ABSTRACT

REED, MERIDITH. Practicing What We Know: Graduate Writing Instructors Navigating the First-Year Writing Classroom. (Under the direction of Dr. Chris M. Anson.)

Recent scholarship on GSIs calls for more nuanced, rigorous inquiry into the preparation and learning of new writing teachers. Acknowledging that writing pedagogy education (WPE) has often operated in “primarily reactive modes,” adapting, for example, to institutional needs to staff courses or provide work and funding opportunities for graduate students, Estrem and Reid assert that WPE “is ready to make significant strides away from reactive and toward generative practices in teaching and scholarship” (“Writing Pedagogy Education” 240). My project responds to this line of research by examining and theorizing the ways in which graduate writing instructors develop their practices of teaching writing. I argue that to achieve generative practices in teacher preparation, it is essential to see the whole context of formal and informal influences that shape graduate instructor teaching practices. Formal influences include composition pedagogy courses, mentoring, instructor meetings, and pre-semester workshops, whereas informal elements include peer sharing, personal interests and beliefs, prior experience of teaching as a student, tutor, or teacher, and the temporal constraints of needing to balance teaching with other graduate responsibilities and personal obligations.

Drawing on data collected from a national survey of 133 graduate instructors and follow-up interviews with 24 of these survey participants, I use grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss; Charmaz) to examine the connections GSIs make between their past experiences, disciplinary fields of study, and their processes and practices as new instructors of writing. This research suggests that GSIs’ teaching practices are strongly influenced by a variety of sources outside of formal teacher preparation. I employ Levi-Strauss’ idea of
bricolage as a way of theorizing how GSIs act as bricoleurs, drawing on available materials, including physical materials (like handouts and assignment sheets) and theoretical materials and concepts from a variety of disciplinary fields, and piecing these materials together to form their individual teaching practices. By acknowledging and understanding the ways in which graduate writing instructors operate in a network of influences and sources, writing pedagogy educators will be better equipped to shape formal preparation experiences that interact with and support the full range of experiences, sources, and influences that are already impacting GSI teaching practice. As a result, writing pedagogy educators will be able to create better theorized and better situated preparation experiences. In turn, since many sections of first-year writing are taught by GSIs, this will mean better support for undergraduate writing instruction in higher education across the US.
Practicing What We Know: Graduate Writing Instructors Navigating the First-Year Writing Classroom

by
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DEDICATION

To Emily, Rebecca, Brian, Trevor, Josh, Sam, Zina, and Laura—my first and best friends.
BIOGRAPHY

Meridith Reed was born in Provo, Utah. She received her BA in English with a minor in editing from Brigham Young University in 2009, and an MA in English with an emphasis in rhetoric and composition from BYU in 2011. After completing her MA, Meridith worked for three years as a full-time instructor in BYU’s English Department before leaving to pursue doctoral studies in the Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media program at North Carolina State University. Her research interests include writing pedagogy education, writing program administration, and the digital and material composing practices of undergraduate writers. She is excited to return to BYU this fall as an Assistant Professor of English.
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Chapter 1: Introduction: Bricolage as Metaphor and Theory of Teaching

In a circumstance not uncommon to many graduate student instructors (hereafter GSIs), I walked across the stage to receive my BA diploma in the same month that I began teaching my first college writing course. A mediating week of immersive preparation in composition theory and pedagogy marked my transition between the two events. On the first day of class, I arrived too early, clutching an overly scripted lesson plan as a stave against my nervousness. I didn’t feel qualified to assert my own authority as a teacher of writing, so, in my design of the course and my daily lesson plans, I relied heavily on the authority of others. Not unlike a first-year writing student whose lack of coherent voice results in an essay of patchworked quotations, my first-semester was a pedagogical bricolage: a marginally altered syllabus borrowed from a more experienced GSI (a syllabus that had, in turn, been adapted from a previous GSI and on and on through the generations of anxious graduate instructors), lesson plans pieced together from online research and conversations in the graduate offices, and assignment sheets already developed and written by the program for which I taught. Recently, I found in my files a peer review sheet I had written up for my students in that first semester: it is word-for-word copied (and cited!) from Cheryl Glenn and Melissa A. Goldthwaite’s The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing. I depended on such outside authorities to piece together my daily practice and ethos as a new instructor of writing. The pressures of needing something to teach each day in class made it difficult to have the time or

1 What to call graduate student writing instructors is contested. The term graduate teaching assistant (or GTA) or simply teaching assistant (TA) is the most prevalent term in the literature, but some object to its use as inaccurate for writing instructors since teaching assistant implies someone who assists an authorized and supervisory instructor, and not someone who acts as the sole instructor of record in his or her own course. In this research, I adopt an alternate term: graduate student instructor (GSI). I echo Long, Holberg, and Taylor’s argument that graduate instructor is a more appropriate term for graduate students who teach their own courses. I will return to this debate about terminology surrounding graduate writing instructors later in this dissertation.
know-how to transfer and apply the theories I was learning concurrently in a composition pedagogy class. I wanted to be a good, theoretically sound teacher, but more pressingly, I needed to fill fifty minutes of class time for twenty students each Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

My experience of nervous pedagogical scrambling is not an isolated one, and stories of anxiety and imposter-ism are thoroughly chronicled in the published literature on composition GSIs. Indeed, the subtitle of a text written by and for GSIs in writing studies is *The Anxious Craft of Teaching Composition* (Bramblett and Knoblauch). I share my own experience not to add to the tales of GSI struggles, stories which are better told and better examined elsewhere (in addition to Bramblett and Knoblauch, see Restaino; Taylor and Holberg; Good and Warshauer), but rather to demonstrate the ways in which GSI teaching practice is, perhaps more so than that of experienced instructors, a composite or bricolage of voices, ideas, and materials. Experienced instructors may have a greater grasp of the research and theory in composition study (I say *may* since the preparation and professional development of experienced composition instructors varies significantly). With a firmer grasp of theory, instructors are better equipped to create coherence between the theoretical underpinnings of their teaching and their classroom practice (Fulkerson, “Four Philosophies”). As a novice instructor, I didn’t have a firm theoretical foundation from which to build. My teaching, especially my teaching in those earliest semesters of my graduate work, depended on remixing others’ material, and in the process of remixing, I eventually created my own collage of practice. This observation feels obvious: sharing and borrowing of materials is a quotidian and ubiquitous part of teacher practice. But despite the ubiquity of teacher sharing, writing studies as a field does not know much about *what* knowledge and
resources GSIs collect, implement, and share about teaching and how they collect, implement, and share it. In this introduction to my dissertation research, I adopt that the concept of *bricolage* to theorize the practice and development of the novice GSI of writing as well as the material realities of how they transfer (or do not transfer) the formal theoretical and pedagogical preparation they receive into their day-to-day classroom work. This chapter’s theoretical exploration of bricolage and of current literature on graduate writing instructors provides a starting place and an impetus for this dissertation’s empirical exploration of what sources influence and shape graduate instructors’ actual teaching practices (as opposed to what formal teacher preparation suggests they should be practicing in the classroom).

GSIs leave material trails and traces (in their shared and repurposed syllabi, lesson plans, assignment sheets, and philosophies) of how they move (or do not move) theory and formal preparation into practice. Teaching is knowledge-making and exists within a knowledge-sharing community. Novice teachers entering the community of teaching writing may, like me, borrow, tinker with, and recreate philosophies, approaches, and practices. In a Bakhtinian sense, novice teachers practice the heteroglossia of speaking with many voices as they plan and conduct their courses, and as they play out a variety of roles in their time as graduate students (researcher, student, teacher, writer, expert, novice). Through this process of speaking with many voices, GSIs piece together their own approach to teaching and learning. The voices they borrow are those they absorb from observation, formal pedagogy courses, informal conversations with other writing instructors, and other sources. Calling attention to and tracing these voices, these patchworks, in the day-to-day work of GSIs, will provide a better understanding of what elements of theory, pedagogy, and preparation
resonate with and are taken up by GSIs. Understanding what sources shape GSI practice also provides insight into what shapes writing instruction in the US, since many first-year writing courses are staffed by GSIs.

A 2007 ADE survey found that at Carnegie Doctoral/Research institutions, 48.6% of first-year writing courses were taught by GSIs, 24.9% by part-time faculty, 24.5% by full-time non-tenure-track faculty, and only 2.1% were taught by full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty. At master’s institutions, 16.7% of first-year writing courses were taught by GSIs, while 41.2% were taught by part-time faculty, 28.8% were taught by full-time non-tenure-track faculty, and 13.3% were taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty (“Education in the Balance”). These numbers demonstrate that at institutions with graduate students, a significant portion of first-year writing courses are taught by GSIs. In courses taught by part-time and full-time non-tenure-track faculty, at least half and often a majority of the instructors have a master’s-degree as their highest level of education. Additionally, according to a report from the ADE based on data from a 2004 National Survey on Postsecondary Faculty, “close to half (49.1%) of all those teaching English in colleges and universities hold a master’s as their highest degree—31.0% of the faculty in four-year institutions and 68.7% of the faculty in two-year colleges” (“Rethinking the Master’s Degree” 3). For many of these graduate and NTT writing instructors, the teacher preparation they encounter in graduate programs will be their most sustained exposure to the theories and practices of writing studies as a field.

Investigating the ways graduate instructors learn to teach writing also provides important insight into how English and writing scholars grow into their disciplinary practices and knowledge—perhaps, indeed, more insight than might come from investigating mature
sociohistoric research has found, after all, that “mature practices are heavily abbreviated, presuppositional, and tacit. To make such practices visible, it is necessary to examine them in non-routine use, in development as relative newcomers are learning them” (Prior, xiii). Thus, a study of GSIs in writing carries important implications for how new scholars develop their teaching and research practices, as well as what the state of writing pedagogy education can tell us about writing studies as a whole.

For many graduate students, their preparation in composition pedagogy is the first and often only exposure they will have to advanced scholarly work in composition studies. What impact does their formal preparation in composition pedagogy have on them and, in turn, on their first-year students? And, perhaps more pertinently, what sources and preparation from outside of composition studies inform GSIs’ classroom practice? It is worth investigating both the formal, program-initiated preparation and the other, external influences that shape GSIs’ voices in the classroom because many of those sources may come from places outside of our field’s published theory and research. If GSIs act as bricoleurs, what are the materials that make up their bricolage?

**Examining Bricolage and Formal Writing Pedagogy Education**

Research in Writing Pedagogy Education (hereafter WPE) has focused primarily on the formal preparation of GSIs, including composition pedagogy seminars, mentoring and practicum experiences, and “crash course” workshops. But as Estrem and Reid point out, this formal preparation is only one part “among multiple streams of influences, cultural models and expectations, and experiences that new instructors are negotiating” (“What New Teachers” 476). Further research on these multiple streams would offer insight into what sources impact GSI practice, and whether that impact results in *more* or *less* cohesive and
effective writing instruction for undergraduates. Understanding these multiple streams is also important because it will suggest how the discipline might retool formal writing pedagogy education to interact productively with these less formal influences. Catherine Latterell’s 1996 survey of graduate instructor preparation programs found that most GSI preparation employed a “what works” approach: providing GSIs with survival skills to operate a classroom, but often leaving them without a clear theoretical understanding of the principles of rhetoric and composition. In the twenty years that have elapsed since this study, there is evidence that more WPE programs are emphasizing theory-based approaches and helping GSIs grapple with the complexities of teaching as a mode of intellectual inquiry (see Stenberg and Lee; Stancliff and Goggin; Reid, “On Learning to Teach”). Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon write that “a multiphilosophical approach” to teacher preparation has become popular in recent years; this approach emphasizes “building on the diverse theoretical premises and philosophical assumptions with which TAs enter teacher preparation programs” (359). In other words, current approaches to GSI preparation acknowledge that GSIs are not blank slates and that their prior knowledge, theories, and experiences must be engaged with as part of teacher education.

Researchers have found that it is difficult to assess how or what GSIs do or do not implement from their formal education in writing pedagogy in their own teaching. Estrem and Reid’s two-site, three-year study suggests that GSIs may not often make conscious connections and applications of WPE to their actual classroom practice (Estrem, Reid, and Belchair). They write that “the very specific information we bring to TAs [through composition pedagogy principles] still occupies a limited and sometimes peripheral position
in their daily thoughts and practices regarding teaching writing” (49). Sally Barr Ebest, in her own research on GSI education, writes,

Too many TAs exit their pedagogy seminar without fully developing an understanding of their writing or their teaching. For many of these students, composition studies remains a boring, blurry subdiscipline. Such results are not only a disservice to these future professors and their future students but also to composition studies (5).

GSIs bring to the classroom a long history of prior experience about teaching and writing gained from their experiences as students (and sometimes as tutors or teachers) and from other sources (Yancey; Qualley; Reid, “On Learning to Teach”)—prior experience that shapes their practice for good or ill and that perhaps creates a barrier preventing them from “fully developing an understanding of their writing or teaching,” as Ebest writes above.

Although formal WPE is structured to expose students to evidence-based research about the most effective ways to teach writing, effective transfer, as we know from much recent literature in the field, is difficult, takes time, and must be supported by conscious effort (see Qualley for a compelling exploration of transfer and GSIs). Complicating and refining ill-informed or outmoded assumptions and approaches to teaching that may be practiced by GSIs requires time and conscious effort on their part and on the part of their mentors.

Teaching, like writing, is a complex intellectual activity that develops recursively over years of practice. In the meantime, what happens when new GSIs walk out of their composition

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2 Transfer refers to the ways in which learners use prior knowledge and experiences to navigate new learning contexts. The term itself is controversial for the way in which it suggests a simple movement of knowledge from one context to another. Elizabeth Wardle suggests alternate terminology for this process, such as repurposing, transformation, generalizing, expansive learning, or integration (“What Is Transfer?” 149). I adopt the word “transfer” (the standard term in the literature) in this chapter to refer to these different ways in which learners move knowledge from one context to another.
theory seminars and must contend with the work of lesson planning, grading, and teaching now, in their own classroom, where anxious first-year students are depending on them to have the authority and knowledge to run the show? Especially as that work must compete for time and attention against the other responsibilities and stressors that face graduate students?

Jessica Restaino writes, “The first semester [of GSIs’ teaching] is more of a day-to-day keeping afloat than it is a carefully constructed, planned course” (1). She examines the first semester for “its drama, its real challenge to survival skills and adaptation, and its relevance as a shaky foundation on which writing programs and even scholarship rest” (1-2) and emphasizes that the experience of GSIs in the first semester (and, I would add, beyond) is that of a challenging middle ground between student and teacher, novice and expert.

Considering the challenge of transfer in WPE, the limited timeframe in which GSIs have to learn to be effective teachers, and the complicated positionality of the GSI as both student and teacher, it is clear that GSIs’ teaching is shaped by a convergence of material, temporal, and intellectual constraints and affordances, including the psychological and social complexities of teacher-student relationships, authority, mentoring, and representation. In the context of these constraints and affordances, many GSIs practice bricolage to cope.

Seeing the work of GSIs of writing as a bricolage highlights important questions about how our field’s current practices for preparing GSIs may compel the work of the bricolage in ways that might be particularly constraining or challenging to novice instructors. It also suggests, however, that bricolage may be a particularly effective method for GSIs to employ to as they process these material and intellectual constraints since it allows GSIs to “borrow” whatever pieces they need, including theorized approaches to teaching. The key question becomes, what are GSIs borrowing and patchworking? The quality of bricolaged
pieces they choose to use may indicate the quality of the learning experience they are creating for undergraduate writers. For this reason, it is important to explore the sources GSIs draw on in shaping their teaching practice. To this end, I theorize GSIs as agentive bricoleurs and their classroom practice as shaped and pieced into a bricolage pulled from a variety of ideas, experiences, and contexts.

In writing this dissertation, I speak from my current positionality as a doctoral-level GSI, and from my past experiences as a graduate assistant writing program administrator and mentor to other GSIs, a visiting lecturer of writing, and as a master’s-level GSI. My teaching practice has been shaped by my preparation and work as a GSI in two programs, and by my peer interactions with other GSIs, both informally in casual sharing and conversations about teaching and formally as a part of structured teacher development programs. I am a bricoleur as a teacher, an administrator, and a writer, and by providing my experience as an example, I hope to illustrate how bricolage plays out in one graduate writing teacher’s experience, both positively and negatively. Sharing my experience also allows me to confront and represent my contextualized positionality in approaching and designing this research. I believe my status as a current graduate student and as a long-time graduate instructor shapes my unique contributions in this research. This personal history offers my motivation for, and experiential backdrop to, the empirical research on GSIs and their teaching practices that forms the core of this dissertation.

**Bricolage and the Teaching of Writing**

The concept of bricolage in scholarly work stems from the use of the term in Claude Levi-Strauss’s 1962 work, *La Pensée Sauvage* (translated into English in 1966 as *The Savage Mind*). Here, Levi-Strauss uses bricolage to understand the myth-making practices of
“primitive” societies. He describes the bricoleur as “someone who works with his hands” and draws on a “heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited” (17). The bricoleur is always able to “make do with ‘whatever is at hand’” (17), and, in piecing together a project, the bricoleur “has to turn back to an already existent set made up of tools and materials, to consider and reconsider what it contains and, finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue with it [. . . and] to index the possible answers which the whole set can offer to his problem” (18). Levi-Strauss develops the idea of the bricoleur by means of contrast with the concept of the engineer, a sort of pure scientist who works in an uncontaminated realm of ideas, “always trying to make his way out of and go beyond the constraints imposed by a particular state of civilization while the ‘bricoleur’ by inclination or necessity always remains within them” (19). The bricoleur is always situated and so always creates within the constraints of the context in which he or she works.

Moving out from Levi-Strauss, scholars have taken up the idea of bricolage in fields as varied as education, sociology, creative writing, management, nursing, and cultural studies. These scholars use the term as a method, a theory, and a metaphor. For example, evolutionary biology uses the term “to describe the process of evolution not as a product of design—the unfolding of a predetermined plan or template—but rather as the makeshift adaptation of existing structures and functions to new ends” (Johnson 356). Christopher Johnson claims that the extensive use of bricolage by a variety of disciplines demonstrates “the status of bricolage as a kind of universal concept” (356), and “what bricolage as a universal concept teaches us is that the evolution of technology [defined broadly] is always a two-way (retroactive, feedback) process of projection and retrospection, thought and action, abstraction and application” (368), a process “no different to that of (natural) evolution itself.”
(368-69). Appropriately, acting out the nature of bricolage itself, the concept takes on new permutations and meanings within each field that applies it. In applying the term to writing studies, and as a way of adding additional dimensions to this adaptable idea, I echo Johnson by suggesting that teaching and writing both occur as a sort of two-way evolution: the writer or teacher must work with what is available and the available means shape what teaching practices and philosophies are produced. It is a recursive process of theory and practice and new theory.

The usefulness of bricolage in understanding the teaching of writing is in some ways obvious: writing itself is a sort of bricolage—an intertextual gathering of what is at hand into a new form. Bricolage has clear connections with the ways composition scholars such as Cynthia Selfe, Stuart Selber, Jason Palmeri, and Adam Banks have theorized writing as intertextuality and remix. But teaching and administration are equally well suited to the idea of the bricolage: as teachers or as administrators, composition professionals have had to creatively make new and make do within material limitations and constrictions. In many ways, the act of teaching is not unlike the act of writing: an act of composing, remixing, and patchworking. Both writing and teaching involve repeated practice, revision, and reflection. Both require some “disciplining” into a discourse community. And novice teachers, like novice writers, often struggle with preconceived notions about what teaching is and how it is to be done. In fact, one could easily take the list of threshold concepts from the recent landmark collection, Naming What We Know, and replace the word “writing” with “teaching”: “Teaching Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity,” “Teaching Is a Knowledge-Making Activity,” “Teaching Involves Making Ethical Choices,” “All Teachers Have More to Learn,” “Teaching Is Performative,” “Teaching Enacts and Creates Identities and
Ideologies,” “Revision Is Central to Developing Teaching,” and on and on. This suggests that the teaching of writing is, like writing itself, a complex cognitive task requiring the novice to balance various pressures, performances, skills, audiences, and expectations. Empirical research supports this conclusion and demonstrates “that instruction is a complex, paradoxical task—one that requires a savvy instructor to navigate effectively” (Thompson et al. 24).

**Bricolage and Programmatic Mandates**

In theorizing the bricolage, Johnson writes that “it could be argued that it is *bricolage* which thinks, or operates, through the *bricoleur*, rather than the reverse—as we shall see, (s)he is never entirely in command of his or her means of production” (360). Similarly, GSIs’ theories and practices of teaching are shaped by the programs and material realities in which they are trained and in which they teach. In the compressed learning situation that GSIs face, where they must begin efficiently acting out their learning before they have fully absorbed it, the GSI may be said to be acted upon by the program, which carries out its policies, philosophies, and objectives through them. In a broader sense, GSIs are acted upon and disciplined by the academic world at large, which identifies GSIs as students but assigns them the labor of apprentices at least and colleagues at most. Working within this context—with these material pressures “at hand”—the GSI also must create an intellectual bricolage of ideas, piecing together theories, research, and strategies to shape their work in the classroom. These theories, research, and strategies will often be given to them, like a pre-cut and pre-packaged quilting kit: many squares from their composition theory courses and other formal GSI preparation, some squares from conversations with other teachers, some squares perhaps surreptitiously added from their own studies of linguistics or poetry or film. And, like a
novice quilter, the new GSI will struggle at times to see how all these squares are supposed to fit together, sometimes resulting in a lack of coherence in their course design and classroom practices. The extent to which GSIs are acted on by a larger bricolage may vary depending on the specifics of the program and the amount of independence granted to the GSIs to draw on their own experiences and interests as they design syllabi, assignments, and so on. But, even when GSIs are granted considerable leeway in designing their courses, their status as novices will inevitably lead them to depend on a bricolage of existing approaches, past experiences, and teaching documents (like assignment sheets and syllabi) to discipline their work in class, much as I did in my first semester of teaching.

*Bricolage as Play*

The novice’s dependence on predesigned materials does not preclude a sense of play or independence in the work of the GSI. After all, as Levi-Strauss writes, the bricoleur is someone who “works with his hands and uses devious means” (16). As Frank Farmer’s work on zines and citizen bricoleurs makes clear, the work of the bricoleur can be subversive and counter-culture. In the practice of a GSI, this may look like the ways in which the GSI takes ownership in their teaching, asserting themselves by basing their teaching approach on previous knowledge or skill (as I saw one peer GSI do when he designed his first-year writing course around film, his area of research). Attempts at play and agency within the bricolage may also explain some of the problems of resistance frequently chronicled in literature about GSIs (Hesse); in a system where GSIs are being disciplined by theory and

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3 The difficulty of creating a consistent and coherent classroom experience is difficult even for more experienced writing instructors. See, for example, Richard Fulkerson’s work on how assignments in composition courses were often designed with one philosophy in mind but graded in the context of another philosophy (Fulkerson, “Four Philosophies”). Fulkerson might argue that this is an even more difficult process for novice instructors, who have less familiarity with theory to build on as a starting point.
practice, their resistance and reliance on knowledge from outside disciplines may just be the
work of the bricoleur: making do by bringing a prior piece of knowledge to a new context.
When this prior knowledge is utilized in the new context of the writing classroom, however,
it takes on new resonances. Johnson writes that the elements with which the bricoleur works
are “multivalent, that is, they retain a certain determinate use value, but because of their
abstraction from their original functional context there is a degree of manoeuvre, or play, in
their redeployment” (362). Even when GSIs are handed a collection of tools and elements by
a FYW program, they add their own tools and elements to the stock, culled from their past
experiences as students, tutors, teachers, and writers, from their own research interests, and
perhaps from other pieces in their lives. Their particular agency and positionality shapes how
those tools and elements are deployed in the classroom. Whether these playful maneuvers
provide sound writing instruction to undergraduate students remains an open question. Some
novice instructors may make choices motivated by their personal preferences or interests
rather than by learning objectives or a coherent teaching philosophy.

Even as it pulls from various inspirations and sources, however, a sophisticated
approach to teaching writing will be undergirded by some guiding principle or coherent
philosophy, otherwise it runs the danger of arbitrarily structuring learning (as Fulkerson has
observed). For this reason, we might say there are two ways to understand bricolage in
relation to the work of GSIs: as haphazard, incoherent mixing and matching for survival or as
agentive gathering and redeploying of materials to create meaningful, purposeful learning.
Ultimately, the purposeful bricolage in teaching is a product of practice, reflection, and
theorizing on the part of an aware and often experienced instructor. Many GSIs may operate
in a space between these two conceptions of the bricolage, hopefully not completely
incoherent but likely not experienced enough to thoroughly examine and design their own teaching in sophisticated, purposeful ways. Theorizing both orientations is useful because it raises questions about how to move GSIs from the haphazard approach to bricolage to the purposeful one.

**Reflection, Resistance, and Play**

What role does WPE play in the creation of the material conditions that encourage GSIs to approach their teaching as bricoleurs? First-year writing is sometimes seen as a “content-less” course that can be filled in with whatever topics interest the instructor or the students, and that can be taught by anyone. Although our field pushes back against this idea (for example, Downs and Wardle suggest writing courses should be taught by writing experts; “Intro to Writing Studies”), current material conditions—such as the fact that many writing programs are still housed in English departments with graduate students in need of the financial benefits of an assistantship and undergraduate students in required sections of FYW in need of instructors—suggest that restricting first-year writing to the jurisdiction of writing experts is unlikely to happen. For these reasons, WPE has long faced the challenge of instructing “outsiders” and novices in composition theory and pedagogy. In fact, the preparation of writing GSIs may be said to pre-date composition as a field of research. Catherine Latterell writes that “rhetoric and composition studies programs owe a great deal to GTA training programs because they continued the tradition of advanced rhetorical studies when official programs of study were practically nonexistent” (“Politics” 6). Even today, the composition theory and pedagogy course remains a central site for introducing advanced

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4 Of course, expertise is a complex concept and difficult to define. A GSI may indeed develop practicable expertise through effective writing pedagogy education. In later chapters, I will examine what kinds of knowledge an effective writing teacher must have as well as ways to use WPE and WAC/WID programs to create this practicable expertise in non-experts.
scholars outside of composition studies to the theories and research of the field. In this way, WPE is both a challenge and an opportunity for composition theory. Stancliff and Goggin propose engaging GSIs in “reflective conflict” by encouraging them, among other things, “to make their own theoretical links between composition theory and their home fields” (12). In encouraging these kinds of connections, teacher educators ask GSIs to productively and reflectively practice bricolage. These connections between GSIs’ home disciplines and their work as writing instructors may provide rich additions to writing studies and teaching practice (as will be discussed later in this chapter).

Teaching theory as part of GSI preparation is not without its challenges, however. Many argue that GSIs often resist theory-based approaches, struggling to absorb and apply the theory and preferring (perhaps urgently) more practical strategies for the classroom (Estrem, Reid, and Belchair; Hesse). Research suggests that GSI resistance is complex, and for some GSIs, resistance is a front adopted to cover insecurity. Jennifer Grouling describes Blaire, a GSI who presented the “narrative of herself as a resistant student-teacher,” but who also was “obsessed” with “wanting to give her students the best course possible.” Grouling describes Blaire as someone “who is trying extremely hard to meet the expectations of graduate school and the writing program rather than someone who is completely resistant” (1). Similarly, Restaino describes a research participant, Shirley, who indicated early on that her loyalty and her identity were attached first to her home discipline of creative writing: “Shirley boldly asserted that she was at Public U to work on her fiction, which would always come before teaching; she was not there to be a teacher. Shirley described her pre-semester attitude toward teaching: ‘Find a way to get through this with as little involvement as possible’” (9). But Restaino writes that Shirley’s attitude was “tinged at the time with more
self-defense than real distaste for teaching” (9). Grouling also asserts that “it’s important to acknowledge that resistance to teaching does not necessarily equate to poor teaching or even a lack of caring about teaching” (9). In fact, resistance to composition theory and pedagogy can be a good starting place for GSIs to productively engage in teaching as intellectual inquiry. Their resistance and objections may push them to struggle to understand the place of teaching in their intellectual work as graduate students; it may also encourage them to make choices as agents and play with these pedagogical theories and practices.

The importance of encouraging GSIs to resist, question, and play in the context of their formal WPE is emphasized by many scholars, and is an important step toward helping GSIs move from haphazard approaches to bricolage to more purposeful, agentive bricolage. Stancliff and Goggin teaching GSIs that “questioning and reflecting are integral to strong teaching” (25). Similarly, Nancy Welch, in arguing against conversion as a WPE strategy, encourages teacher educators “to see resistance not as intolerance but as an opportunity for investigation, articulation, and learning” (400). Reid proposes focusing on “uncoverage” instead of “comprehensiveness and scope” in composition pedagogy courses “to emphasize discoveries that lead to long-term learning over immediate competencies” (“Uncoverage” 16). Stenberg and Lee propose that pedagogical theory “should work in a dialectical relationship to practice” (331), as GSIs are taught to collaboratively engage in questions about teaching and theory in the context of their practice. Each of these proposals invites GSIs into an agentive position where they must choose to understand and adopt composition theories on their own, rather than an unreflective deployment of mismatched materials: “We cannot endow our TAs with new theory by giving them a pedagogy class; they must appraise and integrate new knowledge themselves” (Reid, Estrem, and Belchair 55).
The emphasis on learning to teach as an intellectually challenging activity may help reverse an additional challenge that feeds GSI stress: the message GSIs are given that teaching is of low importance in their graduate studies. Research in academia is generally valued more highly than teaching as an intellectual practice (see Stenberg and Lee), although this varies based on institution type. I learned quickly as a novice instructor that I was not to put my teaching first. As a new graduate student and a new graduate instructor, I attended a lecture in a required introduction to graduate studies course in which I was encouraged to be cautious about prioritizing teaching over my research. “Don’t win the teaching award,” I was told. “Don’t spend more than half an hour preparing for your class sessions.” This advice was, I believe, well-meant and motivated by compassion: first-time teachers can easily spend hours and hours preparing a single class session, and GSIs need to balance the realities and constraints of the expectations that are placed on them as students and as instructors. At the same time, this common advice to deprioritize teaching reflects a general attitude in higher education that teaching is less intellectually rigorous than research and requires (or deserves) less effort. This attitude towards teaching persists, despite attempts to raise its status as scholarly work in the academy (perhaps mostly notably, those by Ernest Boyer). This low value of teaching also devalues teacher preparation. If teaching is not particularly important or rigorous, then why should teacher preparation be rigorous and theory-based? Wendy Bishop states, “It takes encouragement and courage to find a clear passage to the safe harbor of affirming oneself as teacher within an institution that valorizes almost every other role first” (“Places to Stand” 13). Composition instructors, particularly, are often valued even less than instructors of more advanced courses. Paul Heilker traces how composition teachers in the past are described in the literature as mindless drones, dependent on textbooks for content
and disconnected from the theory and research on composition; eventually, the idea of the composition teacher became somewhat rehabilitated: “teacher in composition studies has also come to mean theorist, researcher, and knowledge-maker” (234). Stancliff and Goggin “take it as a given that teaching is a form of theorizing” (11), and Stenberg and Lee argue that teaching should be seen as “intellectual work deserving of study” (327). Yet valuing teaching as intellectual work seems not to have effectively trickled down to individual departments and students. GSIs still feel a pull between teaching and research: Restaino describes the graduate students in her study struggling with feeling they must choose between their teaching and their research (115).

One possible way to move students past this dichotomy is to present teaching and research as two pieces in a larger bricolage of scholarly inquiry. The concept of the bricolage allows for research and teaching to shape and inform each other reciprocally rather than for teaching to act as a distraction from the more serious work of research. Some research in STEM supports this idea and suggests that scholars who teach may be stronger researchers than those that do not, countering the common notion that research improves teaching, but teaching distracts from research. STEM is typically perceived to value and prepare teachers less than English departments (who need instructors for many sections of first-year writing and have a longer history of teacher preparation). However, David F. Feldon, et al., found that STEM graduate students who held teaching and research responsibilities performed better at designing and writing research proposals than those who held research responsibilities only (likely because of their repeated practice in talking undergraduates through developing and answering research questions). They argue that these findings suggest that teaching is “a value-added component of graduate research training” (1039).
the language of the bricolage, this suggests that all materials are usable and valuable—that all pieces of the GSI experience can be threaded into the tapestry of advanced intellectual development.

**Interlude: My GSI Experience as Bricolage**

As an example of how GSIs practice bricolage, I reflect on my own first semester of teaching writing. My formal education in the teaching of writing consisted of several experiences, in addition to that weeklong crash course that preceded my first day in the classroom. As a first-semester GSI, I took a required composition theory course and attended weekly teaching meetings to support my work in the classroom. In class, we were carefully introduced to a survey of literature on the teaching of writing. One day we read and revived old debates about the place of grammar in the writing classroom. The focus of our discussion was the updated version of Lunsford and Connors’ famous study examining the errors teachers marked on first-year composition papers (Lunsford and Lunsford). I found myself engaged with my classmates in the debate, and relieved to learn that my lack of knowledge about comma usage perhaps would not destroy my students’ ability to learn to write, as I feared. But when I entered my own classroom, I still taught my students punctuation as a sort of isolated game because I felt unsure about approaching it differently (despite the fact that I had been exposed to some research about teaching grammar in context). Reid, Estrem, and Belchair note in their findings that “TAs’ vision of themselves as teachers often focuses on classroom and life management rather than issues of writing pedagogy” (44). As a new instructor, this was certainly true of me. I was, in fact, learning composition theory from a capable professor, engaging in key debates with my classmates, and yet the first-year writing classroom itself seemed to put blinders on me: the composition theory I learned didn’t make
its way into my practice very firmly for several semesters.\textsuperscript{5} Let me provide one specific example of how various elements came together for me over time.

In my first semester of teaching, I acted the part of the bricoleur by piecing together my practice from many sources, but I generally avoided experimentation and play until I could get the lay of the land. That first semester, I felt more like the observer in Kenneth Burke’s parlor, who comes late to the never-ending conversation without anyone able “to retrace for [me] all the steps that had gone before” (\textit{Philosophy} 110). Even though I was ostensibly directing the classroom, the structure and day-to-day work of my class really came from others. In Burke’s parlor metaphor, “You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar” (110). I listened to the classroom that first semester, as Levi-Strauss says bricoleurs must engage in a dialogue with their materials to figure out how to use them. I mostly implemented other teachers’ course designs, assignments, and lesson plans. In that listening, I found one place where I wanted to put my oar: my first-year students frequently struggled with understanding and writing to audiences who disagreed with them. In my composition theory course, we read a chapter from Kenneth Bruffee’s \textit{Collaborative Learning} and John Trimbur’s response to Bruffee’s earlier articulations of his ideas (Trimbur, “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning”). After a full semester of teaching, I found that I was ready to play with these ideas. My department offered GSIs the opportunity to propose experimental courses, choosing their own texts, themes, and approaches to teaching first-year writing. At the encouragement of a peer GSI and because of our conversations together, I proposed a course around the theme of negotiating difference. My goal was to push students beyond their

\textsuperscript{5} Some approaches to writing pedagogy education may help GSIs move from theory into practice more easily. I will discuss possibilities for making this happen in more depth in my conclusion.
assurances in their own positions and their assumptions about their audiences. I taught this course in my third semester as a GSI. Among other things, it required students to collaboratively write a research paper on a controversial issue. In reflective papers addressed to me, students reported the course helped them understand those they disagreed with, and, in some cases, even caused them to change their minds about an issue. I can still recall where the “pieces” of this course on negotiating difference came from: the articles in my composition course that I have already mentioned, my own experience of growing up in a homogeneous environment and sensing the need for understanding a wider variety of perspectives, and a professor outside of my teaching coursework who introduced me to the reader Negotiating Difference, edited by Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg.

After I graduated with my MA and became a full-time lecturer, I continued to experiment with ways of engaging students in understanding complex issues and speaking to audiences who were different from themselves. To provide some real stakes for their use of argumentation, I designed a first-day activity in which I invited them to design the course syllabus with me. We started with a discussion of what constitutes an effective college class and who has a stake in what happens in college classrooms (students, teachers, administrators, parents, future employers, accreditors, etc.). Encouraging them to consider how they might balance the concerns and needs of these various audiences, I divided them into groups and gave them copies of different instructors’ course policies (giving them these materials to work with was essential to the argumentative negotiation I was asking them to engage in). Each group was invited to debate and design together the course policies for our class: one group in charge of attendance policies, one group in charge of late work policies, and so on. When each group had drafted their policies, we debated them together as a class.
Later iterations of this activity found me allowing students to choose their assignments from a list of possibilities I provided. (I was open to student designs for assignments as well, but felt it was important to give them already existent pieces of a course to pull together.) As a class, we tinkered and cobbled until we had formed a class adapted to our particular group. As a result of the activity, students took greater ownership of the course and appeared less resistant to learning. In other words, this strategy for designing a syllabus worked in the local context of my work with those students, though I can’t make any claims about its effectiveness elsewhere. But this, also, is the nature of bricolage—it is individualized and handmade within a particular setting and context. Effective teachers are able to adapt and respond to the needs of their specific students.

Tracing this theme of collaboration, difference, and consensus across several years of my teaching demonstrates how, as Estrem and Reid write, “learning to teach (writing) is a protean and lengthy process” with “uncertain and recursive progress” (“What New Teachers” 450). Trimbur’s article on consensus and difference resonated with me immediately when I read it in my composition pedagogy course, but it didn’t make its way into my classroom in any particularly theorized or thoughtful way for several years. In practicing bricolage, GSIs may eventually come to the more complex, intricate, and theorized patchwork that many experienced instructors employ each day. More sophisticated teaching practice may have

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6 There are obvious challenges with this approach to designing a course, and its effectiveness might depend on the makeup of the student body in the course: the student body at this university was high-achieving and relatively homogenous. I found that first-year students, as newcomers to university courses in general, did better when asked to participate in small design tasks (determining the attendance policy only, for example, rather than providing input on many parts of a syllabus), while my 300-level students were comfortable and capable in working through multiple policies and an assignment sequence with me. The initial conversation about stakeholders was essential to the success of this activity because it created the necessity of designing something that would appeal to the values and needs of all stakeholders (and not just students). It positioned students as problem solvers and rhetoricians.
smoother, less visible seams, but it is not a move away from the bricolage—from piecing together observations and readings and experiences into teaching practice. It is instead a simply more sure-footed and more theorized. It becomes art instead of survival. But it is not clear how or if all GSIs will move from a haphazard to a theorized approach to their classroom teaching. And if it can take a lengthy amount of time for novice instructors to learn how to theorize their teaching, what do they do early on as they make decisions about designing courses, assignments, and class time? This research project was designed to address these questions.

**Exigence for Empirical Investigation of GSI Bricolage**

My project explicitly examined what sources influence and shape GSIs’ teaching practice in the first-year writing classroom. In surveys and interviews with current graduate instructors, I explored how graduate writing instructors approach piecing together their classroom practice: what resources did they rely on and what were their processes for designing syllabi, assignments, and daily class time? By gaining a stronger understanding of exactly what shapes GSIs’ teaching knowledge and practice, writing pedagogy educators will be better equipped to design formal preparation experiences that interact with and support the informal and prior experiences and sources that are already impacting GSI teaching practice. This research yields specific insights into the current state of GSI preparation in writing studies as well as insights into how graduate writing instructors navigate the complexities of learning to teach writing. From these insights, I make specific recommendations for supporting novice instructors in this complex process. It has been over twenty years since published research has examined national trends in GSI preparation (Latterell), and that study surveyed writing program administrators for descriptions of their preparation practices rather
than surveying GSIs directly. Examining GSIs’ experiences with teacher preparation provides a clear understanding of the state of the field itself, since, as Catherine Latterell and others have noted, GSI practicum courses became the starting point of graduate-level education in composition studies and continues to be a key site of introducing new graduate students to the field, thus shaping how writing instruction is delivered to undergraduate students. My project explicitly raises questions about what connections GSIs make between their prior experience, disciplinary study, and their practice as new instructors of writing. I explore the following research questions:

RQ1: What sources (people, communities, texts, theories, etc.) influence graduate writing instructors’ practices in the composition classroom? What sources do GSIs draw upon in designing their courses, creating lesson plans, and solving problems in the classroom?

RQ2: How do graduate writing instructors’ previous experiences and disciplinary courses of study shape their approaches to teaching writing and their experiences of writing pedagogy education?

RQ3: How do GSIs navigate (consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly) between theory and practice (including disciplinary theories and practices) in their work as classroom writing instructors?

In the next chapter, I examine in more depth the history of writing pedagogy education in the United States, the forces that shape graduate instructor labor, and the perceptions and arguments about the place of graduate instructors and their work in the field of writing studies. Chapter 3 outlines my methods for collecting and analyzing data for this project, while Chapters 4 and 5 present my findings and results. I conclude in Chapter 6 with a
discussion of the results, implications for writing pedagogy education, and how we might re-position the preparation and labor of graduate instructors in the field moving forward.
Chapter 2: History and Positioning of Graduate Labor in Writing Studies

For each of the four founders had
A house in which they might

Take only those they wanted, so,
For instance, Slytherin
Took only pure-blood wizards
Of great cunning just like him.

And only those of sharpest mind
Were taught by Ravenclaw
While the bravest and the boldest
Went to daring Gryffindor.

Good Hufflepuff, she took the rest
and taught them all she knew.

—J. K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix

Historically, as a field, composition played a role not unlike that of Helga Hufflepuff, one of the four founders of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter novels: readily accepting “the rest” of the students, those deemed unfit or in need of remediation by others. When Harvard established its written English entrance exam in 1874 and its first freshman writing course in 1885, it was in response to growing numbers of students whose writing skills were not considered up to snuff (Connors 184-85). This initial remedial focus in first-year writing was the start of hiring many instructors to staff numerous sections of composition. Later, when mass influxes of diverse students entering universities in the decades following WWII triggered fears of a “literacy crisis,” composition courses again were expected to provide these students with a thorough education in literacy, curing them of their “deficiencies” as writers and thinkers before they moved on to advanced study. Generally, this work was to be accomplished by instructors at the lowest ranks with the lowest remuneration and support for their work: often contingent faculty and graduate
instructors and often women (see Schell; Marshall; S. Miller; Sledd). The history of composition studies is also the history of these laborers and their professionalization (or lack thereof). Today, composition courses are generally required of all first-year students (with some exemptions) and not just of those students perceived to be unwashed and unworthy of college-level study. But the historical labor issues surrounding college writing continue to influence the structure and status of writing programs in the United States.

**A Brief History of the Origins of Composition**

Composition as a field was shaped by competing tensions in American universities: the tensions between professional and practitioner, male and female, research and teaching, knowledge construction and knowledge transmission, and literature and composition (in each pair, the first term is usually privileged above the second). Of course, these hierarchical dichotomies are somewhat simplistic and contested, but they still represent key forces that have shaped the place of composition in the academy at large and in departments of English specifically. Throughout the nineteenth century, many American scholars headed to Germany for doctoral programs; soon, the German model of the university with its focus on scientific investigation and specialized elective courses of study became the prevailing model in American universities as well.

As a result of these changes in focus in American universities, knowledge production became more prestigious than knowledge transmission, raising research above teaching and literature above composition as scholarly endeavors (Crowley 54-58; Marshall 8; Schell 29-33; Berlin 20-25). Literature was seen as having content and existing as a field of research, whereas composition was a site of service and skill-building. Writing instruction moved from being integrated in all four years of college studies to being largely relegated to the first-year
Although for many years Harvard maintained a robust writing program with eminent and respected faculty, Brereton describes how “[b]y 1910, composition had become almost totally apprentice work, and responsibility for its oversight became the province not of a scholar or curriculum expert but an administrator” (21). When teaching writing became apprentice work, it also increasingly became women’s work. Eileen Schell notes that while “male writing teachers were portrayed as reluctant composition teachers, imprisoned and often repulsed by their teaching duties,” women were considered “less ambitious, more inclined to enjoy or endure the detail-oriented, self-sacrificial duty of reading freshman themes and tutoring the ‘great unwashed!’” (32). Thus, the study of literature came to be seen as a professional, male, research-oriented endeavor focused on the creation of knowledge, while composition became a feminized teaching-oriented practice focused on the transmission of knowledge. It was not until the 1960s and 70s when composition began to establish itself as a research discipline that some of these perceptions began to shift, although these tensions still affect the status of composition in English departments today.

From this brief history of composition studies, I now move to a brief history of graduate labor in composition.

A Brief History of Graduate Labor in Composition

The effective preparation of new writing instructors has been a topic of scholarly conversation and publication for over a hundred years, long before rhetoric and composition emerged as a field in its own right in the 1960s and 70s. The English Journal in the 1910s is full of essays urging for better preparation of graduate instructors (see Alden; Cox; Denney; Greenough; Noble). And yet, for many decades, this conversation remained just that: “more talk than action,” according to Janet Marting (40). Although conferences as early as the
1920s were calling for careful preparation of new composition instructors in both content area and pedagogical knowledge, by and large, institutions did not see teacher preparation as an object worthy of their time and energy (Marting). In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, when more graduate students and contingent faculty were placed in FYW (Crowley 4), there were few support or preparation measures. As a result, “preparation” of novice writing instructors often amounted to no preparation at all: the scholarly literature is full of “tales of neglect and sadism” (Taylor and Holberg 607) and “tales too terrible to tell” (Pemberton 154) about the exploitation and utter lack of preparation provided to GSIs of writing.

Many of the difficulties experienced by new composition teachers early in the history of English departments may have stemmed from the fact that “resistance to pedagogy ran deep within departments of English” (Roen, Goggin, Clary-Lemon 357). The study of literature continued to hold status as a better and more prestigious use of scholarly time than the study of pedagogy, despite the fact that many English graduates would go on to become teachers where their primary responsibility would be the teaching of writing (Roen, Goggin, Clary-Lemon 351). It was not until the mid-twentieth century that teacher preparation courses began to be more widely taught, and not until about the 1970s that writing pedagogy education was taken more seriously by English departments (Pytlik). In the meantime, teaching FYW often became a site of exploitation and isolation for graduate instructors.

A tipping point occurred at the 1986 Wyoming Conference, when an exploited graduate student who taught basic writing, Susan Wyche, stood and described her problematic labor conditions, including how she and a graduate student colleague of hers had been coerced by their department chair into teaching a course without pay, and then tearfully asked, “Why aren’t you all talking about this?” (Wyche 8). Her emotional plea resulted in the
drafting of the now famous Wyoming Resolution, which eventually became the 1989 CCCC
Statement of Principles and Standards for the Postsecondary Teaching of Writing (most
recently updated in 2015 and now called the Principles for the Postsecondary Teaching of
Writing). This Statement was designed to improve working conditions for exploited laborers
in composition studies, including contingent faculty and graduate instructors, but it has a
controversial history and remains controversial to this day (see McClure, Goldstein, and
Pemberton’s edited collection Labored: The State(ment) and Future of Work in
Composition), particularly for the ways in which it fails to fully address ongoing labor issues
for contingent faculty. Since many GSIs will go on to contingent teaching positions in which
they will primarily teach general-education composition courses, the labor and preparation
concerns relevant to contingent faculty are closely related to the those of graduate instructors.

Despite ongoing concerns about contingent faculty and exploitation of graduate labor
(McClure, Goldstein, and Pemberton; Edgington and Taylor), things have improved in the
preparation and labor conditions of GSIs of writing since Susan Wyche stood and made her
complaint. Long, Holberg, and Taylor wrote in 1996 that “the situation of a new teaching
assistant being thrust into a classroom for the first time, with little more than a class list and
(perhaps) a copy of the approved text, has been reduced to a mythical remnant of our
profession’s history” (66). The development of formalized and required practicum and
pedagogy courses and other support measures has resulted in more effective and protective
teacher preparation for graduate students. Summer workshops or “crash courses,”
composition pedagogy and theory courses, practicum and mentoring experiences have all
become common elements of preparation. In addition to the improved teacher preparation
run by WPAs in English or writing departments, many universities have also begun
providing preparation in basic teaching skills (leading a discussion, creating rubrics, managing a classroom, planning lessons, etc.) to graduate students across the curriculum. Often, these programs are run out of teaching and learning centers. This is evidence of the fact that, today, there are many more opportunities for graduate students to receive teacher preparation than existed in the past.

Questions still remain, however, about the effectiveness of the most commonly-employed approaches to WPE. Writing in 2005, Shari Stenberg’s research suggested the “what-works” approach Latterell described in 1996 was still the prevailing model of teacher preparation (Stenberg 27). While acknowledging the diversity of contexts and programs for preparing writing teachers, Doen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon outlined in 2008 four central approaches to WPE: functional (the “what works” approach that Latterell found to be very common in 1996), organic (a focus on learning by doing), conversion (a focus on disciplinary enculturation where GSIs must adapt to their program’s philosophy), and multiphilosophical (an approach that involves using a variety of theories and philosophies to build on GSIs’ own theories and experiences with teaching and writing). Today, WPAs and researchers continue to innovate and offer insight into how to most effectively prepare writing instructors (see Fedukovich & Hall; Reid, “Uncoverage”; Dobrin). Current trends encourage preparing new instructors for the labor realities of composition and providing them with intensive, cross-tiered mentoring (Fedukovich & Hall); teaching them how to critically write, think, and reflect like teachers instead of attempting to offer them coverage of composition as a field in a short semester (Reid, “Uncoverage” and “Teaching Writing Teachers”); and partnerships and intersections with secondary English education programs (Reid, “Preparing Writing Teachers”; Tremmel) and writing centers (Ianetta, McCamley, & Quick).
Although more programs are providing grounding in the theories and research undergirding first-year composition teaching, the speed with which GSIs must operate competently in the classroom means many still find themselves casting about for practical ways to deal with their immediate transformation from students to college instructors. This desire for practical knowledge about what to do each day in class represents both the panic of novice instructors and the harried exhaustion of overburdened graduate students who may or may not see teaching first-year writing and learning composition theory as useful elements of their education. Indeed, for some graduate students, teaching first-year writing is a rite of passage (perhaps even a hazing ritual) that they must endure before moving on to the reward of teaching advanced courses in literature or theory. Preparation to teach has improved but teaching first-year writing is often still perceived as a low-status position. This image problem is not helped by the fact that at the research institutions where many graduate instructors are educated, tenure-line faculty in English and writing studies typically teach advanced undergraduate and graduate courses and rarely teach first-year writing. Those faculty who do regularly teach composition courses are typically contingent laborers who are not seen as carrying scholarly or institutional prestige. Ray Kytle argues that the low status of composition instructors also discourages contingent faculty from being taken seriously as leaders or innovators in the field, which in turn decreases any motivation for these instructors to try to lead and innovate (340).

Writing in CCC in 1951, Robert S. Hunting describes attitudes that still haunt writing studies and the preparation of college writing instructors today. He explains how, from the graduate student view, “it is absurd to waste time” on learning the teaching of writing when “a wholesome regard for his own professional advancement compels him to think of [FYW]
as a mere stepping-stone” (3). As long as teaching composition remains the site of low-status, feminized, stepping-stone labor, WPE will similarly remain a low-status, feminized, stepping-stone endeavor. Again, Hunting describes this symbiotic relationship between FYW and WPE:

If the freshman composition course continues to be something for the rising teacher to brush past as soon as possible, then the status of the training program can never attain to any dignity. . . . When, and if, the freshman composition course acquires the professional respect it deserves, then, and only then, will graduate students entertain a genuine respect for a Training Course for Teachers of Freshman Composition (6).

The status of composition in the academy will continue to affect the work that is possible in WPE. I would add to Hunting’s argument that it is not only the FYW course that must “acquire the professional respect it deserves.” It is teaching itself as an embodied intellectual activity worthy of scholarly attention, innovation, and reward.

The fact that teaching FYW is a nearly universal experience for English graduate students has contributed to its low status but it may also be an opportunity, both for composition and other disciplines who engage in the teaching of FYW. This space is a shared site of professionalization in graduate English studies (and, increasingly, beyond English studies). FYW is where prospective scholars often gain their first experiences teaching college-level English; it is where many are first introduced to the theories and practices of composition studies; and it may also represent the most public and prevalent way that English departments and English studies are known and understood (for better or worse) by students and faculty from other departments and colleges across campus, as well as by the general public. For this reason, English faculty and students in and outside of writing studies
have a stake in the success of FYW and the WPE that accompanies it. Dobrin writes that the ubiquitous composition practicum course “is the largest, most effective purveyor of cultural capital in composition studies” because it “defines for the noncomposition specialist what composition is. The course, generally speaking, is not merely a space in which new teachers are ‘trained’ or even professionalized, but one in which they are enculturated into the cultural ideologies of composition” (21). Long, Holberg, and Taylor write that “how we define and prepare new members of the profession is directly correlated to deepening the value of what we do in the domains of teaching and administration” (76). Thus, WPE represents a space for composition studies to rewrite itself (and teaching and administration) in the perceptions of other disciplines and across institutions, and to provide a value-added, challenging, complex intellectual experience to graduate students across disciplines. Before we can consider how GSIs experience WPE and how to design effective WPE, it is important to ask what the purpose and goals of preparing GSIs has been in the past and should be in the present.

**What Is the Purpose of Graduate Instructor Preparation?**

I am not the first to observe the similarities between the roles and position of FYW as a course and WPE as a program, between first-year writers and first-year writing teachers (Recchio; Estrem & Reid, “Writing Pedagogy Education”; Dryer). An important parallel between these two threshold sites is the confusion and debates over their purpose and outcomes. One reason FYW remains such a contested space is that many scholars, factions, and stakeholders disagree on exactly what FYW should prepare students to do: Should it prepare them to write effectively in courses across campus during their time at school? Should it prepare them for writing beyond campus? What kinds of genres and skills should be taught? The purposes of WPE are perhaps questioned less frequently, but it is equally
important to ask of these programs so often required of all English graduate students, what are we preparing these graduate students to do? What is the purpose of having graduate students teach introductory courses? Is it simply to staff courses economically? To provide graduate students with a stipend to help fund their education? To provide the best writing instruction possible to undergraduate students? To prepare graduate students for the work they will do after graduation as a sort of workplace training? To ease the instructional burden for tenured faculty so they can teach subjects of their own interest to upper-level majors and graduate students? A combination of the above?

Traditionally, WPE has existed in response to an imperative to quickly prepare novice instructors to staff first-year writing courses; it has often been perceived as a sort of apprenticeship. To position graduate instructor labor as professional development, however, raises the question of what profession or work this labor prepares graduate instructors to do. In criticism of the apprenticeship model of graduate instructor preparation, Allison Laubach Wright suggests that “an education that includes teaching a 2/2 load of FYW with minimal training, no private office space to consult with students, a low salary, little chance of shared governance, little representation on department committees, and few benefits sounds like an apprenticeship towards a contingent faculty position” rather than “an education in doing the work of a tenured faculty member” (277). Of course, not all tenured positions are created equal; neither are all contingent positions created equal. A look at one year’s worth of job ads in English studies makes it clear how varied these positions are at different institutions with different missions. A tenured faculty member at a community college might teach more courses per semester than a contingent lecturer at an R1 institution; their pay, power, and support will differ as well. Most of the graduate students who pass through a WPE program
will not go on to the somewhat idealized tenured position at an R1 school, teaching 1-2 courses a semester, publishing a great deal, and taking on some administrative duties. But neither will all go on to become exploited freeway fliers. There is a spectrum of post-graduate positions in the teaching of writing, some with more problematic labor concerns than others. Importantly, we must also recognize that not all graduate students want a tenure-track position or to stay in academia at all, for that matter. Many will take jobs in the private sector. Wright is correct that graduate instructor positions as they often exist are more clearly preparation for contingent faculty work than tenured faculty work, but perhaps WPE needs to broaden its goal beyond simply preparing GSIs for faculty roles.

If, as Estrem and Reid urge, WPE is to move past “primarily reactive modes” of teacher preparation ("Writing Pedagogy Education" 240) that equip GSIs to manage the nuts and bolts of a first-year writing course, we must conceive of WPE having a purpose beyond reaction to immediate institutional needs. What can WPE become for graduate students, other first-year writing faculty, or departments as a whole? What role can it play? Can we conceive of WPE as intellectual preparation integral to the education of graduate students in English studies and not simply as skills training and a convenient option for economic support? Can it be an opportunity to participate in a shared effort to engage new undergraduates in literate practices? To answer these questions, we must reconsider what it means to teach writing and what position we allow GSIs to inhabit as laborers in the work of literacy instruction.

Who Teaches Writing?

While composition has long carried a stigma as a course that requires no special preparation to teach, the rise of composition studies as a discipline with its own field of research has raised questions about who should teach writing and what a writing teacher
should know. The idea that “anyone can teach writing” is now officially marked as a bad idea in the book *Bad Ideas About Writing*, though Seth Kahn points out in his contribution to this collection that contingent faculty (with varying degrees of preparation and expertise) teach approximately 70% of general education writing courses in the US (363). Historically, it has always been the case that “the required first-year composition course has been taught by untenured faculty” and graduate students, most of whom are “undervalued, overworked, and underpaid” (Crowley 4-5). As outlined above, the teaching of writing as a low-status endeavor has often meant it has been relegated to anyone willing to teach it, a group that typically does not include tenure-track English faculty or even tenure-track composition faculty. Indeed, since many graduate students are admitted to teaching positions based on their academic prowess (often in areas outside of composition studies), Sharon Crowley argues that it “becomes quite possible that the people who are selected to teach first-year composition may be uninterested in composition theory or pedagogy” (5). Furthermore, Kytle argues that employing literature specialists as composition instructors reinforces “the condescending notion that ‘anyone can teach the course,’ that teaching it well requires no special interest, no real commitment, no specialized knowledge” (341). In turn, this only reinforces the marginalization of FYW in the academy.

The Writing About Writing movement, an approach to teaching writing that has gained traction in recent years, questions what kind of expertise a writing instructor should have to teach writing. Downs and Wardle designed this approach that reimagines FYW as

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7 Contingency itself, as Crowley writes, is “irrelevant to the quality of teaching in the first-year course” (5). Many contingent faculty are effective writing instructors. Many of them also, however, lack some of the resources that would most strengthen their teaching, like funding, space, time, and support for ongoing professional development, etc. The prevalent practice of staffing these courses with contingent faculty (including graduate instructors) who frequently operate in poor working conditions does suggest a lack of support and value for writing instruction.
“Intro to Writing Studies,” with a focus on dispelling misconceptions about writing and teaching students research-based knowledge about writing and writing processes. In a course of this type, students read research in the field of writing studies, write autoethnographies on their own literacy backgrounds, and investigate and write about issues relevant to writing studies as a field. An effective course of this type requires an instructor with expertise in writing studies; in turn, this requires a different approach to labor in our field. Downs and Wardle write, “Our field’s current labor practices reinforce cultural misconceptions that anyone can teach writing because there is nothing special to know about it. By employing nonspecialists to teach a specialized body of knowledge, we undermine our own claims as to that specialization” (575).

And yet, without a systematic reform of how FYW functions in the academy and a huge change in budgets, it is unlikely that the teaching of writing can simply be handed over to writing experts (especially if, by experts, we mean those with a writing-studies-related PhD). In the absence of these major reforms, writing programs must continue to employ “non-experts” to teach general education writing courses. Although there are clear drawbacks to this position, it may not altogether be a bad thing. The existence of WAC/WID programs suggests the value and even the imperative of preparing non-experts to teach writing to undergraduates across the curriculum. The problem with non-experts as instructors is well-stated by Seth Kahn, who writes, “All too often ‘Anybody can teach writing’ translates to ‘It doesn’t matter who teaches writing,’ and as a result, nobody needs to pay attention to writing instructors at all” (366). Instead, Kahn argues, “Anybody who is trained and supported well and treated like a professional can teach writing. The key word is professional” (366). In order for writing instructors to be effective (whether they be graduate, contingent, or tenure-
track), they must be seen as professionals, as well as receive appropriate support and exposure to the evolving and expanding knowledge base of writing studies. They must have some understanding of the basic tenets and major findings of the field since its inception.

Because learning to write effectively is an iterative, recursive process that requires practice in a variety of contexts and genres, I argue that, if supported appropriately, the field may actually gain value from drawing writing instructors from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds and even experience levels. Misty Anne Winzenried, in her study of GSIs who taught writing as part of general education courses across the disciplines, found that GSIs with educational emphases outside of English studies were able to “mediate the tensions between general academic and discipline-specific writing” for students because certain knowledge had “not yet become entrenched or tacit” (np) for them. In this way, they may have been more effective in helping students to cross boundaries between disciplines. Thus, diversity of background and experience can be a strength to a teaching community. Although Winzenried’s study focused on GSIs working outside of English departments, this diversity may include the diversity of English departments themselves since they often contain graduate students and instructors with emphases in literature, creative writing, rhetoric and composition, linguistics, film, and other areas. How might we deploy the variety of disciplinary loyalties and expertise of these graduate students to become an asset instead of a liability in the FYW classroom?

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8 I will come back to what appropriate support looks like in my conclusion, but it should involve ongoing professional development in the field rather than the one-semester “inoculation” method of teacher preparation so common today.
What Should a Writing Teacher Know?

Writing instructors (no matter their background) must have some knowledge and expertise in order to work effectively with undergraduate writers. Although “non-experts” may have some boundary-crossing ability to bring to their teaching, clearly a complete lack of knowledge of composition studies would be a liability. As a field, there have been several attempts to outline what kinds of knowledge college writing instructors must have to be effective. For example, the CCCC Statement on Preparing Teachers of College Writing argues that writing instructors should have rhetorical knowledge, linguistic knowledge, instructional knowledge, knowledge of ethical and effective research methods, and technical knowledge. In his influential 1977 article, “Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers,” Richard C. Gebhardt argues that four types of knowledge are particularly essential for new writing instructors. First, he says, these instructors must have “an understanding of the structure and history of the English language sound enough to let them apply their knowledge to the teaching of revision, style, dialect differences, and the like” (134); second, they need “a solid understanding of rhetoric” (134); third, “some theoretical framework with which to sort through ideas, methodologies, and conflicting claims of texts, journal articles, and convention addresses” (135); and, finally, he says, writing teachers need “a broad awareness of reliable, productive methods to help students learn to write” (137). Gebhardt’s list suggests effective classroom teachers need a combination of declarative (knowing that) and procedural knowledge (knowing how; Ryle). In Gebhardt’s words, these instructors “need to know the ‘what’ of composition teaching; but they also need to know the ‘how’ and the ‘why’” (138).
Margaret J. Marshall writes that effective preparation of writing instructors includes helping them understand several “different facets” of the classroom experience, including the “teacher and his/her role in the classroom,” “the student,” “the context,” and “the subject matter” (168-69). More recently, two edited collections, Adler-Kassner and Wardle’s *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies* and Ball and Loewe’s *Bad Ideas About Writing* outline some of the things that our field has come to know about writing, concepts and ideas that may also be on the list of what a writing teacher needs to know. Some of the essays in *Naming What We Know* explicitly address the ways threshold concepts can be used to improve writing pedagogy education and professional development (see chapters by Nowacek & Hughes; Adler-Kassner & Majewski; Anson). *Bad Ideas About Writing*, a public facing work, explicitly names teachers as one of its audiences.

Expertise means more than understanding specific ideas about writing, however. Ann M. Penrose’s work on contingent faculty in composition emphasizes the importance of three aspects of professional identity—expertise, autonomy, and community. Understanding professional identity in these terms, she argues, “yields an image of professionals as experts developing knowledge and exercising judgment in a communal enterprise” (122). Penrose argues for a view of expertise as a dynamic, rhetorical ability that instructors build over time: “Composition experts are identified not by the possession of a finite body of knowledge but by a rhetorical understanding that motivates them to assess, apply, and adapt their knowledge and develop new expertise as needed to meet teaching challenges in varied contexts” (121). The key idea here is the idea of “rhetorical understanding” that undergirds the choice of what knowledge to gain and how to use and adapt that knowledge in the classroom.
The emphasis on rhetorical and metacognitive ability as the foundation of pedagogical effectiveness is supported by other researchers in the field. Shari J. Stenberg argues that pedagogy refers to a set of “critical processes” (xxiii) rather than “a body of knowledge or a skill” (7). Stenberg defines pedagogy as “a knowledge-making activity that involves the interplay of visions and practices, both of which require reflection.” Additionally, pedagogy “is dependent on learners and is remade with each encounter, as the students and the teacher change,” and, finally, pedagogy “cannot be finished; we cannot ‘finally’ learn to teach” (xviii). Stenberg’s definition of pedagogy adds useful dimension to the question of expertise in the teaching of writing. In her definition, pedagogy focuses more on critical (or, we might say, rhetorical) processes than on mastering a body of knowledge or developing skills. Teaching, like writing, is more complex than right or wrong answers that one can memorize and implement. Richard Fulkerson notes, “If future teachers could be ‘trained,’ presumably each would know the correct response for each situation, programmed in ahead of time. And English teachers would lead simpler lives” (“Forward,” xi).

In reality, if a writing instructor is faced with teaching revision, for example, she must have declarative knowledge about effective sentence and paragraph structure, organizing logics for ideas, and the genre expectations of the writing to be revised. She must have procedural knowledge to structure revision activities for her students, including peer review. But she must also be able to reflect rhetorically on what her students believe about revision, how they are responding to specific ideas and practices of revision, and whether her classroom practices are effectively creating knowledge and improved practice among her students. She must understand the threshold concepts of “Revision Is Central to Developing Writing” and “Failure Can Be an Important Part of Writing Development,” among others.
(Adler-Kassner & Wardle, vii), and how to help students move through these thresholds. These are just some of the complexities a writing instructor must navigate and negotiate to effectively teach revision to her students.

Effective writing instructors, then, must know something of the content, theory, and research of the field of writing studies, but more importantly they must know how to use, adapt, and reflect on that knowledge as they engage in the intellectual and critical process of teaching. This conception of teacher knowledge means that an effective instructor has more than declarative knowledge (Reid calls this learning about) and procedural knowledge (what Reid calls learning how), but also a grasp of rhetorical, critical, and reflexive processes that allows them to create learning experiences in the complex contexts of their classrooms (metacognitive knowledge, or what Reid calls learning through insight; “On Learning to Teach”). To gain this kind of knowledge, writing instructors will need time, support, and community to help them study the research, theory, and practice of teaching, reflect on it, and continually develop their own pedagogy. This involves complexity and messiness and difficult intellectual work. It will not happen in one semester of formal preparation, and, as Stenberg argues, it is work that is never “finished” (xviii). For this reason, writing pedagogy education must mean more in our field than preparation for first-time instructors. This perspective sees learning to teach as a career-long endeavor that writing instructors must continually engage in, a positioning often in contrast to the traditional positioning of graduate instructors as “assistants” in need of “training.”

**Positioning Graduate Instructors: Assistants, Apprentices, Novitiates?**

Language, of course, matters. In his explanation of how terministic screens focus our attention and our understanding in various ways, Kenneth Burke writes, “Even if any given
terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” *(Language 45).* For this reason, the terminology we use to describe graduate writing instructors, their work, and their position in the university matters since it becomes one way of shaping or selecting the reality of these instructors.

In the literature on GSIs of writing, language and terminology is a recurrent theme and a continual problem. For example, as I briefly addressed in the introduction to this dissertation, the most frequent and most standard term in the literature to refer to these instructors is “graduate teaching assistant” (GTA) or, even more concisely, simply “teaching assistant” (TA). Although GTA and TA are common terms not only in the field of writing studies but more broadly in the academy as a whole, they are problematic terms because of how they reflect, select, and deflect reality. These terms are used interchangeably to refer both to graduate students who assist a professor in a course and graduate students who teach their own courses as instructors of record, thus obscuring and devaluing the labor these graduate student instructors of record provide to the university. These terms are also surrounded by a constellation of language that kyburz calls the language of “corporate culture” (67), including “outcomes,” “mission statements,” and “training.” This corporate language positions graduate instructors (as well as all those who teach courses) as laborers in a capitalistic enterprise with an emphasis on efficiency of preparation and instruction. Following the German model of universities, teaching becomes subservient to knowledge production and specialization. Efficient teaching of courses frees up research faculty to spend more time producing research, which is “more easily quantified and commodified” than

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9 I note here “GTA” and “TA” as the common terminology in the literature. Different terminology is often employed at different institutions including “teaching fellow,” “associate instructor,” “graduate instructor,” etc.
teaching (Stenberg 9). Published research represents scientific, masculine work and collects prestige for the university and for the discipline. Teaching, especially teaching of introductory course, then becomes low-status, feminized work that can be passed down to low-status laborers like GSIs and contingent faculty.

In this way, GSI labor is problematically positioned in large research institutions, where GSIs teach many courses, but their contributions are largely invisible in terms of the university’s reputation and advertisement. Wright argues that Tier One schools who advertise to potential students about their excellent research institutions can ultimately “erase the work of graduate student workers . . . by falsely constructing them as apprentices who are the primary beneficiaries of their work in the academy” (272). The apprentice model does not acknowledge the ways in which “graduate students are a vital part of the university machine” (276) and “graduate labor is the labor foundation of the department” at many universities (277). (Wright argues this specifically about the University of Houston, but her point extends to other large research institutions that employ many graduate instructors who teach 1-2 courses per semester.)

The positioning of GSIs has long been a subject of scholarly critique. Taylor and Holberg explore the subject position of GSIs in writing studies as “outsiders,” “subordinates,” and even “slaves,” who are “monstrous to their students—as a result of their oppressive conditions” (614). This negative perception of graduate instructors as both poor teachers and bitter or unruly laborers then creates a cycle where the training and disciplining of GSIs is justified, along with their low status; as a result, graduate instructors remain subordinate (614). Even an apprentice model, which seems to lift GSIs from the status of slaves into emerging professionals, carries its own complexities. Taylor and Holberg suggest
that the apprentice model still places GSIs in a position with a “lack of agency and passivity” and “emphasizes efficiency rather than engagement” (622). This is perhaps particularly apparent in the historical practice of some schools that required GSIs to teach the same syllabus and the same material in the same sequence on the same days. Elsewhere, Long, Holberg, and Taylor write that “apprenticeship implies a rigid differential in status and power between master and apprentice,” and also suggests learning as “uni-directional, determined solely by the master” (68). Similarly, Cynthia Korpan argues that the apprentice model positions teaching as simple skills acquisition rather than a more complex intellectual activity that requires multifaceted support. Korpan proposes “workplace learning” and “professional development” as alternative language in opposition to the idea of “training.” In her summary of a national survey of writing teacher preparation programs conducted in the early 1990s, Hutchings describes how many writing pedagogy educators objected to the word training as a condescending or simplistic. She quotes Chris Anson, who was a respondent to the survey, who said, “Words such as training suggest the taming of cattle or the toilet etiquette of toddlers, and should be rejected in favor of development, support, and growth” (131). Hutchings also described how another respondent, Brian Coppola, emphasized TAs needed more than simplistic tips and tricks but “increasing levels of responsibilities. Not just paper shuffling and equipment handling but serious pedagogical thinking” (131). These comments suggest the importance of the language used to describe GSIs and how that language shapes their place in a program or department. If GSIs are to take on the complex work of teaching, we must use language for them and their experiences that reinforces and describes the complexity of their work.
In addition to the metaphor of teacher as apprentice or trainee, Stenberg questions other models of positioning GSIs, including teacher as scholar (where pedagogy becomes a body of knowledge to be mastered) and teacher as owner (where the classroom is a domain ruled by the instructor and isolated from the broader community). She proposes teacher as learner (where the instructor is perpetually learning and developing pedagogy in a community setting) as a more useful alternate metaphor.

Another problematic construction of GSIs is as novitiates in need of conversion and transformation. Nancy Welch objects to models of preparation that attempt to “convert” and discipline new instructors to conform to an “ideal” teaching method or style, an approach that, however theoretically grounded the evangelized ideal may be, results in a narrative of “those who are with us and those who are against us, the true believers and the damned” (400). It also positions GSIs as passive receptacles of a program’s theories and practices of teaching writing instead of active and reflective practitioners.

**Looking Forward**

It is in this context of contested terminology and troubled labor history that GSI preparation takes place today. The history of composition and the real, material labor concerns that shaped it continue to affect the ways in which WPE is constructed and implemented. Vexing questions still exist about who should teach writing, what a writing teacher should know, and what role a new writing teacher should play in the academy or in a department. GSIs have sometimes been positioned by the scholarly literature and culture surrounding them as blank slates or as a homogenous category of young, novice scholars. It is therefore important to acknowledge how diverse GSIs are as a group. GSIs come to graduate school with their own identities, backgrounds, and experiences. Some come to their
teaching preparation with years of prior experience as writers, tutors, teachers, or in other
settings. They come from a variety of family backgrounds and configurations. Some are the
first in their families to pursue higher education, while others come from academic family
backgrounds. They vary in age, gender identity, race, and other demographic categories. It is
with this complexity in mind that I now turn to my own empirical investigation of GSIs and
how they position themselves in these discussions. Through survey and interview research, I
ask GSIs to speak for themselves about how they approach and design their work as
classroom teachers, what resources, experiences, and knowledge they draw on, and how they
perceive their labor as GSIs and imagine their future labor in or outside of the university.
Chapter 3: Methods

In this chapter, I outline my framework and methods for designing the research and collecting and analyzing the data for this dissertation. I received IRB human subjects research exemption for this research, and all participants provided consent for their participation in this study. This study employs a mixed-methods research design.

The first two chapters of this dissertation have outlined the theoretical, experiential, and literature-based exigences for conducting this empirical research. The extant research on GSIs of writing focuses primarily on how they process and experience formalized pedagogy education, in specific local contexts, and particularly in their first semester of studying composition theory and teaching first-year writing. Much of the previous research on preparing new writing instructors falls into a few general categories: ethnographies, narratives, or case studies following small numbers of new instructors as they navigate beginning their work as teachers (see Bishop’s *Teaching Lives*; Farris; Ebest; Rankin; Restaino); personal storytelling from GSIs (Good and Warshauer; Bramblett & Knoblauch); theorizing, description, and analysis of approaches to GSI preparation by those conducting the preparation (Bridges; Hesse; Pytlik & Liggett; Stenberg and Lee; Dobrin; Morgan; Stancliff and Goggin; Qualley); and survey and interview research seeking to understand GSI perspectives on their preparation and needs as new instructors (Weiser; Reid, Estrem, & Belchair; Estrem & Reid, “What New Teachers”; Taggart & Lowry; Grouling). My study falls into this final category of survey and interview research and builds on work by Reid, Estrem, & Belchair in ways that will be explained more fully below. My study differs from previous studies, however, in its scope and participant population. None of the previous studies have conducted a nation-wide exploration of graduate instructor experiences. I
designed a study that would 1) explore both informal and formal influences on new instructors, 2) examine GSIs’ thought processes and choices about their teaching practice, including their design of syllabi, assignments, and class activities, and 3) investigate GSIs’ experiences across a larger section of the GSI population than has previously been explored in one study (including both master’s- and doctoral-level graduate students, first semester teachers and those who had been teaching for several years, and GSIs in a variety of programs across the US). Since much previous research valuably focused on local, contextualized sites of GSI pedagogy education, this study examines what elements of the GSI experience seemed to be shared (or not shared) across program contexts throughout the United States.

Examining GSIs as a broader population means the loss of some context-specific data about individual programs and GSIs. What this broader scope offers, however, is a sense of general trends of WPE and insight into what is shared by GSIs across the field as they learn the teaching of writing. Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s 2012 study offers some justification for this broader approach. They surveyed and interviewed first- and second-year graduate instructors at two different institutional sites (one in the Northwest and the other on the East Coast). Although they hypothesized that they would find significant differences in results depending on the site, they found few differences of any significance between the two different sites and the two levels of cohorts (first- or second-year). Ultimately, they argue that although local contexts do matter, there are general concerns that the field as a whole needs to consider when it comes to how we prepare new instructors (like the ineffectiveness of the inoculation method which assumes teacher preparation as a static, one-time experience). They also call for more data from more programs about how graduate instructors are
processing and implementing (or not) their formal writing pedagogy education. My research builds on this and other research to examine what resources (both formal and informal) influence GSI teaching practice.

**Methodological Framework**

In addition to the WPE-related exigences for this research, this study also responds to the need in writing studies for larger-scale, empirically based research. In a landmark address to the field, Chris Anson called for a rigorous research agenda in our field that (without abandoning hermeneutic, ethnographic, and introspective studies) expands the “use, scrutiny, and corrective influence” (“Intelligent Design” 31) of research by employing a variety of methodologies, particularly empirical mixed-methods and quantitative research. In 1996, Davida Charney identified a central problem in writing studies methodologies: an “over-reliance” (589) on localized, context-dependent qualitative ethnographies and case studies that did not build on or establish relationships with each other. “If subjectivist methods and findings,” she writes, “are truly local and context-bound, if they are deliberately disqualified as grounds for reliable or valid generalizations, they cannot extend a discipline’s repertoire of methods or deepen its knowledge” (589). Over twenty years later, this lack of replication and aggregation in writing studies is still an issue of concern. Tricia Serviss notes in 2018 that “our field still does not value replication as much as originality” (4). She calls for writing studies researchers to “develop our research findings together rather than striving to do alone what none have done before” (5).

This call for more empirical, RAD (replicable, aggregable, and data-supported) research (Haswell, “NCTE/CCCC”) is not necessarily a call for positivist, objectivist research that imagines an external truth to be discovered through examination. Writing
studies, stemming as it does from primarily hermeneutic, interpretive traditions in English studies, recognizes the complexity and constructivist nature of “knowledge” and “truth,” and the inherent biases of particular methods and researchers. Serviss argues that “we need research to become more accountable via reproducibility, but we also need research designs that go beyond replication” and “individual research projects that live beyond their original incarnation and evolve” (13). In other words, the localized and naturalistic nature of writing and the teaching of writing resists simple, generalized replication, but empirical investigations in writing studies can still be held accountable and made reproducible by transparent accounts of methods and evolution and revision of those methods. This perspective on methodology allows for messiness, failure, and adaptation, while also claiming the possibility of aggregating knowledge across contexts and building on previous research in specific ways that expand, revise, and generate knowledge about an issue.

This transcontextual view of research both supports and challenges RAD methodologies. Serviss and Sandra Jamieson argue for seeing research as a process, meaning “that the relationship between researcher and design must remain dynamic and responsive in writing studies RAD-oriented research” (26). According to this perspective, “RAD research in writing studies ought to be continuously evolving rather than simply being reproduced and verified via replication” (28). I adopt this methodology in the present study by building on previous research while making revisions and additions to the research design and methods of that previous research.

Since this study is primarily exploratory and seeks to understand how GSIs “make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam & Tisdell 15), I employ a mixed-methods approach that adopts qualitative methodology as its primary
perspective for making sense of the data. I also use grounded theory as a method for analyzing the data. Although I make use of quantitative research methods in this research, I acknowledge that I approach this research primarily from a qualitative research perspective. As Bob Broad notes, “quantitative and qualitative researchers should and do often borrow from each other’s domains of data” (198), but these researchers also “most often use ‘the other kind of data’ in ways that are noticeably more basic than, and secondary to, their primary methodological commitments and goals” (198). In this study, I employ some quantitative measures and feel they add value and depth to the research I conducted, but I also want to acknowledge the ways in which I am working from primarily a qualitative research paradigm.

Qualitative research allows for the exploration of complex phenomena that are difficult to capture in quantitative terms, making it an appropriate choice for my exploration of the complex ways in which graduate instructors navigate disciplinary knowledge, prior experiences in teaching and learning, and formal WPE as they process and make choices about their own teaching practices. Compellingly, Denzin and Lincoln adopt the metaphor of the bricoleur as a way to understand the work of the qualitative researcher. Qualitative researchers, they note, can be methodological bricoleurs, theoretical bricoleurs, and interpretive bricoleurs (among other possibilities) who creatively adapt the tools at hand to the situation or problem in front of them. This is a useful way to understand qualitative research because, as Denzin and Lincoln note, “qualitative research is a set of complex interpretive practices. As a constantly shifting historical formation, it embraces tensions and contradictions” (13). Qualitative researchers “seek to understand how people construct the world around them, what they are doing, how they are doing it or what is happening to them
in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insights” (Flick 5). To achieve this objective, qualitative researchers must adapt their methods (like a bricoleur) to the research context in front of them. In the case of this particular research, building on previous work, I designed an exploratory study to answer my research questions: 1) What sources (people, communities, texts, theories, etc.) influence graduate writing instructors’ practices in the composition classroom? 2) How do graduate writing instructors’ previous experiences and disciplinary courses of study shape their approaches to teaching writing and their experiences of writing pedagogy education? and 3) How do GSIs navigate (consciously or unconsciously, explicitly or implicitly) between theory and practice (including disciplinary theories and practices) in their work as classroom writing instructors?

Again, since these questions point me to an examination of GSIs’ processes and internal decision-making about teaching, a qualitative framework felt most appropriate to achieving my research goals of understanding how GSIs think through these decisions about practice. I did, however, gather some quantitative data by collecting general demographics, a summary of previous teaching experiences, and a numerical measure of how specific experiences or resources impacted GSI confidence and skill-building as instructors. Specifically, I conducted a national survey of graduate writing instructors to provide general insight into which influences GSIs rely on most often in the classroom, followed by more in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted over Skype to probe the specific thought processes and practices behind employing these influences. The survey also included open-ended questions that allowed survey participants to write freely about their experiences. In analyzing the open-response answers, I employed both qualitative and quantitative methods
by using open and axial coding to place the data into categories and counting codes to get a sense of the prevalence of certain categories.

**Limitations and Affordances of Methods**

Before I explain my specific research design in depth below, I want to acknowledge the limitations and affordances of my methodological choices. Cindy Johanek writes, “All research methods have limits—and all research methods have potential—depending on the contexts in which we ask and explore our research questions” (186). In the case of my methods, there are limits and potential to the use of survey and interview research. The survey data allowed me to collect some quantitative data about graduate instructors’ perceptions of what resources impacted their teaching practices and to what extent. By asking students to respond to Likert-scale questions about these issues, I was able to quantitatively examine and compare how different populations of survey participants (including those in different types of programs and disciplines and with different levels of experience) valued the teaching resources available to them. To enrich the quantitative data and compensate for some of the limitations of surveys, however, I also determined to conduct follow-up interviews with participants because, as Johanek argues, both numbers and narratives provide only “some information” (88). By putting quantitative data into conversation with qualitative data, I construct a more multifaceted picture of what graduate writing instructors experience as teachers of writing. The interviews provide some context-specific knowledge about individual GSIs’ experiences at specific institutions with specific approaches to WPE, adding depth to the generalized data gathered in the survey and allowing insight into how the generalized survey data plays out in the lives of individual instructors.
I approached the interviews from a constructivist perspective, seeing the content of the interview as the product of a collaboration between interviewer and interviewee. I draw this perspective from Holstein and Gubrium, who argue that “interviewing is unavoidably collaborative,” and therefore “participants in an interview are inevitably implicated in meaning-making” (18). Instead of seeing the interviewee as a passive vessel from which information must be extracted with attempts to reduce contamination, Holstein and Gubrium argue an active perspective recognizes that “the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms the facts and details” (7). As part of this construction of knowledge, it is the interviewer who creates the script from which both participants create “a kind of limited ‘improvisational’ performance” (17). In this conception of interviews, bias becomes a nearly meaningless term because bias is a meaningful concept only if the subject is seen to possess a preformed, pure informational commodity that the interview process might somehow contaminate. But if interview responses are seen as products of interpretive practice, they are neither preformed, nor ever pure. They are practical productions. (18)

This view of interviews also suggests the importance of the interviewer becoming aware of and acknowledging the ways in which their “performance” in the interview is impacting their interviewee’s choices of what and how to share information. Member reflections, in which participants can provide feedback on the results a researcher has compiled, are another way to allow the participants to participate more fully in the representation of the data and to generate additional insights from the participants into the data (Schwandt 187).
In their discussion of the use of interviews in grounded theory studies, Charmaz & Belgrave write, “Grounded theorists need to balance hearing the participant’s story in its fullness with probing for the analytic properties and implications of major processes” (350). The structure of my interview protocol (discussed in further depth below) allowed opportunities for me listen and hear as GSIs spoke openly about their processes and experiences as instructors. At the same time, the semi-structured protocol and follow-up questions kept our conversations focused on issues related to this study’s overall research questions.

As noted previously, one limitation of this research is the lack of context-specific programmatic knowledge about GSIs’ experiences (specific knowledge that would have been possible to gather in a survey restricted to one institution). Individual writing programs’ needs and approaches to teaching their specific undergraduate students will vary according to student body, funding, and institutional type, among other constraints; necessarily, then, different institutions will employ varied approaches to teacher preparation. Another limitation is the inability of my methods to provide the sort of thick description that is possible in ethnographies or case studies. Since other studies of GSIs have provided this type of thick, ethnographic description, however, the national survey will add value to the literature on GSIs in rhetoric and composition by representing national trends in writing instructor preparation and providing a larger sample from which to understand GSI experiences and practices than would be available in a study of a single-institution.

**Research Design**

I wrote the survey and interview questions for this study after conducting a pilot study and consulting several survey and interview protocols used in previous studies of graduate
writing instructors (Weiser; Reid, Estrem, & Belchair; Estrem & Reid 2012; Taggart & Lowry; Grouling).

My original small pilot study consisted of nine multiple-choice and Likert scale questions and one open-ended question (see Appendix C). I obtained IRB-exemption for this pilot research and distributed the survey to all graduate first-year writing instructors at a large, Southeastern university. I received fifteen responses to this initial pilot study, including seven master’s level students and eight doctoral students. The survey questions asked participants about which WPE experiences they found most valuable (and named specific, localized WPE experiences available at their university), what resources they relied on to design learning and to solve classroom problems, and what modes of communication they used to communicate about teaching. Survey respondents ranked informal conversations with other GSIs and faculty as the most useful preparation experiences they received in preparing to teach first-year composition. In response to the open-ended question, students particularly emphasized their reliance on other GSIs as a source of knowledge about teaching and indicated that talking to other GSIs was often more convenient and less intimidating than taking teaching problems to their supervisors. Respondents also indicated that in their day-to-day work, they relied most often on these peer conversations for knowledge about how to deal with classroom problems.

The limited results of this pilot study suggested to me the importance of peer graduate student influence on GSIs’ teaching practices. There were several limitations to this study, most notably, perhaps, that I conducted this research at my own institution and likely knew most participants personally. As a test run of my survey and questions, however, it suggested to me what resources some GSIs were drawing on in their teaching practice. Importantly, I
also learned from the survey what questions were confusing or inadequate and thus needed revision. After completing this pilot study, I redesigned the survey to expand and generalize the questions and responses for a broader population of participants and to focus the questions more specifically on what experiences and resources shape GSI practices.

In designing the revised survey, I followed recommended survey theory and design procedures including piloting the survey, building on previous survey designs, and carefully constructing the wording of the survey to avoid leading or confusing research participants (Smyth). In the revised survey, I contextualized my study by drawing on some survey and interview questions from previous research, allowing me to frame it more specifically as transcontextual, RAD research (Serviss and Jamieson). Specifically, my survey reused (with slight modifications) some questions (numbers 10-14 on my survey) from research done by E. Shelley Reid and Heidi Estrem on graduate writing instructors at Boise State University and George Mason University (Reid, Estrem, & Belchair; Estrem & Reid, “What New Teachers”). On questions 10 and 11, I added an additional option (“Discussions/exchanges with mentors or advisors”) to the list of options in Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s study of experiences that helped GSIs build confidence and skills as teachers, since my pilot study indicated that GSIs highly valued input and consultations with mentors and advisors. Questions 13 and 14 on my survey also came from Reid, Estrem, & Belchair’s interview protocol, but I adapted them for use as open-response survey questions.

The final survey design consisted of 20 questions, including 8 multiple-choice questions, 3 Likert-scale questions, and 9 open-response questions (see Appendix A). The survey questions were designed to provide insight into the demographics of the GSI population being surveyed, what preparation and support experiences were most valued by
GSIs, and how GSIs were processing their knowledge and experiences both in their work as graduate students in a variety of disciplines and in their work as instructors of first-year writing. In conducting the follow-up interviews, I employed a semi-structured interview protocol that consisted of 11 open-response questions (see Appendix B for full list of interview questions; questions 3 and 6 are related to two questions from the interview protocol in the Reid, Estrem, and Belchair study). The interview provided an opportunity to explore in more depth the specific ways that various resources influenced GSIs’ classroom practice and philosophy of teaching.

All interviews were conducted over Skype and the audio was recorded for later transcription. The semi-structured protocol allowed me to ask follow-up questions to probe GSIs’ experiences and provided rich data on how GSIs conduct their teaching practices. I personally conducted and transcribed the interviews myself. As graduate student, I positioned myself to participants as a peer. This removed some of the power dynamics that sometimes appear when writing pedagogy educators conduct research on GSIs who are under their supervision. During the period when I conducted the interviews, I was employed at a university as a graduate research and administrative assistant in programs outside of first-year writing, although I have taught first-year writing courses many times as a graduate instructor. This positioned me as a peer, but also as someone with some distance from the day-to-day work of teaching first-year writing. Additionally, I assured all participants in the consent form and verbally that their responses would be given pseudonyms and their confidentiality would be protected. Since participants came from universities across the US, the scope of the research also created a better sense of anonymity and positioned participants as voices within a broad, national conversation rather than voices at a specific institution who
might more easily be identified. All of these elements together were designed to allow participants to speak openly about their experiences. My position as a graduate student peer of my participants resulted in conversations that may not have occurred in different interview contexts.

**Data Collection**

*Survey Distribution*

The survey questions (Appendix A) were distributed through an email link to a Qualtrics survey. After obtaining a second IRB approval for the revised survey and interview design (the first IRB approval was for the pilot study), I distributed the survey through several channels: an email to the Writing Program Administration-Listserv (WPA-L), a post to the Writing Program Administration-Graduate Organization Facebook group, and individual emails to 64 writing program administrators (WPAs) at schools across the country. Each of these distribution models encouraged WPAs and graduate students to share the survey with eligible graduate instructors in their network (graduate instructors were considered eligible to take the survey if they were current graduate students who had taught a first-year writing course within the previous year). I selected individual schools by consulting the Carnegie Classification website and choosing schools that represented a variety of graduate experiences in English studies (including schools with and without rhetoric and composition doctoral programs, schools with only master’s programs in English, or schools with interdisciplinary programs where graduate students taught in the first-year writing program, etc.). After searching the Carnegie Classification website for schools with graduate programs at either the master’s or doctoral level, I searched the schools’ individual websites for contact information for that school’s WPA in charge of the first-year course and emailed
the WPA requesting that my survey be distributed to graduate instructors teaching first-year writing at that institution. Many of the WPAs I contacted personally distributed the survey to the graduate students who were currently teaching first-year writing at their university. By using a variety of distribution methods, I hoped to reach graduate students studying in fields outside of rhetoric and composition—a result that was achieved when the majority of participants were ultimately studying in graduate programs or emphases outside rhetoric and composition.

**Participants**

After deleting incomplete or irrelevant responses, the total survey response count included 133 graduate writing instructors. Of these, 24 writing instructors participated in follow-up interviews.

Of the 133 graduate instructors, 62 were pursuing master’s level degrees (MA/MS/MFA), and 66 were pursuing doctoral level degrees (PhD); see Table 1. Of these students, 51 were students of literary studies (20 of these at the MA/MS/MFA level and 31 at the PhD level), 21 were students of creative writing (18 of these at the MA/MFA level and 3 at the PhD level), and 46 were students of rhetoric and composition (18 of these at the MA level and 25 at the PhD level, with 3 of them pursuing other degree designations like combined MA/PhD and MAT). Fifteen participants were students in other emphases and programs, including Children’s Literature, Comparative Studies, Community Development, Community Development,

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10 Responses were considered complete if respondents had completed all questions except open-response questions. Responses to open-ended questions were not forced by the survey, and some participants answered some open-response questions while leaving others blank. Because of this variation, if participants completed responses to demographic, multiple-choice, and Likert-scale matrix questions, their survey data were still analyzed as part of the quantitative analysis. Irrelevant responses (which were deleted) included responses by faculty or other demographics ineligible for participation based on sampling parameters (participants needed to be current graduate students who had taught a first-year writing course within the previous calendar year).

Table 1. Participant breakdown by degree type and disciplinary focus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>MFA</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Writing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetoric and Composition</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical/Professional Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>66</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>133</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 133 participants’ demographics broke down as follows: 36 (27%) identified as male, 94 (70.6%) identified as female, and 3 (2.2%) identified as another gender identity. Most participants were native English speakers (129 or 97%), while 4 participants indicated their native language was not English (3%). Most participants were in their 20s (27 participants or 30.3% were in the age range of 20-24 while 54 participants or 40.6% were in the age range of 25-29). Twenty-nine participants (21.8%) were between the ages of 30-34, while the other 23 participants (22%) were over the age of 35. One-hundred and thirteen of the participants identified their racial/ethnic identity as white (85%), while 2 (1.5%) identified as Black or African American, 2 (1.5%) identified as Asian, 8 (6%) identified as Hispanic/Latino, and 8 (6%) identified as other racial/ethnic identity.
To recruit for the interview portion of the data collection, I emailed 58 of the 84 graduate instructors who had indicated on the survey that they would be willing to participate in the follow-up interview. I selected these graduate instructors based on their answers to survey questions about degree type and disciplinary field of study, in an attempt to interview students from a variety of degree types and levels (MA, MS, MFA, PhD) and in a variety of disciplinary fields. Twenty-four of the 58 participants I emailed responded that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. All 24 of these interviews were conducted over Skype. Interviews averaged between 30-45 minutes in length. The shortest interview was 13 minutes long, and the longest was 52 minutes. Thirteen of the interviews took place in the last third of a semester, and 11 took place in the first third of the following semester. This meant all participants (even those who were in their first-year of teaching) had at least taught for several months in the classroom and thus were better able to talk about their processes for teaching. The timing of different interviews across different points in a semester provided some variety in the aspects of teaching and learning that were forefront in instructors’ minds: setting up versus wrapping up a course, which assignment was being taught, etc. On the whole, however, since the questions asked generally about teaching processes and practices in setting up a syllabus, designing assignments, and doing the day-to-day work of teaching, the timing of the interview in a semester was not particularly relevant to most answers. What did matter was that participants had had enough time working in the classroom (even during their first semester teaching) to talk in-depth about their process and experience in the classroom.

The 24 interview participants consisted of 16 women, 7 men, and 1 gender non-conforming individual. Nineteen of the interviewees identified their racial/ethnic identity as
white, 1 as Asian, 2 as Hispanic/Latino, and 2 as other racial/ethnic identity. Twenty-three of the participants spoke English as their native language, while 1 interviewee was a non-native speaker of English. Interview participants focused in a variety of disciplines, including literature (7), rhetoric and composition (6), creative writing (3), linguistics (2), community development (1), TESOL (1), technical communication (1), education (1), public policy (1), and comparative studies (1). The interview participants were pursuing several degree types, including PhD (15), MFA (3), MA (3), MA/PhD (1), MS (1), and MPP (1). Matching the survey population, most of the participants were in their 20s (15), while the other interviewees were in their 30s (4) and 40s (5). Finally, the graduate instructors I interviewed represented a variety of experience levels: 10 were in their first semester of teaching writing, 5 had taught for 8 or more semesters, and the other 9 had taught between 2 and 7 semesters, with 5 semesters taught being the average for these 9 interviewees, and 3.3 semesters taught being the average number among all 24 interviewees.

To protect their anonymity, I did not ask survey participants to name the institution where they were studying and teaching. For this reason, I am unable to state exactly how many institutions are ultimately represented by the 133 survey participants in this study. The 24 students who participated in the follow-up interviews, however, did disclose the names of their institutions in the interview when describing their university context. Again, to protect their anonymity, I will not share which institutions are represented in the interview data. I will state, however, that the 24 interview participants came from 15 different institutions from across the United States, spanning a broad geographic range (including schools in the Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, and West). Three of these 15 institutions were represented by 2 participants each, and 3 of them were represented by 3 participants each. The other 9
schools were represented by only 1 participant each. Although survey participation was solicited from a variety of types of institutions, including private schools, all of the interview respondents attended public universities. Of the 15 universities represented by interview participants in this study, 11 are classified by the Carnegie Classification as R1: Doctoral Universities – Highest Research Activity, 2 are classified as R2: Doctoral Universities – Higher research activity, 1 is classified as R3: Doctoral Universities – Moderate research activity, and 1 is classified as M1: Master’s Colleges and Universities – Larger programs.

**Data Analysis**

In my quantitative analysis, I used simple statistics, averages, percentages, and cross-tabulations to sort the data. For example, I calculated the percentages of Likert scale responses for each question, but I also compared the ways in which certain factors (like disciplinary affiliation, previous experiences teaching writing, and year in graduate school) affected other factors (like participants’ confidence as writing teachers, skills as writing teachers, and use of problem-solving resources as writing teachers). As I will show in the next chapter, some of these cross tabulations demonstrated relationships between these factors (for example, disciplinary affiliation seemed associated with how valuable GSIs found their composition pedagogy/theory course), whereas other factors demonstrated no relationship (for example, GSIs’ level as students—master’s or PhD—did not seem to impact how valuable they found the composition course). This quantitative analysis allowed me to compare my data for these questions with the previous research done by Reid, Estrem, and Belchair to see how my participants’ responses measured up with theirs. I also went beyond their analysis to look at the impact of factors in my study that were not collected in their study (for example, the differences in responses among GSIs at the doctoral as well the...
master’s level). The quantitative data provides a sense of general trends among GSIs that I then investigate in more depth through my analysis of the qualitative data.

**Grounded Theory**

In analyzing the qualitative data, I employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss; Charmaz) and constant comparison to identify relevant themes in the responses and words of the GSIs themselves. As an inductive method that “especially facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence, and change” (Glaser 444), grounded theory was an appropriate choice for examining the inner processes of GSIs as they navigate a variety of resources and make choices about their own classroom practices. My use of grounded theory is both similar and different in method and focus than the Reid, Estrem, and Belchair study that influenced some of the research design of this study. Although they did code short-answer and interview responses in their data, their report of the results focused on identifying counts in general response trends without reference to building theory, whereas my study focuses on identifying codes and building grounded theory about how GSIs construct their teaching practices.

My approach to grounded theory was constructivist and adaptive (in the spirit of bricolage) in that, although I approached the data looking to inductively build a theory of how GSIs move theory and experience into actual practice, I was also aware of the ways in which my previous research and thinking about this topic might impact my construction of codes. Charmaz & Belgrave write,

> Constructivist grounded theorists [. . .] assume that researchers already possess theoretical and research knowledge concerning their substantive field. Therefore, constructivist grounded theory encourages researchers to be reflexive about the
constructions—including preconceptions and assumptions—that inform their inquiry (355).

It is impossible (and not particularly desirable, I would argue) to fully remove myself from my previous conceptions of how GSIs navigate these issues. Part of what new knowledge I am able to construct as a researcher depends on my subjectivity and positionality. I determined to accept that as a starting point instead of a liability. As a graduate student who had long been engaged in issues of teaching practice personally and through mentoring and preparing other graduate instructors before beginning this research, I developed assumptions about what happens when a new instructor enters the writing classroom. Conducting this research allowed me to question, clarify, and grapple with these assumptions and to respond to Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s call to “gather data—not just impressions” about GSIs. I chose to be reflective and conscious about this process of questioning my own preconceptions to make room for emergent, inductive analysis of the data. Therefore, in approaching this study, I wrote out in detail my preconceptions about this issue based on my personal experiences, observations of peers, and readings in the area of WPE. By writing out these things in advance, I was able to have a reference point of my preconceptions to compare with what new or different understandings of GSI practice might emerge from the data and the process of identifying codes, concepts, and grounded theory. My first chapter theorized the ways that GSIs approach classroom teaching. The chapters that follow question and build on that theorizing through the benefit of empirical data collection and analysis. In her reflection on her conversion from hermeneutical/interpretive research methods to empirical research methods, Rebecca Moore Howard writes that “coding is an important intervention between theory and interpretation. [ . . . ] Ideally, we find theory emerging from
the coding” (80). In my own approach to my data, I saw grounded theory coding as a way to check my preconceptions and proto-theory building, thus allowing the empirical data I gathered to inductively direct the building of theory about GSI practices.

I also conducted member reflections by asking all 24 of the GSIs who participated in both the survey and interview portions of my research to read my codes and preliminary results and check them for how well these codes represented and resonated with their experiences. Nine interviewees did not respond. Fifteen responded that they felt the presentation of the data accurately represented their individual experiences and also resonated with their sense of their peers’ experiences as GSIs.

**Ensuring Quality**

Because of the interpretive and subjective nature of qualitative inquiry, it is important to account for what efforts I made to ensure the quality of this research. Theorists of qualitative methods outline several characteristics that represent best practices in qualitative research. For example, Sarah J. Tracy outlines eight qualities of effective qualitative research, including worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (839). I sought to account for each of these markers of quality in my approach to conducting this study. In outlining my methods and providing my justification for conducting this research, I have worked to demonstrate why examining the sources which inform the teaching practices of graduate writing instructors is a worthy and relevant topic to writing studies. I have also sought to collect an abundance of data and samples to add rigor to my study. I have established sincerity by self-reflexively examining my personal experiences and biases on this topic. Credibility and resonance are apparent in the member reflections I solicited as part of my methodology, the multivocality
of the way I report findings (quoting extensively from many participants to allow their voices to speak), and the transferable implications of the GSI experiences represented in my data. My account in this chapter of my methods works toward achieving the characteristic of ethical research by following typical procedures for this type of research (including receiving IRB approval), as well as offering transparency about my specific interactions with my participants and my choices about how to present and represent participant voices. Finally, I attempt to achieve Tracy’s criteria of significant contribution and meaningful coherence by clearly outlining the theoretical contributions of my empirical findings and by clearly referencing in my results chapters the initial research questions I outlined at the beginning of this study.

In the next two chapters, I share the results of both the quantitative and qualitative data collection and examine what these results reveal about the graduate instructors’ teaching processes, practices, and influences. I also identify in more depth the process by which I developed the codes from this data.
Chapter 4: Survey Results

In this chapter, I report on the findings of the survey portion of this research. The survey results demonstrate the diverse experiences that GSIs bring with them to the FYW classroom, what experiences and resources they find most valuable and helpful in their teaching, and how their disciplinary fields of study impact both the way they teach FYW and their other work as graduate students. As I share the results of the survey data, I compare my findings with prior research on these questions of what experiences shape GSIs’ practices in the classroom. The survey data responds directly to the first two research questions of the study:

RQ1: What sources (people, communities, texts, theories, etc.) influence graduate writing instructors’ practices in the composition classroom? What sources do GSIs draw upon in designing their courses, creating lesson plans, and solving problems in the classroom?

RQ2: How do graduate writing instructors’ previous experiences and disciplinary courses of study shape their approaches to teaching writing and their experiences of writing pedagogy education?

Quantitative Results

RQ2: Participants’ Prior Experiences Teaching Writing

Survey participants were asked to report on their prior experiences teaching writing as a way to explore what teaching experiences GSIs might bring with them and draw on as they teach FYW. Identifying what experiences GSIs have teaching writing is an important starting place for answering RQ2 about how previous experiences shape GSIs’ practices in the FYW classroom. Out of the sample of 133 GSIs, 106 reported having had one or more experiences
teaching writing prior to their then-current appointment as a GSI. As Table 2 demonstrates, the population of GSIs in this research represented a variety of experience levels.

**Table 2. Previous teaching experiences of survey population prior to current position**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS or MS English teacher</td>
<td>23/133</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing center tutor</td>
<td>74/133</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GSI of writing in another program</td>
<td>33/133</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct/part-time instructor</td>
<td>22/133</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time lecturer/instructor</td>
<td>11/133</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other*</td>
<td>21/133</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other—None**</td>
<td>9/133</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response***</td>
<td>18/133</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**“Other”** open-responses described a variety of experiences, including tutoring writing outside of a writing center context, community teaching (such as after-school programs or workshops for K-12 students and tutoring ESL in the community), editing, previous education in English/Language Arts secondary education, working in writing center administration, previous employment as a faculty member or teaching composition overseas, etc. **“Other—None”** designates participants who wrote in the open response that they had no previous experience teaching writing. **“No Response”** are those who did not answer this question at all, despite answering the questions before and after it (presumably because they did not have experience in any of these categories, as 16 out of 18 who did not respond were first-semester GSIs).

Although we sometimes write as a field about GSIs as if they are a homogenous group in terms of their experience (or lack of experience) teaching writing, Table 2 makes clear that some GSIs have had extensive experience in the teaching of writing prior to accepting a position as a GSI, or as a part of moving between programs and degrees. In fact, the majority of participants in my study had some prior experience teaching writing in some capacity; it stands to reason that many GSIs will come with expectations, priorities, and approaches shaped by those experiences. Previous experiences may shape perspectives on the purpose of FYW, as well as GSIs’ perceptions of first-year students themselves. Graduate instructors who have taught high school English, for example, prior to teaching college English will have a familiarity with what incoming first-year students bring with them from
their experiences writing in high school. This may impact how they structure learning in their classrooms as well as their sense of what and how first-year students need to learn about writing.

Perhaps most relevant to questions about WPE is the fact that many of these prior teaching experiences also come with their own required teacher preparation (preparation with its own goals and purposes). High school and middle school teachers will have participated in preparation as part of an undergraduate secondary education degree and/or licensure requirements. Writing center tutors will have learned about the teaching of writing in their own formal preparation to act as tutors, which typically includes exposure to theories about teaching and tutoring writing (for a compelling analysis of the relationship between writing centers and GSI preparation, see Ianetta, McCamley, and Quick). And, as Table 2 demonstrates, many GSIs experience teacher preparation at more than one institution as they move from one graduate program to another. Since many FYW GSIs will be exposed to several different types of formal WPE, these results suggest the importance of considering what similarities and differences exist between secondary education English preparation, writing center preparation, and teaching college writing preparation (with its many variations including curriculums focused on WAC/WID, WAW, personal writing, literature, civic argumentation, and so on). How do these different preparation programs’ principles and theories intersect, contradict, or build on one another in ways that might benefit or block effective teacher development in college writing instructors?

Since many GSIs in this study had been teaching FYW for a long time (30 of them for eight or more semesters), it is useful to ask how substantially participants’ prior teaching experience varied based on whether participants were brand new GSIs or had been working
as GSIs for a while. In Table 3, I compare the writing center and HS/MS teaching experiences of first-semester FYW GSIs and eighth+ semester FYW GSIs. Graduate instructors who taught FYW longer tended to have slightly more experience in writing centers and as high school or middle school teachers. This may indicate that some individuals may teach high school or middle school between master’s and doctoral level work, and that GSIs are likely to gain writing center experience along their way in graduate school (even if they did not work in writing centers as undergraduate students). Table 3 also demonstrates that many of both new and experienced GSIs may have had prior experience teaching and tutoring writing outside of FYW.

Table 3. Comparison of previous experience teaching writing of first-semester GSIs and eighth+ semester GSIs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First-semester GSIs</th>
<th>Eighth+ semester GSIs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS or MS English teacher</td>
<td>7/51 14%</td>
<td>8/30 27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing center tutor</td>
<td>21/51 41%</td>
<td>19/30 63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Considering the variety of prior preparation and experiences that GSIs bring with them to their work as FYW teachers, it becomes even more important to question what influences, resources, and theories GSIs draw on in making decisions about their classroom practices. GSIs are not entering their WPE experiences as blank slates but may already have extensive experience with and exposure to approaches to teaching writing. To what extent do GSIs draw on their prior experiences when designing and planning their FYW courses? What do they carry over with them and how do they implement it?
RQ1: What Resources Help Build Teacher Confidence, Skill, and Problem-Solving Ability Among GSIs?

RQ1 specifically questions what resources inform and impact GSI teaching practices (including their course design, lesson planning, and problem-solving). To explore this question, three Likert-scale questions in the survey asked participants to indicated how valuable specific experiences were in building their 1) confidence as writing teachers, 2) skills as writing teachers, and 3) ability to solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers. These three questions were drawn from Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s survey that they administered to master’s level GSIs at Boise State University and George Mason University. Figure 1 shows the results of their survey of 88 GSIs over several semesters at these two schools (43). These researchers explained that their participants placed less value on commonly-employed, formal WPE experiences like “reading professional articles,” “reflective writing/thinking about teaching” and “orientation or professional development workshop” (45) but placed higher value on their personal experiences as writers, tutors, and teachers as well as on exchanges with peers in building their confidence, skills, and problem-solving abilities. Reid and her co-authors question whether their findings would apply to more experienced GSIs, like those enrolled in doctoral programs who have often been teaching for years as graduate instructors. My results, which include responses from 133 GSIs from a variety of experience levels and backgrounds, indicate that more experienced GSIs still value exchanges with peers and mentors over formal WPE experiences. (I will examine more of the differences between new and experienced GSIs below.)
Figure 1. Screenshot of Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s results from surveying master’s level GSIs at two universities

Note: This screenshot shows how graduate instructors in Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s study ranked various experiences in terms of helping them build skills, confidence, and problem-solving ability as writing instructors (Reid, Estrem, & Belchair 43).

To further examine the differences between how GSIs valued formal WPE experiences and more unstructured, informal experiences, I divided the list of experiences into those most commonly employed and required in formal WPE measures (observing other teachers; role plays, presentations, guest- or practice-teaching; composition pedagogy/theory course activities or assignments; reading professional articles; reflective writing/thinking about teaching; orientation or professional development workshops) and less structured, informal WPE activities (experience as a writer; experience as a tutor; experience as a teacher; discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers; discussions/exchanges with mentors
or advisors\textsuperscript{11}). As Figures 2–7 demonstrate, GSIs continued to value their personal experiences and exchanges with peers and mentors above formal WPE activities. The one commonly required WPE experience that GSIs in my survey did value more than other formalized WPE experiences, however, was observing other instructors: 71\%\textsuperscript{12} of participants ranked observing other instructors as a 4 or 5 on the scale of valuable activities for building their confidence as writing teachers (with 5 being “Helped quite a lot”), 71\% ranked it as a 4 or 5 on the scale for building their skills as writing teachers, 68\% ranked it as a 4 or 5 on the scale for helping them solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers. The WPE activities that participants consistently ranked as least helpful were role plays, presentations, guest- or practice-teaching (only 37\% ranked these as 4 or 5 in helping to build confidence, 34\% as a 4 or 5 in helping to build skills; this category was not an option for solving problems or addressing challenges), with reading professional articles as a close second (40\% ranked this as a 4 or 5 in helping to build confidence, 43\% as a 4 or 5 in helping to build skills, and 35\% in helping to solve problems or address challenges).

In terms of less structured WPE experiences, participants highly valued their \textit{interactions with peers} in building their confidence (88\% ranked this as 4 or 5) and skills as writing teachers (76\% ranked this as a 4 or 5), but particularly in solving problems and addressing challenges they face as writing teachers (90\% ranked this as a 4 or 5). Participants also highly valued \textit{exchanges and discussions with mentors and advisors} in building their

\textsuperscript{11} The division between formal and informal experiences is, of course, somewhat blurry. Some formal WPE programs may require interactions with peers or mentors and may encourage GSIs to draw explicitly on their past experiences. Since previous experiences and exchanges with peers and mentors often occur in less formal or supervised environments, however, they are counted here separately from the most common, formal WPE experiences.

\textsuperscript{12} “Have not encountered” answers from the total number of respondents were removed in order to calculate percentages. As such, the numbers represent the percentages of participants who found these experiences helpful from all those participants who actually had that experience.
confidence (82% ranked this as a 4 or 5), skills (76% ranked this as 4 or 5), and in solving problems and addressing challenges (84% ranked this as a 4 or 5). They also valued their own experiences as writers in building their confidence (83% ranked this as 4 or 5), building their skills (80% ranked this as 4 or 5), and, to a lesser degree, in helping them solve problems or address challenges (53% ranked this as a 4 or 5) as writing teachers. Participants also ranked their experiences as writing tutors as helpful in building their confidence (79% ranked this as 4 or 5), building their skills (75% ranked this as 4 or 5), and helping them solve problems or address challenges (57% ranked this as a 4 or 5) as writing teachers.

Teaching experience was ranked as more helpful than tutoring experience in building confidence (90% ranked this as 4 or 5), building skills (91% ranked this as 4 or 5), and in helping to solve problems or address challenges (81% ranked this as a 4 or 5) as writing teachers. Past experiences were less valued for solving problems and challenges than discussions with peers and mentors, suggesting that these challenges may require new, context-specific responses rather than methods learned from experience.
Figure 2. Effect of common WPE experiences on building GSIs’ confidence as writing teachers

Figure 3. Effect of other experiences on building GSIs’ confidence as writing teachers
Figure 4. Effect of common WPE experiences on building GSIs’ skills as writing teachers

Figure 5. Effect of other experiences on building GSIs’ skills as writing teachers
Figure 6. Effect of common WPE experiences on helping GSIs address problems or challenges as writing teachers

Figure 7. Effect of other experiences on helping GSIs address problems or challenges as writing teachers
The results as charted in Figures 2–7 suggest that GSIs value unstructured preparation experiences over formalized experiences. Participants may value formal WPE experiences to a lesser degree because they perceive these experiences to be less relevant to their concerns about managing the day-to-day work of the classroom or because they value the more collaborative nature of less structured activities, like discussions with peers and mentors. The results of the sample raise questions about how differences in GSIs (such as their degree level or disciplinary emphasis) may affect the way they perceive or value these various WPE experiences. Do more experienced GSIs value theory-directed preparation experiences more since they have had time to learn the basics of classroom management? Do GSIs focused on composition as their primary site of disciplinary study also value theory-directed preparation more? I ran several cross-tabulations of the data to explore these questions.

**RQ2: Master’s vs. Doctoral Degree Level in How GSIs’ Valued WPE Experiences**

To examine how new and experienced GSIs differed in their perspectives of WPE experiences, I compared the answers of those participants who were pursuing master’s level degrees to the answers of those who were pursuing doctoral level degrees. The distinction between master’s level and doctoral level students in this study roughly coordinated with levels of teaching experience (92% of master’s level participants had taught for 1-3 semesters, while 64% of doctoral level students had taught for 5 or more semesters), making this exploration a valuable addition to exploring RQ2 about the impact of previous experiences. If doctoral-level GSIs generally have more teaching experience, does this affect how helpful they find specific WPE experiences? Figures 8, 9, and 10 show the differences in how master’s and doctoral GSIs valued WPE experiences. These figures show the
percentage of GSIs in each degree level who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 on a Likert-scale asking how useful each of these experiences was in building their confidence as writing teachers (Figure 8), their skills as writing teachers (Figure 9), and helping them solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers (Figure 10).

Figure 8. Effect of degree level on how GSIs perceived WPE experiences to help build their confidence as writing teachers

Note: This chart shows the percentage of master’s level and doctoral-level GSIs who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 in building their confidence as writing teachers, with 5 being “helped quite a lot.” Answers of “Have not encountered” were excluded from total response count when calculating percentages in this chart.
Figure 9. Effect of degree level on how GSIs perceived WPE experiences to help build their skills as writing teachers

Note: This chart shows the percentage of master’s level and doctoral-level GSIs who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 in building their skills as writing teachers, with 5 being “Helped quite a lot.” Answers of “Have not encountered” were excluded from total response count when calculating percentages in this chart.

Figure 10. Effect of degree level on how GSIs perceived WPE experiences to help them solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers

Note: This chart shows the percentage of master’s level and doctoral-level GSIs who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 in helping them solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers, with 5 being “Helped quite a lot.” Answers of “Have not encountered” were excluded from total response count when calculating percentages in this chart.
Interestingly, there did not seem to be many distinct differences in how master’s level and doctoral GSIs ranked their experiences. In fact, they valued many experiences at similar percentages. The one exception here seems to be that doctoral level GSIs valued “Writing/thinking reflectively about teaching” more than master’s level GSIs as being helpful to building their confidence, skills, and problem-solving abilities as teachers. This may suggest that developing a reflective mindset as a teacher may take time and experience and thus may be more highly valued by experienced GSIs. It may be difficult for relatively new instructors to value reflective writing/thinking if they are focused on obtaining survival or management skills. Master’s level GSIs also seemed to value their experience as writers slightly more than doctoral level GSIs. The fact that newer GSIs seemed to rely on their experiences as writers more heavily is compelling in light of Dryer’s findings that novice graduate instructors “expressed considerable anxiety about—and frequent hostility toward—academic writing conventions and then projected disconcertingly reductive versions of these anxieties and writing practices onto students” (421). Perhaps these less experienced GSIs rely more on their experiences as writers as a way to manage this anxiety and stake a claim of expertise in their interactions with first-year students.

Aside from these few differences, the general similarities in the way both new and experienced GSIs valued their WPE experiences may reinforce Reid, Estrem, and Belchair’s assertion that learning to teach writing is an iterative process that requires time and experience, and therefore differences in perspective may not appear in the first few years of teaching. Since experienced GSIs are often called on to be mentors who recreate their preparation experiences for new GSIs, this chance to “relive” their formal preparation may also encourage reflection. Alternatively, the lack of difference may also suggest some
entrenchment in attitudes, practices, and resources that GSIs rely on in their teaching. It may also suggest that respondents are not experiencing ongoing professional development, and therefore are reflecting on the same WPE experiences that they encountered as new GSIs. If, for example, GSIs’ value and experience of reading professional articles or learning composition theory does not change even after several years of teaching composition, it may mean they have not have read professional articles on pedagogy or encountered updated composition theory since beginning to teach writing. GSIs may experience their initial composition theory courses as an inoculation that prepares them with the basics of theory and, therefore, there is no need to continue reading professional articles. The lack of difference in the way that new and experienced GSIs valued their experiences may suggest that, even after several years of teaching, novice instructors are not moving past their initial resistances to composition theory so often noted by previous research on GSIs (Hesse; Grouling; Welch; Stenberg and Lee).

The similar responses of both new and experienced GSIs to reading professional articles and implementing composition theory also suggest that GSIs’ resistance to seriously engaging with composition theory may go beyond the survival focus of a first-semester new teacher. New teachers, of course, may be more concerned with practicalities of day-to-day practice because of the anxieties attached to managing a college course for the first time. But if, after several years of teaching FYW, these participants still do not value or glean insight from reading professional articles, for example, it suggests that it is more than first-time teaching anxieties that causes this resistance. Instead, it may stem from other pressures that are continually present for graduate instructors, such as the difficulty of balancing time, the
pressure to put other graduate responsibilities above teaching FYW, and the need to master the theories and content of specific disciplinary studies.

RQ2: Disciplinary Differences in How GSIs’ Valued WPE Experiences

As part of my exploration of RQ2 and specifically the ways that disciplinary fields of study affected how GSIs approached their work as teachers, I also looked for the impact that GSIs’ home disciplines had on the way they navigated or experienced their preparation experiences. I used cross tabulations to see if participants’ disciplines affected their perceptions of which WPE experiences (either formal or informal) were most helpful in their development as writing teachers. In Figures 11, 12, and 13, I share the results of these calculations. Participants who reported studying in disciplines outside of literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition are not represented in these charts because there were insufficient numbers of them to run these calculations.
Figure 11. Effect of disciplinary focus on how GSIs perceived WPE experiences to help build their confidence as writing teachers

Note: This chart shows the percentage of GSIs by disciplinary focus who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 in building their confidence as writing teachers, with 5 being “Helped quite a lot.” Answers of “Have not encountered” were excluded from total response count when calculating percentages in this chart.

Figure 12. Effect of disciplinary focus on how GSIs perceived WPE experiences to help build their skills as writing teachers

Note: This chart shows the percentage of GSIs by disciplinary focus who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 in building their skills as writing teachers, with 5 being “Helped quite a lot.” Answers of “Have not encountered” were excluded from total response count when calculating percentages in this chart.
Figure 13. Effect of disciplinary focus on how GSIs perceived WPE experiences to help solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers

Note: This chart shows the percentage of GSIs by disciplinary focus who ranked these experiences as a 4 or 5 in helping them solve problems or address challenges as writing teachers, with 5 being "Helped quite a lot." Answers of “Have not encountered” were excluded from total response count when calculating percentages in this chart.

Perhaps the most distinct differences apparent in these charts are in Figures 11 (effect of WPE experiences on building confidence as a teacher) and 12 (effect of WPE experiences on building skills as a writing teacher), where it is clear that the rhetoric and composition GSIs place a much higher value on common, formal preparation activities than do their counterparts who are studying literature or creative writing. While half of literature (50%) and creative writing (53%) GSIs ranked their composition pedagogy/theory course as 4 or 5 in building their confidence as writing teachers, a full 78% of rhetoric and composition GSIs ranked the course as a 4 or 5. Similarly, in considering the effect of this course on building their skills as writing teachers, 45% of literature GSIs and 42% of creative writing GSIs ranked the composition theory/course as a 4 or 5 in helpfulness, while 74% of rhetoric and composition GSIs ranked it as a 4 or 5. Similarly, rhetoric and composition GSIs also
perceived reading professional articles to be more helpful to building their confidence and skills as writing teachers than did literature or creative writing GSIs.

Composition pedagogy/theory courses and professional articles relevant to teaching may feel more useful and pertinent to rhetoric and composition GSIs’ disciplinary work than it is to the work of literature or creative writing students. But the survey question here asked about the effect of these courses and reading these articles on GSIs’ *confidence* and *skills* as writing teachers and not their effect on professionalization or progress as graduate students. Therefore, it is interesting that a disciplinary connection to composition studies seems to increase participants’ perceptions of the impact of these WPE experiences on their confidence and skill-level as writing teachers. This may be because these rhetoric and composition GSIs are more invested in the scholarship of composition and its relation to pedagogy.

My survey did not ask participants to explain the reasoning behind their responses, and therefore it is hard to know exactly why literature and creative writing GSIs value these formal WPE experiences so much less than rhetoric and composition GSIs do. Although additional data are needed before it would be possible to answer this “why,” I would offer as one possible explanation the pervasive perception of writing as a content-less discipline (discussed in more depth in Chapter 2). While GSIs whose own graduate work is focused on composition may see a composition theory as informing the *content* of their FYW classrooms, literature or creative writing GSIs may feel that studying composition theory is too abstract and idea-oriented to be practically applicable to the work they are doing in the classroom. This may be especially true if they determine to theme the content of their FYW courses around their own interests in film or eco-criticism or some other disciplinary interest.
Historical debates in composition studies about expressivist and social epistemic approaches, for example, may feel unhelpful to GSIs who are only worried about filling the next day’s class time on paragraph development.

It is interesting to note that in the final Likert-scale question, where participants were asked to evaluate experiences based on how helpful they were in helping them solve problems and address challenges as teachers, there is no longer a distinct difference with regard to the valuing of the composition theory course between literature, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition GSIs. Here, rhetoric and composition GSIs also rank the composition pedagogy/theory course as less useful to helping them solve problems and address challenges as writing teachers. This suggests that teacher problem-solving may require the development of teaching skills that are not discipline-specific, and therefore may be somewhat outside the disciplinary purview of composition studies. Instructional challenges like late or absent students, silence during class discussions, or lack of engagement tend to be problems facing teachers across the disciplines, rather than just writing teachers specifically. GSIs from all three disciplines represented in this study felt the composition pedagogy course was less useful in helping them handle these difficulties. This raises the question of whether some teacher preparation (such as the development of teaching skills to solve problems and address challenges) may belong outside of WPE. University-wide initiatives to improve college teaching (such as those hosted by teaching and learning centers and graduate schools across the country) may more effectively address these pedagogical concerns that are not discipline-specific. WPE, in contrast, if freed from preparing students with basic pedagogical skills, can deal more specifically with writing pedagogy and the theories that underlie its best practices. Currently, many universities offer
or require some kind of generic GSI preparation, but FYW GSIs are typically recused from this preparation because WPE as it currently operates covers many of these concepts.

Would GSIs value the composition pedagogy/theory course more if their practical, survivalist questions about teaching were answered elsewhere? If the course focused more on the theories and practices that make up effective college writing instruction? Or would they instead value it less—as being even more detached from their practical, survivalist concerns? The data in this study do not contain answers to these questions, but it is worth exploring why literature and creative writing GSIs find these courses less valuable and how to better engage these GSIs in formal WPE experiences. I will return briefly to this question of engaging students across different home disciplines in Chapter 6 when exploring the implications of these findings for structuring WPE.

To add further depth to the experiences of these GSIs, I now turn to the open-response results of the survey, which offer additional insights into how disciplinary emphases affect GSIs’ experiences of WPE and where their teaching principles and practices originate.

**Qualitative Results**

The seven open-response questions on the Qualtrics survey resulted in a total of 52 single-spaced pages of responses from participants. I first printed and read through all the responses to get a sense of the data, making hand-written notes to annotate and mark patterns or outliers in responses. Following the requirements of grounded theory, I engaged in constant comparison in order to identify recurring patterns or themes in the data. As part of this stage of constant comparison, I used Nvivo to read through the data again, this time highlighting and coding specific patterns. I created many codes for what I was seeing in the data. I then went through all the data again, this time reducing the codes I had made and
looking for larger concepts, themes, and relationships between the codes. My unit of analysis was any single complete idea that contained a proposition relating to the focus of the question (this meant that a unit was sometimes a sentence, a part of a sentence, or a group of several sentences together). Frequently, one individual’s responses to the survey were divided into multiple units of analysis if they contained multiple distinct ideas. For example, in response to question 14 on the survey, participants described where their key principles for teaching writing came from or what they were related to. I coded all responses into categories identifying the central places/experiences GSIs drew on in shaping their own principles for teaching writing. The following complete response from one participant was categorized as three separate units, each with its own code:

I think a lot of it is what I have learned from experience in the classroom, but I also value the teaching styles of some of the great teachers I have had and I’ve tried to model my teaching off of them, to some degree. The focus on writing process is also a subject that was discussed regularly within my pedagogy courses.

The first half of sentence 1 (“I think a lot of it is what I have learned from experience in the classroom”) was coded as “experience—as a teacher,” while the second half of this sentence (“I also value the teaching styles of some of the great teachers I have had and I’ve tried to model my teaching off of them, to some degree”) was coded as “experience—as a student.” The final sentence in this response (“The focus on writing process is also a subject that was discussed regularly within my pedagogy courses”) was coded as “formal writing pedagogy education.”
Rarely, the same unit was coded under more than one category when it seemed to contain multiple coding categories in its meaning. For example, under “teacher challenges,” the following open-response from one survey participant was coded in two categories:

I feel anxiety about serving my students properly. I have been trying to take deep breaths before finalizing any assessment. I remember awful things teachers said to me unintentionally, and I don't want to accidentally stick words in my students’ heads that they’ll hold on to for years. It’s a lot of power I’ve been given, and I find it persistently challenging to focus that power and use it as productively as possible.

This unit was coded both a “teacher-centered challenge—subcategory: teacher emotion” and as a “student-related challenge—subcategory: meeting student needs” because it represented both the instructor’s deep anxiety about their positionality and power as a teacher as well as the instructor’s desire to appropriately meet student needs by grading fairly (see below for more detailed explanations of each of these codes). Generally, most units fell into only one category, but there were some exceptions like this one.

As part of the process of reducing the data to fewer categories and codes, I also employed peer debriefing, where I asked a fellow researcher in rhetoric and composition to examine my placement of some units of data into various codes and to provide feedback on how I coded the data. This peer offered additional and sometimes contradictory ideas that helped clarify my ideas. As a result of the peer debriefing, I further refined my categories and codes and made some changes in category descriptions and code assignments.

By employing open coding and constant comparison, I identified key ideas and themes in the data, leading to the construction of theoretical concepts to understand what resources shape GSI classroom practice. For example, to describe what elements of GSIs’
disciplinary backgrounds they imported into their FYW courses from their home disciplines (of literature, creative writing, linguistics, etc.) and what they exported back from their FYW preparation into their work in their home disciplines, I identified several codes, including “identity” and, separately, “theories.” After further exploration of the data, I collapsed these codes into a construct of “mindsets.” Mindsets described the specific ways of seeing and doing that belonged to particular disciplines; some of these ways of seeing and doing included literary theories (from literature studies), writing from the senses (from creative writing), and a focus on empowerment in structures of power and privilege (from community development).

In what follows, I share coded responses and illustrate those categories and codes with quotations from participant responses. Grammar, capitalization, and punctuation are left unchanged in respondent answers reported below.

RQ1: Shaping Influences for GSIs’ Principles for Teaching Writing

Discovering what sources inform GSIs’ key teaching principles is key to understanding what shapes GSIs’ teaching practice. For this reason, two of the open-response survey questions asked GSIs to 1) identify three or four of their key principles for teaching writing and 2) describe where these principles came from or were related to (whether it was something they learned, observed, or experienced). In response to these questions, participants described a variety of principles, such as “writing as a process,” “learning as active and collaborative,” “teaching as adaptive and flexible to student need,” and “the classroom as decentered space where all voices are valued.” For the purposes of answering my research questions (specifically RQ1 about what sources informed GSI practice in the
classroom), I focused my coding analysis on the influences GSIs said impacted their development of these principles.

In describing where these guiding principles came from or what they were related to, 248 coded units fell into five categories: experience (including subcategories of experience as a writer, experience as a student, and experience as a teacher or tutor); formal writing pedagogy education; theory, readings, and coursework; learning from other teachers; and personal beliefs and commitments. There were 116 participants who answered this open-ended question on the survey.

**Experience (110 units coded; 80 participants represented).** In this category, GSIs described a variety of experiences that impacted the development of their key teaching principles. Some participants simply said that their principles came from “experience” or “personal experience” with no elaboration. Others cited experiences as professionals in various fields, as parents, and as readers. Nonspecific or varied references to experience made up 23 units of the coded responses (representing 20 participants). Most responses in the category of experience, however, fell into one of three sub-codes of influential experiences: *experience as a writer* (18 units coded; 18 participants represented), *experience as a student* (28 units coded; 27 participants represented), and *experience as a teacher or tutor* (41 units coded; 40 participants represented).

*Experience as a writer (18 units coded; 18 participants represented).* GSIs relied on their own experiences as writers for knowledge about how to approach teaching their students about writing. For example, one participant explained the reasoning behind a guiding principle of assigning frequent in-class writing: “I find I write more confidently when I am writing a lot.” This GSI reflected on what helped him or her develop confidence
as a writer and attempted to recreate similar learning opportunities for the students. Another wrote, “My belief in the importance of having fun with language is based largely on my own experience with writing.” Participants used their experiences as writers to help them create specific writing experiences for students that would help them be more successful, confident, or inventive as writers.

*Experience as a student (28 units coded; 27 participants represented).* GSIs’ experiences as students, past and present, also impacted their decisions about their own classroom practices and principles. GSIs described both positive and negative student experiences that impacted them. For example, one respondent wrote, “[M]y professors would tell me I needed to fix something, but wouldn't provide a reason, which then didn’t ensure that I wouldn’t make the same mistake again.” This individual’s own frustration with vague feedback led to adopting a principle of providing clear feedback. In other cases, the opposite effect occurred: GSIs became more concerned with providing effective feedback precisely because they had received useful feedback from their own teachers. For example, a participant described highly valuing feedback received from an advisor: “[It] showed me how I was actually not getting many of my major points across, leaving out key details, and not providing for nuance. I was a very anxious writer. My supervisor showed me how I don't need to be anxious.” Another GSI described reflecting on his or her own experience as a first-year student:

I tried to think about what some of the most important lessons I learned during my first year away from my family’s house, and time management is certainly one of them. Deadlines are mushy in the creative writing world to a certain extent, especially when extensions are requested professionally. I’ve tried to set up a class that emulates
this writing reality, and gives students the flexibility to experiment with their own time management.

By reflecting on their own experiences as students, these GSIs were attempting to enter into their students’ experiences and have empathy for the struggles of being a student, as well as empower students to form their own effective practices as students and writers. (Of course, one possible drawback of this strategy for developing practice is that GSIs might project attitudes or experiences on their students that do not apply to those students. See Dryer for an exploration of how GSIs’ projections of writing anxieties on their FYW students sometimes caused them to see their students in reductive ways.)

*Experience as a teacher or tutor (41 units coded; 40 participants represented).*

Finally, students described key teaching principles coming from their past experiences as teachers. Often, they developed their principles of teaching from observing student responses to their teaching or from noticing elements of learning that students struggled with in the past. For example, one GSI wrote, “I noticed that my students were really writing assignments, based upon what they thought I, as the teacher, wanted from them.” This observation led to a change in pedagogical focus for this GSI. Another shared adopting a principle of flexibility in adapting to student needs because “My students do better when I’m flexible in my teaching styles, and their grades have notably higher after I’ve had personal meetings with them.” In terms of experiences as a tutor, one participant described noticing that ESL students who came into the writing center were being treated with bias “by some professors, and oftentimes good papers with few grammar mistakes are labeled as ‘unreadable’ when it’s obvious the professor didn’t bother reading the paper without proof the student went to the writing center.” This tutoring experience shaped this GSI’s
pedagogical attitude towards grammar instruction and their own practices in working with ESL students in the classroom.

**Formal WPE (44 units coded; 41 participants represented).** Participants also frequently cited their formal writing pedagogy education experiences as important influences in shaping their teaching principles. Often, they referenced composition theory or pedagogy courses, professional development workshops, orientations, and program philosophies as important influences. For example, participants credited formal WPE with shaping many of their principles: “Reflection and metacognition are principles I learned about in my pedagogy classes,” “writing process is also a subject that was discussed regularly within my pedagogy course,” and “These principles align with my university/department’s FYW mission, and so I learned them in part through the department’s TA prep.” These responses demonstrate that GSIs did draw on their formal WPE preparation as they shaped their own teaching philosophies and principles.

**Theory, Readings, and Coursework (42 units coded; 41 participants represented).** This category of shaping influences describes theory, readings, and coursework that impacted GSIs’ principles but which were not necessarily connected to their formal WPE experience. Frequently, participants mentioned specific authors (Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Peter Elbow, Ken Bain, Stanley Fish, etc.), classes, or theories that shaped their teaching. For example, one GSI “read about making course objectives visible in classroom practice in scholarly articles and edited collections.” Another credited his or her philosophy and approach to grammar instruction to “multiple linguistics classes.” Others described drawing on “knowledge of coaching philosophy,” “undergraduate work in psychology,” or “critical theory.” Many GSIs shaped their philosophies and principles of the teaching of
writing by drawing on and making connections with their studies and readings in areas outside of composition. Their own readings in composition theory (perhaps unconnected with their formal WPE) also impacted the development of these principles.

**Learning from Other Teachers (35 units coded; 34 participants represented).**

This category primarily consisted of informal discussions and conversations about teaching among the GSIs and their peers, mentors, or professors. One GSI wrote, “I think everything I’ve every [sic] tried has been recommended to me by someone else at some point; such recommendations are not always (or even often) useful, but everything that has been useful has come from someone else.” Another participant described brainstorming ideas with a family member who was a middle school English teacher: “We frequently discuss pedagogy and compare how we can approach certain writing topics or activities. Hearing about his success with small group work, I was inspired to attempt more peer instruction—and I feel my classes are stronger because students are learning more from each other.”

**Personal Beliefs and Commitments (17 units coded; 17 participants represented).** Some GSIs described their teaching principles as coming simply from their own beliefs or commitments. This category described principles that GSIs believed in personally or felt came from their own intuition or sense. For example, one cited an “investment in critical thinking” as a shaping influence, while another referenced “my own common sense,” and another shared, “Inspiring curiosity is something that is more politically important to me than anything else—curiosity leads to knowledge leads to understanding and open mindedness.” These personal beliefs or gut instincts often referred to more generalized attitudes towards pedagogy, as is evidenced by the GSI who justified principles for teaching writing by saying, “All three are longstanding, instinctive principles that have only been
reinforced by my recent instructional training.” This category suggests that GSIs may enter their teaching experiences with strong or solidified mindsets or beliefs. If formal WPE builds on these principles, it may be easier for GSIs to adopt them. But if formal WPE contradicts these personal beliefs or commitments, it raises questions about how difficult it may be for GSIs to let go of entrenched beliefs.

**RQ1 & RQ3: Teaching Challenges**

Question 18 on the survey asked GSIs to identify the biggest challenge they faced in their teaching. In response, GSIs described a variety of challenges they experienced as writing instructors which fell into four general categories: student-centered challenges, instructor-centered challenges, course-centered challenges, and program-centered challenges. RQ1 asked what resources inform GSIs’ practices (including course designs, lesson planning, and problem-solving in the classroom), while RQ3 asked how GSIs navigate between theory and practice. To better understand the answers to these questions, it is valuable to examine what kinds of problems GSIs encounter and must solve in their practice as classroom teachers. Identifying what GSIs consider to be their central teaching challenges better situates how they perceive their work and practice in the classroom, as well as what kinds of problems they have in mind when answering the questions about what resources help them solve problems or address challenges as teachers. There were 117 participants who responded to this open-ended question.

**Student-centered challenges (49 units coded; 48 participants represented)** involved concerns about student behavior, attitudes, or experiences in the classroom. These challenges fell into several subcategories: *engaging students* (29 units coded; 29 participants represented), *meeting diverse student needs* (12 units coded; 12 participants represented), and
helping students adjust to college (8 units coded; 8 participants represented). GSIs were concerned with engaging students (29 units coded; 29 participants represented) both by getting them to participate in class and by helping them “buy-in” to the relevance of the course. One student shared, “The biggest challenge I face is student engagement. I can have an awesome (or what I perceive to be awesome) lesson planned, but if my students don't buy into it, the whole lesson flops.” Another said, “The material is dry and difficult for them [students], so it is a challenge to keep them awake and engaged.” A third described the biggest challenge he or she faced as “Getting students to take their writing seriously and get enthusiastic about it.” Some respondents in this subcategory also described the difficulty of engaging students as originating from the problem of teaching a general-education writing course, a course designation and topic that GSIs perceived as unappealing to their FYW students.

Instructors were also concerned with meeting student needs (12 units coded; 12 participants represented). This included learning the personality of each class or section as a whole, as well as the learning needs of individual students with different levels of skill and experience. Instructors described needing to adapt and adjust their teaching methods to respond to the diverse student needs they observed in their classrooms. One GSI described being careful to teach “at a slower speed and speaking in a way that ESL students can easily follow me.” Another wrote about the challenge of teaching students who were at different levels:

The biggest challenge I face is making sure I am aware of the needs of my students. It would be so easy to just make a series of lessons plans and stick to those staunchly. I want to make sure that my lesson plans are suited towards the needs of my students.
It’s so complex in that the needs can vary for everyone and I may not always be aware of those needs. But I hope that I can be conscious of this.

Finally, the last subcategory in student-centered challenges focused on other teaching challenges, particularly those associated with helping students adjust to college-level expectations (8 units coded; 8 participants represented). This sometimes included addressing problems that were not related to writing, such as teaching students how to communicate with college faculty. A GSI wrote,

Right now, the biggest challenge I have is getting students to communicate with me and understand that college is different from High School. Most of them are aware of the need to communicate with their teachers and that college is a completely different animal than High School, but they don't act on it. One of my responsibilities as a teacher of first-years is to encourage my students to act on these differences now rather than two weeks before graduation.

Another GSI described the biggest challenge as “Unteaching the utter crap they learned in high school, or at best transforming it into something useful.” Others described the difficulty of helping students recognize what they still had to learn about writing, including students who “are not willing to change their writing habits/their understanding of writing” and students who believe “they already know how to write and learned everything important for success in college in ‘AP English.’”

Instructor-centered challenges (51 units coded; 48 participants represented) also fell into three subcategories: balance (26 units coded; 26 participants represented), enacting authority/identity (14 units coded; 14 participants represented), and managing teacher emotions (11 units coded; 11 participants represented). Many GSIs described the difficulty of
balancing their teaching, their graduate coursework/research, and their personal lives. One respondent wrote, “I need to learn how to find a balance between putting enough time into my teaching to facilitate student success but not too much time that it takes away from my dissertation.” A different GSI shared, “The biggest challenge I face is balancing work, my own studies, and my personal life. Sometimes, as in the case of this semester, it seems my teaching suffers.” Another described trying to achieve this balance between teaching and graduate student work as “brutal.” Many GSIs also shared concerns about balance relating to managing time and having time to complete their grading, struggling to find “adequate time to respond to papers.” This category also included concerns about balancing intellectual work with the material realities of their lives as graduate students (such as worrying about finances, material support, and health insurance). For example, one participant shared that “surviving on the stipend is difficult/not possible for some people.” As a result, this participant continued, “I know many graduate students who have had to get other part-time jobs, which makes time management even harder.”

GSIs also struggled with establishing and enacting authority (14 units coded; 14 participants represented) in the classroom, sometimes finding it difficult to hold students accountable and maintain boundaries. One GSI described struggling with “overcoming my timidity. This manifests itself either in my reluctance to be overly authoritarian (I'm a bit of a pushover) and/or my difficulty overcoming my shyness and anxiety the first week of classes.” Others described struggling with being nervous or anxious about teaching the course, and some said they worried they were “too gentle” or unable to maintain boundaries; for example, one said, “Another challenge is how nice I am to my students. I care about them and I will bend on rules for them, but I don't want to do that. I want to require them to work
harder.” Sometimes challenges with enacting authority stemmed not from nervousness about claiming authority but instead from other elements of instructor identity, such as gender, age, or race. One participant shared,

I also have some students test me what they can get away with and I think it is because of my age (I’m 25 but I look a little younger and I don’t always dress up because they are there to learn from me not look at me). I have had a student try to hijack me midsentence answering a question and mansplain, so I let him, and then took the opportunity to introduce that word into our class lexicon. I think some students toe the line when we discuss race in class out of nerves/fear/whatever because I’m a Black woman, but I’ve told them multiple times this is their opinion and I just want a statement and supportive “why” or “because” and they’ve been loosening up. Nothing I can’t handle and that doesn’t make for a funny story.

The third subcategory under instructor-centered challenges was teacher emotion (11 units coded; 11 participants represented), including apathy, burn-out, lack of confidence, and anxiety or wariness about academic structures and institutions. One GSI shared, “The biggest challenge is trying to keep the students engaged even though I am not as excited or engaged with the material I am teaching.” Another wrote that “Because I have so many writing students, I can often lose my enthusiasm and interest, which can make me depressed and anxious. . . . It is hard to sell a required class to students, which means many days I feel deeply unsatisfied with my work.” One described dealing with “personal disaffection with the future,” and another shared feeling “a deep wariness about the politics and fairness of the composition industry in general.” Another sometimes wonders “what I’m even doing here. I wonder how my students can become strong, effective writers when their teacher isn't one.”
Another shared that he or she struggled with “Keeping my emotions to myself. I get grumpy and that shows to my students,” while a different GSI struggled with “Not being overly empathetic. I think empathy is important, but having too much empathy can be detrimental and I think has led me to being almost burnt out in the past.” This subcategory of teacher emotion is an important one because it points to the affective burdens and emotional labor of teaching, issues that are often not addressed in formal WPE.

Course-related challenges (22 units coded; 22 participants represented) included challenges with planning and organizing content for class (including generating ideas and filling class time). It also included concerns about covering enough or the right material, and meeting course outcomes by appropriately preparing students in particular subject areas. For example, one participant wrote, “We have only one semester of writing courses and not enough time to teach students both how to analyze and evaluate rhetoric, how to research and evaluate sources, and how to take all of that information and improve their writing.” Another shared, “I think I struggle to generate new and innovative assignments that are research-based.” A third described difficulties with day-to-day lesson planning:

For me, the biggest challenge that I’ve faced with teaching has really been logistical. The day-to-day preparation continues to be a struggle, as I have a difficult time preparing more than a day ahead. Right now, it seems that I have to experience the day’s class in order to know how to prepare for the next day. I think that this will be much easier next semester since I’ll have a semester of daily plans already in place. But as of now, knowing how to approach each day is a bit difficult and requires a lot more planning than I would currently like.
As these examples demonstrate, the responses coded as course-related challenges centered on GSIs’ concerns about planning and delivering the content and objectives of the course. GSIs were concerned about filling time each day and having lessons prepared. They were also concerned about designing courses that were coherent, creating assignments that were innovative and research-based, and preparing students appropriately with the skills and knowledge they were expected to gain in FYW.

**Program- or institution-centered challenges (13 units coded; 12 participants represented)** involved GSIs’ difficulties navigating expectations, structures, and culture at their programs and institutions. This included challenges with finding sufficient and effective guidance and mentorship. A recurring theme in this category was the challenge of navigating individual freedom in making choices about teaching with the need to meet expectations and standards set by programmatic structures. One participant wrote, “Presently, I’m working with a curriculum I didn’t design but am required to deliver, and that’s not something I [sic] especially like to do. So I would say that the biggest challenge I face is negotiating my own vision with an imposed curriculum.” Another GSI shared experiencing the opposite problem, describing how the biggest challenge he or she faced was

. . . too much freedom and not enough support/structure. While I deeply appreciate the freedom we have in developing our own courses more-or-less from the ground up, I wish I had a larger knowledge base of examples and best practices to draw from, and more structured mentorship from a senior instructor or faculty member. I think this experience will, in the end, help shape me into a fantastic teacher, but I worry about doing disservice to my students this semester because of my inexperience and lack of existing structure to lean on.
One GSI shared that he or she struggled with “Feeling unsupported. Feeling limited by the canned syllabus. Feeling like faculty and administrators don't see us as ‘people’, yet we teach the majority of 101 courses on campus.” This GSI’s perception of institutional culture created feelings of alienation and dehumanization. Another GSI struggled because “the actual goals of the university and writing program were not made clear to my cohort.” Some GSIs also described specific institutional structures and pressures that affected their work. For example, one described the challenge of “teaching at a regional state school that is under constant efforts to be privatized, and i [sic] think everyone is feeling it,” while another said they struggled with teaching in a program with “a small, almost non-existent rhet-comp department.” These varied responses suggest how strongly GSIs’ experiences as teachers can be impacted by larger institutional structures and cultures. It also demonstrates the value that GSIs placed on participating in a programmatic, departmental, and institutional culture that supported and valued them as instructors, oriented them to program goals and missions, and gave them the freedom to incorporate their own individual ideas and approaches into an existing structure of teaching FYW.

**RQ2: Disciplinary Imports & FYW Exports**

As part of this study’s exploration of RQ2, participants were also asked about what concepts (ideas, theories, scholarly literature, disciplinary practices) from their primary disciplines shaped their approached to teaching FYW (Question 15 on the survey; this question was not displayed to participants who listed their area of study as rhetoric and composition; see Appendix A). As a parallel to this question, all participants were also asked what impact teaching FYW had on their own research and writing practices as graduate students (Question 16 on the survey; see Appendix A). Responses to these questions were
coded as identifying “disciplinary imports” and “FYW exports.” Each of these general categories contains several subcategories.

Disciplinary Imports referred to concepts or ideas that GSIs brought with them from their home disciplines into the FYW classroom. Because of the close connection between rhetoric and composition as a field and FYW, this survey question was not displayed to GSIs who indicated their area of study was in rhetoric and composition; rhetoric and composition students may not perceive their inclusion of concepts from a multimodal rhetoric class, for example, to be an “import” to FYW. The responses of other participants fell into five central categories: GSIs imported content (19 units coded; 19 participants represented), mindsets (25 units coded; 25 participants represented), pedagogies (19 units coded; 19 participants represented), and skills or expertise (12 units coded; 12 participants represented), or they reinforced the boundaries (6 references coded; 6 participants represented) between their home disciplines and FYW by keeping their home disciplines separate from their work in FYW. Because this question was only displayed to participants who indicated that their primary area of study was outside of rhetoric and composition, there were only 71 participants who responded to this open-ended question.

Content (19 units coded; 19 participants represented). This code referred to specific ideas or texts from GSIs’ home disciplines that they explicitly taught in the composition classroom. For example, literature GSIs described bringing in literature from their areas of focus as examples of effective writing, while creative writing GSIs similarly assigned contemporary fiction and nonfiction for their students to read. A GSI focusing on medieval literature did not bring in medieval texts but did cover “some of the history of English
concepts to ‘explain’ why we write the way we do,” while a GSI who had studied law taught the “structures used in appellate arguments” to help students write speeches.

*Mindsets (25 units coded; 25 participants represented)* refers to responses describing specific ways of seeing, theorizing, and doing based on disciplinary training, allegiance, and identity. For example, a creative writing GSI shared, “probably that i [sic] identify first and foremost as a poet has shaped the approach that we should just be writing, simply, and writing about things we can touch, that are around us, about ourselves, and addressing issues that affect us.” Another GSI shared, “I am studying community development, which focused on issues of power and privilege quite a bit. Because of that, I draw heavily on Paulo Freire’s focus on empowerment.” A GSI pursuing a degree in education described how “the idea of classroom as community (Lave and Wenger and sociocultural theory in general) compels me to teach in a way that honors my students’ humanity and their communities.” These disciplinary ways of seeing and theorizing formed a foundation from which these GSIs approached their classroom work.

*Pedagogies (19 units coded; 19 participants represented)* referred to pedagogical practices, strategies, or assignments drawn from common ways of teaching/learning in disciplinary courses. For example, creative writers mentioned often implementing workshops and regular freewrites in their courses; literature scholars described highly valuing large group discussions about reading assignments; digital humanists assigned digital texts and multimodal assignments.

*Skills or expertise (12 units coded; 12 participants represented)* referred to specific competencies that GSIs had that they felt were assets to them in the classroom. For example, one GSI described their expertise in “How to read literature and analyze it to make an
interesting argument,” another shared he or she brought a “Well-rounded knowledge of different literary works.” Generally, these respondents did not specify how these skills or competencies affected their work as FYW instructors, but some identified specific transferrable skills (such as close reading) that they hoped to pass along to their students. For example, one GSI wrote, “I also think that my close reading skill help me to define analysis to my students. I urge them to analyze everything.”

_reinforced boundary (6 units coded; 6 participants represented). _Some GSIs reported making a conscious effort to not import any elements of their home disciplines into the FYW classroom. One wrote, “I do not integrate my literature interests into the writing classroom. I suppose this is because I feel my students signed up for a writing class, not a literature class, and I want to honor that.” Another responded, “I was fortunate enough to receive excellent training from our FYW program that immersed me in the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition and allowed me to get a sense of what is happening in the field. This theory, far more than literary theory, structures my classroom.” Responses in this category, in some ways, seemed to reinforce boundaries between composition and GSIs’ home disciplines, emphasizing the distinctions between these disciplines. This may come from a desire from the GSIs to position themselves as qualified to teach FYW despite having expertise in a field outside of composition. It may also represent a sense that FYW is not relevant to their own work in their respective fields.

_FYW Exports. _In this category, participants described how teaching FYW impacted their own work as graduate student writers and researchers. Specifically, participants’ responses fell into three subcategories: _student dispositions and practices (7 units coded), writer and researcher dispositions and practices (94 units coded), _and _none or negative
effect (17 units coded). There were 113 participants who responded to this open-ended question.

Student Dispositions and Practices (7 units coded; 7 participants represented). Some GSIs described changing their dispositions or practices as students because of their experiences teaching. For example, they participated more in their own classes and reached out to their professors more frequently with questions because these were behaviors they wanted their own students to adopt: “I always wish my students were more talkative, so I have become more talkative in my own classes.” Others managed their time better and felt they were more aware of the pedagogical approaches of their professors, and more aware of the institutional structures that shaped university education. One GSI wrote, “Teaching writing as a graduate student is helping me better understand (and appreciate) the approaches my current and previous professors use in the classroom.”

Writer and Researcher Dispositions & Practices (94 units coded; 80 participants represented). Many GSIs felt that teaching FYW had an impact on their dispositions and practices as writers and researchers. While some GSIs wrote generally about how teaching FYW was influential in making them better writers and researchers, most responses fell into three subcategories. Specifically, they described how teaching FYW changed their writing processes and practices (23 references coded; 23 participants represented), encouraged reflection (38 references coded; 38 participants represented), and inspired the topics of their research projects (24 references coded; 24 participants represented). One GSI described specifically the impact that FYW had on writing process: “My research and writing has improved tremendously as I have applied what I teach my students to my own processes. . . . I also love doing the style challenges I assign them for my own writing.” These GSIs were
often concerned about “practicing what they preached” and avoiding hypocrisy. They felt that if they were requiring their students to create outlines or plan ahead, they needed to adopt these practices in their own writing processes. Many GSIs described how teaching FYW made them more reflective as writers, researchers, and academics. For example, one shared,

I feel that I truly understand research better now. Having gone through all four years of college successfully, I *thought* I knew what research was! But in fact, by the time I graduated as a senior, I was only *just beginning to learn* what research was. Now that I’ve been pressed for clarity in my own explanations of it, I do feel that I’m arriving at a richer, better understanding of how this works.

Another shared how teaching FYW “has helped me to understand and rethink my own writing processes; I never took a writing course as an undergraduate.” Others described how teaching FYW impacted their choice of research projects and topics. For example, one participant shared, “My graduate studies are about teaching at the community college level, so it has impacted that a lot obviously.” Generally, respondents who credited FYW with inspiring research projects were graduate students in rhetoric and composition.

None or Negative Effect (17 units coded; 17 participants represented). Some participants shared that they felt teaching FYW had no impact on their writing and research practices. One respondent wrote, “Writing papers has always come easy to me and teaching writing hasn’t changed that in anyway,” while another wrote, “my creative writing projects are extremely separate from teaching.” Others felt their graduate work impacted their teaching but not the other way around: “Teaching writing hasn’t yet impacted my own studies but my studies have certainly affected my teaching.” Other participants felt that
teaching FYW actually negatively affected their graduate work when student mistakes “infected” their own writing, or teaching “created a time vacuum” drawing them away from their own research or writing.

**Summary of Open-Ended Results**

Ultimately, the qualitative analysis of open-ended survey data demonstrates that GSIs draw on a variety of sources and influences in shaping their philosophies and practices as teachers. Some are unconsciously or consciously transferring (or deliberately not transferring) their experiences and knowledge from other parts of their lives into the FYW classroom. The fact that these various influences are bleeding into each other (into the FYW classroom and back out of it) suggests the importance of WPE consciously addressing these influences with GSIs and bringing these influences into the teacher preparation process. In the next chapter, I share the results of my follow-up interviews, which provide additional insight into the elements that shape GSI practice. In the conclusion, I discuss the implications of my findings for the structure of WPE and GSI experiences across the US today.
Chapter 5: Interview Results

As I outlined in Chapter 3, I conducted follow-up interviews with 24 of the survey participants. The transcripts for these interviews were, on average, between 8-10 single-spaced pages each, resulting in a total of 207 single-spaced pages. I transcribed these interviews myself, which gave me a strong familiarity with the data. I read through the interviews after completing the transcriptions, loaded them into Nvivo, and read them again, this time assigning codes to patterns or processes I perceived in the data. The questions in the interview protocol (Appendix B) focused participants’ responses on their pedagogical goals and how they approached designing their courses, assignments, and daily class time, including what resources they most relied on in making these design decisions. Additionally, the interview questions asked about the context of participants’ university and program settings, as well as their career goals. These questions helped contextualize how these GSIs approached their work in the first-year writing classroom, as well as their relationship to the programs in which they worked. In this chapter, I outline the specific results of the interviews that respond to this study’s two central research questions: 1) what resources inform GSIs’ teaching practices and 2) how GSIs navigate disciplinarity, theory, and practice in their classrooms. All interview participants have been given pseudonyms.

RQ1 & RQ2: Sources Informing GSIs’ Classroom Work

RQ1 in this study asked what sources (including people, communities, texts, theories) GSIs draw on in shaping their practices and designing their courses, while RQ2 questions specifically how participants’ disciplinary course of study and previous experiences impact their teaching. In this section, I examine disciplinary focus and prior experiences as part of the “sources” that participants draw on in forming their teaching. The interview format
allowed for participants to provide detailed explanations of how and why they used the sources that inform their teaching practices. The results of the interview data aligned in some ways with some of the findings of the open-response survey questions, but provided additional depth, detail, and insight. In accounting for their guiding principles in the survey open-response, survey participants described depending on their experience (as students, writers, and teachers/tutors); their formal writing pedagogy education; other theory, readings, and coursework they completed; their experiences learning from other teachers; and their own personal beliefs & commitments. In contrast to the open-response survey question which asked participants what elements informed their key principles for teaching writing, the interview asked participants to describe specifically their processes for planning their course design, assignments, and daily class time and the resources they relied on in those planning processes. Participants’ responses to interview questions about what resources they relied on in preparing these specific elements of their courses provided more detailed explanation of influential sources than the survey.

Although I also conducted open-coding on the interview data rather than transferring over the codes from the survey-data, the categories did generally overlap between the two sets of data, reinforcing the findings of the survey data. Sources that GSIs drew on in their classroom practices fell into four categories: Formal WPE and Programmatic Structures; Instructors’ Experience, Interests, Identity, & Perceptions (a combination and expansion on the survey’s categories of experience and personal beliefs/commitments); Theory, Readings, and Coursework; and Learning from Other Teachers. Below, I will outline each of these categories and provide excerpts from the data as examples. Then, I will examine how GSIs report navigating, connecting, and resisting these sites of influence in their work as
classroom teachers. It is important to note that although I share these categories as distinct examples, there was often crossover among influences. For example, many times one specific assignment was shaped by multiple resources, some of the inspiration and planning coming from formal WPE, some from conversations with peers, and some from an instructor’s personal experiences, for example.

Formal WPE & Programmatic Structures

In the survey open-response data, participants described drawing on elements of their formal preparation to teach writing (such as orientations and coursework) in shaping their guiding principles for teaching writing. The interview data expanded and deepened this category from the survey-response data, demonstrating that GSIs’ teaching practices were heavily impacted by their experiences both with formal preparation but also with ongoing professional development as well as programmatic structures, expectations, and cultures. Sources in this category included teaching resources that were sponsored by and conveyed to GSIs by program structures. This included resources such as composition and pedagogy courses, professional development workshops, summer orientations, shared electronic resource banks hosted and maintained by the program, course learning objectives outlined by the writing program, and required or encouraged common syllabi, course design, textbooks, and assignments. GSIs described drawing on all these program-sponsored preparation and development resources.

For many GSIs, this meant depending on program resources to get a sense of course structures and building their courses out of these resources provided by a program. For example, Ken, who was pursuing a PhD in composition, shared how he pulled on the examples provided to him in the composition pedagogy course he took prior to beginning to
teach FYW: “In this class, I got a lot of samples from the writing program that we are in now. And just by looking at some sample syllabi the previous teachers constructed, I tried to construct my own or I tried to design my own syllabus.” Some GSIs blended expectations and common assignments from different programs where they taught, demonstrating how they were piecing together and adjusting their teaching as they gained more experience and were exposed to more professional support and development. Lillian, who had taught as an adjunct prior to starting the MFA program where she taught as a GSI, described combining some of the sources she encountered at each of the two programs where she taught. At her prior institution, students wrote essays on a specific theme common in all sections. In her current institution, instructors frequently assigned an autoethnography assignment (an assignment included in the textbook GSIs were required to use). Lillian said, “So I thought, ‘Well, we could put those two together [the theme and the autoethnography assignment],’ and that’s how I adapted the assignment for the second time I taught when I was able to pick my own textbook.” Even after Lillian switched textbooks, she still retained elements of the assignment she developed from using the program’s common text, ultimately piecing together an assignment that was her own, but which drew on programmatic influences.

For some GSIs, formal WPE shaped their personal thinking about the teaching of writing more than it shaped specific classroom content or practices. For example, Rosa, a PhD student in literature, described how the readings for her composition theory and pedagogy course affected her work in the classroom:

I’ll be honest. I don’t draw on a lot of the stuff we read for our class. I guess, I felt like it was a little bit kind of above our students’ heads, and it just wasn’t necessarily going to be directly helpful for teaching. But it definitely kind of helped me
understand why teaching writing as a process is important, and the kind of product vs. process discussion and stuff like that. So, it helped give me some of the background, but that doesn’t—I don’t really return to those readings like every semester or anything like that. It’s just kind of in my head.

Rosa felt the theoretical readings from her composition pedagogy was not something she wanted to bring directly to her students, but also acknowledges that it impacted her own thinking about composition. It was “in her head,” affecting the way she conceptualized and structured her classroom. Like Rosa, Ray, an MFA student in creative writing, also described how his composition theory and pedagogy course changed the way he conceptualized the writing classroom. In contrast to Rosa, Ray did choose to bring theoretical concepts from the composition theory he was learning to his first-year students. He shared how his composition pedagogy professor’s “teaching of the history of composition theory was very rooted in connections to contemporary theories like queer theory and feminist theory and critical theory, and that really spoke to me as a queer teacher.” For Ray, this professor “sort of opened up this lens to me to be able to see writing teaching as something that can be more than just bare bones, ‘This is a lab report. This is a social sciences paper.’ But also creates space for students to think about how language and writing are used in power spaces.”

In discussing the impact of formal WPE and programmatic structures, GSIs also described the challenge of taking the theory and objectives they were taught by the program and implementing it in the classroom. For example, Charles, a creative writing MFA student, said,

The thing that I think a lot about with the objectives, both as they’re laid out by the first-year writing program and also as I kind of understand them myself is that in
order to teach someone to write well, you have to teach them to think well, or you have to encourage them to think well. And that’s a really difficult thing to quantify, and I think the objectives do an admirable job of getting about as close as you can to pointing in that direction, but at the end of the day, what do you do in a classroom that is going to encourage someone to think more deeply, to think more rigorously, to think more mindfully, to think with greater complexity, with greater synthesis? [...] So, I think there is—the objectives for this class amount to a skeleton, and it’s still up to an instructor to figure out how to breathe life into that skeleton.

Charles’ metaphor of the skeleton suggests how strongly formal WPE and programmatic structures can impact the shape of a FYW classroom, but it also points to how much of what happens in the classroom depends on an individual instructor’s choices about how to “breathe life into that skeleton.”

**Instructors’ Experiences, Interests, Identities, and Perceptions**

This category included sources that were directly connected to instructors’ personalization of their courses, such as GSIs’ personal beliefs or theories about writing, their intuition and gut instincts, their previous experiences as writers, students, and employees. Their prior experiences as teachers were particularly impactful, especially in terms of how it helped them develop a perception and awareness of their students’ needs and development as writers. These instructor-related resources represented the specific ways that GSIs made their first-year writing courses their own and took ownership over course content and student learning experiences.

Ruth, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, carefully considered and theorized her work in the classroom, but she also acknowledged the process of personalization
involved experimentation and play, some of which would succeed and some of which would not. For Ruth, the process of teaching was “kind of rolling the dice and being like, ‘Well, this seems, a lot of people think that this is working. Let’s just see how it goes, and if it works horribly, I’ll redesign my syllabus in the middle of the semester.’” Being willing to try new things in the classroom also included a willingness to adapt and make changes when needed.

Many GSIs described how their experiences as teachers attuned them to their students and influenced them to make changes to their teaching based on what their students needed or how their students were responding. For example, Anne, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, described how a revision assignment she created originated from “noticing that my—I felt like my students weren’t getting an opportunity to really work through like a major revision in their writing. And I really wanted them to have the experience of really rethinking or reworking certain aspects of their writing from one of their prior projects.” Similarly, Will, an MA student in rhetoric and composition, designed an assignment around encouraging more thorough revision among his students after he noticed that his “students were not taking the sort of revision idea as generously as I would have liked them to. I wanted like entirely new second drafts that were radically different, and it was, generally speaking, like the first sentence in the third paragraph is different, but other than that, there’s like a comma splice that’s fixed.” In order to help his students understand “the idea that you can achieve the same meaning in a lot of different ways,” Will designed an assignment that required students to write essays which they then remediated multiple times into various social media formats to experiment with radically reworking their original texts.

Frances, a PhD student in literature, designed an autoethnography assignment in part because of where she perceived her incoming students to be in their relationship with writing:
“They come into the college setting thinking, with all these rules in their head that I want them to get away from, like, ‘I can’t use first person,’ that everything has to be super scholarly, like their own impressions don’t matter.” By starting with a more personalized assignment, Frances hoped to “catch them off guard” at the beginning of the semester by beginning with “something that they’re genuinely interested in writing about.” Diana, a PhD student in literature, shared how she revised the prompt for one of her assignments as she “figured out what gets confusing to students, or what their level—I definitely overestimated their level of preparation for research when I first taught it.” GSIs also described basing some of their daily lesson planning on what they perceived students needed to learn about at particular moments, remaining adaptable even while following a planned schedule. Andy, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, described how his daily lesson plan “depends on where my students are, and I don’t necessarily mean that in the semester, I mean where they are developmentally in their writing.”

GSIs also personalized their courses based on their personal pedagogical commitments and interests. For example, Emma, a PhD student in literature, ended up personalizing her course by focusing it around drafts and rewrites on one central project (in contrast to the way most FYW courses in her department were structured). This decision was based partly in her strengths as an instructor and her own experiences as a student. These experiences led to a strongly held pedagogical commitment on her part. She said, “I really believe in this one thing, one project over and over and over and make a really good one.”

GSIs also indicated a variety of personal experiences as resources that they drew on in determining their classroom practices. For example, Mary, a PhD student in linguistics,
described how part of her inspiration for one assignment came from the listening to mixtapes in her car:

I’m always listening to my CDs in the car, and I make mix tapes, like mix CDs, and that’s something I’ve done since I was young. And then I just had—a thought came to me while I was driving, actually, like why don’t I have students pick out—well, I have them pick out three songs, and then talk about how they’re all connected and what they are actually saying in a larger sense because I thought it was really interesting.

Ray said his prior work as a youth leader for a religious organization taught him to be prepared to always have a backup plan and mini-lessons, while Jake (PhD in literature) described how his prior experience working on a curriculum redesign committee at his prior institution affected the way he shaped his course at his PhD institution. Lucy (MPP in Public Policy) shared that her prior experience working one-on-one with students as an academic advisor prepared her to conduct effective one-on-one writing conferences with her students. Charles and Allison both relied on their prior experiences as professional writers to talk with their students about writing effective, clear prose.

Theory, Readings, & Coursework

GSIs also described relying on theory, readings, and coursework that they encountered outside of their formal WPE. This included coursework they completed as undergraduates and graduate students, theory from writing studies and from other fields, as well as a variety of readings (including readings from a variety of academic fields, readings from textbooks, and readings outside of scholarly texts, like news articles and creative
nonfiction). Jack, a master’s student in rhetoric, shared how studying collaborative writing at the graduate level led him to implement a collaborative writing assignment in FYW:

[We talked about] how like academia for the longest time has kind of built on this premise of the lone genius, like you have to go in a room by yourself and write your dissertation, and that’s the only thing that’s respected. And so much writing in the world is actually done completely opposite of that, that it’s collaborative at every level, so like I didn’t have a collaborative writing assignment in my syllabus, and then I was converted halfway through this seminar, and then changed one of the assignments that I had to making it a group writing assignment.

Alex, a PhD student in education with an emphasis in writing studies, said that his engagement with the field of writing studies led him to “incorporating more technology and multimodal-related assignments in the course because I felt like it was important from what I was learning at conferences and in what I was reading.” GSIs outside of writing studies were also impacted by their coursework. Diana (PhD student in literature) shared how her reading in eco-composition led her to rework her literacy narrative assignment to a “literacy place narrative where I had them first write a literacy narrative that was in some way attentive to the geography of that literacy, the place that was important for how it was developed or that they associate it with.” This kind of mixing of disciplinary ideas in GSIs’ FYW courses was common in interview responses and will be discussed in more detail below.

GSIs also relied on readings from the textbooks they used in their writing courses to help them structure their daily class time especially. Lucy shared that she used “discussion

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13 This is an example of where some of the categories contained overlap. I put textbooks in this category as an example of how readings acted as a resource for teaching decisions. Some GSIs, however, did not choose their own texts; instead, the textbook was assigned to them by their program and thus represented programmatic
prompts and activities from [the textbook] on a regular basis,” while Ken said he “mostly relied on the textbook” in designing daily work. Others described beginning planning their daily class time by reviewing textbook readings and designing activities to accompany those readings. GSIs also used a variety of readings and resources as texts for study in their classrooms that were not specifically related to composition, such as news articles or editorials on current events, YouTube videos or snippets of documentaries, and short pieces of literature that acted examples of specific composition concepts (like code-meshing). For example, Ray described how he brought in “texts from writers who use dialect writing or signal in some way minority presence of characters in the writing style itself. So, we used things like Junot Diaz, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and writers who focus on minority stories on a writing level.” Ray used these texts to talk to students about revision, audience, and language choices.

GSIs also described how they used teaching blogs and websites as sources for their course designs, assignments, and daily lessons. Jessica pulled from teaching blogs hosted by The Chronicle of Higher Education; Gabrielle and Sarah both used lesson ideas found on other institutions’ FYWP websites; Frances used open educational resources, the Bedford Bits teaching blog, and a Facebook group for writing teachers.

Learning from Other Teachers

Finally, GSIs described the importance of learning from other teachers as a resource they relied on in planning their teaching. This learning came in the form of informal conversations with peers and mentors in small groups or one-on-one. For example, Jessica

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influence. Many GSIs in this study were able to choose their own texts, so I determined class texts fit better in this category even though some texts were mandated by the programs.
shared how she “sort of stole or borrowed or used existing assignments for a lot of what I did,” implemented “a lot of reflective practice throughout the semester, which I totally took from somebody else in the program,” and also regularly talked “to other graduate students and try to get ideas from them about how they do things.” Ray also described having “very nerdy conversations” with a linguistics graduate student about Jewish-American speech patterns, and then implementing some of the ideas from those conversations into his course. He said, “And I felt excited to give students an opportunity to explore those things also. And so maybe, I guess, the presence of social linguistics and linguistic diversity as something that’s going on in the linguistic department at [my university] is like a text that I drew from for designing this unit.” Gabrielle similarly described how her cohort became a site of shared development and energy: “So many people just immediately became so emotionally invested, professionally invested in getting better. That was something that we always could go to teach other, ‘Oh hey, I heard you talked about this assignment in class. Can I get that assignment sheet?’ And it was always like that. It was always very reciprocal.” Isabella (PhD student in comparative studies) shared how she created a more formalized method of sharing ideas with peers by creating teaching partnerships:

One of the things I love to do is work with a teaching partner or teaching group, like have some people that I can a) bounce ideas off of, but also maybe I’m responsible for putting together Monday’s lesson, and you’re responsible for putting together Wednesday’s lesson, and then we put together Friday together, or something. Because I feel like it gives me more time to write a really good lesson, as opposed to having to write three lessons and maybe not having such a high-level—high-quality level lesson.
Not all participants regularly consulted peers, though. Charles said, “I didn’t do what I think a lot of my peers do which is kind of hivemind it, message the group and say, ‘Hey I need to do this.’ Again, I’m kind of a loner. That just doesn’t occur to me. I just did it myself.” The fact that Charles noticed and commented on how common “hivemind-ing it” was as a strategy for his peers, however, suggests its prevalence as a resource among GSIs.

GSIs valued both peers and mentors as members of their teaching communities. For example, Isabella shared how she had a peer who she had worked with for years in planning lessons, but that she also had a strong relationship with the professor of a pedagogy course she had taken in the past and was still able to ask this professor for advice and help. Isabella pointed to “having a sense of community, not just in the classroom, but as instructors, as being a really critical part” of her process as a teacher. Ruth, Alex, and Allison also described mentors as sources of influence on their own teaching practices. Allison said that having a writing program administrator who made himself available was “one of the most supportive things” in her work as a classroom teacher.

Andy also described how his relationship with his assigned teaching mentors allowed for productive conversations about teaching that he felt were reciprocally beneficial (partially based on Andy’s years of teaching experience prior to becoming a GSI):

It’s not one—it’s not unidirectional. It’s omnidirectional in that respect. And that’s been—so it’s been almost a reinforcement of the way I try to approach talking about teaching with others. I’m not trying to make them do anything. I’m trying to learn from them, and hopefully they’ll learn from me. But I hear my colleagues with less experience having more unidirectional experience, sometimes with the same mentors.
Will described highly valuing the small teaching group he was required to attend in his program. This group was led by a professor who taught writing in a different department, creating a safer environment for sharing failures or questions about teaching than might be possible when participating in a group led by a WPA. Will said,

And we kind of talk out the issues there, and we share lesson plans, techniques, and things like that, which I have found really helpful because I can so roundly learn from my peers, but also get advice from a faculty member who is not my supervisor, and who actually is teaching in a different department. So, this is the only vein in which I interact with her, and so it’s not like, “Oh if I say something weird and embarrassing in front of you, you won’t want to advise my comps in four years.” Like this is like a totally separate kind of thing.

Anne similarly commented on the value of having discussions with instructors who were not bosses or direct supervisors of GSIs: “I feel way more comfortable talking with peers than I do like a professor, like a WPA, about like the specifics of what a class discussion or a class activity might look like.” Anne’s and Will’s remarks suggest the value of teaching discussions that happen in a site of decentered authority, where GSIs can speak freely about their teaching to those who do not have direct authority over their employment.

**RQ3: Navigating Disciplinarity, Theory, & Practice in FYW**

RQ3 asked how GSIs navigate their classroom work in terms of disciplinarity, practice, and theory. As GSIs described the resources that they relied on and their processes for designing and carrying out their courses, they also discussed the ways in which they navigated disciplinary divides and connections in relation to their work as FYW instructors,
as well as how they navigated moving theory and learning objectives into practice in the classroom.

**Navigating Disciplinarity**

Participants’ navigation of disciplinarity in the classroom involved navigating three different areas of disciplinarity: the disciplinary content that they brought into the classrooms or were expected to dispense, the disciplinary mindsets from which they approached teaching writing, and their sense of their disciplinary identity and expertise in connection to the teaching of writing (and how this identity and expertise qualified them or not to teach FYW).

**Disciplinary Content**

The way that GSIs navigated disciplinarity included both how they managed their home disciplines and how they responded to the disciplinary space of the FYW classroom itself. For example, some GSIs brought in (or deliberately avoided bringing in) content from their home disciplines into the writing classroom to build on their own strengths and expertise. Others, assigned to teach a writing-in-the-disciplines curriculum or otherwise prepare students in write in various genres and disciplines, struggled with knowing how to address the disciplinary-based content they were expected to cover with students. Some GSIs specifically described wanting to engage their students in writing by bringing in elements of students’ majors and disciplinary interests.

Many GSIs described bringing content from their home disciplines to the FYW classroom to personalize the class and build on their strengths as individual scholars. For example, Rosa, who studied literature and environmentalism, themed her classes around environmental topics. She explained this allowed her to create “a foundation so that everybody can kind of talk about the same things when we’re talking about rhetoric and
things like that,” but that she also made the choice “because I wanted to do something that was kind of within what I was studying, but it’s also very hard to kind of bring literature into introductory writing courses. So, I kind of picked the environmental side.” Several of the GSIs expressed similar concerns about not wanting to force their own interests into FYW if it did not feel relevant but also wanting to bring their expertise into the course. Lillian, a creative writing MFA student, described how she brought in “contemporary writers and poets” as a way of highlighting relevant social issues that were being discussed in her FYW classroom. Vanessa and Jessica both described how many of their peers in their programs structured their courses around literature-based themes, requiring students to read literary texts as a basis for thinking about writing. This approached seemed to allow these GSIs to teach content on which they had a level of expertise and personal interest.

One challenge that GSIs faced in teaching writing was the fact that first-year composition often requires familiarity with (or at least an understanding of) a variety of disciplinary ways of writing. Several of the participants I interviewed taught in writing-in-the-disciplines focused programs, while all of them, of course, worked with first-year students coming from majors across campus. Gabrielle described the anxiety she sometimes felt in trying to teach a WID-focused course without having a strong knowledge of science writing herself. She spoke of how “intimidating” it was to try to help students read and understand scientific discourse:

They [students] would be like, “I don’t understand what this is saying.” And I’m like, “I don’t understand what this is saying either! That’s what the dictionary is for!” So, it was—I think that was the thing that at the time, I was like, ‘I am not qualified to be talking about these things,” but then realizing, “Okay, it all comes back to rhetoric, it
all comes back to understanding an audience.” And then as soon as I was able to bring conversations and bring activities back to those kind of essentials and fundamentals, I was like, “Okay, I got this.”

Gabrielle handled her anxiety and regained her sense of expertise and competence by falling back on her knowledge of the fundamentals of writing and rhetoric. Another way in which GSIs engaged with disciplinary content was by choosing content that they felt would best engage their students in the objectives of the class. For example, Lucy described trying to engage her students by drawing on examples of writing from a variety of disciplines to help students see the relevance of what they were learning. Lucy had one student who struggled with hating writing and feeling it was “useless for his life.” To help this student, Lucy said, “I tried to include examples from like a million different fields where this is needed, and how it’s not just about writing. It’s about crafting ideas and arguments in a way that makes sense in any context.” These efforts required an awareness of how writing operated in a variety of disciplines and professions.

**Disciplinary Mindsets**

Disciplinary mindsets referred to specific ways of seeing and thinking that stemmed from specific disciplinary ideas or theories, and that impacted the way that GSIs approached teaching FYW. For example, April shared how her study of American literature affected the way she talked about context and place with her writing students:

But the idea that our narratives, our canon, our context, all serve to create the frame through which we view the world that we live in, basically, and then what happens if we shift that a little bit to the left or a little bit to the right? What happens if our canon stops being Whitman and Melville and Poe and it starts being indigenous writers, or it...
starts being something else? So, understanding, you know, our national context, I
guess, the perspectives that create our historical narrative and our national narrative,
understanding those things has helped me to help my students understand their own
contexts. [. . . ] “Place yourself in the world, and understand, you know, if you feel
these things, if you think these things, if you have these certain reactions to readings,
why? Press against that a little. Shift your frame of focus a bit and see how that
changes.” And that’s something that I tried to get my students to do in class.

April’s answer demonstrates how disciplinary concepts of canon and context bled into the
way she talked to her students about writing their own narratives. Isabella, a comparative
studies PhD student, commented that that her perspective as a teacher was shaped by the fact
that “comparative studies is very multidisciplinary. It’s very much about what skills you can
transfer from one discipline to the other, and so I think that’s probably part of what informs
my thinking about it, is like, ‘I must teach multidisciplinary and transferrable skills.’” Sarah
shared that although she felt there was generally a “kind of a disconnect” between her
disciplinary focus and her teaching, she did share that the mindset with which she
approached her teaching was affected by disciplinary study: “The one thing that I do think
carries over is my interest in feminism because I do feminist and queer theory in my work,
and, less the queer theory but more the feminist theory, I see that it informs the way that I
teach and the way that I approach just day-to-day interactions in the classroom.” The
answers of Sarah and the other students in this category suggest that even when GSIs did not
import specific disciplinary content into FYW, their study in their home disciplines shaped
their mindsets in ways that then shaped their teaching.
Sometimes disciplinary mindsets also affected the ways that GSIs responded to their formal WPE. For example, Vanessa talked about not wanting to incorporate strategies recommended by the writing program administrator because of Vanessa’s own disciplinary mindset: “She one time encouraged us to have our students meditate on their writing, which for me is like really like—I mean I get that some people do it, but again, I’m very like, I’m a social scientist, and I’m very like math-y in a way, so I’m not your usual English type of student. So, if a professor tells you to meditate and that’s what you’re going for, it’s kind of stressful.” Vanessa’s disciplinary mindset as a social scientist impacted the way that she responded to the WPA’s recommendations as well as her perception of what strategies would be most effective for her students. Being able to see outside a typical “English” mindset allowed her to empathize with what some of her students’ own disciplinary mindsets might be. Becoming conscious of the impact of disciplinarity on teaching may also help GSIs recognize how their graduate work can usefully inform their classroom work and connect them to their students.

**Disciplinary Identity & Expertise**

Many of the GSIs whose primary area of study was outside rhetoric and composition felt that their lack of disciplinary expertise made them less qualified to teach FYW. Rosa, a literature PhD student, shared how she felt her students were not particularly able to define rhetorical concepts with depth as a result of Rosa’s own lack of knowledge in that area: “I think that’s because I personally get a little bogged down in the kind of technical rhetoric and have a hard time conveying to them the kind of complexities that come in with each of those terms, and the kind of myriad different ways those can be used and taken and understood.” Sarah (PhD student in literature) similarly shared that she felt less qualified to teach FYW
because she didn’t “actually have any rhetorical training like the people in rhet/comp do.” Sarah further shared, “So my partner actually is a rhetoric person and when she talks about her class, I’m like, ‘Oh man, that’s so cool. You are able to organize that differently, and you have this expertise that I just don’t have, and it allows you to do a lot more with your students.’” Ray also expressed feeling less qualified based on his disciplinary focus: “I am an MFA student who’s been invited to do this, and I’m making the most of it and really enjoying it and having a good time, but nonetheless, it’s not like my area of expertise necessarily. Or it’s not something that I’ve devoted years previously to practicing.” Emma referenced more than once her sense that not being a “comp/rhet person” affected her confidence and ability in teaching FYW: “It was really sort of, I guess, intimidating coming in because it’s a comp/rhet first-year writing class, and I’m not a comp/rhet person.” Later in the interview, she shared, “And I think probably where I feel really unqualified is that I’m not a comp/rhet person. I’m a literature person. And I don’t feel qualified.”

In contrast to these students, Diana, who also was a PhD student in literature, shared how her secondary interest in composition helped her feel more prepared to teach the course. In addition to her study in literature, Diana took four graduate seminars in composition and worked as a writing tutor as an undergraduate. As a result, Diana felt more qualified and prepared for her role as a FYW instructor “than just a typical English PhD student who has to teach it because it’s part of their funding package.” The fact that these PhD students were concerned about their level of familiarity with rhetoric and composition concepts seems to suggest that composition has gained status as a discipline with expertise that not just anyone can step into easily (even if many outside the discipline still teach FYW).
Navigating Curriculum, Theory and Practice in Teaching FYW

In response to RQ3, GSIs’ navigation of theory and practice was a theme that appeared implicitly in the ways that GSIs talked about their experiences with navigating program expectations, personal theories of teaching and writing, and actual classroom practice. Instead of speaking often about theory and practice specifically, GSIs more commonly discussed how they navigated programmatic expectations, learning outcomes, and their own personal visions for the course. These generally practical matters seemed to take precedence in GSIs’ minds, but the ways in which they navigated these practical elements also revealed some of their attitudes about the balance between theory and practice.

As demonstrated above, GSIs’ classroom practices were constructed from a combination of the specific resources that they implemented in their courses. It is important to acknowledge, however, that GSIs’ decisions about what resources to implement were not solely their own decisions to make. They did not autonomously and independently decide every element of what occurred in their courses. Instead, they had to navigate within a larger system of influences and structures that shaped what they did in class each day. Much of what occurred in these GSIs’ classrooms (and in all first-year writing classrooms) is determined by larger external forces such as historical and contemporary expectations of what a first-year writing course should be and do (including expectations of the public, other departments on campus, scholarly research, and national organizations like CCCC and CWPA), specific institutional and program culture and requirements, course learning objectives, and available resources and preparation. While these external entities were resources that GSIs chose to draw on, they were also sometimes forces that shaped the classroom outside of the GSIs’ own agency. All these external forces also represent ways of
understanding and doing in the FYW classroom, and thus carry theoretical underpinnings. In navigating their positionality among these external forces, GSIs’ described the challenges of finding balance and creating their own sense of the classroom.

**Navigating Programmatic Structures & Individual Vision**

The complexity of navigating the influence of program structures, expectations, and culture (and the theoretical positions that those structures often represent) is apparent in how it impacted GSIs who had experience teaching in multiple programs. Some GSIs came to their current institutions with prior experience gained from teaching while pursuing master-level degrees at other institutions or from teaching as adjuncts. These GSIs described how moving between programs changed the way they taught and structured their courses, suggesting that GSIs often tried to learn from and adapt to the specific learning objectives and programmatic expectations of wherever they were teaching. For example, April described how moving to a new institution impacted the way she prepared for daily class time:

> So, yeah, being here the way that I compose, I guess, my activities, my lessons, has changed a lot. So, before that, or at the beginning of this semester, it was more, okay, well, kind of more I think the way that high school—not to sound like that’s a negative—but kind of the way that high school teachers I think approach teaching, where it’s, “We have to get to point B, right now. We’re at point A, we have to get to point B. The easiest and most direct and quickest way to get there is just to explain what the hell point B is.” So, I would go into class often times and say, “Okay, we need to learn what a research paper is because you’re about to write one. So what do you think a research paper is?” [ . . . ] But, lately, or towards the middle-end of the
semester, what I’ve been trying to do is work backwards, and this is a resource that I absolutely got from the writing program here, is to work backwards on lesson plans, is to say, “What is the goal for today?” If the goal for today is to get them to understand what a research paper is, get them to conceive of various modes so that they can conduct research, get them to broaden their expectations for research, for research essays, then how do I get to those goals beyond just asking these direct questions? [. . . ] Really, the difference is shifting the emphasis from me, knowing the answer and giving them the answer, to the students, to produce their own ideas, totally independent of me asking them.

April, who had taught for several years at another institution prior to pursuing her PhD, was in her first semester of teaching at her new institution. In the above account, she describes how she readily adapted her classroom planning and preparation because of her exposure to a new pedagogical approach in her new writing program. The way that she talks about this experience suggests her understanding of the value of this backwards design approach to preparing class time, explaining how it helped her with a theoretical shift from focusing on herself as a giver of knowledge to empowering her students as knowledge-producers. This shift in theoretical perspective and practice is something she attributes to the influence of pedagogical strategies taught and recommended by the program.

Like April, Andy described the complexity of creating a coherent whole in his classroom from multiple streams of influence: “Okay, imagine two rivers coming together and forming a single one, so on one hand I’ve got the course requirements, what I’m supposed to do in the class, and in the other hand, I have my own desires.” Andy described trying to meet both the program learning objectives as well as his own goals for his students’
learning. For some GSIs, this combination of program vision and personal vision coincided well. For example, Diana shared that she understood and believed in the philosophy underlying her program’s approach to FYW (writing about writing), and that made it easier for her to implement the theory in her own classroom work: “I think if I didn’t believe in the writing about writing philosophy, then I might have a harder time sticking to it. But since I totally understand it and I am on board, I—anything that I’ve changed that it’s from my own interest or that I want to do, I definitely tried to connect it.” Other GSIs discussed the difficulty of navigating programmatic structure with a desire for freedom to create their own courses. For example, April described appreciating “all the writing program’s work that goes into making sure that their teachers are doing this the correct—or the same things in class as all of their other teachers. [. . . ] And on the other hand, it is, it can be, I think, a little stifling.”

While some GSIs struggled with overly structured programs, others struggled with programs that provided them with too much autonomy and not enough guidance. Jessica shared that she valued the freedom offered by her program, but also wanted more guidance and structure because, as she said, she sometimes felt like she was “trying to be an acrobat without a net. And sometimes it starts to really feel like you don’t know what you’re doing and you’re totally failing.” Similarly, Lucy shared feeling that she did not receive enough structure as a first-time teacher. She said, “Feedback that I’ve given my program is that I did not feel qualified to be writing that syllabus. Like I wish they had just given it to us. And that might be because I’m one of the few people in the program who haven’t taught before.” Vanessa also expressed frustration with her formal WPE because she felt it did not provide enough structure and preparation in how to teach. She describes specifically wanting more
concrete learning objectives from her program, and commented, “When I started teaching, I didn’t have an idea of what I was teaching, much less how to teach it. And so it was really not cool sort of being thrown into having to teach this thing that you don’t really know what you’re teaching aside from writing.”

Ultimately, GSIs wanted enough structure and program-provided materials to work from and to orient their practice. They did not want so much structure that they could not find space to experiment or make the course their own. The difficulty for administrators of WPE is that the right balance between structure and freedom will vary from GSI to GSI and may change according to a GSI’s experience levels. While a first-semester GSI may want more detailed instructions from a program, a GSI who has taught for several semesters may want more opportunity to experiment and develop their own practice. In balancing these concerns, program administrators must also consider the need for coherence and consistency across various sections within one program. This will further complicate the challenge of working towards a balance of structure and freedom for GSIs.

Finding a Balance of Theory and Practice

In addition to struggling with the extent to which their program provided too much or too little programmatic structure, participants also struggled with feeling their preparation was too theoretical or not theoretical enough. This struggle manifested in participants’ frustrations about the balance between theory and practice in their preparation. Some GSIs complained that their preparation was too theoretically focused without enough explanation of what to do each day in the classroom. For example, April shared how her first experience with WPE provided “minimal pedagogical training. More focus on your pedagogical theory than on what do you actually, literally do in the classroom day-to-day.” Similarly, Jessica, as
a first-time teacher, felt frustrated that the preparation that was offered to her was “really at a high thinking-level and not at a practical, hands-on level.” Lucy, also a first-time teacher, shared being “very stressed” about how to spend class time: “Like what do I literally do in the classroom?” She wished that her formal training had focused more on these practical, day-to-day teaching concerns. In contrast to these students, some participants struggled with the fact that their programs had not theorized the courses enough. For example, Anne shared her frustration with a push in her program to implement multimodal assignments in FYW:

   Even though there’s this big emphasis in the program on multimodal composition and teaching multimodal composition, I felt like it wasn’t theoretically grounded. There was no good theoretical justification for it, and when I asked for that justification from the WPA, it didn’t really happen. I didn’t really get a good justification for it, so I just kind of turned to doing my own research and reading on how I could better incorporate multimodal composition in my classroom.

Ruth, a PhD student at a different institution, experienced essentially the same frustration with her program’s directions to “do more digital stuff”: “I feel like I’m pretty open, like if you can tell me why we’re doing something, you can show me some scholarship that suggests this is going to be really helpful for students, and you either tell me what we’re removing, or how this links or builds on what we’re doing, I’m pretty open to it.” But Ruth felt that her program did not provide theoretical justification or grounding for their push for more digital assignments, and therefore was more skeptical of what it meant to implement those assignments.

   GSIs who felt that their programs were either too heavily theoretical or not theoretical enough shared one thing in common: both groups wanted their programs to make clear
connections between theory and practice. GSIs did not appreciate theoretical instruction if it was not also clear how to take that theory and put it into practice. Similarly, some GSIs did not value practical strategies or approaches that were not theoretically justified. Effective programs must not only provide clear justifications and connections between their theory and practices, but also must help GSIs themselves learn how to justify and connect the theory they encounter in their formal preparation and their day-to-day work in the classrooms, and vice versa.

In the next and final chapter, I further examine the implications of these findings for how to structure writing pedagogy education.
Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

The results presented in the previous two chapters demonstrate how GSIs rely on a variety of resources as they shape and compose their classroom practices. Like a bricoleur, they use whatever is usable and relevant to the task at hand, which means drawing on sources in and outside of their formal WPE. GSIs’ creation of what happens in their classrooms is not ex nihilo, nor does it simply derive from their formal WPE experiences as if they were blank slates before beginning their preparation. Rather, GSIs are engaging in a complex navigation between their prior experiences, their participation in teaching communities, their formal preparation, and their own personal interests and goals as classroom teachers. This navigation is both shaped and constrained by their prior experience, knowledge of writing studies, program expectations, and material constraints (such as limited time and institutional funding and support). I call this navigation the practice of bricolage and suggest that it represents a complex cognitive process in which novices learn their craft through drawing on and using a variety of materials. In this chapter, I further theorize GSI teaching practice as bricolage. I also discuss the implications of my results for the way we structure and develop writing pedagogy education and the way we position the experiences and work of GSIs of FYW.

Findings & Contributions

The central contribution of this study is empirical evidence supporting a theory of GSI teaching practice as bricolage. The results of this study demonstrate that GSIs create their courses by navigating a variety of materials, resources, and programmatic constraints and expectations. For GSIs of writing, designing a FYW course is an act of composition or bricolage. This conception of teaching as an act of bricolage carries implications for how we approach and structure formal WPE experiences. For example, it suggests that WPE see
novice instructors not as trainees but as unique individuals, each carrying with them a combination of attitudes, perspectives, materials, and experiences that will impact their work as classroom teachers. To be effective, formal WPE needs to consider how to prepare GSIs to reflectively engage with the unique materials they bring with them and to enact meaningful bricolage instead of haphazard, thoughtless bricolage. This means preparing new teachers not only to deliver program-created learning objectives but also to reflectively consider their own positionality in delivering literacy education to undergraduates and to critically examine the resources they draw on to inform their practice. Without this type of reflection, they will be unable to practice thoughtful, agentive bricolage. Theorizing the positionality and the teaching practices of GSIs also contributes to conversations about the place of graduate students in the teaching of FYW, the place of teaching FYW in the educational experiences of graduate students, and the place of FYW in the academy.

**Bricolage Is (Inter)Disciplinary Work**

Disciplinarity was a recurring theme in the data for this dissertation. As described in Chapter 5, participants frequently imported content and mindsets from their home disciplines to the FYW writing classroom and exported concepts from FYW to their disciplinary work as graduate students. In other words, practicing bricolage in the classroom was frequently interdisciplinary work, and its interdisciplinarity became apparent in the ways that GSIs created bridges or reinforced boundaries between disciplines as they navigated the intersections of disciplines inherent in the structure of FYW in US universities. Frequently, FYW courses are taught by an instructor with disciplinary expertise outside of writing studies, taken by students from a variety of majors across the academy, and populated with content (including writing genres and approaches) from disciplines across the curriculum. In
this way, FYW is inherently an interdisciplinary site, and instructors who teach FYW must manage the interdisciplinary nature of FYW as they make decisions as teachers/bricoleurs.

As explored in Chapter 2 of this dissertation, composition has always been a site of disciplinary tension and overlap. The place of composition (and therefore the place of WPE) has in part been shaped by the historical tensions between literary studies and writing studies. FYW has been seen as a service course, empty of disciplinary content, and not requiring any particular expertise to teach. Although FYW and other general education writing classes account for the bulk of enrollments in English department courses, the work of these courses has been seen as less scholarly and valuable than the work of literary studies. From these historical tensions, however, writing studies has established itself as a scholarly field with its own body of knowledge and is increasingly recognized as a discipline (see, for example, Malenczyk, Miller-Cochran, Wardle, and Yancey’s 2018 edited collection, Composition, Rhetoric, and Disciplinarity, for a discussion of writing studies’ disciplinary turn). Although primary responsibility for WPE typically remains the responsibility of writing studies scholars and administrators, WPE for graduate students represents a site where individuals from the various disciplines of English have come together to engage in the same work of providing introductory college literacy instruction. This has made the FYW classroom itself a continued site of disciplinary contestation and interaction, as scholars trained in a variety of English-oriented disciplines (and some outside English) are employed as instructors to teach FYW. As writing studies gains more status and history as a discipline in its own right, the fact that many writing teachers are not trained in writing studies becomes a more distinct issue. Does a background in English literature or creative writing (or public policy, for that matter) still qualify someone to teach first-year writing, as it typically has in the past? What
level of disciplinary expertise in writing studies is needed to effectively teach the first-year course? These are questions that concern not only WPAs and WPE professionals but also the graduate writing instructors who teach FYW. The GSIs in this study frequently reflected on their sense of their own expertise, training, and competence to teach a writing studies course.

Considering the existence of FYW as an interdisciplinary site, it is no surprise that GSIs’ disciplinary fields of study shaped their mindsets, the content they chose to include in their FYW courses, and their own sense of identity and competence as instructors. For GSIs whose home disciplines were outside of writing studies, their roles as FYW instructors were complicated by the bridges they built (or, conversely, the walls they erected) between their disciplinary graduate work and the complex disciplinary space of the FYW classroom. As the survey and interview results demonstrated, GSIs generally identified FYW as a course bounded by disciplinary lines (many of them, remarking on the fact that FYW is a writing class and not a literary class, were hesitant to overtake the course with literary ideas and themes even as they imported content and mindsets from their home disciplines). GSIs also felt that disciplinary expertise in rhetoric and composition was an asset for an FYW instructor to have, suggesting that GSIs themselves are concerned about gaining enough disciplinary knowledge in writing studies to effectively teach FYW. This study also found that some graduate instructors continue to come to the teaching of writing from non-English and, indeed, non-humanities fields (such as public policy and community development). These graduate students from outside English studies brought with them their own disciplinary knowledge, mindsets, and attitudes that informed their work as instructors, and often dealt with their own sort of disciplinary isolation as they engaged in work that has so often belonged to English graduate students. The GSIs in my study, no matter their
disciplinary background, did recognize writing studies as its own field that they were attempting to learn and the FYW course itself as having specific goals and outcomes that they were attempting to achieve. All this suggests that GSIs sense of their choices as agentive bricoleurs was impacted by their sense of the materials available to them, including disciplinary materials.

FYW instructors whose disciplinary homes were outside of writing studies sometimes seemed to carry a sense with them that certain expertise and knowledge was unavailable to them for use in their classrooms; they lacked the knowledge to usefully employ writing concepts that they were still learning on their own. Effective WPE might help new GSIs to consciously examine these disciplinary boundaries and reflectively question how to cross them to effectively work in the interdisciplinary space of FYW. Part of this process might include examining disciplines as social identities and spaces instead of simply bodies of knowledge, as well as enculturing new GSIs into a community of knowledge producers and users in writing studies.

As other scholars have demonstrated (Welch; Hesse; Ebest), WPE has sometimes operated as a sort of conversion experience in which new instructors are enculturated into in writing studies by exposure to the disciplinary theory and content of the field through formal courses and orientations. The GSIs in my study, although they valued their formal WPE experiences, seemed to place higher value on their own experiences and identities as writers, students, and teachers as well as their participation in communities of teaching as they exchanged ideas with peers and mentors. In this way, GSIs placed their enactments of knowledge and disciplinarity above their exposure to or mastery of disciplinary content. Ken
Hyland argues that disciplinarity is enacted in relationships and shaped by the ways in which individuals interact with the larger community. He writes,

But while individuals enact who they are only in their dealings with others, they all bring different experiences, inclinations and proclivities to their performances as academics, teachers, and students. Disciplinary membership, and identity itself, is a tension between conformity and individuality, between belonging on the one hand and individual recognition on the other (26).

Hyland’s emphasis on the social elements of disciplinarity is useful in considering the enculturation of GSIs, a process that is more complex than simply presenting them with the content of writing studies. Indeed, many GSIs (especially new GSIs) in my study were just as concerned (perhaps more so) by what they were expected to do in the classroom than what they were expected to know about writing studies. WPE might work to provide GSIs with a space where they can explicitly encounter the tension between individuality and conformity, personal instructor choices and program expectations. Encouraging GSIs to acknowledge and explore the individual disciplinary identities and loyalties they bring with them to FYW creates space for interdisciplinary imports and exports rather than disciplinary conversion. WPE might also create spaces for GSIs to experience ongoing interaction with the theory and research of the field of writing studies beyond their introductory writing studies course; this might happen in reading groups, conferences, teaching communities, or online conversation spaces. In other words, GSIs must be invited into the community, and not just the content knowledge, of writing studies. In considering how to introduce GSIs to the teaching of writing as a discipline, it is useful to adopt a social, process definition of disciplinarity. Paul Prior’s work is useful here. He writes,
Disciplinary enculturation then refers not to novices being initiated, but to the continual processes whereby an ambiguous cast of relative newcomers and relative old-timers (re)produce themselves, their practices, and their communities. These images of participation in disciplinary practices point to doing things [. . . ]; they suggest a process view of disciplines (xii).

Reconceiving teacher preparation as a space for inviting newcomers into a field of study positions teacher preparation as a complex site for learning, transfer, reflection, and becoming in graduate education, rather than a site of conversion and training. This also positions FYW as more than a funding opportunity for students outside of rhetoric and composition, but, more valuably, an opportunity for them to engage in the social processes of literacy education and contribute to these processes with their own disciplinary mindsets and knowledge. Their expertise in their home disciplines can become a collection of materials from which they draw as bricoleurs. It can also be a “way in” for them to confront prior experiences, proto-theories, and preconceptions about writing that might need refining as they learn more about the content and theories of writing studies as a discipline.

Although our German model of universities encourages increasing specialization and fragmentation, it may be useful to consider the broader connections and bridges between English subdisciplines as another way of creating coherence, relevance, and meaning for GSIIs who are tasked with the teaching of writing. Michael Carter’s concept of metadisciplines is useful here. Metadisciplines, Carter argues, represent “broader patterns of disciplinary ways of knowing, doing, and writing” and are “collections of disciplines that share an emphasis on certain metagenres and are constituted by the various genres within each metagenre” (403). Interestingly, Carter’s categorization of various metadisciplines puts
literary studies and writing studies in different metadisciplines. Literary studies is placed in a humanities metadiscipline characterized by its emphasis on “research from sources” (405), whereas writing belongs to the metadiscipline focused on performance. Carter acknowledges, however, that these boundaries are permeable, and some disciplines may belong to multiple metadisciplines. Writing studies also shares characteristics with humanities metadisciplines, but its primary focus on performance may mean that graduate students trained primarily in the study of literature may struggle with the transition to the values of a performance-based conception of writing as a discipline. Carter’s concept of metadisciplines carries useful implications for writing pedagogy education because of the way it moves the focus of disciplinarity towards “modes of inquiry rather than static territories of knowledge” and makes visible the “relationships among the disciplines that are often otherwise obscured” (410). Graduate students who come from literary studies (with its focus on research from sources and disciplinary ways of knowing and reading the world) may benefit from explicit exploration of what disciplinary mindsets they bring with them to the teaching of writing and how those mindsets align with or differ from the performance-centered disciplinary ways of knowing and doing found in writing studies. Teaching FYW can thus engage GSIs, as well as their more experienced colleagues who also teach writing, in a mapping and exploration of interdisciplinary literacy work, and a more self-conscious examination of the sources that inform their individual teaching bricolages.

Why Do Graduate Students Teach FYW?

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I raised the question, “What is the purpose of asking graduate students to teach FYW?” Although there are still complex economical, historical, and institutional reasons that so many graduate students teach FYW courses, I would argue
that one reason *should be* to provide graduate students with a challenging intellectual experience and to provide undergraduates with a learning experience that will help introduce them to the complexities of literacy at the college level. One of my interview participants, April, although not asked specifically about what she perceived to be the purpose of GSIs teaching FYW, commented on what she felt the experience provided for her and her students:

This isn’t just something that we’re doing for the university to pay our bills. This isn’t just something that we’re doing to pass the time. This is something that we’re doing to make ourselves into better instructors for our students, whether it be this semester or next semester or a year from now, that we are doing this to become better instructors, to become better teachers, and to—hell, I hope the reason is that we can help somebody eventually, that these freshman students coming in, trying to socially climb or trying to live out the job of their dreams or pursue something that they’re interested in, I hope the goal is that we become better instructors by being allowed to do this, so that we can better help them is ultimately the goal.

April’s answer suggests that she sees her work in FYW as a series of relationships and as a site of social and professional becoming. She is part of a larger community invested in the literacy education of college students, and suggests her responsibility as a writing teacher is to “help somebody,” to assist students “trying to socially climb or trying to live out the job of their dreams or pursue something they’re interested in.” April’s work as a writing instructor is connected to broader goals of social mobility and change for her students. She also sees her work as having personal value by making her a better instructor. Although April does not expand on what it means to be a “better instructor,” I suggest it includes her work of helping her students by engaging in the complex task of gathering materials, sorting through them,
and making decisions in order to create effective and coherent learning experiences for her students. This is an intellectual task, it is the work of bricolage, and it is one that develops capacities of synthesis and awareness of audience that would be applicable in a variety of work spaces outside of the teaching of writing.

A bricoleur who learns how to draw on the materials at hand and put them to work in the service of their craft can transfer that “make do” ability to tasks outside the teaching of writing. This is important because many GSIs who complete master’s and doctoral degrees will not go on to become tenure-line research faculty. For many GSIs, attending graduate school is a path not to a research career, but to a teaching career at postsecondary institutions. According to a report from the ADE based on data from a 2004 National Survey on Postsecondary Faculty, “close to half (49.1%) of all those teaching English in colleges and universities hold a master’s as their highest degree—31.0% of the faculty in four-year institutions and 68.7% of the faculty in two-year colleges” (“Rethinking the Master’s Degree” 3). Additionally, “two-thirds of courses taught by non-tenure-track MA-holding faculty members are lower-division writing courses.” Despite this reality that many master’s students will go on to become teachers, master’s programs surveyed by the ADE were more likely to require their students to take a course in literary theory than a course in composition pedagogy (35). Graduate students with master’s degrees in English pursued a variety of professions after graduation, but the most frequent occupation for them was postsecondary teaching. Of employed college graduates with a master’s in English as their highest degree obtained, 18.1% were employed as post-secondary teachers, 16.8% as artists, broadcasters, editors, entertainers, public relations specialists, or writers, while 13.6% were employed as
secondary school teachers. The rest of the survey population was scattered from 0.1%-4% in a huge variety of other professions (“Rethinking the Master’s Degree” 30-31).

In terms of doctoral education, in 2014, 47.1% of recipients of doctoral degrees in letters found employment upon graduation (“letters” as a category included the subfields of English language and literature, American literature, folklore, creative writing, classics, speech and rhetorical studies, rhetoric and composition, and comparative literature). Of those who found employment, 89.7% were employed in academia (see MLA Office of Research’s “Report on the Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2013-2014”). In 2007, an MLA survey on placement of English doctoral recipients found that in the fall after graduation, 49.2% had tenure-track jobs, while 18.6% had renewable non-tenure-track positions, and 10.8% held non-tenure-track positions of one-year or unknown length (MLA Office of Research, “MLA Survey of Placement” 1). What all of this suggests that teaching will be an important professional activity for many graduates with master’s and doctoral degrees in English. Examining how GSIs build their teaching practices and what sources they draw on in the process has implications both for what happens in their classrooms, but also for their professional lives after graduation. If many GSIs will be teachers in their careers after graduation, it becomes even more important to consider how they build their practices, and whether their pedagogical bricolage is haphazard or thoughtful.

Thomas P. Miller has argued that English studies professors at institutions that carry out graduate programs and prepare graduate students have come to “ignore the fact that they teach and write for a living” (47) by placing the highest value on the research activities of those working in tenured positions. By undervaluing teaching and service, Miller says, “English departments have deprofessionalized so much of the work that they do that the
viability of the profession itself is at risk” (55). Miller proposes not only valuing academic
teaching and service more highly, but also preparing graduate students for work in a variety
of civic settings as well:

   We need to expand our frame of reference beyond the internal workings of
   composition programs, or even writing across the curriculum. Many of our students
   graduate with the institutional expertise, intellectual sophistication, and social
   commitments needed to lead general educational reforms, technological innovations,
   and outreach programs. (55)

As literacy educators (and this includes scholars in areas of English studies outside of
composition like literature, creative writing, linguistics, and cultural and comparative
studies), we must expand our vision of what intellectual capacities a graduate degree in
English or related fields develops in students. And we can imagine the teaching of FYW as
preparation in practicing bricolage, in adapting knowledge and materials to complete the
tasks or solve the problems at hand, wherever our graduates end up after graduation.
Centering the teaching of FYW as an important educational experience for graduate students,
however, must also mean being careful not to exploit graduate instructors. One of my
participants, Rosa, feared that graduate students sometimes simply existed as “a pool of
labor” to act as FYW “mules” for schools who did not care whether the graduate students
themselves completed degrees or gained the professionalization they needed. Instead, the use
of graduate students to teach FYW must offer value both to the GSIs and to the teaching of
writing itself. Exploitation of graduate instructors is likely to lead to haphazard, survivalist
approaches to bricolage rather than thoughtful, creative ones.
Implications for Writing Pedagogy Education: Supporting the Bricoleurs

What does this mean for how we might structure and perform WPE as a field? First, it means acknowledging and understanding bricolage as a useful way to conceptualize of GSIs’ work in the classroom. It means making the practice of bricolage explicit to new GSIs and encouraging them to share and reflect openly on how bricolage shapes their own practices, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. The high value that participants in my study placed on their personal experiences and peer interactions suggest that drawing on informal sources is an important element of GSIs’ practice of bricolage. Formal WPE might encourage participants to consciously reflect on the origins of their own decisions about their writing classes, but also might bring them into conversations about how programs themselves practice bricolage by tracing the origins, justification, and design of common syllabi and program-required assignments or texts. Effective teaching of undergraduates requires a clear explanation and justification of learning outcomes. GSIs in my study were highly concerned about creating “buy-in” with their first-year students, about helping them understand the relevance of studying writing to their lives as students, citizens, and future workers. How clearly does formal WPE create a similar sense of “buy-in” by asking GSIs to consider and critique personal and programmatic theoretical foundations for the teaching of writing? How might formal WPE engage GSIs in discussions about the relevance of their own work as writing instructors to their personal and professional goals as graduate students (beyond providing financial support for their work)? How can formal WPE encourage GSIs to be thoughtful, self-reflexive, and creative in their practice of pedagogical bricolage?

The findings of my study suggest the value of engaging GSIs in these conversations as well as positioning their work as writing instructors as professional and intellectual work
and positioning GSIs themselves as emerging professionals joining a larger community of literacy educators and bricoleurs. Below, I outline several implications of this research for how we might conceptualize and structure WPE moving forward.

**Teaching Communities**

The high value that GSIs placed on their informal interactions with peers and mentors suggest WPE might more clearly foreground and support these opportunities for teacher talk. Scholars in fields outside of composition studies have done important work on teacher networks of sharing. Andrea N. Hunt, et al., have explored the role of informal networks on sociology GSIs’ development as instructors. Sociology GSIs use informal networks to share knowledge about teaching and to develop professionally as teachers. This study concluded that “[s]haring of teaching-related information is best facilitated through one-on-one interactions of choice or within formal teaching groups at the department level led by faculty” (212). In her study of urban educators, Frances O’Connell Rust found that conversations and storytelling about teaching played an important role in helping new teachers reflect on the process of learning how to teach. Jennifer L. Cohen found that teacher talk was important to the development of professional identities among teachers in urban public high schools. These peer-to-peer interactions among teachers are important both because they shape the way instructors perceive themselves as teachers and how they narrate their experiences in the classroom. Teacher talk is also a key site for the sharing of materials that make up GSIs’ pedagogical bricolage.

Other research on GSIs in writing studies support my findings that instructors highly value their interactions with peers as they learn to teach. In Taggart and Lowry’s survey of forty-one current and former GSIs, the “TAs reported that their peers are their most
important resources” (97). Estrem, Reid, and Belchair report that in terms of “the perceived value of various factors in building their confidence, increasing their teaching skills, and aiding their problem-solving abilities as teachers, TAs report that they place more value on their own experiences or those of peers than on the strategies they are learning from the WPE programs” (42). All this research supports my findings that GSIs depend on each other for knowledge about teaching both in terms of what to do with class time and how to deal with problems, and that they use each other as sources from which to piece together their practice and theory of teaching. They use each other to fill in their gaps of knowledge and to find new approaches to teaching writing.

This informal sharing plays an important role in the professionalization and socialization of new writing instructors. If GSIs self-report that informal conversations with other instructors are among their most valuable and supportive experiences as they develop their identities as teachers, administrators might consider creating more opportunities for informal conversations between GSIs and experienced writing instructors as part of preparation experiences. GSIs in my study indicated that they particularly valued opportunities to talk with experienced instructors in ways that were not punitive or evaluative. This may be one reason that GSIs value interactions with their peers so highly: their peers were not also their bosses or professors. Faculty tasked with preparing GSIs might consider ways to create opportunities for GSIs to talk with both peer and experienced writing faculty in informal, non-pressured situations. Informal conversations about teaching with faculty, including with contingent faculty, may allow GSIs to see their professors and mentors as reflective and active members of the same community of practice that they are just beginning to enter. It will also allow them to see the ways in which their experienced
colleagues also practice pedagogical bricolage, but perhaps in better theorized and more coherent ways than a novice instructor might be ready to do. Since teachers value the informality and authenticity of these interactions, programs might consider how they can encourage these interactions without unnecessarily dictating them. WPAs might ask themselves, “What opportunities exist for teachers to interact and see each other regularly, to build informal relationships and teaching partnerships, in my program? How is office space configured? How far away are GSIs’ office spaces from the office spaces of NTT and TT instructors who also teaching writing courses?”

Another possibility for creating cross-tiered teaching sharing is a mentoring program like that described by Fedukovich and Hall, whose program matches GSIs with experienced mentors and explicitly introduces GSIs to the realities of work and contingency that face many composition professionals. Stenberg and Lee also describe implementing a teaching community in their program that included both GSIs and experienced faculty members talking together about teaching questions. They describe the challenges inherent in this mixed-level group (rather than operating as a group with decentralized and shared authority, the group sometimes devolved into a master-apprentice model, where faculty members saw themselves as answering GSIs’ questions instead of joining together in the process of pedagogical inquiry). Despite these difficulties, however, Stenberg and Lee argue the importance of seeing “teaching as an ongoing process of learning, which is aided by collaborative inquiry” (343). Building an effective teaching community will require seeing GSIs less as students and more as new members of a community, as recent additions to the never-ending parlor conversation of teaching inquiry, and as members with something to add to the community’s bricolage.
This also means seeing teaching as ongoing scholarly, intellectual practice rather than a skill that is quickly mastered in graduate school. Stenberg and Lee argue that the “entrenched” model of professor as “a scholar—not a teacher” carries with it the assumption that scholarly development is a matter of mastering a subject, that professors operate as “autonomous, self-developing individuals” and not as collaborators with students or other faculty, and that, once graduate school is complete, teacher development is complete as well (327). The image of the isolated scholar delivering inspired lectures that have come fully formed to a brilliant, lonely mind is as much as a myth as the creative, Romantic genius who composed poetry as the muse dictated, without feedback or collaboration from others.

In reality, for many teachers (experienced and inexperienced), teaching often means sharing, borrowing, and adapting materials from others rather than creating materials ex nihilo. Creating teaching communities that regularly talk about teaching builds on the already common practice of sharing materials. According to Etienne Wenger, “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Wenger theorizes “learning as social participation” which involves the “process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities” (4). He also argues that “in spite of curriculum, discipline, and exhortation, the learning that is most personally transformative turns out to be the learning that involves membership in these communities of practice” (6). If this is the case, he argues, then educators must focus on “inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, [. . .] and of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities that they value” (10). The fact that
GSIs in my study so highly valued their membership in cohorts and communities coincides with Wenger’s conception of learning as social and suggests the importance of WPE creating opportunities for involving GSIs in shaping the communities of practice into which they are being enculturated. For example, GSIs must run workshops on teaching for whole departments; they might teach alongside experienced faculty; they might lead discussions in teaching groups; they might participate in curriculum design or textbook selection; they might have office space in the same general area as do experienced NTT and TT faculty. The possibilities are extensive. Jennifer Grouling argues for the importance of helping GSIs merge their identities as students and teachers in order to see themselves as members of a community of teachers and to recognize that they have a voice in that community. In this way, educators of GSIs can help GSIs recognize their role as agentive bricoleurs joining a larger community of scholarly practitioners of teaching.

Wayne C. Booth writes, “Designing and teaching [an effective first-year writing course] will require the joint efforts of young and old, experienced and inexperienced, specialists in many different fields, those who are most learned and those who have been lassoed off the streets. In such a course, everyone will have something to teach and something to learn” (78-79). I am not at all suggesting that content expertise does not matter in the teaching of writing (or the teaching of any subject for that matter), but I agree with Booth that it will take the joint efforts of teachers from various backgrounds and experiences levels to create effective learning experiences for our diverse student bodies. I also argue that my data demonstrates the value GSIs place on participating in a vibrant learning community that includes both new and experienced members. Where new teachers have less content knowledge, they might have strengths in understanding undergraduate perspectives, seeing
curriculum with outside (and therefore fresh) eyes, and providing disciplinary examples of writing concepts or practices from their home disciplines (examples that might connect with undergraduate writers from a variety of majors). In turn, experienced teachers might offer content and pedagogical knowledge gained from years of teaching FYW writing.

As we invite new graduate instructors in the field, we need meet them there with a willingness to share our own successes, failures, and practices as teachers and to invite them into a social community of becoming that values of a variety of backgrounds and experiences. We can build such a community as we create cross-tiered conversations and teaching communities that help graduate instructors see the ways in which even experienced instructors continue to develop their teaching practice, and that allow new instructors to learn from experienced instructors and vice versa. We can extend teacher development for graduate instructors beyond one or two semesters to reinforce the idea that effective teaching involves continual reflection and revision, and we can conceptualize the teaching of writing as a site where students from various home disciplines gain valuable intellectual and professionalization experience and where they bring valuable knowledge about disciplinary ways of writing and conceiving literacy that can add value to first-year students’ learning.

Experimentation and Play

Another implication of these findings is the importance of empowering GSIs to take ownership of their courses by experimenting and playing as bricoleurs with various informed ways of teaching college literacy to undergraduates. Meg Morgan argues that effectively preparing GSIs to teach may also involve preparing them “to be responsible professionals, to question and respond to what they do within an ethical context, and to look at the short- and long-range implications of their decisions” (394), lessons that will serve GSIs well in or
outside of the profession of teaching writing. Donna Qualley claims that “the furthering of expertise is tied to both the individual and the community’s capacity for modification”; thus, depending on their capacity and openness for change, as some GSIs move through a writing program, “the FYW program makes its mark on them and they make their mark on the FYW program” (70). Qualley provides an example of a GSI named Justin who “drew on his prior experience of working as a prosecuting attorney and began to develop a practice intended to help students consider their audiences” (74). Later, the program adopted Justin’s innovation as “a formalized part of the FYW curriculum” (75). Qualley’s program’s bricolage of assignments and materials was built from sources that included its GSIs’ ideas and contributions. In an example of how composition programs might influence GSIs, Jennifer Grouling describes how a GSI began to see connections between what he taught his students about ethos, pathos, and logos and his own work as a poet (10). In both cases, practicing bricolage, piecing together seemingly disparate elements from different systems, spheres, or disciplines, resulted in new coherences and practices. The many examples in my own research of GSIs importing and exporting practices, content, and mindsets in and out of the FYW classrooms suggest that GSIs have much to bring to the teaching communities of which they become a part if they are allowed to experiment and play.

Administrators of WPE might consider ways to emphasize this sense of play and adaptation (perhaps by encouraging proposals for experimental courses or assignments, creating awards for innovative teaching, or creating a shared blog or resource bank of creative lesson plans to which GSIs can contribute). This type of play invites GSIs to make connections and participate in the making of knowledge in composition. It can position them as members of a community that makes knowledge about teaching instead of as resistant,
apathetic, or “managed” outsiders. Restaino writes that the GSIs she studied in their first semester of teaching “were simultaneously capable, interested, and insightful but also bound up and contained by the pressures of a system not of their own design” (104). She argues for the importance of allowing GSIs room to experiment and for “more of a collaborative, workshop environment for the practicum” that makes room for both composition theory/pedagogy and “sketch[ing] and try[ing] out alternate approaches” (104). In other words, it is important to make room for GSIs to bring their own pieces to the bricolage of their teaching practice. This experimentation and play should be encouraged while also making GSIs aware of the stakeholders to whom they are answerable for the choices they make as teachers: mostly notably, the undergraduate students themselves who have a right to thoughtful, pedagogically sound writing instruction.

Accounting for and Tracing the Origins of Teaching Documents & Practices

GSIs in this study drew on a variety of materials to inform their classrooms, including textbooks, readings outside of composition, and assignment sheets and syllabi from other instructors. Since GSIs draw on such a variety of sources, WPE might better prepare GSIs to critically and reflectively evaluate the sources they bring into the classroom, much in the same way that we teach first-year writers to evaluate the sources they incorporate into their writing. Just as some sources are not appropriate for an academic research-based argument, some sources may also be out of place in the FYW writing classroom. Novice instructors might be encouraged to account for their decisions as bricoleurs. WPAs might ask them, “Are you bringing in this film or poem or assignment only because it coincides with your interests and content expertise or because it represents for you the best pedagogical choice for your students? What makes it a good pedagogical choice?” WPAs should be equally
prepared to provide an account of program decisions, assignments, and course designs. This accounting can be part of the intellectual fun and the rigorous challenge of creating effective writing instruction. It is an opportunity for thoughtful investigation and analysis.

Dylan B. Dryer proposes that WPE educators “provide opportunities to deroutinize” teaching genres like “response papers, seminar papers, rosters, syllabi, notes on office doors, assignments, in-class exercises, and comments on student papers” (442). His list of strategies to accomplish this include examining “the interdependent systems of documents that scaffold the seemingly autonomous figure of ‘the teacher’ so as to learn how teachers are constrained and enabled by training, curricular requirements, historical traditions, assumptions about students, teaching, and language and so on” (443). He also suggests the importance of recognizing the interdisciplinarity of teaching: “Consider,” he says, “how texts produced by classmates or the practicum instructor seem inflected by transfer from some other system (the creative writing workshop, the literature or professional writing seminar, prior ‘English’ teachers, commonplaces about literacy crises, critical thinking, metaphors of clarity, focus, coherence, etc.)” (443). In other words, WPE might make explicit to novice instructors the various institutional, historical, and disciplinary factors that shape their own teaching and the teaching practices of their professors. Teaching GSIs to carefully and critically consider the origins and implications of the sources they bring into the writing classroom will prepare them to create more coherent and effective courses.

Teaching as Reflective Theory and Practice

As part of inviting GSIs into a community of teaching, WPE should be concerned about preparing GSIs to think through the complexities of teaching and develop the mindsets and critical reflection skills that will help them navigate the processes of turning a scattering
of varied materials into a wholly realized and theorized course. The participants in my study typically justified their choices about course design or lesson planning based on their pedagogical goals or programmatic expectations. However, some seemed to struggle with exactly how to move the theory and objectives that they were committed to into effective classroom practice. Teaching, like writing, is not something someone can be taught by being pre-programmed with all the right answers. Instead, teachers, like writers, must develop an ability to navigate their specific context. For teachers, this means an awareness of their purposes and their audience, an understanding of how to challenge or engage students, and the ability to reflect on and recognize the strengths and weaknesses of their own classroom practice.

Many WPE scholars have emphasized the importance of teaching reflection about theory and practice as a way of engaging GSIs with the complexities of teaching (Bishop; Morgan; Stenberg and Lee; Dryer; Hesse; Stancliff and Goggin). E. Shelley Reid writes in her “Letter to a New TA” about the importance of GSIs building on their own prior knowledge and experiences as students and writers as they begin to teach writing: “You bring all this knowledge to your pedagogy course—whether it’s on the tip of your tongue or lurking beneath the surface of your mind like the hidden bulk of an iceberg—and you should take some time to articulate what you know” (130). She also suggests that one way to measure the success of WPE is by “how many variables [a GSI] can identify in a dynamic situation and how many reasonable alternate paths [they] can imagine” (137), an ability that sounds very much like the talent of the bricoleur. In this way, WPE prepares GSIs with rhetorical and pedagogical competence for “considering multiple possibilities rather than settling on a right answer” (137). Elsewhere, Reid encourages writing pedagogy educators to
design difficult and challenging writing assignments for GSIs ("Teaching Writing Teachers Writing") and to resist the temptation towards “coverage” in teaching writing pedagogy courses ("Uncoverage"). Instead, she argues, WPE should “emphasize discoveries that lead to long-term learning over immediate competencies,” thus preparing GSIs to “think like teachers” ("Uncoverage" 16). In other words, preparing writing teachers includes preparing them for the complex intellectual work of theorizing, experimenting, and practicing ideas about the teaching of writing and not simply preparing them with content knowledge. Deanna Dannels, in her research on GSIs’ communication concerns, similarly encourages this type of preparation that creates space for new instructors to sit with uncertainty and helps “teachers understand and learn to find rhythm within states [of] unpredictable motion” in order to avoid “many frustrated teachers metaphorically dealing with motion sickness.” Preparing GSIs to critically examine their processes for teaching and the resources they draw on as part of these processes is one way to move them towards this more reflective, experimental, and open approach to teaching.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There are several limitations to this research. Despite the national scope of this data, the sample size was still relatively small (especially when broken down by degree level or disciplinary focus of study). The survey and interview format of the research also means that the results represent participants’ individual perceptions and accounts of what sources they rely on and how they navigate disciplinarity, theory, and practice. GSIs’ perceptions of their practices may differ in some ways from their actual classroom practices. To build on these findings, it would be useful to also examine the course documents (such as syllabi, readings, assignment sheets, and handouts) that GSIs used in their courses. It would also be valuable to
interview FYW students about their own experiences in various sections of FYW to determine if what concepts they have learned differs based on whether their GSIs came from different degree levels and disciplinary fields of study. Additionally, a study of what resources experienced composition instructors draw on would provide a nice comparison point to this research on GSIs. How do GSIs’ processes for designing and preparing their courses compare with the processes of experienced composition instructors (such as those who have taught for ten or more years)? Each of these directions would lead to a greater knowledge of how theory and practice play out in the FYW classroom, and to a more complete picture of the practice of pedagogical bricolage. Although the field of writing studies has been theorizing the teaching of writing since it became a field (and even before), there is still not enough research on exactly what happens in our FYW classrooms and how instructors’ positionality (GSI, adjunct, full-time NTT, or TT) and background (disciplinary course of study and degree level) affect what happens in the classroom. These questions about the intersections of instructor labor, instructor experience, student learning, and curricular practice are also essential questions for the field because they are closely tied to the identity of writing studies as a discipline.

**Conclusion**

This research project was prompted by questions about what sources GSIs draw on in shaping their FYW teaching practices and how disciplinarity, theory, and practice intersect in GSIs’ classroom work. The findings of my survey and interviews suggest that GSIs draw from a variety of resources, including formal WPE and programmatic structures; instructors’ own experiences, interests, identities, and beliefs; theory, readings, and coursework in and outside of writing studies proper; and conversations and exchanges with other writing
teachers. GSIs’ use of these resources is shaped by the contexts in which they teach and their identities and roles within the university. GSIs occupy dual roles in the university as they are simultaneously students and teachers, novices and experts. Complexity is added to these roles by the various disciplinary affiliations, backgrounds, and expectations GSIs must navigate as they go about their work in the FYW classroom. They must present themselves as having the expertise needed to act as teachers, while also learning writing pedagogy and theory as students. This complex navigation results in the practice of pedagogical bricolage, piecing together the materials at hand in order to create courses and classroom learning.

Understanding the sources and disciplinary influences that inform GSIs’ writing instruction matters because it provides insight into the state of FYW writing instruction in the United States as well as the attitudes, experiences, and perspectives that GSIs bring with them to their preparation as writing instructors. This understanding can help reshape WPE from a reactionary, managerial work in creating competence among novices to an intellectual, community-based endeavor to improve teaching and learning for both graduate instructors and their undergraduate students. One way to achieve this vision is by theorizing the teaching of writing as a practice of bricolage, in which an agentive bricoleur pieces together and composes classroom learning from diverse sources, experiences, and people. Formal WPE structures can play a role in determining whether this piecing together is haphazard or whether it is coherent by helping GSI bricoleurs to take ownership of the ways they shape their classroom practices, exposing them to the variety of resources that are available for them to work with, and welcoming them into a community of ongoing teacher development and pedagogical play. In this way, formal WPE can position teaching as
dynamic, complex work requiring reflection, creativity, and a bricoleur’s ingenuity to practice effectively.
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Appendix A: GSI Survey Questions

1. What degree are you currently pursuing?
   - MA
   - MS
   - MFA
   - PhD
   Other (please specify):

2. What is your primary field of study?
   - Literature
   - Creative Writing
   - Rhetoric and Composition
   - Technical/Professional Communication
   - Linguistics
   - Cultural/Media/Film Studies
   Other (please specify):

3. What is your age?
   - 20-24
   - 25-29
   - 30-34
   - 35-39
   - 40-44
   - 45-49
   - 50-54
   - 55-59
   - 60 or over

4. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female
   - Other gender identity

5. What is your primary racial/ethnic identity?
   - White
   - Black or African American
   - American Indian or Alaska Native
   - Asian
   - Hispanic/Latino
   - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - Other

6. What is your native (first) language?
   - English
   - Other (please specify):

7. What previous experience have you had teaching writing (aside from your current position as a graduate instructor in your program)? (Mark all that apply.)
   - High school/middle school English/Language Arts teacher
   - Writing center tutor
   - Graduate instructor of record of writing in another school/program
Adjunct, part-time instructor
Full-time lecturer/instructor
Other (please specify):

8. How many semesters/quarters/terms, including the current semester/quarter/term, have you taught undergraduate first-year writing courses as the instructor of record?
   1 semester
   2 semesters
   3 semesters
   4 semesters
   5 semesters
   6 semesters
   7 semesters
   8 or more semesters

9. Describe what formal, sustained training experiences you participated in as part of your preparation to teach first-year writing. *(This might include composition theory courses, practicum, mentoring/apprenticeship, a professional development series, etc.)* (Open Response.)

10. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped **build your confidence** as a composition teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates “didn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helped quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered yet.
   - Experience as a writer
   - Experience as a tutor
   - Experience as a teacher
   - Observing other teachers and/or being mentored by other teachers
   - Role plays, presentations, guest- or practice-teaching
   - Composition pedagogy/theory course activities or assignments
   - Reading professional articles
   - Reflective writing/thinking about teaching
   - Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers
   - Discussions/exchanges with mentors or advisors
   - Orientation or professional development workshops
   - Other (please specify):

11. Please rate the following to indicate whether/how well they have helped **build your skills** as a writing teacher. Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates “didn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helped quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered yet.
   - Experience as a writer
   - Experience as a tutor
   - Experience as a teacher
   - Observing other teachers and/or being mentored by other teachers
   - Role plays, presentations, guest- or practice-teaching
   - Composition pedagogy/theory course activities or assignments
   - Reading professional articles
   - Reflective writing/thinking about teaching
Discussions/exchanges with other peer teachers
Discussions/exchanges with mentors or advisors
Orientation or professional development workshops
Other (please specify):

12. When you **face a challenge or a problem** as a tutor/teacher, how well do the following help you address that problem? Use a 1–5 scale, where 1 indicates “doesn’t help much at all” and 5 indicates “helps quite a lot.” Use “0” for anything you haven’t encountered or tried yet.
   - Drawing on my experience as a writer
   - Drawing on my previous experience as a tutor
   - Drawing on my previous experience as a teacher
   - Observing other teachers (or consulting their course materials)
   - Consulting a mentor or advisor
   - Remembering strategies from composition pedagogy/theory course activities and assignments
   - Reading and/or remembering previously-read professional articles
   - Writing/thinking reflectively about teaching
   - Discussing the issue with other peer teachers
   - Drawing on orientation or professional development workshops
   - Other: (please specify)

13. What do you see as 3–4 key principles for your teaching of writing? (**In other words, what do you think is important for you to do as a writing teacher? What do you try always to do or not do?**) (Open Response.)

14. Could you say where those principles come from, or are related to? (**Were they from something you read or learned, something you heard of or saw someone doing, some experience you had?**) (Open Response.)

15. If your graduate work is in a field outside of rhetoric and composition, what concepts (ideas, theories, scholarly literature, disciplinary practices) from your primary discipline shape the structure and content of the way you teach writing? (Open Response.) **(Note: This question was not displayed to respondents who listed ‘rhetoric and composition’ as their primary area of emphasis.)**

16. What impact, if any, has teaching writing had your own research and writing practices as a graduate student?

17. How do you plan to use your degree after graduation? What role, if any, do you imagine teaching playing in your career after you complete your degree? (Open Response.)

18. What is the biggest challenge you face in your teaching? (Open Response.)

19. Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview? If so, please provide your email address: (Open Response.)

20. Would you like to be entered in a random drawing to win one of two $20 gift cards to Amazon.com? If so, please provide your email address: (Open Response.)
Appendix B: GSI Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Could you describe your university context (size and type of school, a little about the student population, number of graduate programs & students, etc.)?

2. Could you describe a bit more about your program context? What discipline is your program in, what emphases are available, what is the population of graduate students like (MA and PhD, etc.)?

3. Describe your process for designing your first-year writing course and syllabus. Why did you design the course the way you did? What resources (people, books, websites, graduate coursework notes/lectures, etc.) did you draw on in designing this course?

4. Think of one of the assignments you created for your course this semester. What are the origins of this assignment? What resources (people, books, websites, graduate coursework notes/lectures, etc.) did you draw on in designing this assignment?

5. How do you see your course design carrying out or responding to your First-Year Writing Program’s philosophy and policies?

6. Describe your process for preparing for a typical day in class. What resources (people, books, websites, graduate coursework notes/lectures, etc.) do you rely on to prepare for class?

7. In what ways do you feel most qualified to teach this course, and in what ways do you feel least qualified to teach this course?

8. Describe the central principles or ideas you want your students to take away from your course this semester. Why do you think these principles or ideas are so important?

9. What is the most influential piece of scholarship you’ve read in terms of your own teaching?

10. What connections, if any, do you see between what/how you teach first-year writing and what you are learning in your coursework and research as a graduate student?

11. What are your plans for your career after graduation? What elements of your graduate experience do you feel are best preparing you for your post-graduation plans?
Appendix C: Pilot Study Survey Questions

1) What is your graduate program?
   - MA in English
   - MFA in Creative Writing
   - PhD in Rhetoric/Communication

2) How many semesters have you taught English 101 (or another first-year writing course) as a GTA (either at this university or at another institution)?
   - 1 semester
   - 2 semesters
   - 3 semesters
   - 4 semesters
   - 5 semesters
   - 6 semesters
   - 7 semesters
   - 8 or more semesters

3) How many semesters have you taught college-level composition courses in a capacity other than as a GTA (for example, as a lecturer or adjunct instructor)?
   - 0 semesters
   - 1 semester
   - 2 semesters
   - 3 semesters
   - 4 semesters
   - 5 semesters
   - 6 semesters
   - 7 semesters
   - 8 semesters
   - 9 semesters
   - 10 semesters
   - 11 semesters
   - 12 or more semesters

4) Which of the following experiences were part of your training as a GTA? Check all that apply.
   - Required pedagogy or composition theory course
   - Required practicum or classroom mentoring
   - University-sponsored Certificate of Accomplishment in Teaching
   - University-sponsored Preparing the Professoriate program
   - Self-teaching (searching online and in books for teaching tips and resources)
   - Teaching and learning lecture series (such X, Y, and Z and this institution)
   - Informal conversations with other GTAs
   - Informal conversations with professors/supervisors
   - Other (please describe):

5) Evaluate the usefulness of each of these experiences in preparing you to teach English 101 from Not Useful (1) to Very useful (5). Leave blank experiences you have not had.
   - Required pedagogy or composition theory course
   - Required practicum or classroom mentoring
University-sponsored Certificate of Accomplishment in Teaching
University-sponsored Preparing the Professoriate program
Self-teaching (searching online and in books for teaching tips and resources)
Teaching and learning lecture series (such X, Y, and Z and this institution)
Informal conversations with other GTAs
Informal conversations with professors/supervisors
Other (please describe):

6) What resources do you consult most frequently in day-to-day lesson planning, grading, and classroom business? Likert scale from Never (1) to Regularly (5).
   - Yourself (individual brainstorming and problem-solving
   - English 101 textbook and readings
   - Teaching manuals, blogs, and websites
   - Other GTAs
   - Professors/supervisors
   - Readings and notes from pedagogy course or other formal training
   - Other (please describe):

7) What resources do you consult most frequently in dealing with classroom challenges (disruptive or shy students, angry emails, objections over grades, attendance problems, lack of participation, etc.)? Likert scale from Never (1) to Regularly (5).
   - Yourself (individual brainstorming and problem-solving
   - English 101 textbook and readings
   - Teaching manuals, blogs, and websites
   - Other GTAs
   - Professors/supervisors
   - Readings and notes from pedagogy course or other formal training
   - Other (please describe):

8) What modes of communication do you most often use to discuss teaching and classroom problems with other GTAs? Likert scale from Never (1) to Regularly (5).
   - Social media group (such as an online forum or Facebook group)
   - Email
   - Texting or phone call
   - Face-to-face conversation in offices or other work space
   - Face-to-face conversation in a social setting (at a cafe or party, etc.)
   - Other (please describe):

9) What modes of communication do you most often use to discuss teaching and classroom problems with faculty members and supervisors? Likert scale from Never (1) to Regularly (5).
   - Social media group (such as an online forum or Facebook group)
   - Email
   - Texting or phone call
   - Face-to-face conversation in offices or other work space
   - Face-to-face conversation in a social setting (at a cafe or party, etc.)
   - Other (please describe):

10. What experiences have been most important and most valuable to you in your development as a teacher?