

## Resistance and Identity Formation: The Journey of the Graduate Student-Teacher



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**Abstract:** Drawing on the stories and words of GTAs themselves, this article works to complicate our narratives of GTA resistance within practicum courses by situating this resistance in the larger process of identity formation and graduate school. I explore the way that GTAs' dual roles as students and as teachers intersect with teacher preparation, particularly practicum courses. Finally, I offer suggestions for teacher preparation programs that stem from my study, my experience, and the scholarship in the field.

### Introduction

As we sit down for what would be a two-and-a-half hour interview about her experience teaching first-year composition, I ask Blaire, a young master's student in literature, about her background. She begins almost immediately by telling me something that she says she's "not *supposed*" to admit: she applied to graduate school to satisfy her nagging parents. In particular, the need for a teaching assistantship was reinforced by her friends and family. "That little voice that sounds like my dad came back in my head," she explains, "and said, 'Why would you get more loans when you could get it paid for?'" Over the course of the interview, she continues the narrative of herself as a resistant student-teacher who does not belong in the academy and does not want to be there. Yet, there are points where I question this narrative of resistance. There are times in the interview where Blaire identifies strongly with academia, talking about herself as a member of the field of literature and as someone who is very "ivory tower." She also talks about wanting to give her students the best course possible and how she undergoes therapy to help with her fear of public speaking in the classroom. Blaire points out the paradox in her own situation, saying, "I just have this paradoxical personality where I really dislike all the teaching part, but at the same time ... I want to do it the best I possibly can, to the point where I'm obsessed and can't stop thinking about it." It's true; her interview isn't just complaining, it's contemplating—obsessing about—the best strategies for teaching and her own teaching philosophy. This second side of Blaire's narrative shows someone who is trying extremely hard to meet the expectations of graduate school and the writing program rather than someone who is completely resistant. Clearly, Blaire is struggling with her own identity as a graduate student and a teacher. But I think to enrich our understanding of graduate teaching assistant (GTA) resistance, we need to place these stories in conversation with the larger, more complex narrative of GTA identity formation. Using the stories and words of GTAs themselves, I work here to complicate our narratives of GTA resistance within practicum courses by situating this resistance in the larger process of identity formation and graduate school. I explore the way that GTAs' dual roles as students and as teachers intersect with teacher preparation, particularly practicum courses. Finally, I offer suggestions for teacher preparation that stem from my study, my experience, and the scholarship in the field.

As writing program administrators (WPAs), we've all had our Blaires, and our field has continually addressed resistance in practicum courses, whether we see that resistance as problematic or as potential for growth. We've talked about the source for that resistance: the university culture that focuses on research and disciplinary coursework over teaching (Ebest 8), the GTA's inexperience with the discourse community of composition (Hesse 227), the insecure and anxious nature of new teachers (Restaino 72). We've also acknowledged resistance as a natural part of learning and participation (Ryan and Graban W289). We've talked about how to re-frame resistance, to take advantage of it in our practicum courses to interrogate GTAs' previous beliefs and help them

question their own long-held values (Estrem and Reid 462), to see resistance in practicum as a “site of possibility” and “disciplinary negotiation” (Ryan and Graban W278). In other words, we’ve talked a lot about the reasons for resistance, what to do with resistance, and the effect it has on our practicum courses. As Dylan Dryer notes, “GTA resistance to practicum may be a given” (423). But we have not often explored the way the resistance we see in practicum is a larger part of the graduate student experience or how resistance to other areas of graduate school impacts the resistance we see among new teachers.

Dryer explains that to further understand our problems with the practicum course, we need to realize how widespread difficulty with academic writing is and how that struggle shapes the identity of our graduate students (424). These difficulties with academic writing and the resistance we see in practicum are connected. Not only are graduate students being enculturated into their own disciplines by learning new genres of academic writing—the literature review, the seminar paper, the dissertation—but they must also learn the genres of the teaching profession—assignment sheets, syllabi, comments on student writing. We could see the first of these as the genre set of the student and the second as the genre set of the teacher. Setting up this binary of scholarly genres and teaching genres reinforces the notion that these two communities of practice are distinct and unconnected. Yet, Joseph Harris resists this notion of community, explaining that even when a student masters genres of a particular community, their identity is still a mix of insider and outsider. Instead, we must see these different identities in terms of how they interact with each other. Dichotomies work against the formation of a coherent graduate student/teacher identity and our construction of our GTAs as complex, multifaceted learners. Rather, we must look at how these genres and these identities interact to form a more complete picture of GTA identity. While I first address issues of the acquisition of theoretical concepts and the genres of the graduate student, and then discuss issues of the acquisition of the genres of the teacher, I am ultimately interested in the interaction between these two identities. I conclude by showing how student and teacher identities can either work against one another or be reconciled. Ultimately, the GTAs who are struggling in one area bring that resistance into the other. Likewise, those who are able to accept their dual nature as student-teacher in a way that allows each identity to inform the other are more positive about graduate school and teaching in general.

## Methods and Site of Study

This article stems from a larger study conducted at Virginia Tech in which I studied the overall professional development of new GTAs and their identities as teachers within the first-year writing program. In order to see how GTAs interacted with theoretical readings and talked about their teaching during the practicum course, I analyzed their final practicum portfolios. These portfolios included an opening letter, responses to readings, assignments developed by the GTA, and a teaching reflection.<sup>[1]</sup> To get a more complete picture over time, I supplemented this data with data from interviews conducted after their first semester teaching. My participants included seven GTAs—three MA students in literature, three MFA students, and one PhD student in Rhetoric and Writing—to represent the diversity of graduate students in Virginia Tech’s English department. However, I focus here on only the master’s level students since they were new to both graduate school and to teaching.

I chose the teacher preparation program at Virginia Tech because of my own involvement; at the time I was a graduate assistant WPA. I also chose the program because it fits well with national standards for GTA preparation. As a field we are moving toward what Duane Roen, Maureen Daly Goggin and Jennifer Clary-Lemon call a “multiphilosophical approach” where we value GTAs developing their own theories and philosophies of teaching (359). Stephen Wilhoit writes about how current teacher preparation programs balance GTAs’ own backgrounds and theories with composition theory (18). Today’s practicum melds theory and practice and can hardly be called a “practicum” anymore, as witnessed by the title of Sidney I. Dobrin’s (2005) edited collection *Don’t Call It That: The Composition Practicum*. Although practicum courses are diverse and vary between schools, the literature supports combining theory and practice as was done at Virginia Tech.

My study occurred at a fortuitous time in Virginia Tech’s teacher preparation history. Working closely with then WPA Diana George, I helped develop the proposal for our “Theory and Practice of Teaching Writing” course, which GTAs took as a 6-credit course in their first semester before they began teaching. Commonly referred to as a “practicum,” the course began with a thorough background in composition theory before moving on to the “practical” elements of teaching, such as grading and developing assignment sheets. This course replaced a three-hour, non-graded practicum that was paired with a pedagogy course offered through the graduate school and a second-semester composition theory course.<sup>[2]</sup> Because administrators wanted GTAs to teach in the spring semester, and SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) requires 18 graduate credit hours first, master’s level GTAs were expected to take on 18 credits in the fall semester. This was not a solution we favored but was one we had no choice but to work with. From our personal experiences, we felt that taking on what is nearly a double load caused students to be overwhelmed with coursework and take practicum less seriously,

seeing it as padding in order to get those 18 hours. This was particularly true because the 3-hour practicum was graded pass/fail. Since we could not get around the 18 hour requirement, we decided to engineer a graded course to take up 6 of those hours, feeling that GTAs would give it more of their time and attention while also eliminating one of their other 3-credit courses. The GTAs in my study were members of the first class to take the newly structured practicum course. In addition to shifting the workload of the GTA, I believe that changing from a non-graded, practice-based course in the fall and a graded theory-based course in the spring to one “theory and practice” course affected the way GTA identities were constructed. Combining theory and practice we hoped would provide the opportunity for GTAs to meld their teacher identity with their student identity. However, in practice the inclusion of a grade took the focus away from teachers doing professional development and placed our GTAs in the role of students concerned about maintaining their GPAs.

While I assisted in the practicum course and helped propose these programmatic changes during the 2008-2009 school year, once the changes were enacted in 2009-2010, I took on other duties that were unconnected to the GTAs in order to focus on my role as researcher. As Jackie Grutsch McKinney and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater show, the view that WPAs get of GTAs while teaching practicum does not present us with a complete picture. Particularly when practicum courses are graded, GTAs may feel pressured to overstate their enthusiasm for teaching or to find connections between teaching and theoretical readings. Thus, I felt that it was important to back off my involvement with teacher preparation and focus on my role as a researcher. I had the background as a member of the administrative team and the experience of working with the practicum course the previous year; however, by not working with the GTAs in my study, I was able to establish myself as a researcher, not a supervisor. This allowed me to gather more complex and (I hope) honest views of the teaching preparation program.

In order to compare GTAs' views while in the practicum course with their views after a semester of teaching, I collected portfolios that were turned in at the end of the practicum course and conducted follow up interviews a semester later. I correlated what was said in these portfolios with the interviews I conducted with GTAs after their first semester teaching. However, I found the interviews to be the richer set of data. In particular, the combination of these two data sets helped me see a more complete picture of GTAs' views and experiences beyond what I could have gained by working with them in the capacity of an assistant WPA.

## Graduate *Student*-Teacher Identity: Theory in Practicum Courses

The course “Theory and Practice of Teaching Writing” began with an introduction to composition theory. While some programs offer a separate theory course, our switch to one six-hour course meant that we now included it at the beginning of our teacher preparation program. Whether it is a part of one integrated course or a part of a two-course sequence, the inclusion of composition theory in practicum has been discussed for a long time. Dobrin notes that early discussions about practicum in a 1956 workshop at CCC centered around the need to introduce students to composition theory and combine the work of graduate students with their preparation as teachers (15-17). While this idea did not gain traction quickly, Roen, Goggin, and Clary-Lemon see the 1977 publication *Balancing Theory with Practice in the Training of Writing Teachers* as a turning point in the history of teacher preparation, when theory was taken seriously (357). By 1993, Douglas Hesse's article on *Teachers as Students* almost takes for granted that theory is the “content” of the practicum course, and talks about the secondary role of reading composition theory in the practicum class: to remind teachers that, like their students, they are beginners (226). Finally, Dobrin reminds us that practicum is the location where “composition studies, as a discipline, as theory, as practice, is constructed for the newest members of the field and, perhaps more important, for many who never identify themselves as compositionists” (5). It's clear that, for us, the inclusion of composition theory has to do with sharing our disciplinary expertise and being taken seriously. Theory adds weight to our course by making it like other graduate coursework. But this connection may work against us. We expect GTAs to engage with composition theory as teachers, but they may only know how to connect to it as graduate students.

As WPAs, we are often caught in a difficult position where we must be concerned with both the graduate education of our GTAs and with the undergraduates they teach, who deserve a programmatically coherent, well-taught composition course. Thus, we see it as essential that we make the connection between composition theory and composition teaching. For us, practicum is not just a place for reading theory; it is for thinking about theory and its application to teaching. Michael Stancliff and Maureen Daly Goggin note that one way to teach practicum “advocates building teacher-training curriculum around the theoretical and pedagogical assumptions graduate student teachers bring to a program” (14). Katrina Powell, Peggy O'Neill, Cassandra Mach Phillips, and Brian Huot advocate for GTAs coming up with their own answers to pedagogical questions, noting that they often ask GTAs, “What is your theory of language?” (125). Kathleen Ryan and Tarez Samra Graban also align themselves with scholars who stress the importance of practicum as a “site for theory building” (W278). These approaches stress

that it is not enough to read composition articles. GTAs should also investigate their previous theories, compare those to concepts in the field, and develop their own new theories of teaching composition. In this sense, we ask our students to interact with theory as *teachers*, knowing that teaching can be viewed as “the enactment of a theoretical position” (Odom, Bernard-Donals, and Kerschbaum 215).

One major obstacle to this synthesis of theory and practice in practicum courses, however, is the positioning of our GTAs as new graduate *students*. We often forget that this role can be as problematic for new GTAs as the role of teacher. Dryer draws on Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas Huckin, and John Ackerman’s case study of new graduate student Nate (later revealed to be Ackerman) to talk about the difficulty of graduate students in not only learning new styles of academic discourse but in adopting new identities. Dryer explains that GTAs are in a particularly difficult position of having to “writ[e] to become someone they really know nothing about” as new members of a graduate school community while also learning to teach students to do the same (440). This inner conflict can lead to resistance. So, too, the members of my study resisted composition theory, in part, because of their larger resistance to graduate school in general and their conflict over learning their new graduate student identities.

Participants in my study were quick to talk about the differences in what they saw as two parts to the same course and to reflect dismay at the theoretical part. This dismay was not unexpected. Traditionally, the field has acknowledged that this resistance to theory is because it does not fit with GTA’s expectations for the practicum course. Scholars have argued that the pressure that GTAs feel to perform as teachers can cause resistance to engaging with theoretical readings (Ryan and Graban, W290; Restaino 26). They are looking for practical advice to problems in the classroom, which they see as separate from theory. Certainly this held true for my participants, who frequently expressed relief at moving on to the second part of the course that involved learning more practical advice about teaching. However, my data also suggests another reason for this resistance, one that ties it to the larger formation of the identity of the new graduate student. When talking about the theory section of the course, my participants often connected it to their other graduate coursework and their frustrations with their courses. Resistance to theory on the grounds that practical advice is preferable to learn how to teach shows the concerns of the novice teacher; however, resistance to theory as content and to the genre of theoretical texts shows the concerns of the graduate *student*. As this role is also new to many of our GTAs, we should keep it in mind when discussing the role of theory in our practicum courses.

Out of my seven interviewees, five directly expressed that they came into their first year of graduate studies with no concept of composition or composition theory and that this theory confused and frustrated them. This frustration was often tied to identity. MA literature students Blaire and Marty were clear that they did not feel like they were the intended audience for the theoretical readings in the practicum course. Blaire notes that she didn’t think the readings helped her at all. They were for people who actually wanted to go on and be professors, she laments. Although Blaire knows that she is a “teacher” of composition, she associates theory with the “professors,” not with GTAs like herself. Similarly, Marty states that the theory part of the course was better “for people who really understand composition and think about it a lot more.” Marty says he likes teaching composition. However, he explains, “the theory of it, I’m like, I don’t know that’s not really my thing, and it’s never been my thing. It’s just another world I don’t understand that well.” Both clearly make a division between scholarship in composition, which is best left to experts in the field, and pedagogy, which can also be the domain of newcomers. By seeing these aims as tied to particular discourse communities (one of scholars, one of teachers), Blaire and Marty both struggle to make connections between composition theory and pedagogy. Furthermore, their identities as scholars lie outside of composition while their identities as teacher lie within it. By seeing these identities as separate, they are unable to see the relevance of composition scholarship.

However, these identities may be more connected than they realize. It is important to note that neither Blaire nor Marty had previous experience with theoretical readings in general, and both also commented negatively on their critical theory seminar. Blaire states that she never understood what was being talked about in critical theory, and Marty notes that he received a less than stellar grade in it. Thus, it seems that what both students are resisting here is the way that graduate school as a whole is interpolating them. Marty has “never been” a theoretical person, and Blaire never intends to be a “professor.” They resist the theoretical discourse of graduate school at large as something antithetical to their identities. Interestingly, however, Blaire does not distance herself from her fellow graduate students. Rather, she overstates her case and notes that *everyone* hated their critical theory class and the theoretical portion of the practicum course. Resistance here spans communities of practice, and resistance to a particular type of discourse—such as theoretical readings—in one context may perpetuate resistance in another context.

Even those who were more comfortable with theoretical readings in other classes still seemed to draw on their positions as *students* when talking about the theory in practicum. Sophie, also a master’s student in literature, was

much more comfortable with theory, in general, but was dismayed by the readings in practicum. She explained,

I was really familiar with theory. I mean wholly, completely familiar with theory. You could throw Derrida at me with no problem whatsoever, but when we started reading composition studies and like the theories of composition, I just thought: what is this?!?

Sophie went on to explain that her initial concern was that this material was what she would need to teach herself. MFA student Kevin shared this concern saying he felt, “it’s like being asked to teach about medieval literature and never having read anything like that.” Although we hoped that some of the content would work its way into the syllabi of these new teachers (particularly concepts from rhetorical theory), our program did not have a Writing About Writing focus, and we were not expecting GTAs to teach composition theory in their first-year classrooms. Rather than using theory as *teachers* thinking about how to teach, these GTAs saw theory as content they needed to learn as students and then teach. Ultimately, most of my participants brushed the “theory part” of the course aside. They talked of it in terms of their role as students struggling with difficult material. Even the GTAs, like Sophie, who were comfortable with their role as graduate students reading theory, talked in their interviews about the connections between the theory they read in practicum and the theory they read in their other courses rather than the way that theory informed their teaching.

Similarly, in their practicum portfolios, GTAs comment on theory as students practicing the graduate school genre of a “reading response.” They work hard to compare sources and summarize their main points but rarely comment on how they see these sources interact with their own teaching. As Grutsch McKinney and Chiseri-Strater note, one purpose of practicum portfolios and teaching journals is “to persuade the WPA that they [GTAs] are doing a credible job” (61). The GTAs in my study tended to be much more positive about the source material in their portfolios than they were in their interviews, which reinforces the idea that they are taking on the role of student performing for a teacher. For example, in her portfolio, Blaire claims to find the readings “relevant to today’s teaching” even though she stated in her interview that they “did not help at all.” In her interview, Blaire talks about how she feels like graduate school is all about finding the “hidden formula” to get good grades, and this seems to apply to her responses in her portfolio. The portfolio rarely reflects the anxieties she had over teaching that she shared with me in the interview, anxieties that she may fear label her as unprepared. Rather, she is careful to portray herself as a capable student who is prepared and understands the readings. Interestingly, the most personal connections I saw with theory in the portfolio were when students responded to Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University.” In further support of Dryer’s claims about the connectivity of learning academic writing and resistance in practicum, GTAs related this article to their own experience learning academic writing anew in graduate school, but not to the experiences of their first-year writing students. Thus, they saw connections between this article and their identity as students but not as teachers.

When we see GTAs resist theory in our practicum course, it’s important to consider the associations they draw between theory in that course and theory in other contexts. While we may initially see this resistance as not taking the course seriously as an academic endeavor, we should consider that when we use theory in the practicum classroom, GTAs may take this as a sign to don their student hats, read closely, and talk about the meaning of the text. It may not occur to them that we are asking them to read theoretical texts (like they have done in other classes) through the new lens of a teacher, nor may they know what it means to do so. Depending on if other classes have asked students to apply theory or not, they may associate what we do with “reading Derrida,” not with preparing for teaching. Thus, they may resist these texts because they do not fit with a scholarly identity that, to them, is separate from their newly developing teacher identity.

## Graduate Student-**Teacher** Identity: Learning Teaching Genres

My data supports Dryer’s claim that GTAs may have difficulty in practicum because of their larger struggles with academic writing acquisition (424), and I would add general reading and interaction with theoretical texts. These are the genres of the graduate student, and they are ones that don’t come naturally. So, too, must GTAs reinvent themselves as teachers through learning the genres of the teaching profession. However, even when we move away from theoretical readings to the development of assignment sheets and syllabi, elements that Dryer argues are essential to any practicum course because they put the GTA in the subject position of the teacher (442), student and teacher identities may come into conflict with one another. Students may see syllabi and assignment sheets as representative of a specific instructor, someone who has more power than they do. That view is only reinforced when we give individual grades for creating assignments as a part of our practicum courses, signaling that these are solo authored pieces. These documents actually represent a melding of individual teaching persona and programmatic identity, and this important connection may get lost because of the grading structure of practicum courses. Thus, this signals another area where the intersection of graduate student and teacher

identities is problematic.

In the literature on practicum, we have talked far more about the ways that GTAs interact with composition theory than we have about how GTAs interact with these teaching genres. Heidi Estrem and E. Shelley Reid note that despite our focus as a field on pedagogy, we have not really focused on “learning about teaching” (450). In my study, the genre that GTAs displayed the most anxiety about was the assignment sheet, and our field has also seen this genre as significant. In particular, we advocate for giving GTAs flexibility to come up with their own assignments. Restaino argues that providing prepackaged assignments can cause GTAs to define themselves in opposition to composition (108). When GTAs aren't participating in defining what it means to teach composition for themselves, they further distance themselves from that community. They may see themselves as students being asked to perform a task (teaching) and get graded on it when the teacher of their practicum course (often the WPA) comes for an observation. Similarly, Ryan and Graban stress that it is important that the development of assignment sheets be a space of negotiation (W291). Negotiation means moving away from a model where an experienced member indoctrinates a newcomer into a stable community by showing the GTA that this community is also in flux. As Harris argues, students should be dissuaded of the notion that they must master a particular discourse to become members of a community. Rather, they should be “encouraged toward a kind of polyphony-- an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses” (17). This polyphony gives students, and GTAs, a place for their own voice within composition. Yet this ability to negotiate may get eclipsed by the power of a grade.

It's also important to note the role of others within the writing program in the development of these genres. Estrem and Reid note that GTAs draw on peers and mentors when developing assignments, even when they don't credit them for influencing their larger views about teaching (460). Although we know that “when writers begin to write in different genres, they ... invent both their texts and themselves” (Bawarshi 17), we have not looked specifically at the role of learning teaching genres in the formation of GTA teacher identity. In particular, we have advocated these genres as sites for the development of teacher identity without discussing how that identity interacts with other identities, such as the identity of graduate student and the identity as member of the community of the writing program.

While giving GTAs a space for feedback on assignment ideas, practicum also complicates the way that GTAs use assignments to form their teacher identities by making these materials part of a class in which they are students. In fact, one of the potential problems with our switch from a non-graded to a graded practicum was the way that grades interfered with GTAs' desire to experiment with assignment design. As Restaino argues, practicum should be a safe place for students to experiment with pedagogy (114). The presence of a grade, to some extent, removes that safety net and creates an even bigger focus on the role of GTA as student. I did not study our pass/fail course in the same way and cannot make a direct comparison; however, in my study, some of my participants commented on how the presence of a grade for creating syllabi and assignment sheets added anxiety in creating such materials. “It stressed me out,” Blaire says. Grades clearly enforced the importance of creating quality assignments and worked to ensure that students created assignments that did fit with the program. However, they also place the GTA clearly in the role of student and may work against the development of an identity as teacher and member of a writing program.

For example, Blaire complained that her first assignment draft was graded and that she received a low grade when she had yet to really know what she was doing. She comments that the WPA told her that her assignment sheet “wasn't an A draft,” that if it were to be graded at that point it would be a C-. “That's not constructive,” Blaire says, noting that she felt like the comments explaining this statement would have been more understandable to someone with more experience. Even though that grade was tentative, and all GTAs revised their assignment sheets before they were finally graded as a part of the practicum portfolio, Blaire was frustrated by having to write and be graded on something that she felt she had not yet mastered, just as many graduate students may feel frustration at having to write academic journal articles or other academic genres before feeling like they have mastered these genres.

Part of this struggle is what Ryan and Graban refer to as “the paradox of wanting to be told what to do without being told what to do” (W278). This paradox is also clear when Marty talks about developing an assignment sheet that would serve both for his practicum portfolio and for his second-semester composition course. He uses this analogy to describe the process:

We were told, go draw me a picture. We'd bring it in, and we'd work really hard on it, and this assignment that we thought was really great, and we'd get, well, that's not a picture of an animal. And we're like, oh, you want a picture of an animal? Ok. And we'd go back and redo it and draw a picture of an animal, and then, it's not a horse, and then go back and draw a picture of a horse. It's not a blue horse, and so it got really frustrating.

The process that Marty describes might be seen as the very natural process of figuring out what is expected within a community of practice, particularly which assignments might be appropriate in a writing program to which the instructor is new. However, Marty does not see this as his own process of becoming accustomed with the program and/or the field, nor does he see this as part of the on-going struggle of a community of participants to negotiate what should be taught in the course. Rather, for Marty this is a never-ending quest to figure out what the WPA wants. While he could have used this as an opportunity to negotiate what it means to teach composition, instead he falls back on the student role, wanting to do whatever the teacher wants him to. He even went so far as to take an assignment created by another instructor, and promoted in the composition custom handbook as an example, and turned that in. Much to his dismay, this assignment still met with questions and criticism. It was not the “right” answer he sought but was treated by the WPA as an opportunity to question and improve already existing work within the program.

The presence of a grade may also have given GTAs a false sense of finality when it came to developing their teaching materials. Some sought after final answers and were frustrated when they kept being asked to change assignments. Blaire complained multiple times that she felt the film review was a “stupid” assignment, yet she kept it in her syllabus. This assignment was a common one at Virginia Tech, but not one that was required for the program. In fact, our program prided itself on allowing teachers a lot of flexibility when it comes to developing assignments that fit with the course objectives. Yet, something made Blaire feel like she needed to teach it. After all, it was what her teacher had said to do, and she wanted to be a good student. She also talks about finding the “holy grail” of rubrics, expressing a finality to her selection. Restaino notes that this sense of making an effort that “sticks” is key to GTAs settling into their identities as teachers (115). However, I would argue that too much focus on finality is symptomatic of the role of a student who wants to get a grade and move on, not of a reflective teacher. Marty’s sense that despite whatever changes he made to his assignment sheet, he could not find the right answer, worked against his ability to gain confidence as a teacher. Just as first-year students may see revision as a sign that they haven’t gotten it right, GTAs who focus on their role as students rather than as teachers may find the continued revision necessary for good teaching as evidence of their inferiority as students who just don’t have it right yet. In actuality, we know that when we see teaching as an intellectual and scholarly endeavor, when we truly embrace the role of teacher, we commit to the constant reinvention of our courses and assignments.

The formation of teacher identities in GTAs is clearly complicated by their student identities. However, assignment sheets and syllabi are also complex in terms of the way that programmatic identity and individual teaching identity intersect. Although Virginia Tech did not mandate any particular assignments, there were still certain assignments, like the film review, that were seen as sanctioned by the writing program. As mentioned above, Marty took one of his assignments directly from the custom composition textbook used at Virginia Tech. In addition to this resource, the writing program had recently created a depository of assignment sheets for GTAs to look at, and many of those in my study mentioned drawing on this resource. GTAs also met with mentors and each other when developing their assignments. In particular, the MFA students in my study worked closely together as a group, both in the practicum course and in other settings. Thus, it’s not surprising that when I looked at MFA students Caleb and Kevin’s assignment sheets in their practicum portfolios, they were extremely similar. Both have a similar tone to their materials—one that conveys a less authoritative stance than what I found among the syllabi of the MA students in literature. Kevin and Caleb also both have similar assignments, such as one that asks students to practice MLA style by creating a bibliography of songs, movies, and stories that are important to them. It is important to note, then, that GTA teacher identity is constructed as part of the collaborative construction of the writing program. When wording on syllabi and assignment sheets is developed collaboratively, these genres reflect not only an individual GTA’s persona but also the larger community of practice. Although I have touched on that issue here, this additional layer to GTA identity needs further investigation.

## Moving On: The Reconciliation of Student and Teacher Identities

In their look at graduate student identity more broadly, Jody Nyquist et al. found that “a significant portion of graduate student development involves efforts to demystify the values of the academy” and that for most students “after a couple of terms” those values had often been not only demystified but internalized (20). Because this takes a couple of terms, it’s important to realize that a one-semester pedagogy course taught in the first semester of graduate school may not be enough to see this reconciliation occur. Estrem and Reid argue strongly for a second semester course, saying that when GTAs only have support from mentor meetings in the semester following practicum (like they do at Virginia Tech), they suffer from the notion that after practicum they should have things figured out (475). Clearly, that assessment holds true in some cases. However, my research suggests that another course may not help with the problem. I argue that some students need the space to figure things out as a *teacher* with continued support from a community of other teachers but without the panopticon of the classroom.

While Restaino argues the key to both introducing GTAs to composition as a discipline and to pedagogy is in “defining teacher preparation in terms of a middle space between teaching and learning, where graduate students are allowed to hitch their teaching approach to the very fact of their studenthood” (113-114), those participants in my study who clung too closely to studenthood continued to spin a narrative of bitterness and resistance. It wasn’t the hitching of teaching to studenthood itself that made the difference but the meaningful connections some GTAs made between their dual roles, tying their work as graduate students to their work as teachers while moving beyond studenthood. In this discussion section, I talk about what caused some GTAs to move beyond their resistance to composition and what we can do to foster this acceptance.

While evaluation of teaching quality was outside the scope of my study, I think it’s important to acknowledge that resistance to teaching does not necessarily equate to poor teaching or even a lack of caring about teaching. As quoted in my introduction, Blaire herself explains this tension between not wanting to teach but still wanting to do her best at it. Even though Blaire spins a narrative of resistance, as someone who really hates teaching and shouldn’t be doing it, she ultimately does care. So, what holds her back from accepting the part of herself that is obsessed with being a good teacher? Ultimately the identity that Blaire expressed most frequently was her identity as a student at Virginia Tech. She proudly admits to also receiving her undergraduate degree there and to her continued involvement in the community. Sometimes that involvement directly conflicts with her role as teacher, such as when one of her students pledged the same fraternity as her roommate and was thus suddenly a part of Blaire’s social circle. Sometimes the conflict is more internalized. For example, she talks condescendingly of freshman students, rejecting the view presented by the WPA that they are bright, capable writers, saying, “I’ve been looking down on freshman since my sophomore year.” In Blaire’s case, she seemed unable to fully occupy the in-between space of student and teacher, but rather saw herself as an upperclassman welcoming students to Virginia Tech when needed and putting them in their place when needed. This seemed to interfere with her ability to fully theorize her own teaching practice but instead caused her to stick with practices she saw others enacting and that she had valued as a first-year student herself. Ultimately, Blaire’s concern about teaching seems to be connected to her studenthood, to her identity as someone who needs to get good grades and figure out the secret formulas for making it through her degree program. In this case a second-semester course might even further designate Blaire as student rather than help her reconcile the identities of student and teacher.

In contrast to Blaire’s self-narrative of resistance, MFA student Kevin offers another common self-narrative, that of being “lost then found” (Welch 387). Resistance plays a role in this narrative as well, but Kevin is ultimately able to reconcile his position as student with his position as teacher. In his interview, Kevin tells the story of how he started practicum as confused by composition but came to love it in the end. The key moment for Kevin revolved around his creation of an assignment. The exigency, he explained, was how he had used a fieldwork report assignment that he had developed in practicum with other GTAs, and how the assignment had “bombed.” He felt that he did not fully understand the assignment himself, and thus he had done a poor job of guiding the students through it. After hearing composition guest speaker Geoff Sirc talk about a mixed-tape assignment he uses in his classroom, Kevin was inspired to develop his own similar assignment. This was a point when Kevin was no longer creating assignment sheets that would be graded. However, he didn’t just go it alone; of his own accord, he used inspiration from a theorist in the field and applied it to his own teaching. For Kevin this represented a moment when he felt like he was “finally grading them as a comp and rhetoric teacher.” It was not the practicum course that led to this happy ending; rather it was Kevin’s resistance to the finality of the graded assignment sheets he had created in practicum and his creation of new assignments that led to his acceptance of his role as teacher. Welch notes that “growing critical consciousness” can “arise from resisting, not embracing, a faith” (388), and while Kevin sounds like he’s offering a narrative of conversion, his story, too, is more complex.

While Kevin may have needed the space to resist the blue horse of an assignment he created in practicum, that doesn’t mean that practicum and his attitude toward it didn’t help make this moment of acceptance possible. I saw a key difference in the way that Blaire and Kevin portrayed themselves in their final portfolios. While Blaire told the story of herself as a confident student, Kevin shared his vulnerability as a new teacher. In his opening letter, Kevin writes, “I’m a clown in a cannon, and someone just lit the fuse.” Somewhere along the line, Kevin learned that being vulnerable was okay, and that message was conveyed not only in terms of teaching but in terms of his overall academic work. In regard to this point, Kevin praises a professor of poetry, who he comments gave him the confidence to not only experiment with his poetry but with his formal papers. This approach helped Kevin negotiate his own identity by taking risks in other contexts as well. He clearly met the requirements of practicum necessary as a student, while still acknowledging his vulnerability as a new teacher. His process of figuring out who that person would be started to develop within the practicum course, where he first began to articulate the connections he saw between his home discipline of creative writing and composition, but those connections were not solidified until the following semester. Kevin initially resisted composition theory as foreign, but in his interview, he explains how his continued development as a creative writer caused him to start making connections between his work as a graduate student and the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Now, he states, he thinks about “ethos,

logos, and pathos” when writing poetry. Thus, Kevin seems to make strong connections between his work as a student and his work as a teacher, between theory and practice in all spheres of his academic life.

## Conclusion

In our discussions of teacher preparation, we focus a great deal of energy on talking about what should be taught in the practicum course; however, my study shows that this is only one factor in the complex development of graduate student-teacher identity. Blaire and Kevin went through the same practicum course, and both began the course with a high level of resistance but ended up with different views of themselves and of composition. This is not to say that we should not try to improve our practicum courses; however, we must also continue more research into what happens after practicum. In addition, we should continue to examine the ways that different models of the practicum experience interact with GTAs’ overall enculturation into graduate school and teaching. Does the presence of a grade for assignment sheets and syllabi discourage experimentation on the part of GTAs? How does one course as opposed to a two-course sequence position the GTA differently? How do GTAs see themselves in relation to the writing program as a whole? Since my study only extends to one method of teaching practicum at Virginia Tech, further research is needed into these and similar questions.

Although this research project was completed at Virginia Tech, I have now moved on to a position as an assistant professor at another university and am teaching our practicum course for the first time (although I have yet to assume the role of WPA). I have also taught the second course in a two-course sequence at my university, one that focuses more on composition theory and research. In closing, then, I offer suggestions for teacher preparation (both in practicum courses and beyond) that draw on the research in the field, my study, and my own experience assisting with and teaching practicum courses.

- Begin with general educational theory rather than composition theory, particularly if you have the luxury of a two-course sequence. If GTAs begin with theory that has a clear application for teaching, they may come to see theory and practice as intertwined, like Kevin did. They may also move away from the notion, learned in other classes, that theory is content to be learned and regurgitated, either in written responses or by teaching it directly to first-year students.
- Talk directly to GTAs about how texts in practicum interact with texts in other communities of practice, such as “the creative writing workshop [or] the literature or professional writing seminar” (Dryer 443). It was Kevin’s connection to his poetry class that helped him process the rhetorical concepts presented in practicum.
- Show GTAs the variety within a first-year writing program. Build databases of assignment sheets, have GTAs collect and analyze them and consider the ways that the teacher’s identity intersects with the program’s identity in these important documents. For example, I had my GTAs use a process similar to Bob Broad’s process of dynamic criteria mapping to analyze teaching documents and interviews with their mentors and make a map of their key values. We then compared these maps as a class to talk about the larger map of our writing program’s values. Rather than seeing one set of assignments as valid, my hope is that this approach helped GTAs see the variety within one program and how key values can be implemented differently. Thus, they would see this community as a space of negotiation that they could participate in as teachers, rather than a homogeneous community they had yet to gain access to. The goal was for them to see a role for themselves within the writing program.
- Give GTAs space. Talk to them about how syllabi and assignment sheets as well as teaching values evolve and change over time for any given teacher. Allow them room to experiment with these documents without initially grading them. For example, when Blaire received a poor (even tentative) grade on a draft of a teaching assignment, she withdrew from any experimentation and went for the assignments that the WPA had mentioned before, even when they did not fit her own teaching goals. By giving GTAs like Blaire that initial “safe space” to experiment with assignments before grading them, we may allow them to approach assignment-building as teachers first, and students second.
- Maintain a speaker series that GTAs attend throughout their careers in the writing program. As we can see from Kevin’s experience, sometimes face-to-face (or Skype) speakers can influence GTAs in a way that just reading composition theory cannot. Such speakers also provide a way to continue connecting the field as a whole to GTAs after they have completed practicum. Since these speakers are no longer a part of a graded class, they may provide an opportunity for GTAs to connect to composition scholarship as teachers rather than students.
- Tie together research and teaching through action research projects, projects designed to research and solve a particular problem in particular community. Even though these projects may be done within the confines of a class, when GTAs can approach them from the perspective of problems that they have seen as a member of a teaching community, they may be able to better meld teacher and student identities. Not

only do such projects increase respect for teaching, as Ebest argues (20), they also help GTAs tie together their skills as graduate students and their skills as teachers. (Again, this suggestion may be more possible when working with a two-course sequence.)

As Dryer notes, not much of the research on practicum has focused on the “*production of identities*” (424). Yet, we know that learning and identity formation are “inseparable” (Lave and Wenger 115). This study has begun to fill that gap by looking at the ways that the production of student and teacher identities interacts with the practicum course. However, our practice of teaching practicum should also directly engage with the production of identities by bringing to the forefront the ways that GTAs and other teachers construct themselves in relation to other communities of practice. Ultimately even the GTAs who convey an attitude of resistance are still learners in the very difficult position of re-inventing the university, the composition classroom, and themselves.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Diana George for including me in the process of developing the new practicum course and for serving on my dissertation committee where this research began. In addition, I'd like to thank my director Katy Powell, and other committee members: Kelly Belanger and Michael Carter.

## Notes

1. GTAs also observed a class taught by a PhD student in the program. As a part of this observation, they taught one lesson, and the portfolios included a letter from the PhD student mentor about the GTA's teaching. As it was not written by the GTAs, this data was outside the scope of this study. ([Return to text.](#))
2. These courses were still offered but were no longer required as a condition of assistantship. ([Return to text.](#))

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Resistance and Identity Formation from *Composition Forum* 32 (Fall 2015)

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