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Experienced Teachers, Emergent Researchers: Graduate Students Developing Scholarly Identities

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Introduction

Graduate students in Writing Studies often experience a puzzling contradiction. We are learning the field and pursuing original research, often for the first time, while simultaneously teaching writing courses where we act as an experienced guide for students. In this article, we recount our experiences teaching EnglWrit111*: Writing, Identity, and Power*, an optional, 100-level composition class. Here, we reflect on multiple questions. As graduate students, how do we combine our roles as emergent researchers with our experience as veteran instructors when teaching first year writing courses? How might a course theme like "Writing, Identity, and Power" allow experienced teachers to bring their scholarship into the classroom? How does teaching inform graduate students' scholarly identities, and how do graduate students' scholarly identities inform their teaching? We analyze and reflect on how our experiences teaching this class allowed us to each bring in our own investments in community literacy, student activism, and digital circulation to the classroom in ways that informed both our pedagogy and our scholarship.

First, we briefly discuss how the field of writing studies has considered the development of graduate students' scholarly identities, both as teachers and researchers. Focusing on the premise that graduate students can benefit from confluence between their research and teaching opportunities but recognizing that there are programmatic challenges to doing so, we offer our own teaching narratives, grounded in the context of our program's teacher training and pedagogical emphases, to show how our research investments around writing inform our teaching and vice versa. We acknowledge that all instructors, including graduate students, bring their scholarly investments into their teaching practice, and we hope to offer insight about how to navigate this emergent-researcher/experienced-teacher duality.

Graduate Students' Development of Academic Identities

We do not claim to give a comprehensive overview of research on graduate student education; instead, we aim to highlight a few central themes that are especially influential to our and our peers' experiences as graduate students. Across different disciplines, much attention has been given to the question of how graduate students develop academic identities, particularly when it comes to their relationship to research and publication (Carr et al.; Coffman et al.; Culpepper et al.; Inouye and McAlpine). In particular, a narrative of apprenticeship and enculturation has emerged, focusing on the often opaque and idiosyncratic ways graduate students learn writing, research, and

disciplinary norms from mentors and begin to model and replicate the conventions of their fields, including choices of research topics, use of accepted methods, ways of writing about their research, and more (Belcher; Casanave and Li; Curry; Reed, "Importing"). Within writing studies especially, critiques have been levied at "the traditional model of apprenticeship" for how enculturation processes reproduce inequities, particularly for students of color, and disciplinary norms without pushing for more than "incremental" advances in knowledge-making (Madden 16). Following calls to focus more on what is revealed by the lived experiences of graduate students (Madden et al.), we focus in particular on the role of teaching in graduate student's emerging scholarly identities.

When it comes to graduate students' development as writing teachers, we are interested in where graduate students find opportunities to create reciprocity between their teaching and research and how programs open up these possibilities. This is why we value examples of graduate programs that work closely to support graduate students as both their researcher and teacher identities are developing, such as our own. We recognize that there have been conflicts between graduate student instructors and professors who disagree on what should be taught, as well as concern over a lack of standardization across sections of the same course (Brown and Conner; Fleming; Reed, "Enacting" 116-117). We are not suggesting that graduate students should have full control over the curriculum of courses they teach, and we are not recommending that any graduate program overhaul their teaching structures; instead, we wish to show that this negotiation of teaching and research is already happening and highlight what is afforded when a program makes space for this work. We recognize that an important stage of graduate students' professional development occurs when they develop teaching philosophies informed by their scholarly investments in writing studies, which they bring into each of the classes they teach.

Recognizing that most post-graduate academic jobs in writing studies have a heavy teaching focus, including requirements to teach first-year writing, we want to highlight how graduate students can make the teaching we do in our programs opportunities for our own scholarly development, including bringing our research interests into the classroom. We have found that, as we advance in our graduate studies to perform original research, part of this process involves identifying personal investments in what writing is and can do and, consequently, how we think it should be taught. We provide some background about our own program's context and show how this has shaped how we bring our emerging scholarly investments into our classes. In addition to the standard teacher training of our home university, we identify teaching EnglWrit111 as pivotal to our own academic identity development.

The Goals and Mission of EnglWrit111

The history of EnglWrit111 at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is intertwined with a larger institutional history of student activism, basic writing, and critical pedagogy. The course first began in 1982 as a basic writing course that functioned as a prerequisite to first year writing for students who did not meet placement standards for

that class (Writing Program). In the late 1980s, UMass Amherst students staged a series of protests in response to a campus culture of racism and discrimination, demanding that the university take action. The UMass Amherst Writing Program – directed by Anne Herrington and Marcia Curtis – debuted a new EnglWrit111 curriculum in 1990, designed to "incorporate civility and diversity" (Herrington) including a revised course text list, which featured stories about social identity and discrimination (Watkins). Herrington and Curtis' vision laid the foundation for future curricular updates, which follow general trends in the field of basic writing to move beyond a focus on correcting perceived student errors through the teaching of rote mechanical skills to a field that centers student writing development through critical pedagogy (Gilyard; Horner; Shaughnessy; Shor).

Throughout the course's history, there has been a strong focus on critical pedagogy as a way of supporting students' self-reflection and writing growth (Herrington and Curtis; Lee; Moran). Past instructors have emphasized the opportunity to focus on how students' identities and their social contexts are inseparable from their experiences of writing, noting in particular that these classes can be "contact zones" (Lee 182). This is a history we have learned about in coursework and professional development we've received as graduate instructors. Furthermore, in recent years, the course was outwardly revised in order to recognize the work already happening within the 111 classrooms. In response to critiques that developmental courses delay student progress towards degree without offering skill-building opportunities (Morales and Reid; Kim; Weaver), the course is now a credit-bearing course that carries Interdisciplinary and United States Diversity designations, meaning it fulfills graduation requirements and does not slow down degree progression. Additionally, the Writing Program has moved away from a placement exam to a directed self-placement model, where students knowingly self-select into taking this course. Finally, in order to more accurately reflect its content and purpose, the course was renamed to *Writing, Identity, and Power*.

In accordance with these curricular shifts, each section of the course shares learning objectives. Rather than copy them here in full, we highlight a few that are especially relevant to our teaching experiences. In the course, students will:

- Explore different disciplinary perspectives on writing, language, and literacy;
- Understand that writing is socially and culturally situated, and that the ways in which writing practices are valued are tied to larger systems of power and privilege;
- Become familiar with practices used in process-oriented writing courses. . .;
- Practice respectful and ethical ways of engaging with others' ideas. . .;
- Develop lines of intellectual inquiry through reading, writing, and primary source research… (Writing Program 23)

We, as instructors at UMass Amherst, are shaped by our program's focus and history, especially given the extensive support and training we receive in the teaching of writing. However, we hope to show how we are co-creating these learning objectives by taking them up in our classrooms differently, based on our own areas of research. In what

follows, we offer three narratives of our teaching to highlight how we also bring our own scholarly investments in writing into our classes and thus meet the course's learning objectives in different but valuable ways. We show how we each negotiate the experienced-teacher/emergent-researcher dynamic from within the space offered to us by this course.

Stacie's Teaching Reflection

As I began teaching *Writing, Identity, and Power*, I was preparing to defend my comprehensive exams on action research and the role of language ideology in community literacy research. This transitioned into my dissertation study, a historically informed ethnographic case study of a community writing group I facilitate at my public library. Underlying my research project is a belief that writing can be used to create social change generally and specifically that we can use writing (and research about writing) to create community with others. In my research, this looks like asking about people's lived experiences and their relationships to writing and seeing how that shapes their participation at the writing group, as well as asking them to co-construct the writing group's activities. In doing this project, I have realized that I have developed a lot of my practice as a researcher and facilitator through my experiences as a teacher.

Broadly speaking, I take an asset-based and critical approach to writing in my teaching, with the hope that students' relationships to writing change so that they recognize what literacy resources they have, can build on, and use to meet their own writing goals. This means understanding and valuing what writing and language knowledge, experiences, and resources students bring into the classroom and also understanding the hierarchies, contexts, and power relations that structure their writing experiences at our university. Many students are already quite aware of these dynamics, but the class highlights what this looks like on an everyday basis in accordance with the objectives to identify that "writing is socially and culturally situated" and to "[p]ractice respectful and ethical ways of engaging with others' ideas," as the course learning objectives state.

One example of this occurs early in the semester when we discuss Vershawn Ashanti Young's "Should Writers Use They Own Language?" We discuss theories of translanguaging and linguistic repertoires, that literacy resources live together, collide with one another, and sometimes mesh in ways that can be creative, subversive, or penalized in academic spaces. Students will talk about this in a very granular way, like how they had to get used to the subject-verb-object structure of a sentence in English, which is different from their native language. From there, students reflect on their orientations towards writing and language – how they've come to feel, know, and value things about language and literacy – which is expanded in the second half of the semester with a family and community literacy project, where students are tasked with identifying the people who have acted as sponsors of their literacy and conducting an interview with them. After the interview is complete, students write a paper that reflects on what gets passed down (or not) to others within their family or community and why, as well as how these literacy practices matter to them. Students have told me how this assignment is often the first time they broach meaningful subjects with family members

and elders in their community. Examples include how oral history in Khmer has helped three generations survive the trauma of war and immigration; how watching Marathi-language films preserve a cultural identity in both India and the U.S.; or how a parent reading to their child at bedtime helped them develop a love of reading even when navigating school-based challenges.

The history of critical pedagogy, at UMass Amherst and generally, informs my approach to this class. On a foundational level, I am cognizant that I am a white, monolingual teacher at a predominantly white institution. And yet, in the four semesters I have taught it, this class has been primarily composed of multilingual students of color, many of whom are international students. Facilitating a classroom environment where students not only learn about their own writing lives but learn from each other – and, in doing so, identify the vast writing and language resources they already have to draw on – is crucial to my pedagogy. This research unit treats students' own lives, literacy sponsors, and literate repertoires as a site of knowledge just as worthy as any published text. I am constantly learning from my students, just as they learn from each other or from me. Looking back, I see that this kind of open reflection about their literacy experiences pushed me to want to understand better how this might work similarly within a community writing context. My research informs my teaching, which has informed my approach as a researcher.

Rachel's Teaching Reflection

When I started teaching this course, my research interests were still in development while I finished my last years of graduate coursework. Throughout this time, I cultivated a scholarly and pedagogical focus on what writing can do for people: how it impacts their everyday lives, shapes their understanding of the world, and serves as a vehicle for change. Charting this work means attending to the contexts and mediums that structure peoples' writing and thinking. My research focuses on feminist rhetoric and activism, in which I primarily study the text production of online writers to examine how experiences of feminist discourse are shaped by digital spaces. In this research, my main focus is on the writers and how their online textual interactions impact their understandings of feminism and social activism more broadly. Now, this is also evident in my teaching, as I similarly ask my students to consider what writing can afford them and how they may enact change through writing within their own contexts.

One way I take this up in the classroom is through a unit focused on student activism. At the beginning of our second unit, I start class by posing the question, "Can students create change?" The answers are wide and varied but trend negative, with most expressing that students do not have enough power to effectively create change. We use this as an opening to discuss the history of the course. I explain that one reason why *Writing, Identity, and Power* exists today is because student activists advocated for it. I show them a timeline of archival material from the late 1980s, including pictures of student protests, documents from the Writing Program, and newspaper articles covering the controversy.

This first lesson sets the tone for the unit and provides a common touchstone as we explore the intersections of writing, identity, and power through the lens of student activism. From here, I assign readings that cover the broader history of activism at UMass Amherst (Bayrak and Reardon) and the role of student organizing in identity-based activism (Hoang). In discussing each reading, we maintain a strong throughline of examining the role of writing and other kinds of text production in order to investigate our broader questions.

For their last set of readings, students read about Gen Z activists and the work they are doing, paying particular attention to the role of technology in the work of these activists. We have class discussions about online activism, which culminates in the question, "Can students create change using social media?" In this discussion, students have the chance to combine everything they have encountered in this unit with their lived experience and personal beliefs in order to consider what they think can be accomplished using social media and digital technologies more broadly.

I value learning how my students see writing working in their own lives. They continue to bring up complicated, conflicting, and nonintuitive feelings about their own experiences of social activism, digital engagement, and writing in their everyday lives. These reactions have shaped my emergent research interests as I explore the individual experience of writing about social causes in online spaces. In turn, my students are highly engaged when we touch on these topics in our course as they get to draw on their own expertise as writers and technology users. In this unit and elsewhere, bringing my scholarly investments into my teaching has helped me to further develop as a researcher.

Jackie's Teaching Reflection

My research and my teaching are deeply intertwined; in both, I emphasize the importance of attending to circulation, especially when writing in digital spaces. Through my scholarship, I aim to offer activists and others approaches to address moments when other actors hijack their digital rhetoric for their own purposes. In the age of virality, personalized web experiences, and black-boxed sorting algorithms on social media, understanding as much as possible about how our and others' rhetoric moves online is essential for those who are using digital spaces to advocate for change because, just as those writers have the potential to affect change, other actors have the potential to disrupt or redirect those writers' attempts. I believe that the writing classroom is a space where students should learn how to leverage digital spaces for socially just purposes; therefore, the writing classroom is a space where students learn how to navigate rhetorical ecologies to advocate for the causes they believe in.

In *Writing, Identity, and Power*, one assignment I designed asks students to identify an academic writing policy they have been affected by and create a text that advocates for some type of change to the policy they chose. Examples include assignment sheets, school policy documents or handbooks, standardized testing materials, and state or national standards for the teaching of writing. Through this assignment, I aim to help

students identify what policies have structured their experiences with writing in academic settings, reflect on the impact that those policies have had on themselves, and examine how they, as agentive writers, can write and circulate texts to advocate for change to those policies. While we might not delve deeply into digital circulation in this course, attention to the potential audiences of their texts in the ecologies students are entering prepares students to more effectively advocate for change online and the assignment more generally builds into the course's objectives of understanding how writing fits into systems of power.

While the students learn about circulation and audience from their classmates and myself, I learn more about circulation and my research more generally from my students' insights during class. The first time I taught *Writing, Identity, and Power*, one of my students approached me during the beginning of the unit saying he wanted to do something different that he believed was not an actual genre, a satirical newscast on standardized testing. After assuring him that that was in fact a genre, I asked him why he chose it and he mentioned that he was trying to reach a wider audience of parents and older students and that, in his experience, if something is funny while giving a message, people are more likely to not only listen to it, but to share it more widely on social media. Several years later, as I was coding my dissertation data, I found a category of actors in the activist ecology I am studying, information brokers, who were doing something similar to what my student described, although with different intentions. These actors used entertainment in the form of gossip or humor to intensify the circulation of activist rhetoric for views and attention, and they were actually spreading the rhetoric further than many of the activists in my data.

Graduate student instructors are in an interesting position when it comes to learning from their students. While they may be experienced teachers, they are less experienced researchers, which means that these moments of learning from students can shape the early foundations of how they understand their own research. Courses that offer more experienced graduate students a space to incorporate aspects of their research and investments in writing studies create opportunities for graduate students to learn from their students in ways that shape who they become as researchers in their field.

Synthesizing and Looking Outward

In reflecting on our own approaches to this course, we illustrate how our shared experiences of scholarly and pedagogical development have manifested in different approaches to the curriculum. When tasked with accomplishing the same course goals, our research interests and understandings of writing prompt us to present the class to our students in distinct ways. We offer our thoughts here as possible suggestions for other graduate student instructors or writing programs, knowing that some changes offer fewer institutional obstacles than others. We have identified several aspects that have supported us in navigating this experienced-teacher/emergent-researcher dynamic.

An Institutional Culture of Sharing

When graduate students first begin teaching for UMass Amherst's Writing Program, they are given access to a database that contains years' worth of instructors' materials, including activities, assignments, and lesson plans. The generosity that we experienced as new teachers illustrated a culture of sharing within our program that encourages experienced teachers to also share their materials, whether that is through adding to the database or passing on materials to individuals. This culture of sharing means that there is also a database for *Writing, Identity, and Powe*r instructors where we and those who came before us have shared their materials. As much as we have designed our own lessons and assignments, we are often drawing on a foundation laid by others.

In addition to offering starting places for instructors new to *Writing, Identity, and Powe*r, the resources show how other graduate student instructors have brought their own research interests into the classroom. These materials demonstrate ways of bridging the gap between teaching and research and encourage us to take risks in our own teaching by designing new assignments and activities grounded in our own research. Furthermore, the fact that we are teaching a course that encourages students to consider everyday forms of writing in a more critical way has helped, encouraged, and reaffirmed our research, which also centers on more "every day," or nonacademic, forms of writing: community writing, online activism, discourse circulating on social media. Creating a set of resources from experienced teachers' voluntary contributions might be the first step in creating a similar ethos of sharing at other institutions.

Mentorship and Training

All *Writing, Identity, and Power* instructors are experienced teachers who have taught for at least two years and have participated in a significant amount of training and professional development that addresses both the theory and practice of teaching writing in college. This includes a weeklong orientation, a year of weekly professional development meetings, a second year of monthly professional development meetings, and ongoing opportunities for pedagogical discussion and reflection. Additionally, this means that teachers of EnglWrit111 are further along in their own research when they are teaching these classes, meaning they are more likely to bring in their own emerging scholarly expertise into the teaching of this class. These are the conditions that have allowed us to develop our own versions of the course that take up these pedagogical commitments in different ways, informed by our own research interests.

Through our training, we have developed and refined our teaching philosophies, meeting with faculty mentors to receive explicit feedback and guidance on this. Furthermore, new instructors of *Writing, Identity, and Power* meet every few weeks with a writing program administrator to discuss their plans for the class and any challenges

they're facing. While this might be structurally difficult to implement at other schools, smaller, more manageable changes could include setting up systems for mentorship, where experienced instructors are paired with incoming graduate students, or optional feedback groups.

Changes to Writing Courses

While teachers naturally bring their philosophies into the classroom, there is also room to build this more intentionally. Courses that make space for experienced graduate student teachers to bring in their research interests are incredibly valuable as they prepare graduate students to think about how they would design their own courses, and it benefits students as it enriches teaching across different sections of a course, creating immersive and real opportunities for students to learn through writing, while still meeting shared learning objectives. We acknowledge that we have a lot of institutional support and history on our side in making opportunities like this possible for graduate students that other writing or graduate programs might not be able to implement easily, especially given that writing instruction, from developmental courses to first year writing, are under attack at different universities (Kim; Sullivan). Still, we wonder what possibilities for graduate student scholarly development open up when the roles of "teacher" and "student" that we occupy do not have to be at odds but instead can be, as they have been for us, opportunities for mutual experimentation, reflection, and learning.

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