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Graduate Teaching Assistants in Composition: How Does Preparation Translate to
Practice?

By

Julia Mann Clem

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

2014

College of Humanities & Social Sciences
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia
Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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Has been approved by the committee
for the capstone requirement for

the Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English

May 2014

At the (month and year) graduation

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When I made the decision to return to college for a master's degree in Professional Writing through the English department at Kennesaw State University, I also applied for a position as a graduate teaching assistant in the department. The Professional Writing program at KSU offers three tracks for the MA degree: composition and rhetoric, applied writing, and creative writing. Students who apply for teaching assistantships are not required to declare a primary concentration in composition and rhetoric, but most do have some level of interest in that field. When I entered the program, I had no teaching experience, but I was confident that regardless of the challenges I might face, I would figure everything out. I decided to treat the fact that I had not taken first-year composition as an undergraduate as an advantage—I didn't have any preconceived ideas of how such a class should be taught, after all—and I began my graduate studies with a truly blank slate. At the end of my first year in the program, I felt as though I had learned the necessary information to teach first-year composition, but I was still quite nervous—I knew what I needed to help my students learn, but I couldn't visualize how a given activity would turn out. I also knew that I wanted to cultivate a collaborative, de-centered classroom where my students could take an active, primary role in their learning, but I wasn't sure what that might look like in practice. As I thought about the project that I wanted to design for my Capstone, I kept returning to my questions about how other teaching assistants make the transition from talking and learning about teaching to actually starting to teach. After all, talking about teaching with other prospective teachers in the safe space of a graduate classroom is one thing, but standing in front of a classroom full of first-year college students and trying to turn

those graduate classroom discussions among peers into a meaningful composition class is quite another.

At Kennesaw State University, graduate teaching assistants in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing program are prepared to teach through a combination of coursework and hands-on experience. All teaching assistants begin their first semester in the program by taking a course in composition theory, followed in the next semester by a course in composition pedagogy titled “Teaching Writing in High Schools and Colleges.” In that same first academic year, TAs also participate in a practical shadowing experience with an established first-year composition instructor in the KSU English department and work as writing assistants in the university’s Writing Center. As writing assistants in the Writing Center, the TAs learn how to interact with the diverse members of the KSU student body in addition to working one-on-one with first-year composition students, as well as students in other disciplines. The shadowing experience gives teaching assistants the opportunity to see a first-year composition class in action and provides a frame of reference for the TAs as they complete the syllabus, assignment sheets, and course calendars for the classes that they will teach during the following semester. As part of “Teaching Writing in High Schools and Colleges,” TAs compose a teaching philosophy statement—a helpful assignment that requires these new teachers to focus on the different theories that scholars implement in the teaching of writing and to think critically about how they intend to use those theories with their own students. When I wrote my own teaching philosophy statement as part of that course, I thought carefully about the information that I needed to communicate to my students as well as the kind of teacher I wanted to be. I anticipated challenges at the start of the semester, but as those first few days and weeks of classes

progressed, I found myself straying from many of the ideals that I had outlined in my teaching philosophy statement in favor of simply getting through the class period.

When the time came to plan out my Capstone project, I returned to these concerns and struggles from my first semester of teaching. The primary goal of my research is to find out how other graduate teaching assistants in the field of composition translate the information they take in as they prepare to teach into practical application in the classroom. Did they encounter the same difficulties that I did? What do other TAs do to place their students at the center of the learning experience? If a TA decides to rely primarily on the theories behind collaborative pedagogy, for example, what does that look like in her classroom?

Most—but certainly not all—training programs for English department graduate teaching assistants have evolved from handing new TAs a textbook and a syllabus to involving TAs in almost every step of the process of designing their own courses. At KSU, new TAs enter the classroom with two semesters of knowledge about composition theory and practical experience gained through their classroom shadowing and their time working as writing assistants in the KSU Writing Center. But as many TAs will admit (perhaps reluctantly) and as Heidi Estrem and Shelley Reid discuss in their article “What New Writing Teachers Talk about When They Talk about Teaching,” even with all of this preparation, a steep learning curve often exists. Understanding how TAs in one program use their knowledge of theory and the practical skills gained in their shadowing experience and their work in the Writing Center will help future teaching assistants by providing an additional reference source to guide their transition into the role of class instructor.

This study and research has been conducted at Kennesaw State University (KSU), a public institution in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. KSU began as a junior college in 1963, was

renamed Kennesaw State University in 1996, and has since grown to become the third largest university in Georgia with a total enrollment over just over 24,000 students. As a result of this transition, KSU undergraduates represent a wide demographic and socioeconomic range. Ideally, TA training should help TAs learn to accommodate the varying needs of their students as well as understand the pedagogical theories and practices that will work best in this setting. There seems to be a lack of research conducted on TA programs in general, but specifically in universities undergoing the growth and transition seen at KSU. This study provides a detailed look at how KSU TAs approach teaching so that future TAs will have an additional resource to see how their peers put theory and preparation into practice in teaching the diverse student body at KSU. As a teaching assistant at KSU and in my discussions with fellow TAs, I have concluded that we share a common goal for our students: we want to help them improve their writing and rhetorical skills. I have also noticed, however, that because the student population is so diverse and because many of our students are already active in the workforce, many of the KSU TAs approach writing with their students differently than instructors at other institutions might.

With the results of this study, I hope to present a resource for future TAs (as well as for their instructors) that bridges the gap between the informal chats between TAs about the difficulties and the triumphs of being a teaching assistant and the more formal, classroom-centered learning about the different theories of teaching writing. As a new TA, I knew that I had the tools that I needed to lead my students successfully to the end of the semester, but I struggled with how to use those tools. I felt a bit as though I was staring at a pile of LEGO blocks and a photograph of the complex toy spaceship that I was supposed to build from all of those blocks, but I couldn't find any step-by-step pictures to help me along the way. Teaching isn't done by prescription and every instructor approaches concepts differently, but with this study, I hope to

present a clear examination—or, to extend the LEGO metaphor, some detailed pictures—of how different KSU TAs combine theory and practice in their classrooms so that future TAs who find themselves with some of the same questions I had will be able to read about how their peers dealt with teaching.

Review of Research on Preparation of Teaching Assistants and New Teachers

My knowledge of teaching assistant programs in the field of composition and rhetoric is limited to my personal experience as a TA at KSU, but in order to design a research study that investigates how teaching assistants incorporate the theory they learn and the practical experience they gain into their classroom practices, I needed to understand how other TA programs are structured so I would have a wider frame of reference for my own research. Just as learning about the history of composition theory helped me understand why most of today's composition instructors embrace the writing process and communicate its importance to their students, learning about how teaching assistant programs began and have evolved over the years has helped me understand the logic behind the structure of my own training.

To understand how and why most teaching assistant training programs have changed over the years, it was important for me to gain a sense of what the standard was when teaching assistants became commonplace in English departments. Betty P. Pytlik, in her article "How Graduate Students Were Prepared to Teach Writing—1850-1970," writes that "[f]or at least 100 years after the Civil War, the preparation...of college English teachers...was shaped by the belief that if one could write English, he could teach others to write it" (4). At that time, composition was grouped in with the study of English literature, and the assumption was that if an instructor could write coherently about a text, he could teach his students to do the same. This notion that an effective writing teacher is one who also writes was ultimately adjusted as college

and university administrators realized that TAs and other instructors needed more formal training in writing pedagogy. Effective writing teachers should certainly be people who also write, but they also need to be up-to-date with the latest research on how to teach others to write. The development of TA programs reflected that need as well as the formalizing of the field of rhetoric and composition as an important, legitimate area of study. Maxine Hairston, in her 1974 article “Training Teaching Assistants in English,” describes the teaching assistant program at the University of Texas at Austin. At this time, TAs were given a prepared syllabus and a set of textbooks, but they were also required to participate in a mentoring program led by “experienced senior [t]eaching [a]ssistants” (Hairston 52). The mentoring program ensured that new TAs stayed in close contact with the more experienced TAs, and Hairston writes that mixing the levels of experience resulted in the whole group benefitting from an exchange of “ideas and methods” (53). Lynn Bloom’s presentation titled “The Promise and the Performance: What’s Really Basic In Teaching TAs,” delivered at the 1976 meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, outlines the beginning of the transition from inflexible TA training programs that did not allow for significant input from the new TAs to more learner-centered programs where TAs are mentored and guided through the process of learning how to teach. Bloom writes that in her TA training program at the University of New Mexico, new TAs took a course titled “Teaching Composition” that was “designed to raise the TAs’ consciousness of diverse areas of the subject matter they are or will be teaching, as well as significant aspects of the profession...” (6). In the context of my research, Hairston’s and Bloom’s descriptions of evolving TA programs in the 1970s serve as markers for this shift in focus from simply getting TAs into the classroom quickly to taking the time to mentor and support the TAs as students and

as new teachers. If one looks at the evolution of TA programs, the programs from the 1970s mark the first similarity to contemporary TA training programs.

Darryl Hattenhauer and Mary Ellen Shaw share Bloom's emphasis on mentoring and guiding TAs. In their 1982 article "The Teaching Assistant as Apprentice," Hattenhauer and Shaw share their experience of being treated as "apprentice instructors" at their respective universities and provide suggestions for helping teaching assistants "develop college-teaching skills" (452-453). Kenneth Eble points out in his 1972 article "Preparing College Teachers of English" that even though (at the time of the article's publication) more graduates of English programs went on to teach than graduates of any other academic program, graduate teaching assistants and students preparing to teach were too often neglected by potential faculty mentors in favor of these faculty members' more prestigious scholarship. Eble describes the beginnings of TA training programs in universities across the United States and notes that "[w]here course work [geared towards TAs learning to teach] is being offered, it often appears to be an outgrowth of specific needs of teachers of freshman composition..." (393). He takes a negative view toward the then-current standards in university dealings with TAs, but offers suggestions for stronger English departments and TA preparation. Although these articles give insight into just a few of the teaching assistant programs that existed in the 1970s, it is clear that the training and development of new teaching assistants has been important to most English departments, even if the initial execution of those training and development programs was perhaps not as successful as it could have been.

To see how current TA training programs built on what was learned in the 1970s about teaching TAs to teach, I looked to more recently published scholarship. Catherine G. Latterell presents a survey of TA programs at thirty-six universities offering PhDs in English with

concentrations in rhetoric and composition in her 1996 article “Training the Workforce: An Overview of GTA Education Curricula.” Latterell begins her article by stating that she conducted her survey because she wanted to learn more about “how we specifically approach GTA education” in composition studies (7). She found that in terms of coursework to prepare TAs to enter the classroom as graduate instructors, “23 [of the 36 programs surveyed] locate their teacher preparation program in a single course” (10). This information surprised me, but Latterell adds that all 36 of the programs she studied offer “[m]entoring programs which involve experienced GTAs, part-time instructors, and/or full-time faculty...” (10). Even though my research took place within the context of the TA training program at KSU, I still wanted to understand how (or if) that program differs from others so that I would be in a better position to offer recommendations to further strengthen the KSU TA program. For the purposes of my research, Latterell’s overview gives me an idea of how other teaching assistant programs are structured so that I can draw comparisons between my experiences (and those of my study participants) in the KSU TA program and similar programs at other institutions.

To design a study that would help me gather the information I needed to draw comparisons and make recommendations, I turned to Estrem and Reid’s previously mentioned 2012 article, published in the journal *Pedagogy*, to provide the basis for the design of my project. They write that “while research within composition studies has focused quite a bit on teaching, there’s not been quite as much focus on...learning about teaching” and state that through their research with graduate teaching assistants, they have reevaluated their own teacher training programs (450). They acknowledge that both teaching and learning to teach are complicated endeavors that are “recursive” and “lengthy” and they used a neutral, third-party space in which to conduct interviews, with questions administered by research assistants not affiliated with the

English department (450). Ultimately, Estrem and Reid conclude that in order to accommodate the recursive nature of the process of learning to teach, teacher training program administrators should avoid thinking of a one-semester pedagogy theory course as the end of the teaching assistants' learning. This conclusion is reinforced in Estrem and Reid's 2012 article published in *WPA* titled "The Effects of Writing Pedagogy Education on Graduate Teaching Assistants' Approaches to Teaching Composition." This article serves as a more detailed review of the study described in the previous article by the same authors, and emphasizes the need for composition pedagogy education to continue throughout a student's tenure as a graduate teaching assistant.

Although their study was conducted in a differently structured TA program, Jim Henry and Holly H. Bruland also advocate for a longer-term, reflexive and reflective component to training programs in their article "Educating Reflexive Practitioners: Casting Graduate Teaching Assistants as Mentors in First-Year Classrooms." Henry and Holland's study positioned teaching assistants as mentors in first-year composition classrooms and found that asking them to take on the role of intermediary, so to speak, between instructor and student resulted in "an enhanced perspective" for teaching assistants who might encounter "challenging pedagogical situations" (316). This role of mentor is similar to the role that the classroom shadowing experience plays for KSU TAs. In more research on reflective teaching practices, George Hillocks, Jr. writes in his book *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice* that reflective practice in teaching—that is, maintaining an attentive, interactive relationship with students during the learning process—is "the basis for inquiry in teaching" (31). This sense of inquiry and willingness to adapt to differing student needs is echoed in many of the interview and survey responses I received in my study.

Along similar lines of initially positioning new TAs in a mentoring relationship, Jane Cogie and Peggy F. Broder write about the benefits of starting teaching assistant training in an institution's writing center. In her article "Writing Centers and Teacher Training," Broder relays the knowledge and experience that writing center tutors and new composition teachers report gaining in their work in writing centers. She writes that work in the "writing center is 'real life': the tutor will probably encounter during his or her time at the center almost any problem that can arise later in the classroom" (Broder 39). Irene Lurkis Clark comes to similar conclusions in her article "Preparing Future Composition Teachers in the Writing Center." TAs at KSU begin their teaching assistant training in a similar way—all TAs are required to spend two semesters working as writing assistants in the university Writing Center. Just as Cogie, Broder, and Clark report in their articles, KSU TAs work with a wide range of students in the Writing Center and I can confirm Broder's assertion that time in the Writing Center exposes TAs to situations that may come up when the TA is an instructor of record.

While Henry and Holland focus primarily on the practical experience that TAs gain in their position as mentors to first-year composition students, Richard C. Gebhardt argues for a balance between learning pedagogical theory and gaining classroom experience in his article "Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers." Gebhardt outlines four basic areas in which prospective writing teachers should be knowledgeable, but also contends that writing teachers should be able to apply various concepts in the classroom to pass knowledge on to their students. He writes, "[Prospective teachers] need to know the 'what' of composition teaching; but they also need to know the 'how' and the 'why'" (138). Lattrell poses a similar argument in her analysis of different TA training programs with her recommendation that teachers of new TAs need to "find ways to balance these 'whats' with 'whys'" (20). Sally

Barr Ebest asserts in her article “The Next Generation of WPAs: A Study of Graduate Students in Composition/Rhetoric” that new teaching assistants and graduate students in composition and rhetoric are often “introduced to totally alien methodologies” upon entering graduate school, which contributes to the learning curve that many new TAs experience during their first semester in the classroom (72).

In research that focuses on development of teaching strategies in new and prospective English teachers, Diane Holt-Reynolds and Fred Korthagen discuss teacher education that is not necessarily specific to composition teachers. Holt-Reynolds specifically addresses the importance of prospective teachers using the tenets of different pedagogies (she writes primarily about constructivist pedagogy) as ways to develop “techniques for teaching” and not just as abstract theories or “strategies” (30). Korthagen attempts to define a “good teacher” and emphasizes the importance of self-reflection as teachers advance through their careers so that they can stay focused on the “core qualities” of their identities as educators (93). Offering a slightly different view of teachers and teaching assistants and their identities as educators, Carrie Leverenz and Amy Goodburn caution against shifting the focus of TAs from their teaching duties to concerns of professional development by placing too much emphasis on turning TAs into “professional academics” (12). Much of the research I read in preparation for my study involves English programs that offer the terminal PhD rather than the MA that is offered at KSU. Concern about proceeding as if all TAs will or wish to enter academia professionally is certainly valid and is mentioned here because it is an issue that appears frequently in the literature; however, this is not a topic that came up during my conversations with my study participants. Not only is the MAPW program at KSU far more wide-reaching in terms of disciplines and post-graduation employment opportunities than an English department that offers only one terminal

degree, but I also made a concerted effort to keep my research aims in mind during my study development.

Research Aims

Through my research into pedagogy, teaching practices, and teaching assistant preparation in college-level composition programs, I hoped to accomplish several goals. My primary interest in this research is to learn more about how graduate teaching assistants and new teachers translate the knowledge that they gain in their two semesters of teacher preparation (through coursework, classroom shadowing, the TA Practicum course, and work in the Writing Center) into practical classroom application. In my own preparation to teach and as I made my way through my first semester of teaching, the most pressing question that I had was how I could translate my knowledge of the theories of teaching writing and the practical experience I had gained in classroom shadowing and my work in the KSU Writing Center into the actual teaching that I needed to do. I understood the components of the rhetorical triangle, for example, but I was not sure how to teach those elements in a way that was engaging and easily accessible for my students. The primary goal of my research is to find out how current and former TAs have approached teaching rhetorical concepts to KSU students so that future TAs will have an additional resource to reference during their preparation to teach and as they settle into the classroom environment.

In order to successfully accomplish my goals, I conducted an online survey as well as several one-on-one interviews with current and former KSU TAs. The survey results and the information the TAs shared with me during interviews helped me learn more about the different ways that teaching assistants identify their stance on pedagogy, as well as gain a better understanding of how they approach their classroom environment, course design, and the

planning or adjustment of lessons, assignments, and daily activities once classes are in session.

Based on this information, I investigated the relationship between how teaching assistants initially say they are going to approach teaching versus how they actually accomplish this once they are in the classroom. My research is based on the following questions:

1. What beliefs do teaching assistants hold about teaching first-year composition before and after they begin teaching?
2. How are these beliefs developed?
3. In what ways (through assignments, in-class activities, their approach towards interacting with their students, etc.) do teaching assistants bring their pedagogical beliefs into the classroom?
4. Does the composition pedagogy with which a teaching assistant identifies influence her teaching style? If so, how?

Chapter 2

Research Methodology: Talking with Teaching Assistants

I knew how I would answer the research questions about teaching style I posed at the end of the last chapter if those questions were directed specifically at me, but I wanted to hear from other current and former TAs in my program, too. The TAs are all different—we represent a wide range of ages, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of previous teaching experience. Some of us are novelists and short story writers, some of us are true composition and rhetoric devotees, and some of us are in this program to expand our technical writing skills. Most of us were English majors in our undergraduate years, but that certainly doesn't apply to all of us. Due to our varying backgrounds and areas of interest, we all approach teaching composition differently.

Because I am currently a teaching assistant, I am a member of the group of people I'm studying. In their positions as faculty members and TA supervisors in their study, Estrem and Reid acknowledge the difficulty of getting honest responses to questions from their respondents (451), but I was able to avoid using an objective third party to conduct interviews. I suspect, in fact, that my position as a colleague and peer to my study participants ensured that the responses I received were more honest and forthright than if I had been in a position of administrative power. Information was gathered in two ways: an anonymous, web-based survey, and one-on-one interviews that were transcribed without identifying information to preserve anonymity. To be eligible to participate in the survey and the one-on-one interviews, participants had to be either a former teaching assistant or a current TA who is teaching English 1101 or 1102. At KSU, English 1101 is the first required composition course and focuses on rhetoric and writing

about texts. English 1102 follows 1101 and combines rhetoric with research. New TAs who had not yet begun teaching were excluded from both the survey and the one-on-one interviews.

Online Survey

The web-based survey was conducted with the survey-building website Survey Monkey over a period of several weeks in October and November of 2013. Eleven online survey participants answered a total of twenty questions (see Appendix A); the first three questions were single-answer multiple choice questions designed to gather basic demographic information about how many semesters the participants had been teaching at KSU and whether or not they had previous teaching experience, and the remainder were a combination of Likert scale and short answer questions. Questions four through ten were each followed by a short answer box that allowed the participant to give detailed examples or otherwise expand on his or her answer to the previous question; of twelve respondents, eleven chose to expand on the questions and give concrete examples of, for instance, how their teaching philosophy influences their pedagogical decisions or how a specific assignment illustrates their approach to teaching writing. The next-to-last question in the online survey asked the participant to reflect on his or her goals and concerns when designing assignments and in-class activities for English 1101 and/or 1102 students, and the final question simply gave the participant an open response box in case there was anything else related to his or her teaching experience that the participant wanted to add.

The online survey link was distributed to the teaching assistants during the first half of the semester, and although the questions took no more than twenty to thirty minutes to answer, I kept the link active for several weeks to give the participants plenty of time to complete the survey. Based on the answers to the survey questions, I was able to gather a basic understanding of how the TAs approach teaching English 1101 and/or 1102 in terms of composition

pedagogies. Both the results of the survey and of the personal interviews were used to present a more detailed look at how TAs translate their education in composition pedagogy into their classrooms.

Online Survey Design

The bulk of the online survey questions asked participants to rate their level of agreement—via Likert scale—with whether or not they used specific tactics or hallmarks of certain composition pedagogies in their classrooms. For example, one question asked participants to select a level of agreement with the statement “I use collaborative learning strategies in my classroom at KSU,” while another question asked participants to select a level of agreement with the statement “I use discussions of current events as a way to contextualize the material my students learn.” That first question directly referenced collaborative composition pedagogy, while the second is a reference to post-process theory. Although I did ask the interviewees specifically to tell me about their teaching philosophy, I wanted to take a more indirect approach with the online survey participants. These Likert scale questions fell under the coding category of “pedagogy of approach.” Questions that asked survey participants to expand and give, for example, concrete examples of how they implement a specific pedagogy in the classroom were coded as “pedagogy of content.” As I coded the data, I found it important to make a distinction between the participants’ level of agreement with an element of a specific composition pedagogy and how they reported actually putting that pedagogical theory into practice. This separation illuminates the differences between what the TAs *think* they do and what they *actually* do in the classroom.

Interviews

Except for one interview that was conducted at a local restaurant, all of the one-on-one interviews were conducted in the TA office, which is a private space for the teaching assistants. Using the TA office as an interview location allowed me to interview my colleagues in a comfortable space where we could all be assured that our discussion would not be unexpectedly interrupted. Estrem and Reid write that their one-on-one interviews created a “thirdspace” or a “kind of temporary context” between interviewer and interviewee, and while I do not think that the interviews I conducted reached such a level, I am certain that the use of the TA office allowed for a more open discussion than, for instance, a classroom (453). The in-person interview questions (see Appendix B) were designed to help me gather more specific information as to how TAs teach certain concepts and how their thoughts about teaching influence their work in the classroom. Asking the interviewees about the practical, day-to-day aspects of teaching and assignment design as well as the more theory-based beliefs behind their teaching decisions allowed me to draw conclusions about the intersection of theory and the more nebulous thinking about teaching and the practical application of those theories and beliefs.

Although I consider my position as a member of the group of people I surveyed and interviewed personally to be an advantage, I was careful to avoid inserting hints of my own experiences and/or opinions into the one-on-one interviews. In her book *Strategies for Empirical Research in Writing*, Mary Sue MacNealy writes that some of the advantages to case study research are the “rich detail” and “more precise definition of research questions” that can be gained through actually sitting down with another person (199). While these points are some of the main reasons that I conducted case study interviews, it is possible that my interview subjects left out some of the detail that I was looking for because they know me personally and assumed

that I knew exactly what they were talking about, or thought that I would make assumptions and form my own conclusions about their answers to my questions based on our history as classmates and colleagues. It was important to the credibility of my data to ensure that my interviewees answered questions as clearly and as completely as possible, so I did ask follow-up questions to clarify at times. I transcribed interviews as precisely as possible, leaving out identifying data and without adding any additional information that I might have had because of my relationship to the interviewees.

Interview Design

One major advantage to the in-person interviews is that I was able to ask clarifying and follow-up questions when necessary. I began each interview by asking questions that would help me gather some demographic information, and then I asked each interviewee about what he or she had found useful about the TA training courses. That initial question gave me a logical transition into next question, which asked the interviewee to talk about the elements of the TA training courses that he or she had implemented in his or her own classes. I did notice some overlap in the responses I received during the interviews, and I found that the more open format of the interview allowed me to gather more detailed information than was present in the survey responses. When I designed both the survey and the interview questions, I anticipated that the two different types of data would reinforce each other; as I completed the coding process and spent many hours reading over the interview transcripts, I found that the survey data provides an in-depth look at how TAs approach teaching and actually teach, while the information I gathered during the interviews illuminates the TA training process—what the TAs thought was helpful about the required courses and practical experiences, and how they transitioned from students to teachers.

The combination of the survey, personal interviews, and analysis of responses allowed me to gather the data I needed to explore my guiding research questions. My study materials were approved by the KSU Institutional Review Board, and I have the appropriate consent documents from each study participant. All online survey participants were given identical questions to answer, and I posed the same basic questions to each interviewee. Follow-up and clarifying questions varied slightly in the interviews, and each interview lasted approximately half an hour to forty-five minutes. To gather survey and interview participants, I sent a message to the KSU teaching assistant email group explaining the project and requesting participants. While Estrem and Reid had the advantage of a large sample size spread out over two universities, my focus was much narrower. The TA program in KSU's English department is relatively small—at the end of my tenure in the program, I am one of only five TAs remaining from my entering cohort. Because my sample size was limited for the personal interviews, I interviewed all of the eligible TAs who responded to my initial email requesting participants—two TAs from the year ahead of my group, two from the year behind my group, and one from my group.

Coding Process

The information that I gathered from the online survey and the individual interviews allowed me to see if there is any difference between how teaching assistants say they approach teaching and what they actually do when they teach. While Estrem and Reid placed emphasis on the stories that their study participants relayed during interviews, my focus was more on my study participants' thoughts about their approaches to teaching specific elements of writing.

I coded the online survey responses following a coding strategy similar to that outlined by Estrem and Reid. In their discussion of coding their study responses, Estrem and Reid address

the differences between study participants talking about a “pedagogy of approach” versus a “pedagogy of content” and I have taken a similar approach (455). Responses that correspond to a “pedagogy of approach” address how the teaching assistants envision classroom or teaching practices—in other words, what they say they might do—while responses that fall under a “pedagogy of content” address how the teaching assistant actually handles teaching a certain concept or lesson—in other words, what they actually do. The remaining online survey data were placed into two additional categories: comments detailing each respondent’s teaching philosophy and its influence on assignment design and explanation of concepts, and comments about goals and concerns when designing lessons and assignments. I found the interview data more difficult to sift into categories. As a result, I chose to present the data by grouping answers to questions that illustrate my research aims.

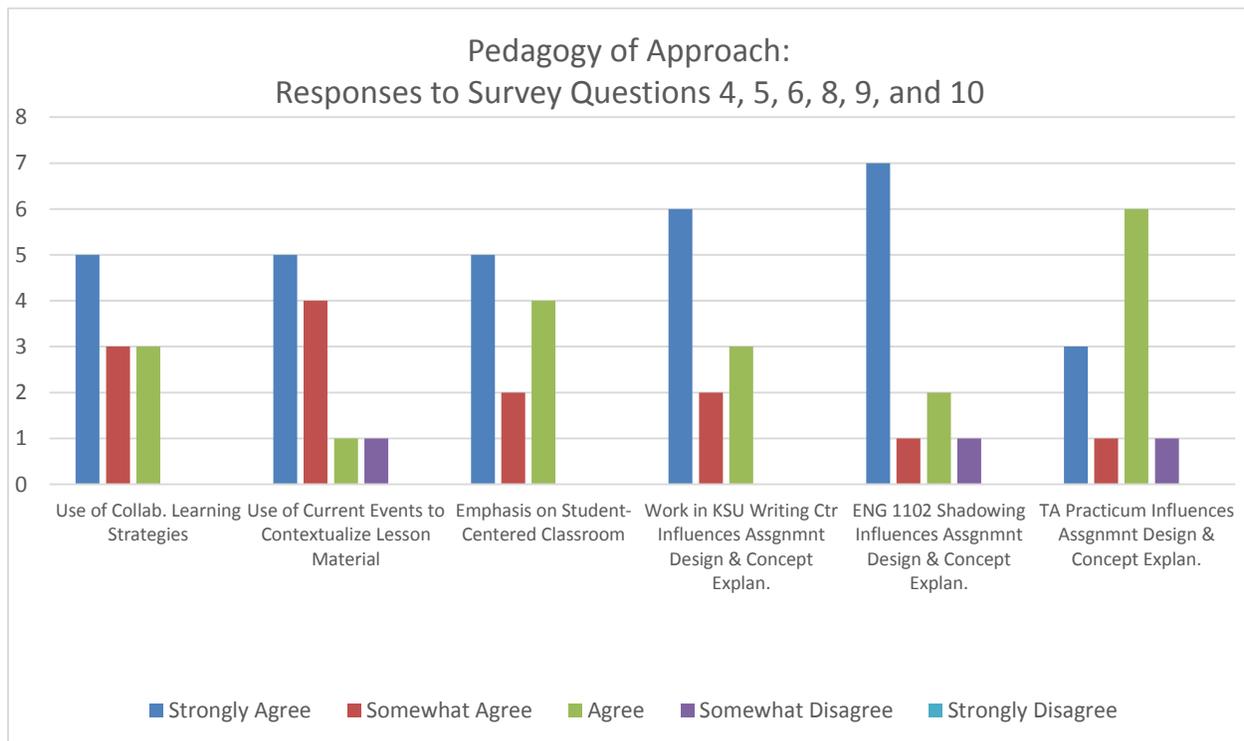
In both the online survey and in the interview, I collected basic information: number of semesters spent teaching as a TA at KSU, the names of courses taught as a TA, and data about whether or not the participants had any previous teaching experience. This information helps define the KSU English TA program in the context of this study. I took a holistic approach to coding the survey data—my primary concern was determining the depth of information I had received from respondents, and then placing those responses into categories that corresponded to what I was hoping to learn as I designed the study in the first place. Because my sample size was so small relative to other studies, I wasn’t concerned with categorizing responses by the level of participants’ teaching experience; rather, I wanted to see if there were any differences between what the respondents said they plan to do in their classrooms and what they report that they actually do. I also wanted to be able to see how the TAs specifically used the information they learned in the TA training courses.

Chapter 3

Teaching Assistants in the Classroom: What We Say and What We Do

The data collected from the online survey and from the individual interviews allowed me to see not only the differences between how TAs envision their teaching and what they actually do as teachers, but also the wide range of creativity in how the study participants teach first-year composition. Much like Estrem and Reid did in their study of teaching assistants, I designed the online survey and the in-person interviews to work together—several of the questions from the survey and the interview were, in fact, quite similar. My primary intention in repeating questions in the two different formats was to see if there were any major differences between what the respondents said when they had a chance to edit their responses and when they had to answer under a little more pressure. Ultimately, the two different formats resulted in relatively similar responses, but the interview responses tended to be more detailed.

Survey Results: Pedagogy of Approach (Questions 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10; see Appendix A)



The chart above illustrates the responses to the survey questions that asked how participants approached teaching composition. All respondents agreed that they use collaborative learning strategies, and ten out of eleven respondents agreed to using discussions of current events to contextualize course material. Similarly, all respondents also reported viewing their classrooms at KSU as being student-centered rather than teacher-centered. When asked to give specific examples of each of these composition pedagogies, the survey participants gave similar answers. Almost all of the responses to the prompt to give specific examples of collaborative learning strategies referenced peer review, group work, and class discussions, while one participant wrote about using “process groups.” In these “process groups,” students “are placed in groups to help brainstorm topics and arguments for individual assignments.” These examples of collaborative pedagogy in action demonstrate that TAs are taking the recommendations of many composition scholars and putting them into practice, even when these pedagogies are difficult to successfully execute. In her article “Collaborative Pedagogy,” Rebecca Moore Howard writes that “...small-group discussion, peer response, and collaborative writing [...] can enhance students’ experience of writing classes, but the perils are also well documented...” (55). Keeping students on task in a group setting can be a challenge, and any type of collaborative writing assignment can bring up concerns of plagiarism—oftentimes more for students than for instructors. Although none of the online survey questions specifically asked about difficulties that the TAs might have encountered while implementing these different collaborative tactics, some of these issues were mentioned by individual interviewees.

Survey Results: Pedagogy of Content (Questions 4a, 5a, 6a, 8a, 9a, and 10a)

Responses to Question 5a in the online survey, which asked participants to give an example of how they use discussions of current events to contextualize lesson material, also

showed a common thread. Many of the respondents mentioned using individual readings or collections of readings that reference current events, but rather than using these resources as a way to situate and discuss the dynamic and culturally influenced act of writing, the TAs report using these readings as a way to keep students engaged in the course. Several participants wrote that they assign articles about Facebook—specifically, about “people who got into trouble using Facebook”—in an attempt to frame discussions about rhetoric in terms of student interests. One survey respondent reported using current events such as “...the War on Terror or international conflict in the US to discuss how to use a concrete example to make a larger point...,” while another used “the [2012] presidential race to discuss rhetoric and visual rhetoric.” These examples show different approaches to incorporating current events into a composition class.

The notion of a decentered—or student-centered—classroom is a frequent topic of discussion among the TAs. In response to Question 6a, which asked participants to give examples of how they establish a student-centered classroom environment, most of the TAs wrote about taking a less active role in class-wide discussions. One respondent, in fact, wrote the following: “Come to my class: you will see students leading the discussion, asking questions of classmates and calling on one another. I will be silent in a corner.” Another TA mentioned a similar tactic of deciding to observe class discussions rather than actively participate, but added that these discussions “were always awkward at first, but students often came to some profound conclusions without my help.” A few other responses mention the issue of students needing an initial push in the right direction. One respondent wrote that she leads “reading discussions...that require students to propel the conversation,” while another TA wrote that she leads “the discussions but [uses] a [Socratic] style rather than a lecture.” Using a Socratic response style—in other words, asking questions to help students think through issues and progress the

discussion—is a technique mentioned by Howard. She writes that an instructor who asks open-ended questions “that can have a variety of ‘correct’ answers,” will usually lead discussions that are collaborative and productive (58).

One of the goals of both the online survey and the in-person interviews was to gather information about what the TAs thought was helpful about the teaching assistant training courses and experiences. What I wanted to know specifically was how these preparatory classes and experiences influenced how the TAs designed assignments and explained concepts to their students, so I phrased those particular online survey questions to reflect that goal. In response to a survey question about how their work in the KSU Writing Center influences how they design assignments and explain concepts to students, most of the TAs wrote about the advantage of being able to see what types of assignments students struggled with and how assignment sheets can either make that confusion better or worse. One TA wrote that “[w]orking with students as a [writing] tutor helps me see where an assignment may confuse them...I take this information to create clearer assignment sheets and assignments. I also show them what to look for on the assignment sheet to help fuel their execution of the assignment.”

Another part of the teaching assistant preparation is a semester of shadowing an experienced instructor in the English department. In my research, I found that for most of my study participants, the shadowing experience did not result in a continuing relationship between the teaching assistant and the instructor he or she shadowed, but nonetheless, almost all survey participants and interviewees reported learning a great deal from their role as an observer and active participant in an English 1102 class. The survey responses to the question about how the English 1102 shadowing experience influenced the TAs’ process of designing assignments and explaining concepts can be sorted into two groups: those who learned what they wanted to do as

instructors, and those who learned what they did not want to do as instructors. Unfortunately, most of the survey participants who did not take as much away from the shadowing experience as others chose not to elaborate in their answers, so I wasn't able to gather much information about what they thought didn't work in the classroom. One respondent, however, did give some more specific information. This TA reported shadowing an instructor who "had a formulaic way of explaining assignments and graded them by a rubric. While I liked that she used the rhetorical canon to contextualize assignments, I couldn't get on board with the by-the-numbers way that she evaluated her students' work." Alternatively, one survey participant reported modelling his or her own classes very closely after those of the instructor he or she shadowed. This TA reports using the same textbook because she "saw how successful the book was in generating thoughtful class discussion and in showing students how to use research to write argumentatively." In more detailed information about how this person uses his or her shadowing experience, the participant writes that "[w]hat also worked really well [...] was the daily informal writing that students did on what they read, and that's how I open all my own classes as well—with students writing informally on [...] what they read for homework." Whether or not the survey respondents reported implementing teaching strategies learned in their shadowing experience, a common thread that ran through all of the responses was that the semester of observing and participating in a class that they would teach a year later helped them see how "real world" classrooms—and students—function.

Survey Results: Teaching Philosophy (Questions 7 and 7a)

Towards the end of the online survey, participants answered two questions about their teaching philosophies. One question asked participants to rate, via Likert scale, their level of agreement with the following statement: "My teaching philosophy guides how I approach

teaching English 1101 and/or English 1102 at KSU.” All respondents agreed with the statement. The participants’ expanded responses to a question that asked them to explain how their teaching philosophy guides their approach to teaching were detailed and showed a wide range of approaches. One respondent wrote that because her “teaching philosophy focuses on engaging with the students’ individual writing processes...I do not give them a set process that they should follow, but instead help them individually realize how best to use the process that works for themselves.” The same respondent continued with the comment to mention an interesting teaching technique: “My philosophy also stresses that writing is a form of communication, so I usually will ask that the students vocalize an argument to me first to help them see how writing and verbal communication are linked.” Another participant mentioned her teaching philosophy in terms of a specific goal: “One of my goals is to create a community of learners, so activities are planned to encourage students to talk to each other, respond on each other’s blog posts, etc.”

Although a few respondents did not explicitly mention tenets of their teaching philosophy, their comments still show elements of their approach to teaching. One such response reads, “I believe that the best students in my classes saw themselves as writers—not in the sense that they wanted to be novelists or study English, but in an authoritative sort of way. Even though they were freshmen, these students ‘invented the University’ and wrote both as ‘experts’ and [as] themselves, and I encouraged this.” Another respondent addressed some of the limitations of the classroom and the effect those can have on the ideals a TA might hold: “There are certain realities of the classroom that make me less able to follow my teaching philosophy (time restrictions, etc.). However, I do try to reinforce process-centered writing instruction and empower my students to create perhaps not quite as rigidly within the strictures they’ve been exposed to in the past.”

Survey Results: Concerns & Goals (Question 11)

The next-to-last question in the online survey asked participants to expand on the goals and concerns they have when designing writing assignments, lesson plans, and daily activities for their students. Most of the participants phrased their thoughts in terms of learning goals for their students, but a couple of respondents voiced specific concerns. On the subject of the required lesson topics, one TA wrote:

Rhetoric doesn't really seem to lend itself to a ladder-like progression once ethos, logos, [and] pathos have been taught along with the basic concepts. It seems the students need to be taught MLA [style] and proposals and research methods and sentence structure all at the same time, and it's difficult to decide that any one area is more important than another. As soon as I determine to teach one concept, I later feel as if I should have taught something else first...

Although this concern about sequencing echoes some of my own struggles with learning to teach, none of the other participants mentioned similar issues. Another TA voiced concern about critical thinking abilities in first-year college writers: "It is always challenging to get [students] to think outside of the box when it comes to defining literacy and the different ways in which writing is used outside of the academic world."

The respondents who answered in terms of the goals that they have for their students seem to share some similarities. Many of the answers to this survey question in particular draw parallels to some of the statements about teaching philosophies, too. Several respondents mentioned the desire to help their students understand writing as a creative process rather than a discrete task to be finished in one attempt, and also shared the goal of using familiar examples and "modern terms" to explain concepts. These goals are mirrored in several of the statements

about specific class exercises and assignments. Two TAs mentioned the goal of students learning a specific writing-related skill, in both the contexts of assignments and class meetings. One TA wrote, “When I design assignments, my goal is to make sure my students can hone in on specific core skills for writing: thesis writing, paragraph development, understanding counterargument, etc.” In terms of class meetings, another TA wrote, “For each lesson, I have an ‘enduring understanding’ that I want them to walk away with as well as (usually) a skill attached to that understanding that I want to help them practice.... Keeping students awake and engaged is a primary concern and goal—second only to having something worthwhile for them to learn that day.” Students who are engaged in the lesson develop a stronger link between a specific skill and the “enduring understanding” of that skill.

Interview Results: Teaching Assistant Training Program

All five interviewees gave similar responses to the fourth question, which asked them to talk about what they found most useful about the TA training courses and practical experiences. The interviewees all named the classroom shadowing experience as the most useful part of their training to be teaching assistants. One interviewee pointed out that without the shadowing experience, she would not have known “how a classroom operates” despite her many years as a student. Another TA agreed that the shadowing was useful to her, but mentioned that during that experience, she learned what she didn’t want to do as a teacher just as much as she learned “what to expect and how to prepare [for the classroom].” One interviewee reported that she modeled her own classes after the class she shadowed, especially the format of her peer review sessions. The interviewee remarked that she was able to see that peer review didn’t “completely fall apart on [the instructor she shadowed]” and that gave her more confidence when it came time to facilitate peer review alone.

Most of the interviewees reported that the composition theories they learned in the PRWR 6300 course, “Understanding Writing as a Process,” were overwhelming, but ultimately, that information proved to be useful. One TA remarked that she “had a hard time seeing how [she] would need any of it” but said that she found herself returning to much of that information to help her plan assignments and classroom activities. Two of the interviewees mentioned the PRWR 6500 course, “Teaching Writing in High Schools and Colleges,” as being especially helpful. One TA mentioned that he had never created a syllabus before, nor had he designed assignments, so having the opportunity to “try out assignments and see what would work and what didn’t work” was instrumental in his preparation to teach. Several of the interviewees also stated that they were glad to have their entire course plan for English 1101 finished by the end of the semester before they began teaching. Teaching for the first time was the source of a lot of anxiety for the TAs I interviewed, but it seems that having a semester of close supervision while designing their classes helped minimize those feelings.

Even though the survey results show that the time that the TAs spent working in the KSU Writing Center was helpful in learning about assignment design and explanation of concepts in writing, only one interviewee specifically mentioned the Writing Center as a useful part of the teaching assistant training program. Of all five interviewees, this person was the only one who had previous experience working in a university writing center, and he reported that in his interactions with students—both individually and in groups—he uses “similar methods” to those that he learned in writing centers.

Interview Results: Other Resources Used for Teaching and Assignment Preparation

To form a more comprehensive picture of how the teaching assistants prepare themselves for the classroom, I also asked about any additional resources that they relied on when designing

assignments and activities, or when deciding how to teach a particular concept. Trial and error was a common response from the interviewees, but fortunately, they did continue with more detailed answers. One TA reported that knowing, especially in the context of teaching English 1101, that there were certain elements that she was required to teach was useful in planning her class and sequencing assignments. One interviewee, who at the time of our interview was guiding her students through a multimedia project, said that she listened to podcasts, visited the library to find books suggested by peers, and spent time talking with the other teaching assistants to gather ideas for her class design. Only one interviewee reported not relying much at all on outside resources for teaching preparation and assignment design. In our interview, he explained that he preferred to be “creative with [his] assignments, so that [creativity] comes from [his] experience rather than another resource.” A common answer given by all of the interviewees was that they valued peer feedback—both formal and informal. One interviewee mentioned that she sometimes asks other TAs what they “like to do when [they] talk to [their] students” about a particular concept, and added that she has discovered several excellent resources, such as specific YouTube videos, through those conversations.

Interview Results: Goals When Designing Assignments and In-Class Activities

In the online survey, I also asked about the TAs’ goals and concerns when designing assignments and in-class activities, but I wanted to see whether the format of a one-on-one interview would result in different answers. For the most part, I found that each type of data reinforced the other. One TA mentioned that her primary goal was to keep her students engaged and to expose them to more expressive pedagogies, such as freewriting and journaling. Several interviewees reported that one of their goals with in-class activities was to walk students through the necessary steps to complete a particular assignment successfully. Another TA mentioned her

goal of using homework assignments as a way for students to practice skills they learned in class. In our interview, she explained her approach: “If I go through how to summarize an article, [...] you’re going to practice [that skill] right after [my explanation]. And then you’ll have an assignment following, just so you can practice it again.” The use of in-class activities and homework assignments together to reinforce concepts was a technique that came up in several of the interviews. Two of the interviewees also mentioned their focus on helping students learn to communicate clearly and respectfully with their peers and other people who may read their writing.

Interview Results: Teaching Philosophy

A few of the teaching assistants I interviewed named specific composition theories when I asked them about their teaching philosophies, while some indicated that their philosophy was cobbled together from several different schools of thought. Because there was so much agreement among some of the survey responses that fell under the category of “pedagogy of approach,” I anticipated that the interviewees might share similar teaching philosophies. Instead, I found that although there were overlaps in the TAs’ beliefs about teaching, the people I interviewed shared similar goals for their students but held different philosophies about how to best accomplish those goals. One TA identified herself as a creative writer, and her comments about her teaching philosophy indicate that this self-identification influences her stance on teaching. In our interview, she reported that she uses expressivist techniques—freewriting and journaling, in particular—in the classroom because those more closely mimic her own writing process. Interestingly, however, she is the only person I interviewed who admitted to changing her teaching philosophy significantly once she began teaching. As we talked, she said that as her first semester of teaching progressed, she realized that although her students did need the space

to explore writing and not worry too much about “being bashed on their grammar,” she needed to help them see that college-level writing occupied a “different realm” than they had previously experienced. As a result, she now makes a distinction between in-class writing and formal papers: she takes a more expressivist approach to in-class writing assignments but grades formal papers by stricter standards.

Another TA said that she considers herself to be a social expressivist when it comes to her teaching philosophy, and she added that one of her core beliefs about writing and teaching writing is that it’s important to remember that “writing is, at its core, for expression.” She further explained to me that part of her teaching philosophy is helping students understand that writers must be aware of their audiences, so she sequences her assignments for English 1101 so that each assignment requires students to write with a different audience in mind. On the other end of the spectrum, another interviewee reported that, as a relatively new teaching assistant, she was still developing her teaching philosophy. When I asked her whether she had any guiding principles in the absence of a more traditional teaching philosophy, she explained to me that she values facilitating successful group work with her students. She added that she “find[s] that [students] learn more in groups. [...] Students, especially when they’re younger, are more comfortable around each other. They’re able to talk to each other and they seem to grasp concepts better.” This focus on group work was mentioned by almost all of the interviewees, again reinforcing some of the online survey data.

One of the TAs who identified his teaching philosophy as a mix of several different theories and pedagogies explained to me that “a big part of the development [of his teaching philosophy] was [PRWR] 6300.” He told me that the writing of Paulo Freire influenced his approach to teaching, and added that he also advocates a collaborative environment in his

classrooms. On the topic of collaboration, the TA said that while he expects his students to work with each other, he also includes himself in the collaborative process. He said, “I don’t expect [students] to come up with ideas on the spot. I think brainstorming is a longer process than a lot of people give credit for, so I like to collaborate with them in brainstorming.” In addition to fostering a collaborative environment, this same TA mentioned that as part of his approach to teaching writing, he emphasizes the public, dynamic nature of the act of writing. During our interview, he explained to me that he wants his students to “understand that they’re going to have to communicate, if not write, mostly outside of the classroom, so they need to learn how to do that. And it’s not just to get a grade from me as much as it is to fulfill humanity’s requirement for communicating.” This focus on helping students understand writing as more than just an academic task or a simple means to an end came up in several interviews and further illustrates the TAs’ commitment to treating first-year composition classes as more than just places where students learn to churn out papers.

Interview Results: Influence of Teaching Philosophy on Assignment Design

Towards the end of each interview, I asked each person to tell me about an assignment that they think exemplifies their teaching philosophy. The TA who identified herself as a creative writer who uses expressivist pedagogies in the classroom said that she uses six-word memoir exercises from *SMITH Magazine’s* Six-Word Memoir Project to teach style. When students create six-word memoirs, the parameters involved—tell a story with only six words—require them to put a lot of thought into word choice and punctuation while still having the freedom to express themselves and tell any story that comes to mind. The Six-Word Memoir Project has a social media aspect, too, so this is an activity that helps students see the public and private nature of writing.

The TA who identified herself as a social expressivist told me about an assignment that she gives in her English 1102 classes. For this paper, students write about an object that holds a great deal of importance to them, but they are also required to do research to prove the item's cultural or historical significance. Although this paper begins in a way that is writer-centered and calls for the use of the first person—an intimidating prospect for most first-year writers—the focus shifts to convincing the reader of the object's importance, thus incorporating emphasis on both the writer and his or her audience into one assignment. In his article “Expressive Pedagogy: Practice/Theory, Theory/Practice” published in Tate, Rupiper, and Schick's anthology *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*, Christopher Burnham writes that “[e]xpressivist pedagogy encourages, even insists upon, a sense of writer presence even in research-based writing” (19). This significant object assignment is an excellent example of combining expressivist pedagogy with the reality that a writer must take his or her audience into consideration.

None of the TAs I interviewed reported that they strictly follow one specific composition pedagogy over another, and in fact, most of them seemed to take bits and pieces from several theories to form their own teaching philosophies. The assignments described above show two different ways that TAs have translated their beliefs about writing and teaching writing into practical, engaging in-class activities and formal assignments. Taken as a whole, the information I gathered from the survey and the interviews indicate that there is no single “right” way to teach first-year composition. The TAs who participated in my study share similar goals for their students, but depending on each individual's approach towards teaching writing, there are different ways to reach those goals.

Chapter 4

Where Do We Go From Here? Discussion of Results & A Look Ahead

As I gathered and coded the results from my study, I was struck by the creativity and adaptability of my fellow TAs. The results of my study demonstrate that while many TAs do indeed translate the theory they learn in the first year of the program into valuable, effective classroom practice, many of us are also heavily influenced by our own careers as students and writers, as well as by our work with students in the KSU Writing Center. To guide the discussion of the study results, I will return to my research questions to emphasize what I wanted to learn when I began this project.

Discussion of Study Results

My first research question was geared towards learning about the beliefs the TAs held about teaching first-year composition before and after they began teaching. It was difficult for me to get a sense of their beliefs prior to beginning teaching because most of the study participants had no previous teaching experience, and many had not taken a first-year composition course as undergraduates. Only one interview participant specifically mentioned a change in her approach to teaching between her first semester of teaching and the time of our interview. As a creative writer, she identified most strongly with expressivist pedagogy—in our interview, she told me that freewriting and journaling were helpful techniques for her and were important parts of her own writing process, so she decided to introduce her students to them, too. She also wanted her students to have space to explore their writing and not be taken to task, so to speak, on grammar mistakes. As her first semester of teaching progressed, however, she realized that there were certain standards that she was responsible for enforcing. Her students needed to understand that in the context of the classroom, they were writing in the world of academia and

those conventions needed to be respected. In our interview, she told me that as the semester continued and she saw that her students were not taking these academic conventions seriously, she recalled David Bartholomae's article "Inventing the University" and started to view her students as people entering her academic conversation. She said, "When my students are writing more academic arguments...[they are] entering my conversation, so I would like [them] to respect where I am now." Over the course of a few weeks, the interviewee came to the conclusion that although her foundational beliefs about writing—that grammar should not be a primary focus and that writing should represent an open, welcoming space for personal exploration—worked well for her own work and for low-stakes classroom activities, ultimately her students still needed to have the importance of genre conventions (e.g., MLA formatting guidelines) emphasized. The interviewee's core beliefs about writing had not changed, but after some time in the classroom, she modified her beliefs about teaching first-year composition.

In a similar manner, another TA mentioned during our interview that although TAs and instructors sometimes talk about "rejecting tradition" in favor of doing away with rubrics and word or page requirements, the reality is that in the typical academic sphere, papers and assignments must be graded. While I think it would be a stretch to say that any TA begins her first semester of teaching with the goal of setting aside all of the traditional trappings of assessment—certainly none of my interviewees said anything to that effect—is it worth noting that many of the loftier beliefs about writing and hopes that some TAs have for their classrooms simply aren't an option. Instead, they find ways to compromise. One TA noted during our interview that one of his beliefs about teaching writing is that rubrics are problematic; as a result, he chooses not to use them—much to the dismay of his students. Rather than simply giving in and implementing an assessment process that he doesn't believe is productive or reflective of the

dynamic nature of writing, he chooses instead to write assignment sheets that are as detailed as possible. He said, "...I tell them that this [assignment sheet] is my rubric...and I will be using [it] to grade essays." He also added that each time students turn in an assignment, he is able to see "where [he] could have been clearer on the assignment [sheet]." When I originally posed this first research question, I anticipated finding that the realities of the classroom environment led some of the TAs to make significant changes in their practices and beliefs about teaching first-year composition. Instead, I found that while entering the classroom did result in many of the TAs reflecting on their beliefs, none of them completely abandoned the plans and ideals that they held before they began teaching. They tried different pedagogical tactics and decided what worked best for themselves and for their students.

The second question that guided my research asked how the TAs' beliefs about teaching writing were developed. This question was answered best through the one-on-one interviews because I was able to ask clarifying questions to ensure that I understood what the interviewees were saying. I expected to hear the interviewees talk about a favorite teacher from high school or college who inspired their writing, but almost all of the interviewees referenced their own writing as an important factor in the development of their beliefs about teaching writing. One of the interviewees allowed her identification as a creative writer to define, to a certain extent, her beliefs about and approach to teaching. Although she did adjust and refine her teaching philosophy after she began teaching, her basic approach to teaching writing remained more or less the same. During our interview, she told me that she doesn't penalize students for taking a more creative, imaginative approach to assignments—especially for the first assignment of the semester. To honor her own background as a creative writer and avoid squelching her students'

expressive sides, she still uses freewriting and journaling as class activities, despite maintaining stricter standards on formal papers in terms of grammar and formatting technicalities.

Another interviewee—one of only two interviewees who had previous teaching experience—told me that she is still developing her teaching philosophy. I was a little surprised by her answer, but I suspect, based on my research and on my own experience, that the longer an instructor teaches and learns and works with students, the more her approach to teaching changes. In the introduction to their 2012 article published in the journal *Pedagogy*, Estrem and Reid write that “learning to teach (writing) is a protean and lengthy process, its uncertain and recursive progress often obscured by the myths of quick competence on which learner, teacher, and institutions rely” (“What New Writing Teachers Talk About” 450). Just as writing itself is a dynamic task, so is teaching—instructors and TAs may have in mind a general plan of how they will teach writing, but that plan may need to change based on the mix of students and their learning styles. Acknowledging that teaching styles and philosophies change—and that those changes are not necessarily negative—is an important part of counteracting these “myths of quick competence” that Estrem and Reid mention.

The third research question I posed asked about the ways that TAs bring their pedagogical beliefs into the classroom, and the results represent the bulk of the collected data. The online survey results in particular helped me gain a sense of the different pedagogies toward which the TAs gravitate when they start teaching. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, all survey participants reported using collaborative learning strategies in their classrooms, while ten out of eleven respondents reported that they use current events to contextualize course material. The statistic representing the use of collaborative learning activities surprised me because as Howard reminds her readers and as I have learned from experience and observation,

collaborative pedagogy can be difficult to implement successfully. Nonetheless, many of the study participants revealed that they rely on group activities and peer review because they find that students learn best when they can discuss ideas with each other. One interviewee who had previous teaching experience at the community college level told me that in her experience, students “seem to grasp concepts better” when they can interact and “talk to each other”—but she also added that because group work “has to be monitored,” she will sit in on groups to help her students stay on task. This willingness (fueled by enthusiasm as well as inexperience, perhaps) to implement teaching strategies despite some of the pitfalls recorded in some of the texts used in the TAs’ training coursework shows the confidence and sense of resilience that many of the TAs reported gaining from their training courses.

In addition to closely monitored group work, class-wide discussions as a collaborative learning strategy and as a way to foster a student-centered classroom was a tactic mentioned by several study participants. I have both observed and been a part of conversations about student-centered—or decentered—classrooms, and my conclusion is that most of us want our students to take an active role in their own learning processes. Class-wide discussions can be an effective way to engage students and help them learn to express their ideas successfully and respectfully, but like any other classroom practice, discussions are not without their difficulties. Similar to some of the issues that instructors encounter with implementing other collaborative pedagogies such as group projects and papers, class-wide discussions can quickly veer off topic, and students who are more confident in group settings than others may dominate the conversation. It is difficult to relinquish majority control of a class discussion to students. Often, they need a prompt of some sort to get them going—I have found it rare that students are able to begin a productive discussion completely on their own. To counteract the silence and blank looks that

often accompany class discussions, several of my study participants mentioned that they offer supplemental or guiding questions to help steer the conversation, but that in the interest of challenging students to take some level of responsibility for their own learning, the TAs will often take as minimal a role as possible in these discussions.

Another interviewee who emphasizes collaborative learning in his classroom talked about his role as a collaborator with his students. He said that he wants his students to know that most of their communication will happen “outside of the classroom” and that they must learn “how to work with others” and how to “communicate [their] ideas to others, vocally and in writing...” To model effective communication and collaboration, the interviewee said that he brainstorms with his students when they begin projects and remains hands-on through the beginning stages. As the assignments and projects progress, he expects his students to put forth more and more effort on their own because he wants them “to be able to problem-solve” with each other rather than rely on him for assistance. The fact that the interviewee specifically mentioned taking on the role of collaborator with his students is an important part of how he brings his pedagogical beliefs into the classroom. In her essay on collaborative pedagogy, Rebecca Moore Howard writes that “[w]hen teachers are no longer dispensing knowledge in lectures but are guiding students in the collaborative process of discovering and constructing knowledge, students are empowered” (57). Too often, collaborative pedagogy is interpreted as blindly placing students in groups and hoping that they will stay on task—after all, if they’re in groups, they must be collaborating, right? But to be truly effective, collaborative activities must be intentional and thoughtfully planned; the TA who places himself in the position of collaborator (in addition to that of facilitator or guide) helps achieve this empowerment that Howard emphasizes in collaborative learning.

Although collaborative learning proved to be a popular pedagogy among the survey and interview participants, the use of current events as a way to contextualize course material received just slightly less support. Ten out of eleven online survey participants reported that they use current events as a way to contextualize course material, and many of their expanded responses referenced using that particular teaching strategy in the research-oriented English 1102. One survey respondent reported that she uses a “current-event focused reader for English 1102,” and several other responses mentioned the use of current articles as supplementary readings. One survey participant said that she uses music videos to teach the rhetorical element of pathos, and another respondent wrote that she “often [references] current controversial topics...when trying to demonstrate proposal arguments...” These responses show that the use of current events to contextualize course material can be interpreted in many different ways, but the common thread that runs through these responses is a desire to keep students engaged and to help them see that writing does not exist solely in the academic sphere. In the one-on-one interviews, several people mentioned to me that they recognize that English 1101 and 1102 are required courses and that most of their students did not register for the class voluntarily—these students attend to meet general education requirements and move on. To make the semester more interesting both for the students and for themselves, the TAs often incorporate readings that focus on news-worthy events and human interest stories.

The fourth research question I posed asked about the influence of composition pedagogy on the TAs’ teaching styles. After coding the data from my study, I have noticed that elements of composition pedagogy, teaching style, and teaching philosophy are often mixed together when TAs talk about their approach to teaching and how they learned to teach. Separating one of these elements from the others is a bit difficult, but some of the survey participants and interviewees

specifically addressed how their knowledge of and exposure to different theories about composition pedagogy impacted their teaching style. As a whole, however, the data I collected indicates that composition pedagogy—whether or not the TA specifically identifies with one theory over another—does indeed influence teaching style. For example, one survey participant wrote that her approach to teaching is process-oriented and emphasizes that “writing is a form of communication.” In the classroom, she works that approach into her teaching style by asking students to “vocalize an argument to [her] first [before beginning to write] to help them see how writing and verbal communication are linked.” In keeping with the Likert scale survey results showing that all respondents use collaborative learning strategies in their classrooms, many of the expanded responses also mentioned specific ways that the respondents implement collaborative pedagogy. One such expanded response read, “I believe in an expressive and [collaborative] approach to teaching that fosters an organic creation of ideas and articulation of those ideas as well as an exchange of ideas that expands critical thinking.” Another survey respondent wrote that “[o]ne of [her] goals [in teaching first-year composition] is to create a community of learners, so activities are planned to encourage students to talk to each other, respond [to] each other’s blog posts, etc.” Because these answers came from the anonymous online survey, I was unable to gather more detailed information, but this expressivist, student-centered approach to teaching writing that is aimed at creating a “community of learners” in the classroom came up on several occasions in the one-on-one interviews. One of the interviewees told me that even though she studied civic discourse in terms of composition—in other words, the connection between writing and an awareness of the ethics of putting words into a public space—and ultimately decided that “in the end...it’s not within [instructors’] purview to turn [students] into engaged citizens,” she still emphasizes the importance of expecting and

respectfully considering opposing opinions when writing. In this TA's case, her study and understanding of different composition pedagogies influenced the way she decided to implement those pedagogies.

Another interviewee who explained how her stance on composition pedagogy influenced her approach to teaching was one of the few study participants who specifically named the pedagogy with which she identified as a teacher. She identifies herself as a social expressivist and said that she thinks "writing is, at its core, for expression," but added that "[students] have to eventually realize that other people are reading what [they] write..." so audience is an important consideration. To honor her beliefs about writing being primarily for expression while still emphasizing the importance of attention to audience, this TA sequences major writing assignments by audience: the first assignment requires students to write for themselves, while the audience for the next paper is their classmates, and the following major assignment challenges them to write to a person in a position of authority. The next-to-last major assignment is a reflective paper, for which the TA is the primary audience, and for the final paper of the semester, students write for "an academic, published audience." The TA said that the idea behind her sequencing method is that "each assignment gets progressively harder" but the use of audience as a major consideration for each paper—even if students are writing just for themselves—is an important part of helping students understand that while writing is used for personal expression, it does not exist in a vacuum.

As TAs, the participants in my study were exposed to a lot of composition theory during their first two semesters in the MAPW program. Some reported that they found the amount of information overwhelming, while others said that it was helpful for them to learn about different ways to teach writing. We all have different academic backgrounds and levels of prior teaching

experience, so with my research, I hoped to illuminate the different ways that TAs bring the information they learn during the TA training courses into their classrooms. I wanted to know how their beliefs about teaching writing were formed, and if—and how—all of the theory they learned influenced their approaches to teaching first-year composition. Taken as a whole, the data I collected suggests that there is no one specific way that the TAs transfer theory to practice. That transition is impacted by a variety of factors ranging from the type of writing that a TA does in her free time or professional work, to the ways in which the TA learned to write, to a TA's beliefs about her own role as an instructor of young adults. Ultimately, the first semester of teaching—and beyond, I would argue—is marked by a lot of trial and error. Even TAs with prior teaching experience find that each new class of students requires them to adjust their expectations and try new ways to teach concepts. To define this process of trial and error, Estrem and Reid use the term “interteaching” coined by pedagogy researchers Angi Maklercz and Caroline Bodóczy. Estrem and Reid interpret “interteaching” as “a stage in which a pedagogy learner is forming hypotheses about successful teaching by acting out both new and previously learned rules, testing whether those are workable in the current situation, and refining his or her practice...” (“The Effects of Writing Pedagogy” 34). From what I’ve learned over the course of my study, “interteaching” is an apt title for much of what the TAs experience as they settle into their new roles as teachers.

Before beginning the background research for this study, I had no frame of reference for what a typical teaching assistant training program looked like. I have since learned, however, that the KSU English TA program had been structured by taking the best recommendations and effective parts of other TA programs around the country and putting them together. In my overview of the literature about TA training programs, I found that the consistent

recommendations for TA programs include requiring students to complete composition theory courses and more practice-oriented “how to teach” courses, participate in some form of master teacher mentoring program, and spend time working in the university writing center. TAs in the English department at KSU do all of this. On paper, we are more than well-prepared to teach. When the actual teaching begins, however, some of us struggle with “interteaching” and accepting the fact that sometimes our approach to a certain concept or planned way of teaching needs to change a bit. A common thread that ran through the information I learned through my study was that although the TAs who are in their third or fourth semester of teaching have gained a lot of experience in the classroom, they still need a level of support from mentor teachers and fellow TAs. One interviewee mentioned his disappointment with the lack of mentoring and feeling of community or togetherness among the TAs once they finish the Practicum course and begin their second year of teaching, which is largely unsupervised. Continuing Practicum at some level through the second year of teaching and fostering stronger, ongoing relationships between TAs and the instructors they shadow would go a long way towards easing the transition into teaching.

A Brief Reflection

Most studies have limitations or shortcomings of some sort, and my study is certainly not an exception. The MAPW TA program at KSU is small compared to programs at larger universities, so my sample size for both the survey and the interviews was quite small. The data I gathered, however, is valuable and provides insight into how graduate teaching assistants learn to teach and how they translate theory about composition pedagogies into classroom practice. Nonetheless, more research into TA programs is needed. If I were to perform additional research or recreate this study, I would make several changes. To gather more data, I would be more

persistent in encouraging eligible TAs to participate; I would also extend the length of time allotted for data-gathering. Ideally, this study would be conducted with the same group of participants over the course of three years (if recreated at KSU), allowing for interviews and surveys during the fall semester of each academic year. Collecting three years-worth of data would allow for an additional element of data comparison that is lacking in my current study results.

To truly understand a transition such as the one from student to teacher, there must be some sort of comparison of before and after. One of the questions that guided my research was geared toward learning more about the TAs' beliefs about teaching first-year composition and how those beliefs changed after entering the classroom as the instructor of record. Because of how my study was structured, the results only scratched the surface of that complicated, but important, topic. Having three (or even two) years-worth of information to compare and contrast would result in a clearer picture of if and how a TA training program changes how TAs approach teaching writing.

Designing and executing this study has taught me a lot about constructing survey and interview questions effectively, so aside from these logistical changes that I would make to my study, I would also make adjustments to some of the questions I posed to participants. Hindsight is always crystal clear, I suppose, but I now see the benefit of wording questions as specifically as possible. In retrospect, I was far too concerned about annoying my participants with too many questions or questions that seemed tedious and called for detailed answers, but I now know that I would have been better off setting those worries aside. Asking more pointed questions would result in responses that were more on-topic and detailed, and reworking the interview questions to avoid repetition of answers would lead to more productive interview sessions. Even with the

shortcomings of my study, the data I collected presents an interesting view of the English TA program here at KSU, and I hope that I am contributing to the larger body of research on graduate teaching assistants and TA training programs.

Looking Forward

My interest in researching how the KSU English TAs translate theory into practice came about through largely selfish reasons: I was insecure in my own abilities as an instructor, and I wanted to know what my peers were doing in the classroom in hopes that I could learn more about being an effective teacher. Through the course of conducting my study and analyzing the results, I have found that on a purely personal level, I am not too different from my fellow TAs. I am certainly not alone in my concerns about whether or not I'm teaching concepts in the most effective ways, or in wanting to learn more about how to be a better instructor. One important finding that I hope readers will take from my research is that trial and error is an important part of the process of becoming a teacher rather than something to be dreaded.

As my study results demonstrate, there is not a single correct way to teach composition—as new instructors, TAs are heavily influenced by their own experience and beliefs about writing as writers and students, and these experiences and existing beliefs inform what we do in the classroom. The TAs learn a lot in our two semesters of coursework as we prepare to teach, and what I discovered through my research is that much of that coursework and instruction in pedagogy serves to give us a foundation to which we can match our own existing beliefs about teaching writing. A TA may enter the MAPW program, for example, remembering that in her own undergraduate writing classes, she benefitted the most from working in groups and receiving peer feedback, but she may not know that those activities are part of a specific pedagogical theory. The two semesters of coursework, working in the Writing Center, and

participating in Practicum and the 1102 shadowing experience give her the vocabulary and the knowledge necessary to form her own approach to teaching writing. Because our experiences expand and our beliefs—both new and existing—about teaching writing often change as we get more comfortable with our new roles as instructors, the recommendations that come from my research for the future of the KSU English TA program center on strengthening the guidance and mentoring of the TAs as they progress through their last few semesters.

The first recommendation is to extend the Practicum meetings, as previously mentioned, beyond the first semester of teaching. To prepare for my study and for this Capstone project, I read a great deal about TA programs at universities around the country, and although the KSU TA program does represent a composite of the best practices of these different programs, one major departure is the lack of ongoing pedagogy-focused contact between the TAs. Beyond that first semester of teaching, we run into each other in the Writing Center or in the shared TA office if our schedules happen to overlap, but there is no formal, structured time during which we can share ideas and ask questions of each other. Continuing well-structured Practicum meetings—on a monthly or semi-monthly basis, perhaps—would give the TAs a place to discuss any difficulties they encounter while teaching English 1102 for the first time. These Practicum meetings would also provide a space for the TAs to talk about whether their approaches to teaching composition have changed—and if so, how to accommodate those changes.

Along with extending Practicum meetings, I recommend that stronger relationships be fostered between the TAs and the instructor they shadow during the second semester English 1102 shadowing experience. The lack of a continuing mentorship between TAs and more experienced instructors is another difference I noticed between the TA programs at other universities and the TA program at KSU, but fostering these important professional relationships

will broaden the TAs' sphere of people to consult for guidance as they settle in to teaching. Several of my study participants mentioned learning a lot from the person they shadowed—in some cases, the TA learned what he or she did not want to do in his or her own classes, but several TAs reported modeling elements of their own courses after what they saw during the semester of shadowing. Encouraging TAs and the instructor they shadow to maintain an ongoing relationship—perhaps checking in with each other once per month through a TA's first two semesters of teaching, for example—would provide yet another form of guidance for the TAs. A sort of circling-the-wagons around the TAs, so to speak, is what will make the biggest difference in confidence levels as these new instructors develop. My survey respondents indicated that the coursework required by the TA program is indeed helpful and necessary, so based on my study, I don't think changes to the course material or sequence are needed. Strengthening the guidance and mentoring of the TAs, however, will provide important ongoing support as the TAs go through the process of trial and error in teaching.

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Appendix A

Online Survey Questions:

1. Please select the number of semesters you have taught at KSU:

Less than 1 1 2 3 4

2. Please select the courses you have taught at KSU:

English 1101 English 1102 English 1101 & 1102

3. Prior to teaching at KSU, did you have experience teaching elsewhere?

Yes No

3a. If yes, what course(s) and what age group(s) did you teach?

4. I use collaborative learning strategies in my classroom.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

4a. If you answered “Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” or “Strongly Agree,” please use the box below to provide an example of a collaborative learning strategy that you use in your classroom.

5. I use discussions of current events as a way to contextualize the material my students learn.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

5a. If you answered “Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” or “Strongly Agree,” please use the box below to provide an example of how you used a current event to contextualize lesson material.

6. I view my classroom as student-centered rather than teacher-centered.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

6a. If you answered “Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” or “Strongly Agree,” please use the box below to provide an example of how you establish a student-centered classroom environment.

7. My teaching philosophy guides how I approach teaching English 1101 and/or English 1102.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

7a. Please use the box below to elaborate on how your teaching philosophy does or does not guide your approach to teaching English 1101 and/or English 1102.

8. Working in the KSU Writing Center influences how I design assignments and explain concepts to my students.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

8a. Please use the box below to give examples of how your work in the Writing Center either does or does not influence how you design assignments and explain concepts to your students.

9. My experience of shadowing an English 1102 class influences how I design assignments and explain concepts to my students.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

9a. Please use the box below to give examples of how your shadowing experience either does or does not influence how you design assignments and explain concepts to your students.

10. The information I learned through my participation in the TA Practicum course influences how I design assignments and explain concepts to my students.

Strongly Agree Somewhat Agree Agree Somewhat Disagree Strongly Disagree

10a. Please use the box below to give examples of how the information you learned in the TA Practicum course does or does not influence how you design assignments and explain concepts to your students.

11. When designing writing assignments, lesson plans, and daily activities, what are your primary concerns and goals? Please use the box below to explain your answer.

12. Is there anything else related to your teaching experience or preparation that you would like to add? If so, please use the box below.

Appendix B

Case Study Interview Questions (adapted from Estrem and Reid):

1. At KSU, have you taught English 1101, English 1102, or both?
2. How many semesters have you taught at KSU?
3. Prior to coming to KSU, did you teach writing or tutor writing anywhere else?
4. As TAs, there are several courses that we are required to take. Think about those courses (PRWR 6300, PRWR 6500, English 1102 shadowing, Writing Center tutoring, and the TA Practicum), and tell me what you thought was useful about each one.
 - 4a. Do you use what you learned in any of those courses in your own English 1101 and/or English 1102 classes?
 - 4b. If no, what resources have you relied on instead?
 - 4c. If yes, please give me some examples of how you use what you learned in PRWR 6300, PRWR 6500, your English 1102 shadowing experience, your Writing Center tutoring experience, or the TA Practicum.
5. When you design assignments and in-class activities for English 1101, what are your goals?
6. If you have taught English 1102, what are your goals when you design assignments and in-class activities for that class?
7. Tell me about your teaching philosophy. How did you develop that philosophy?
8. Do you identify with any specific composition pedagogy or do you have any guiding principles that you follow?
9. If you do have any guiding principles that you follow in terms of teaching, what are some examples of how those principles influence your teaching or how you design assignments and/or in-class activities?

10. Tell me about an activity or assignment that you use in your classroom that you feel exemplifies your teaching style and/or your philosophies about teaching writing.

10a. How did you develop this activity or assignment?

10b. How do students usually respond?

10c. Is this activity or assignment usually successful in helping students learn a particular concept? How do you determine a level of success or failure with this activity or assignment? What do you think makes it successful or unsuccessful?

11. Thinking back to the teaching that you have done so far in your experience as a TA at KSU, is there anything that you would change or do differently in the way you teach writing and rhetoric to your students? What specifically would you change or do differently, and why?

12. Do you have any other comments about your approach to teaching that you would like to add?