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Teaching Boldly, Teaching Queerly: Embracing Radical (Un)Growth and Possibilities as a Graduate Instructor in First-Year Writing

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Introduction

When I accepted an offer to a master's program in English, though I knew that the graduate teaching assistant (GTA) assignment was a mandatory and inevitable part of the assistantship, my main strategy was, candidly, to pretend that I would not in fact be in front of the classroom in just one year's time. I was creeping back into the academic world after five years in student affairs, and was used to operating, even decentering, myself in favor of providing service and experience to the tens of thousands of students under our division umbrella. I was not student-facing in my position. The idea of teaching was intimidating at best and terrifying at worst, partially because in my prior role, I had a degree of anonymity. At this point, I still had a foot in the closet, though my partner and I were celebrating over ten years together. But I had never publicly identified myself as a lesbian, or even queer. However, my own sexuality was not the primary reason I was so concerned, though it certainly did not help. My impressions of what it meant to teach writing were flush with assumptive dread: I imagined that I would be required to teach strict grammar protocols, that I would need to subjectively assign numerical grades to assignments I did not have any expertise or interest in, that I would become the cliché of the underprepared, ineffective college instructor teaching a subject that my students did not want to learn and did not care about. I was prepared to take on teaching as a survival mechanism, something to grit my teeth through in order to get to the other side of the degree.

I recognize that this paints a grim picture of my earliest foray into the role of graduate instructor of writing. I illustrate this early memory of identity formation not because I wish to lament those first recollections, rather because I want to recognize the precarity and uncertainty that is so deeply entwined with the experience of being a graduate student in front of the classroom (Howard-Hill, 2023). If you were to approach me today, four years later, I would introduce myself as someone who loves the art and science of teaching. Someone who recognizes that my instructor-hood is an essential and inextricable part of my identity. Yet, I would also readily tell you that the process of ownership and claiming of that identity was fraught, deeply difficult mentally and spiritually, and required thorough remaking of my perceptions and assumptions about the classroom, the field, and my own positionality. At the time, I feared the breadth of

the field, what I didn't know, and the expertise I definitely did not have. Now, I see that breadth as part of what makes this field, and teaching in this field, so special: the heterogeneity of teaching first-year writing holds more power than I could have anticipated.

In short, it was more difficult than I anticipated to find myself in the classroom, and my struggle in the process of learning to teach was not unique to me in my program. I was lucky, in some ways, to have found the magic I did in teaching. Some around me were not so lucky. And so, I call on programs, and mentors, of GTAs in first-year writing to think through how identity in the classroom can be encouraged and fostered---but more importantly, I ask how we might be sensitive to those GTAs whose identities are still evolving, even fraught, and how we might frame the classroom as a place of (un)growth.

In forming my identity as an instructor, I ended up inadvertently entering a process that might be called (un)growth: in essence, un-learning my assumptions, un-learning my hesitations, un-learning my fears in favor of embracing becoming. This process was unintentionally tracked, accidentally archived, in assignments from classes, but also scrawls in notebooks, jotted down scholar names on dog-eared pieces of paper to look up later, early drafts of syllabi and assignments that represent a found-ecology of (un)growth. As graduate students, we're in a constant state of becoming, somehow trying to embrace an eternal beginner's mindset while meeting external expectations of rapid matriculation into expertise. Though I'm still not fully settled in my identity as a teacher, looking back over the work I was doing, where my mind was dwelling, what I was considering as I was learning to teach allowed me to design a coding strategy where I could see, even in my obvious uncertainty and confusion in this archive of work, snippets of what I cared about, and what I valued, as an instructor.

As Cicchino (2020) notes, approaches to teaching graduate students to teach writing vary widely. As a larger discipline, the conversation around teaching writing, and teaching others (especially graduate students) to teach writing, let alone how we do so with stewardship to graduate student experiences, care for undergraduate student success, and without entirely eviscerating the already overly scheduled life of the WPA or professor charged with disseminating this information in too little time, is, naturally---complicated. Thus, I understand that in asking for more attention to identity, and more consideration to those in marginalized positions, the natural reaction might be to say we wish we could, but we have little to no extra capacity to do so. In this piece, I'm not necessarily arguing that more time needs to be devoted to teacher training, or that the curriculums of GTA education need full overhauls. Rather, the existing conversation around teacher training can always, and, especially in the continuously fraught picture of higher education, *should* always be challenged to think through how we can ask graduate students to do the work of forming a teaching identity.

At my university, a large R1 with over 100 sections of first-year writing per semester, our approach to GTA education has seen several revisions, even in my time as a graduate student. In my era of first learning to teach, we all took a mandatory pedagogy course, tutored in the writing center for our first year, observed a section with an experienced instructor, and in our second year of the two-year program, taught independently with a supportive practicum course each semester. As a PhD student now, I teach two sections each semester independently. My university has a robust teacher training program, one I am grateful for, and I recognize that this is not the case in every institution. My hope for this reflective work is that it speaks to other GTAs who might connect with my experience, regardless of whether they are in an intensive teacher training program, or find themselves going through the process very much alone.
In this piece, I share an autoethnographic mapping of (un)growth as an instructor and graduate student: each archival snippet a glimpse into a pedagogical evolution, that I have paired with practicable strategies for graduate students who may be interested in teaching outside the lines of convention in favor of the radical world of boldly queer pedagogy. Whether the reader is early in their teaching journey, or nearing the end of their graduate tenure, these vignettes are designed for applicability, and, more critically, as an offering for those who might feel isolated, lost, or otherwise uncertain in the classroom.

A Look in the Mirror

> *"… but how, especially as graduate students with limited experience, can we better serve the needs of students?...I think [a clear] point that was present in all three of the readings* [Fulkerson, 2005; Wardle; 2009; Matsuda 2006] *is that within the flaws of the first year* [sic] *composition program, it's impossible - and okay - to not know the answers to that question. It could be argued that by acknowledging the inequities and the flaws, we are already progressing to a more equitable and effective method of teaching first year students."* -- A reading response I drafted in the first week of my writing pedagogy class, dated August 21, 2021

When I drafted this reading response, written in the opening week of my writing pedagogy course in 2021, my fears were still very much present, and for the first time, I was truly considering the implications of coming out to my students, and working, even subliminally, to decide on what academic drag I would don (Samek & Donofrio, 2013). At the same time, the field of composition, let alone *teaching* composition, felt intimidatingly expansive, encompassing far more intellectual sprawl than my earlier assumptions of enforcing grammatical correctness, positing limited genres, and grading students, all of whom were still learning writers, for subjective brilliance on an undefinable numeric scale. Fulkerson (2005), Wardle (2009), and Matsuda (2006) were the first pieces of scholarship on teaching writing that we read in this course, and in all

three, I found myself nearly in a state of shock as the metaphorical curtains on the field were pulled back.

In an articulation of what the first semester of graduate teaching is like, Restaino (2012) poignantly notes that not only are graduate students operating as students of the field of composition, but students of the act of teaching as well. Moreover, Restaino continues that graduate students in this formative time have very limited opportunity to develop the intellectual background---which in an ideal world would take years to develop---for how their teaching operates in a greater disciplinary conversation, the context of their students, and the theories of pedagogy.

In short: from that first week in that very first exposure to the field, the (un)growth took hold. The first step in this process was a decay, even rotting away, of those assumptions, which were somewhat rooted in my own experiences as an undergraduate. What I assumed I would be teaching, or rather how I would be teaching, was what I knew as a student. From those early readings and first weeks of learning what it meant to teach, I needed to metaphorically and literally look in the mirror and confront that the pedagogy I knew, as well as the student I was, did not match with who I felt myself becoming as a future instructor. The readings, as well as the professor of that course, were inviting me into a new stage of active learning, as well as a whole new world of what teaching could look like.

It is critical here that I define what I mean by teaching radically, as well as teaching queerly. As scholarship over decades elaborates, the combining of queer theory and composition is complex, simultaneously generative and limiting, representative of a strategy and a theory, a mindset and a practice (Alexander & Gibson, 2004; Alexander & Rhodes, 2011; Alexander & Wallace, 2009). For graduate students, I argue that queering the composition classroom can take on a variety of shapes, but most primarily involves an approach that embraces the theories of deep care, identity honoring for students and instructors, and encourages the challenging of assumptions (Neto, 2018). Though, in full transparency, I am not completely settled on the binary of my next point, I do maintain that the liminal position of being a graduate student impacts the enaction of queering the classroom in a way that is different than it might be for faculty. To me, my vulnerability in learning to teach, learning to be a professional, and learning to unpack my identity in this formal context of the university made a queered approach simultaneously necessary for my own wellbeing and intimidating in its riskiness. This is not to say that faculty do not experience similar feelings, as I am certain they do in making these pedagogical choices, but to me, all of these components were so new, so unknown, and so unsettling even without the added layer of taking a queer approach that I had to trust my instincts in a different way.

For example, I did not have a community of fellow peers to rely on to problem solve, discuss these strategies with, or even talk through my ideas. I was lucky to have affirming mentorship, but many outside voices within my graduate education cautioned

me against taking on too much, trying to do too much, and that until I got my footing under me, taking an "alternative" approach to the classroom was perhaps more risk than potential reward. While I am only one perspective, this point is important for those involved in GTA education to consider: recognizing that there is not necessarily a "one size fits all" method for learning to teach, or forming a teaching identity, even with a set curriculum, as well as allowing GTAs to be exploratory in their approach, has potential to ease some of the fraught emotions that are somewhat inherent in entering the classroom for the first time. As practitioners in the classroom, we come to understand, whether we like it or not, that teaching is experimental and personal. Even with set standards, GTAs should be encouraged, and allowed, to understand this too.

In articulating what it is to teach radically, I follow the definitional framework of critical pedagogy from Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) but, because of the precarity and risk of the graduate student positioning within the university, as well as the liminality of being both student and teacher, I argue that embracing critical pedagogy in that role tips into the radical sphere, from teaching with alternative assessment practices (Inoue, 2019) to building a culture of compassion (Jazaieri, 2018).

Pedagogical Strategies: Embracing the Process

In learning to become radical in my teaching, I quickly recognized that the breadth of the field was an opportunity, not something to fear. In other words, though it was difficult to embrace how little I felt like I knew, shifting my mindset into teaching as a process allowed me to mirror the same for my students. An early indicator of who I was as an instructor is illustrated in that earlier written response, where I noted that it's okay not to know the answers. In fact, by acknowledging the flaws inherently present in our role as graduate teachers, or even in the field more broadly, we're already on our way to a classroom model that is more progressive.

As writers, we could likely all agree that the idea of writing as a process is common knowledge. What I discovered, though, is that my students were entering the classroom with a set of preconceived expectations, not unlike my own, about what they were about to "endure," for lack of a better term, in a general-education mandated composition course. In an effort to meet my students where they are, and where I am in return, I design a first-day survey, as well as first-week writing responses, that ask very simply what their prior experiences are in a writing classroom, what they're hoping to learn (if anything, which is an important opener as well), and what their concerns are. Of course, not all students want to be vulnerable in this way, but that's where my role as an instructor is especially important. On the first day, I share my teaching philosophy with them, and include it on the syllabus. I tell them what I believe about teaching, what my intentions for the course are, and how the writing classroom can be a place of opportunity, rather than a hurdle. In essence, I open a dialogue about process. I leave my expectations of how my students show up at the door, and embrace them where they are.

The Power of Choice

> *"I think, as Concepts in Composition* [Clark, 2003] *enforces, that teaching freshman composition students one specific tool or multiple specific tools is not so important as enforcing the idea that multimodality is a crucial part of not only writing studies but many disciplines, and that establishing familiarity with a variety of methods is key."* -- A reading response from my writing pedagogy course, dated October 1, 2021

Nearly halfway through my first semester, I was in the process of completing one of the major projects for my pedagogy course, which was a draft portfolio of the course we would teach in a year's time. At the same moment, I had eased fully out of the closet, though I still arguably had fingertips on the door handle. What I mean by this is I was now identifying publicly as a lesbian, and not slanting around pronouns when I talked about my partner. With the encouragement of my professor, I was feeling more confident in the framework of teaching I was developing, and slowly replacing the rotted preconceptions with budding notions of what could be. As I felt more settled in my identity, and began to understand that my perspective and positionality could actually enhance my teaching perspective, I began to weigh that value of choice. To fully honor myself was a choice, one I hadn't chosen before. And, as is evident in this archived evidence, I was already feeling a desire to replicate choice, and variety, in my classroom.

Pedagogical Strategies: Open Assignments & the Graduate Instructor

I'll never forget one of the warnings I received in the early part of my graduate training: adapting an open approach to my classroom was a risk, and a big one, because my students might choose a topic, method, or idea in which I had no expertise. I would risk a loss in credibility, this person insisted. Thinking through first-year writing as a space for students to carry applicable skills into their future paths, however, is shown to be generative in its bridging potential for faculty and students (Menefee-Libey, 2015). My thinking as I ruminated on that conversation was---if my students were to choose a topic beyond my wheelhouse---what an opportunity for mutual learning, as long as I was honest with them.

In our first-year curriculum, the first suggested assignment is a literacy narrative. When I designed that assignment, I chose to flip the definition of literacy over, instead opening it to topics well beyond writing and reading. As long as my students can explain their literacy in their topic of choice, they're welcome to write about it. So too, I give the option of the anti-literacy narrative, where they are free and able to write on a topic that they feel has detracted from, or harmed, a literacy in their life. The response from my students was stunning: topics ranging from sports, to adulthood, to cultural competence

came forward, as well as meditations on a traumatic writing class, a lost love, and more. Open assignments do not need to be limited to conventional curriculum, nor do they need to be a mandate. It is easy, in our academic world, to forget that choice can be radical, and choice can be queer. I cannot emphasize how crucial I believe the power of choice is in first-year writing.

The Friendly Classroom

> *"Dare I say it -- at the orientation session for GTAs especially, I felt that the tonality was very much that a student with accommodations would be an inconvenience to us as a GTA, not an opportunity to foster an environment of inclusivity and practice pedagogy that should already be designed to be accessible, not accessible as an afterthought. It really made me wonder, back to my own research interests in terms of inclusivity for LGBTQ+ populations, how that process of inclusive communication and rhetorical appeal could be extended throughout university language. What is profoundly clear to me is we are not doing enough."* -- A reading response from my writing pedagogy course, dated October 18, 2021

I share this response because it was the first time I openly declared that I was interested in the subject of queering composition, and, notably, the first time I felt assured enough in my own positionality to leverage a critique of wider university messaging around inclusivity. It was true: in that orientation session, the act of inclusivity felt like just that--an act. Coming from student affairs, inclusivity was underscored in every initiative, every effort made, every consideration of student experience. Even as a minority, I learned more about what it meant to be inclusive in student affairs than I could have imagined. In fact, there were multiple moments of learning when I realized that on the academic side of my university experience, my identity had not been supported or honored. To me, inclusivity in the classroom as a teacher was a given: something that should be inherently understood, agreed upon, and considered at every turn. I was so concerned about being inclusive not only because it mattered deeply to me, but because I wanted to honor what I understood to be existing standards of teaching excellence.

Further in the process of (un)growth, this was a moment that was somewhat representative of a loss of innocence. In combination with discovering that teaching writing was so much more than I assumed, there were steps back too, as I recognized that messaging around practices of inclusion and critical or student-centered pedagogy was far from consistent, even negative, unintentionally or intentionally. In some contexts, inclusivity was treated as an option, an afterthought, something that would be good to enact, though not required. To me, in building a friendly classroom, and a welcoming, caring classroom, being inclusive, whether it was sharing my pronouns to ensuring my PDFs were accessible to allowing students mental health days, were clear

choices. In this moment, my restlessness is clear: though I had not set foot in the classroom, I was feeling the strain of how far we have to go to be the best for our students as a collective community.

Pedagogical Strategies: Inclusivity is Not an Option

Scholarship, with Shapiro (2020) as one of many examples, notes how creating an inclusive space is complex, nuanced, and sometimes a challenge, but goes a long way for students. Doing this as a graduate student presents additional layers, including a degree of personal risk if we take the route of sharing our own liminal positioning with our students. However, I argue that treating inclusivity as a minimum standard, rather than an option, opens our classroom up to radical possibilities. For example, I have a conversation with students early in the semester about the barriers of seeking formal accommodations, particularly around mental health. I work with students who have concerns about their ability to complete the course individually to find a plan that will work for them, even if that plan looks different than their accommodations. I encourage, in all my assignments, even traditional research writing, that students reflect on their identity, and provide scaffolding assignments to foster that work.
In my teaching, I've shifted modality for a student who had a critical injury, shared my own story with students who came out to me, invited students to write in their own language. Inclusivity is sometimes more about flexibility and adaptability, rather than mandated university language.

Abandoning Grading

> *"Since I'm on a tangent about assessment: I am using contract grading in my class this semester, though that decision has come under some significant fire. In thinking about Dewey's* [1997] *reflection on experience, and how experience is not only inside the person, but actually changes the experience of the collective: I like to think (and feedback so far tracks this way) that changing the experience of my students to assuage their fears around writing is trickling, tentatively, into the attitude of the university as a whole. But if I, as the grader, am experiencing negative reactions from step-ups, is that experience also trickling down and poisoning the change my assessment practice (and other un-grading methods) is creating as a whole? I believe, as Dewey suggests, that experience is almost specter-like: carrying a certain hauntology with positive or negative effects as we move forward..."* -- A reading response from my composition theory course, dated September 5, 2022

Earlier in the piece, I described one assumption of teaching writing I feared, which was the grading process. For me as a student, grades were always one of the highest sources of stress, and, in many ways, directly aligning to my sense of self-worth. We all understand that writing is subjective, but my fear of failing to be anything less than

perfect in my assignments became a source of deep mental distress. I know I am not alone in the feeling that receiving an unexpectedly low assessment on an assignment that was given considerable effort can be devastating. I recognize that in our contemporary modeling of the university, grading is somewhat of a backbone, but this is not an excuse, in my mind, not to critique and/or subvert the standard system.
After working extensively in alternative grading strategies, which included taking a class using contract grading (Inoue, 2019), I chose with special permission to use an alternative grading contract in my first year of teaching, an extreme rarity in the culture of my program. I was incredibly excited by the idea that I might reinvent some of the trauma around grading, that I might find an assessment strategy that welcomed students, rather than sought to penalize them.

This decision though, to my surprise, received some significant pushback. This pushback came not from my students (nor have I ever since received negative feedback about my grading method from students: in fact, many have noted it as a highlight of their experience) but from other voices, one of which escalated to a major conflict with someone in a position of authority in my first semester of teaching. I was in a position of deference to this voice, and the situation was severe enough I began having panic attacks and a multitude of bureaucratic consequences. This was a further moment of loss of innocence, as I described before. I cared so deeply about my teaching, and my students' experiences, that to see this decision fall under such severe scrutiny was distressing in multiple ways.

In that vulnerable space, I had to lean into my teaching, trust myself, find glimmers of joy in immense darkness in my students. I did not change my strategy, nor did my resolve diminish.

Pedagogical Strategies: Grading & Commitment

In my (un)growth, I needed to learn, similarly to that earlier loss of innocence, that some decisions would be unpopular. To be radical, to grade queerly, to assess writing beyond the normative strategies, can be polarizing. It almost goes without saying. What I did not realize is the *degree* to which it would be polarizing in my own experience. Contract grading, and any form of ungrading, is imperfect, and has consequences negative and positive (Cowan, 2020; Inman & Powell, 2018; Litterio, 2016). The pedagogical strategy I offer here is two-fold and instructor-facing rather than for students: first, that assessment is deeply personal, especially for graduate students, when we are being continuously graded ourselves, and choosing a strategy that honors who you are as an instructor is crucial. Second, that being radical in teaching is a risk, especially as a graduate student, and weighing the risks and rewards is important work. I cannot tell you if the risk is worth it for you, nor can anyone else who isn't you. For me, it absolutely was, and I've only become more passionate and outspoken about the value of ungrading in the first-year writing classroom, as well as critical pedagogy. This does not

mean it will be the case for you. Committing to yourself, and your philosophy as a teacher, is key.

The Power of Transformation

> *"When I entered 5004* [writing pedagogy course], *I was too precious in my assumptions about the discipline of writing. The teacher I would become was screaming to be released, and through that class, my radical/transgressive pedagogy was born, hot and inspired and passionate. But it meant that the old me, the me who came from creative writing and teacher-centered pedagogy, had to die. For a while last year, I hated the person that I was before I was enabled through my coursework to reinvent and honor who I'd been all along. I've since made peace with her, accepted her passing, and realized that without that cycle I could not have become the teacher I'm still evolving to be now."* -- A reading response from my composition theory course, dated October 3, 2022

Around a year after those first archival snippets of my own reflection, I was prepared to call my journey of (un)growth what it was: a cycle of death and rebirth. This response is raw, and honest. I was precious in my assumptions, denying my own identity its wings, and as a result, looking back, I was somewhat horrified with who I had been. By this point, I was teaching independently, carrying the weight of the conflict around my grading strategy, drafting a model of radical teaching in first-year writing for my thesis, and applying for PhD programs to continue that work.

Even a year prior, I never would have imagined I would be taking any of those steps, aside from the teaching, which was only by mandatory assignment. The work of the teacher is a continual work of internal and external transformation, continuation and discontinuation (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Locke, 2014). This cannot be understated for graduate students, who exist in a fraught ecology of career and personal invention amidst composing their teacher identity.

Pedagogical Strategies: Transformation for Students

When we think about the classroom, we might automatically associate the space with transformation. Afterall, students do not emerge from the semester in precisely the same headspace, nor with less knowledge than before. There are dozens of ways we might foster transformation during a semester of first-year writing (Price, 2020). For my students, I frame the semester as an opportunity for growth, for exploration, for finding their footing, whether they are just beginning their college journey or preparing to graduate.

Most importantly, I frame this transformation as an invitation. I do not mandate change in their writing, nor do I promise to shift the way they write. What I mandate is that they

make an attempt to think in interesting ways, and I promise to provide support therein. We explore different genres; I offer choice within those genres. I give contract boosts for cover letters written, for applications filled out, or even for coming to office hours. Transformation is always radical, and does not need to be monumental. In teaching, I recommend prioritizing student growth, and valuing that growth no matter how small it seems to you and whether it has immediate appearance in their writing or not.

Final Thoughts

> *"I considered how Durst* [2006] *aptly considers all the balances the composition teacher must face: binaries, power, identities both personal and of the field. However, as Durst implies, the composition teacher has the unique position of lighting the way for students...Perhaps it is the role of the composition instructor to light up the dark."* -- A reading response from my composition theory course, dated September 18, 2022

As graduate students are all too aware, it can be tempting, even easy, to get caught up in what *cannot* be done. There are days or longer periods where the labor is far too great, the pressures too high, the frustrations tipping into boiling temperatures. We cannot ignore the darkness, the heaviness, the precarity, nor does it serve us to try. Recently, I was a guest speaker for the graduate student teacher orientation at my institution. In response to a question on balancing teaching and research, I explained how, while I was lucky enough to have them entwined, I didn't begin that way. But teaching brought me a unique perspective on my research and how my interests might be harnessed to improve student experiences, in addition to satiating my own curiosities. In brief, I described teaching as that work of lighting the way.

This piece does not exhaust the possibilities for teaching radically or queerly. In fact, I would argue it is just a scratch on the surface. There is far more to be said, far more to be discovered, far more to posit. My central point in presenting this work, for offering this collection of archival evidence and accompanying strategies, is that even in an academic world that is sometimes unfriendly, sometimes restrictive, sometimes harmful, we as graduate students can still find ways to honor ourselves and our students. Though there is always more to be done, we might choose to see that insurmountable task as opportunity, rather than burden. There is always potential to light up the dark.

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