somehow lacking, or the issues are pervasive in nature or scope to the point that scholarship hasn't been able to get its arms around them. Regardless of the explanation, two things are clear: these challenges persist and so does the absence of TA voices as full contributors to the discussion. A reconceptualization could be useful in order to help these burgeoning college-level instructors perform their roles in ways that are both satisfactory for their employment and beneficial to their individual growth as scholars (Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir 62). Our contributors make important strides forward in understanding and responding to these conditions within the RCTAship.

In the first chapter of this section, Leslie R. Anglesey's "Survival is Insufficient': Reimagining TA Orientation as a Meaningful Threshold Boundary," posits that TA orientations, often the first (and sometimes only) threshold to inhabiting a TAship, are too focused on survivalist methods for novice teachers. These survivalist techniques include tasks such as how to create a lesson plan, do a student/instructor conference, design group work, etc. Undoubtedly, these are valuable aspects of teaching but, Anglesey argues, TA orientation designers could shift their focus to listening learning models in the creation of orientations in order to step away from disseminating composition lore. In other words, Anglesey hopes such a shift in orientation thinking and design could allow TAs to not simply wear the "how-to-be-a-teacher" hat in orientations but to be taught as if that wardrobe change had already occurred. This new focus then allows programs to more fully center their attention on professional development through reflective processes that can be missed in survival-oriented orientations.

Following Anglesey's insightful chapter is Madelyn Pawlowski and Brad Jacobson's piece, "Shifting Roles and Negotiating Identities: TA Learning in Landscapes of Practice." These authors discuss the experience of developing a rhetoric and composition textbook as TAs, drawing heavily on communities of practice research and scholarship to highlight the various roles they (and all TAs) perform. Pawlowski and Jacobson argue WPAs can more fully develop TAships through what these authors see as core concepts in professional development: engagement, imagination, and alignment. The authors end the chapter with numerous survey questions for WPAs to help them better understand their TAs' personal interest in professional development. Pawlowski and Jacobson's insights, then, amplify the value of social learning environments for TAs.

Zack K. De Piero and Jennifer K. Johnson's "Doorways to Disciplinarity: Using Threshold Concepts to Bridge Disciplinary Divides and Develop Theory-Practice Praxis," shares results from a mixed-method study of eighteen teaching assistants from various backgrounds. De Piero and Johnson suggest that in order to create more effective teaching practica, WPAs should focus on threshold concepts to help TAs who come to composition from other disciplines and

varying backgrounds. Further, the authors suggest that this type of preparation can deepen individual TA understanding of the field by allowing them to take part in empirical research on those same threshold concepts. In so doing, TAs can begin to step out of the liminalities they experience, for example the push and pull of being an expert in their area of study and playing that role against working as a novice teaching FYC.

The next chapter is Soha Youssef's "International Teaching Assistants (ITAs)' Needs and Undergraduate Native English-Speaking Students (NESS)' Expectations: Meaning Negotiation as a Rhetorical Strategy." Youssef's piece focuses on international graduate TAs and WPA awareness of the unique needs and interests of this often under-theorized group. Youssef asserts, through a mixed method approach focused on both ITAs working with NESSs, that in order to have a balanced and cohesive educational experience, meaning must be negotiated between these groups. ITAs, the author suggests, should be more aware of the classroom dynamic in US schools. Additionally, pedagogical preparation is improved when WPAs listen to and use the information given them by ITAs to design pedagogical preparation programs. Youssef's insight strengthens the argument that WPAs not only need to be aware of the roles their TAs perform but that such performances can occur on foreign stages and in front of unfamiliar audiences. Youssef's contribution to this collection can help WPAs more fully appreciate the diversity of their TA cohorts and their varying professional development needs.

In the final chapter of the "Inhabiting" section, Rachel Robinson-Zetzer and Trixie Smith's "I Feel It in My Body: WC Teaching and Administration as Embodied Praxis," explores the need for discernment in spaces filled with emotion, especially when individuals are not trained to deal with these emotions. Such spaces might include classrooms, offices, or writing centers. The authors do this through a mixing of narrative and academic literature on the liminality of these spaces, arguing for a need to "embrace the emotions around us instead of ignore them, and we do this by paying attention to the ways our bodies feel and move in particular spaces" (Chapter 10, this volume). Often the spaces that graduate students and TAs inhabit are made up of traces, stories, and objects of TAs that have come before, and these traces can physically or emotionally change the atmosphere of a space or even a program. There is value in examining these places.

Often, when research looks at RCTAships, the individuals who inhabit the TAship are overlooked in the search for a better understanding of the writing program as a whole. Choosing a programmatic focus is understandable, but it also relies on something other than lived, direct experience and grounded knowledge that TAs can provide. More specifically, our discussions within this collection, especially in the "Inhabiting" section of the collection require TA voices as direct informants, researchers, scholars. We didn't want to tell RCTAs'

stories for them yet again, when they, as researchers and educators in their own right, can do so in informed, immediate, and direct ways.

Through these chapters, these contributors have shifted the conversation about TA professional development from what is needed in the moment to what is needed to individualize training in ways that will allow TAs need to thrive now and in the future. These are their stories, their research. It is incumbent on us to listen and learn from them, not only for their own wellbeing, but for ours as well—not to mention the continued development of the field. To that end, in addition to these chapters, we have interspersed five RCTA narratives throughout this section. In these narratives—written by Jonathan Marine, Megan Friess, Thir Budhathoki, Elizabeth Topping, and Analeigh Horton—the RCTAs share insights that allow readers to better understand the wealth of stories and experiences that many TAs go through within their programs. These specific TA voices have, we feel, helped us portray the observations and developments that the RCTAs have as they inhabit programs that move them beyond the individualized roles of student, teacher, researcher, mentee, etc. and into something bigger and messier as they begin to think beyond their programs.

While the “Approaching” section of this collection highlights the value of an individualized approach to TA training, the contributors in this section suggest that when inhabiting a TAship, professional development can be more effective when accomplished through social learning and activities. Put another way, every performance is strengthened when each player completely understands everyone else’s role. Each piece in the collection, be it academic or narrative, was chosen because it focuses on ways the RCTAships are inhabited by those wearing the various hats of students, researchers, and instructors. From an immersed and lived point of view, this section hopes to elucidate how programs can improve the labor, mentoring, and communication opportunities for RCTAs.

## WORKS CITED

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