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First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground

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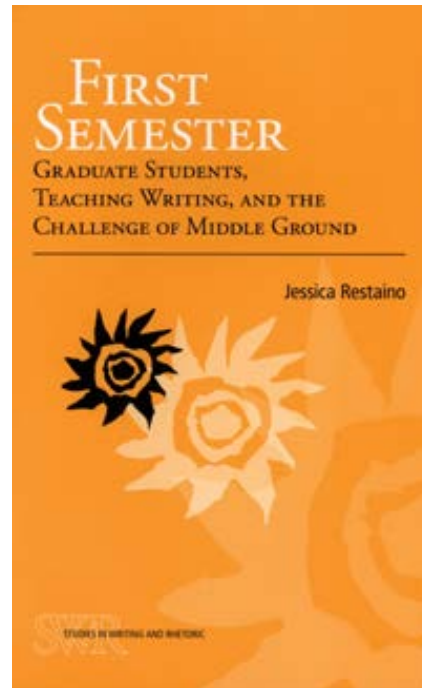
CCCC/NCTE Studies in Writing
and Rhetoric, 2012. 141 pp.

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First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground captures the anxieties, failures, accomplishments, and invaluable pedagogical experiences graduate students endure in their first semester teaching writing. Restaino contends that there is very little research on how graduate student teachers impact composition scholarship, and that graduate student teaching is a diverse field of study capable of widening the theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical purview of the discipline of rhetoric and composition. She uses Hannah Arendt's theories on labor, work, and action to examine how four graduate students (Tess, Nancy, Anjel, and Shirley) wade through their first semester teaching, asking us to ponder how the perception of "endless laboring" for the teaching of writing impacts graduate student teachers (50). Restaino wants us to consider the ramifications for pushing graduate students into teaching roles before they are ready or adequately prepared to teach, and how these ramifications may alter the future of our discipline. A significant realization this book attempts to provide Writing Program Administrators (WPAs), Composition Directors, and faculty responsible for teaching practicum courses and mentoring new teachers is that graduate students may not be capable of deriving value from their teaching without an opportunity to practice being a writing teacher in a more formal space. Restaino uses Christopher Higgins's notion of middle spaces as a place to begin thinking about a formal space where new teachers can learn how to find value in their teaching and how to avoid the tug of Arendtian labor common to the teaching of writing.

In chapter one, "Arendt, Writing Teachers, and Beginnings," Restaino uses Arendt's *The Human Condition* to analyze how graduate student teachers negotiate labor, work, and action, and how that negotiation process shapes their pedagogy and, ultimately, their desire to teach writing. Arendt's "theoretical concepts serve as a kind of equation for discovering new revelations about relationships among teachers, institutions, programs, and students" that help expose how grading, teaching process-ped-



agogy, designing classroom activities and assignments, and dealing with obtuse students can overwhelm all writing instructors (21). Restaino argues that graduate students may benefit from a learning space where they can “experiment safely” with teaching, with work, labor, and action, without fear of “labor’s consumptive grasp” (16), a point she revisits in her last two chapters. Chapter two, “Labor and Endlessness: Necessity and Consumption in the First Semester,” interprets new teacher labor and work more specifically through Arendt’s definitions for labor and work. For Arendt when a process fails to lead to a usable product, it is useless labor. Work leads to a usable, definable product. However, without a usable product or a sense of the work taking place in the classroom new teachers may struggle to identify what they do in and out of the classroom as work. New teachers struggle to see their teaching efforts as something “more enduring” because the heavy workload required to teach writing often obfuscates that value (44).

Formulating classroom activities, discussions, and assignments can bury new writing teachers in Arendtian labor that may ultimately hinder their growth as both a student and teacher. This further complicates a new writing teacher’s ability to see the rewards from her teaching because she is struggling with the frustrations and anxieties that come from heavy grading demands and determining how to occupy class time each week. Realizing student gains in learning and improvements in writing or how teaching sharpens critical thinking and the ability to structure information are difficult rewards for new teachers to recognize because designing classroom activities and grading are consuming all of their energy. For example, Tess is a white female in her mid-twenties and is pursuing a PhD in literature. Her struggles with motivation and finding value in her teaching are connected to her struggles constructing her own authoritative teaching space and identifying as an expert in and out of the classroom. To diminish the anxieties and tension associated with having the power to bestow grades, Tess allows her students to revise their writing as much as they want so they can improve their grades, ultimately creating more grading. Restaino is concerned that this type of “introduction to grading” discourages and deflates new teachers. Concerns about how new teachers understand work and labor are important for WPAs and Composition Directors to consider when designing practicum courses and mentoring and training new writing teachers. Showing new teachers how to find value in their teaching, or how to manage grading stress, can potentially boost teaching morale and keep new teachers from feeling futile or exhausted in and out of the classroom.

Chapter three, “Teachers-as-Students: Work and Action in the Middle Space,” examines the symbiotic relationship between Arendtian work and action in graduate student teaching. Arendt defines action as “the moment in which we reveal ourselves in the public arena for others to see, hear, and remember as distinctive, memorable agents” (53). She asserts that work connects us together and formulates a space for action to take place, and that action is “a kind of saving force against endless laboring” (54). Restaino relies on Higgins’s notion of the middle space to expand her interpretation of work and action in graduate student teaching. Higgins utilizes Arendt’s concern for turning graduate students into “political actors” too soon as a rationale

to construct what he defines as a “middle space” for pedagogical training, a space where students learn to negotiate action and work in and out of the classroom before teaching. Middle spaces provide students an area to practice being “actors and workers” (82) and to simulate some of the complicated issues they may encounter as new teachers before they get into the classroom for the first time. These spaces are potentially an effective way to keep talented graduate students from abandoning graduate programs from stress, reducing the chances that certain teaching experiences will overwhelm new teachers and degrade their work ethic as a graduate student because they will have at least discussed, practiced, or read about these pedagogical concerns in a formal space. Middle spaces can also provide new teachers with teaching approaches and problem-solving techniques that can improve the quality of experiences in the classroom between new teachers and students, making it easier for new teachers to understand what they do in the classroom as work instead of labor.

Tess would have benefited the most from a middle space before having to confront and manage a problematic student in her class on several occasions. One particular incident ended with Tess having this student removed from class and confronted in a student discipline committee hearing. This experience drastically altered her sentiment for teaching and how she saw herself in academia. For Arendt “when we ask others to say who they are before they know themselves, the result is resentment and ambiguity” (67). Tess was unable to create her own middle space to manage this problem student, but the other graduate student teachers were able to carve out a middle space to respond to some of the complicated teaching situations they encountered as new teachers on their own terms. Nancy is a twenty-three-year-old white female and the youngest of the subjects. She crafted a middle space by altering the course readings and assignments to accommodate her students, pushing back on the demand to be fully immersed in public action before she is ready. Nancy’s curricular modifications were an attempt to balance work and action in ways that nurture her pedagogy and give her control over her course. These types of tangible rewards can give Nancy a sense of worth as a new teacher, provided she can notice them. Anjel and Shirley also carve out a middle space to negotiate the complex relationships between students, teachers, and pedagogy. Anjel is a 29-year-old, openly gay, Asian male. Shirley is an African-American woman in her late twenties. They both work together to implement interactive assessment methods in their courses to reduce their cumbersome grading demands and to push back on the demands of public action before they are ready to handle them. Anjel, Shirley, and Nancy resituate the student and teacher dynamic inside an informal middle space they construct out of necessity. Providing graduate students with a formal middle space to practice teaching may lead to stronger, more prepared, political actors in the writing classroom that can improve composition instruction.

In the final chapter of the book, “Thinking What We Are Doing: Knowledge Making in the Trenches,” Restaino resists suggesting specific practices or methods for preparing graduate students to be political actors, but she does recommend using Arendt’s theory on work, action, and labor to further analyze and investigate how graduate student teachers grapple with their own unique set of concerns. Examining

writing pedagogy through the eyes of the novice provides us a raw view of writing instruction, and a new place for composition and rhetoric scholars to think about pedagogical research. Restaino returns to Higgins's recommendation of school as an ideal place for faculty teaching the practicum course to form middle spaces where new teachers can test out the identity kit for teaching writing before moving into the classroom. The practicum course can help graduate students determine and make visible the "lasting value" of their efforts teaching writing in and out of the classroom. That is why Restaino asks us to reconsider how we prepare new teachers for their first experience in the classroom, providing us an important contribution to the discipline. Training graduate students to be teachers is a communal project that requires exposing new teachers to multiple pedagogical approaches and experiences for teaching writing from multiple writing instructors—from all levels and backgrounds. Learning how to teach writing is a complex system that involves an entire department bound together by its objectives for the composition program. Quality teacher training is dependent on a community's willingness to provide new teachers spaces to practice managing a range of teaching experiences.