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Reclaiming Authority in the FYC Classroom as a Graduate Teaching Assistant: Using Feminist Pedagogies to Empower

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Introduction

Throughout my first year as a new graduate teaching assistant (GTA), I often questioned how to address my presence as an instructor and as a young woman in a relatively unstable position in academia. I see instructor presence as synonymous with ethos and persona—how I present myself to a classroom (how I want students to see me) and how my students will see me based on external factors that may be out of my control, like gender/gender presentation, age, and university position. Transitioning from student to teacher is difficult enough without considering the inherent instability and liminality of working as a teaching assistant in graduate school, as many scholars have noted; William J. Macauley Jr. calls the rhetoric and composition TAship a "liminal space" (4) and Jessica Restaino refers to the position of graduate students as a "middle space" (53). Simultaneously, instructors and GTAs whose embodiments include other or additional marginalized identities are likely to experience more challenges in feeling respected by their students or even their institutions.

My liminality as a GTA affects my use of authority in the first-year composition (FYC) classroom—more specifically, my tenuous position as a GTA can create a disconnect between who I am as a student and who I want to be as a teacher. I acknowledge that my presence as a white, cisgender woman has positively impacted my experience in academia and contributed to a sense of credibility from my students but what does this look and feel like for GTAs with further marginalized identities? Elizabeth Ellsworth refers to these instructors with marginalized identities as the "Inappropriate Other": one who does not fulfill the role of white, male authority in the classroom (321). How can the "Inappropriate Other" be the authority in an FYC classroom in a student-centered way? What if grasping authority could be liberating? Because there is not enough scholarship on how GTAs specifically can use progressive pedagogies to empower themselves and their students, my article aims to unpack how institutionally Othered, or "Inappropriate Other," GTAs can use feminist-pedagogy-informed notions of positive authority and embodied approaches to instruction to feel more confident in the classroom despite liminal institutional positionalities.[1]

To illustrate my claim, first, I briefly detail scholarship about feminist pedagogy. Then I draw attention to a gap in the literature on how GTAs can apply this pedagogy to their

[1] I have most heavily relied on feminist pedagogical practices to inform my approach to teaching, but I feel this framework would be remiss without acknowledging part of feminist pedagogy's history and roots in critical pedagogy and how many of the practices in feminist pedagogy (like positionality and embodiment) also overlap with queer pedagogical teachings. My argument will only touch on aspects of critical and queer pedagogies as they inform, support, or bolster the larger feminist pedagogical practices I focus on.

teaching to address identity in the classroom. Next, I discuss my approach to rewriting authority as a form of credibility embraced by feminist teacher-scholars; instead of authoritarianism as a negative force in the classroom that alienates both students and teachers, GTAs can embrace authority as a positive extension of their experiences. Lastly, I touch on how shifting authority to include the Othered instructor is done through both feminist pedagogies and embodiment. With the addition of teaching strategies, I offer recommendations on how GTAs can bring their whole selves into their teaching to validate their—and all—identities as instructors and leaders worthy of respect.

Literature Review

Concepts and Pedagogies of Authority in the First-Year Composition Classroom

In the 1980s and up into the early 2000s, composition and feminist scholars argued for a more egalitarian approach to authorial presence in the writing classroom. Part of this shift included a call for more women's perspectives in academia (Flynn; Ritchie and Boardman) because of the recognition that anyone who is not a white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class man has a very different experience in education due to institutional and historical oppressions (Ellsworth; Rakow). Elizabeth Ellsworth names anyone outside of this traditional identity as the "Inappropriate Other": one who must fight for the authority and respect automatically granted to the white male professor (321). Many other women working in the academy have published scholarship that explains how the classroom's lack of political neutrality (Rakow; Weiler) should encourage women to embrace their authority and claim their identity and expertise to fight against institutionally imposed Otherness (Friedman; hooks).

Scholars of color have complicated this notion by viewing teaching with a more intersectional lens—women of color have different parameters of both authority and Otherness because of institutional structures like racism that do not affect white instructors (hooks; Johnson-Bailey and Lee; Logan). Many feminists of color offer advice on how instructors can feel comfortable teaching and embracing their identities in spaces where they may both be and feel marginalized and like the Inappropriate (underqualified, wrong, overwhelmed, anxious, etc.) Other. A serious emphasis has been placed on investigating and listening to how women of color's experiences are different, often more challenging, and present different obstacles than their white counterparts (Vargas) because authority does not mean the same thing for everyone. As this is true for faculty writing instructors, it is also true for graduate teaching assistants in the first-year writing classroom who may be marginalized in terms of both identity and institutional positionality.

Authority and Positionality for Graduate Teaching Assistants

While this scholarship on feminist pedagogy from diverse voices has grown due to contributions from scholars such as bell hooks (*Talking Back, Teaching to Transgress*), Shirley Wilson Logan ("'When and Where I Enter'"), Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Ming-

Yeh Lee (“Women of Color in the Academy”), Joy Ritchie and Kathleen Boardman ("Feminism in Composition”), Kathleen Weiler (“Freire,” *Women Teaching*), and more, there is not enough scholarship on how graduate students specifically, especially those with marginalized identities, can apply feminist pedagogies to their classrooms. Graduate Teaching Assistants face different circumstances than many of their faculty colleagues due to their temporary and often tenuous position in the university, though many writing instructors in adjunct and lecturer positions also face precarities of employment. Feminist pedagogy, especially scholarship informed by teachers of color, offers the best guide for new GTAs in establishing embodied instructor presence and authority because these pedagogical practices account for and cater to the whole person.

Writing about their respective time as graduate students, Ayo Mansaray refers to the TAship as “boundary work” (171), and Kylee Thacker Maurer and Faith Matzker describe GTA identities as “under continuous construction” (105). Speaking from her experience as a GTA in a PhD program, Stacia Dunn Neeley claims that being in the figurative middle of the academy, both student and teacher, makes it difficult to establish an instructor persona. When existing in this liminal space, it can be difficult for GTAs to establish a strong sense of who they are as instructors, especially if GTAs must contend with additional institutional marginalizations of their identities. In his MA thesis, Sterling James interviewed his fellow GTAs and conducted research on the training and pedagogy process at his university. James found that “[t]he professional development of GTAs is merely about how to teach writing effectively, not necessarily considering the bodies, personalities, or the environment graduate students teach in, where they might have to consider their race, gender, or age because those may be many aspects that go unnoticed in the preparation of teaching” (17). In other words, while there is a focus on composition pedagogy in GTA training, there is often a lack of recognition of how identity affects a GTAs ability to teach and work as an instructor. Unsurprisingly, James also found that GTAs relied more on their personal experiences and embodiments than their pedagogical education when they started teaching (64).

As James and Neeley confirm, many GTAs are thrust into teaching for the first time with limited experience, knowledge, and awareness of expectations. By embracing tenets of feminist pedagogy like authority, credibility, positionality, and embodiment as described by feminist teachers and feminists of color, I offer a guide for new instructors that allows for acceptance and expression of their individual identities. I begin with authority and credibility when addressing instructor presence because, as a new GTA and instructor of a classroom, authority was something I technically had but did not necessarily feel comfortable with. I did not know how to see myself in the classroom, which led to not knowing how to present myself to my students. Using feminist pedagogy as a guide to reclaiming my authorial presence through validating my own credibility, something teachers and women of color have been doing systematically for ages, I began to establish a more identity-affirming, embodied instructor presence.

Engaging Feminist Pedagogy to Rewrite Authority in the Classroom

When starting my graduate studies, my pedagogy classes focused heavily on discussing Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and incorporating student-centered approaches into our teaching. However, we did not fully discuss the difference in setting and circumstance between Freire's teaching experience in the 1960s in Brazil and our current circumstances as instructors in higher education in the U.S. in 2025. We also did not acknowledge the difference in Freire's positionality as a white man and the positionality of GTAs and marginalized instructors.

Kathleen Weiler advocates for a feminist pedagogical framework that expands on Freire's ideas but breaks down the notion that a universalized approach of decentering authority could work for all instructors ("Freire"). By addressing their positionalities as women of color, Juanita Johnson-Bailey and Ming-Yeh Lee further complicate the notion that not all instructors, and not even all women, can be expected to decenter or approach their authority in the same way; there can be no effective, generic feminist pedagogy because all instructors are operating within different contexts and intersections of oppression. I had always understood "authority" in the classroom to be a negative principle. As a new GTA, I felt awkward and uncomfortable trying to be the "authority" in my classroom because I felt I was furthering a power imbalance based in patriarchy and hierarchy. When considering this basic idea of authority, I first had to restructure my connotation of positive authority versus oppressive authoritarianism.

By claiming that we belong in front of the classroom, that our knowledge, experiences, expertise, and identities validate our position as instructors, we are not maintaining a hierarchy of teacher-above-student, but reversing a hierarchy that dictates Other as inadequate, unprepared, inappropriate. Embracing authority, as articulated by feminist scholars of color who have had to justify their positions in the classroom and the academy, does not mean belittling students by making them feel smaller, but instead empowering Othered instructors as leaders worth following. For example, Johnson-Bailey and Lee embrace their authority as women of color by relying on methods of both lecture and facilitation instead of just facilitation and encouraging all voices to participate in discussions (119). I apply Johnson-Bailey and Lee's methods in my classroom to show my students that my role is still to support, assist, and empower them, though my role is set apart by having different parameters and expectations as the leader of the class.

Similarly, in an article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Mariko Silver explains that "it's OK to lead like a woman…In consciously choosing to engage in a way that is authentic to me, I hope to model a form of leadership that is different from the traditional (gendered) assumption of authority and authoritativeness, one which helps me move beyond the double bind—be aggressively authoritative but don't be pushy—that women in leadership often experience." I appreciate Silver's use of personal experience to detail how she moves beyond the normalized concept of authority and into something positive instead. For example, women can be sensitive, caring, and empathetic for their

students while still asking for their respect and asserting themselves as leadership figures in the classroom.

Susan Stanford Friedman made a similar point in 1985, expertly pointing out that patriarchy has warped our idea of authority as something inherently negative when, instead, it can and should feel like a natural assertion of our knowledge, credibility, and expertise (206-207). Sarah Klanderman and Reshma Menon also discuss positive connotations of authority, speaking from their experiences as women and graduate student instructors. Klanderman and Menon specifically differentiate "establishing authority" from "being authoritarian (speaking over students who are being disruptive, ignoring student questions, and bossing students around instead of working alongside them)" (48, 50). This important distinction highlights the same key understanding I and many other scholars have reached about authority and how we can practice it: there is a vast difference between authority as positive and authoritarianism as harmful to the classroom. Authority does not have to be negative but instead can be a path to building connections, trust, and mutual respect in the classroom for students and instructors. The first step in affirming our presence and identities as Other instructors or GTAs is to reclaim the concept of authority as an extension of the role we belong and can succeed in. Then, by acknowledging that GTAs can assume a role of authority in classrooms, we correct the tradition of hierarchical abuses of power that have repeatedly occurred in college classrooms, and we correct the notion that we are the "Inappropriate Other" and unworthy of embracing authority.

The Role of Embodiment in Establishing Authority: Application and Practice

The next section addresses authority in practice primarily through the lens of embodiment, with a focus on teaching recommendations from my own experience and those of feminist teacher-scholars. I offer in-class activities and guidelines that GTAs can use in their own classrooms to help establish authority in a student-centered and empowering way using embodiment, positionality statements, questions of the day, and transparent classroom policies.

Embodiment as a Form of Connection

An important aspect of embracing authority involves addressing who we are as GTAs in the classroom—both literally and figuratively. I have approached this idea through the lens of embodiment—feeling comfortable in our bodies and the space we take up as instructors. When looking at embodiment as a tenet in establishing authority, I focus on embodiment as used in feminist and queer pedagogies to describe the act of including our identities (physical, mental, emotional, gendered, societal, and political) as parts of ourselves as teachers and students. The principle of embodiment embraces subjectivity and individuality not as something negative or deeply biased but as a more accurate way of looking at who we are in connection with what we do. Practicing embodiment also asks us to look at how our thoughts, beliefs, and experiences are shaped by our physical body and societal perceptions of our bodies. For example, I recognize that my

whiteness makes me seem more credible and respectable to my students, even though my gender presentation as a woman and my position as a GTA can provide conflicting ethos. The practice of embodiment can be incredibly useful in the classroom to further situate trust between instructor and student; we want to establish this connection to create a sense of belonging and disrupt the marginalization of instructors and students who may feel Othered in a classroom setting. Embracing positionalities and embodiments can help GTAs feel more comfortable in establishing authority by showing students that all instructor embodiments—not just some—deserve respect and validation.

Embodiment, like positionality, asks instructors not to separate our pedagogy from our person but instead to ask how our lived experiences affect how we want to teach and learn. How can we bring bodies into the discussion? Stacey Waite describes embodiment as a tenet of queer pedagogy and an important investment in FYC classes. Waite discusses the nature of academia as one that often tries to "disembody education" by separating the teacher from what they teach and separating their knowledge from how they share it (18). hooks also talks about this in *Teaching to Transgress* and describes how "[t]he erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information. We are invited to teach information as though it does not emerge from bodies" (139). Waite and hooks recognize the tradition of disembodying education as harmful to both students and teachers by trying to erase the identity of instructors from the classroom and separate their knowledge from who they are as people. Disembodiment leads to a disconnection between instructor and material and between instructor and students. The points of contact that can be made by sharing about ourselves and our identities are squashed when instructors are asked to keep their personal out of the professional. If embodying feminist authority in the classroom means embracing our experiences and identities, disembodied teaching directly counteracts that by asking instructors to erase themselves from the space.

It is much more difficult for a disembodied instructor to feel like they deserve to be in front of the classroom because their histories, uniqueness, expertise—all the things that make them validated as an instructor and professional—are left at the threshold instead of being invited into the classroom. Embodiment as a practice can help GTAs feel more present in who they are in and out of the classroom and, therefore, feel more comfortable embracing their authority and crafting their instructor ethos. I also see embodiment as a way to invite transparency and openness from both me and my students. That is, embodiment helps me to build a connection with my students because they are more likely to see me as a positive authority figure—caring, empowering, resourceful, and worthy of respect—after learning more about who I am, my past experiences, why I teach, and the kinds of educational (or otherwise) values and goals we share. I have found that by approaching teaching with an atmosphere of openness and embracing who I am, I became more accessible, approachable, and authoritative (though not authoritarian).

Positionality Statements

hooks and Waite help us establish what embodiment is and why it is important, but there are many ways to practice this tenet in the FYC classroom as an Othered instructor. Johnson-Bailey and Lee highlight their authority and embodiments as women of color by standing or sitting in the front and center of the room and by asking students to use their formal titles (119). Other instructors of color have found power in sharing and vulnerability as ways to connect with students, especially over controversial issues or when discussing social justice. Kyoko Kishimoto and Mumbi Mwangi, and Barbara Omolade, feel that vulnerability and self-disclosure can lead to transformative teaching. These authors, Omolade especially, are speaking as women of color to students of color to help marginalized students feel more empowered in the classroom. I have found these principles to be effective when speaking about things from my positionality, like white supremacy and white privilege, as well as sexism, patriarchy, and gender oppression. I also like to bring discussions of positionality into my classroom to build connections with students. I share my positionality statement and then ask my students to write their own positionality statements for their research papers to reflect on how their identities and experiences shape how they view their research topic. This can open larger discussions of positionality in general, both within academia and in other settings.

Classroom Policy Transparency

As well as sharing my positionality in terms of identity, I also share my positionality on pedagogy with my students, including what I hope to accomplish in the classroom. This can help to find balance between empowering myself and empowering my students as co-creators of knowledge. Many students, particularly first-year students, may not know what to do with pedagogies that rely on open communication and trust between teacher and student. A progressive classroom may be jarring, especially a FYC classroom where students are frequently asked to write about themselves. Instructors can share the intentions associated with our pedagogical practices to invite students to participate in defining important concepts and goals. Heather Thomson-Bunn advises instructors to "define and regard students as co-constructors of knowledge, [so that] they will be granted a significant role in determining how our class is run—what is discussed and how it is discussed, how authority is distributed, and so forth" (9). Inviting our students in as "co-constructors of knowledge" can help balance and distribute authority between student and teacher. Modeled in the classroom, this can look like building syllabi and assignment sheets with students, creating a class list of expectations at the beginning of the semester, and letting students choose their own essay topics and/or class readings. Honesty with our students about our bodies, minds, philosophies, goals, and even attitudes about our classes is essential in building trust, leading to mutual empowerment and authority in the FYC classroom.

Question of the Day

I also like to start class with a question of the day. These range from class-related topics to more informal and open-ended questions. I answer these questions first and then ask each of my students to answer the question. These questions help my students and I get to know one another and establish rapport without sliding into territory where I ask students to disclose personal things about themselves—things I wouldn't feel comfortable sharing either. Questions of the day allow me to get to know my students as people outside of the parameters of assignments and grading. First-year composition courses are often the smallest and most intimate classes for undergraduate students, and I try to create ways for the students to build connections with one another beyond the scope of our course materials. Questions of the day I use in class include: What are you looking forward to this semester? What is the last movie you saw and loved? What side of TikTok are you on? What is a goal you have for yourself in this class? The answers range from very brief, to more conversation-inducing. Often, I enjoy starting class by not focusing on class material, so that everyone in the room feels more comfortable and more like themselves as a person and not just an instructor or student.

These practices ask all instructors to question how their embodiments are both socially and politically constructed, and how to use tenets of embodiment to create a positive authoritative classroom presence. Being honest and forthcoming about who we are to our students shows that we have credibility, knowledge, and authority just as we are—in this body, gender, race, sexuality—and that these parts are essential to our identity as instructors. Though levels of disclosure will differ for every instructor, if those who are part of dominant power groups in higher education move to more openly share their positionalities and embodiments, this practice will become the norm, and it will be safer for others to do so as well.

Conclusion

As new instructors, we want ways to feel confident in the classroom that do not belittle students or ask us to misrepresent ourselves. Feminist pedagogies of authority and embodiment lend toward a mutually empowering relationship for students and teachers by counteracting the idea that women and women of color are the "Inappropriate Other" in a classroom. Feminist pedagogies can help GTAs and new instructors craft an equitable ethos by authenticating and validating our roles as positive extensions of our expertise, experiences, identities, and embodiment. And when we as instructors feel comfortable sharing information about themselves, it can model to students that their identities are also valuable and credible. Embracing our credibility lends to feeling safe, respected, and validated, knowing that our whole selves belong and deserve to be in the classroom.

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