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Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition

Meaghan Brewer

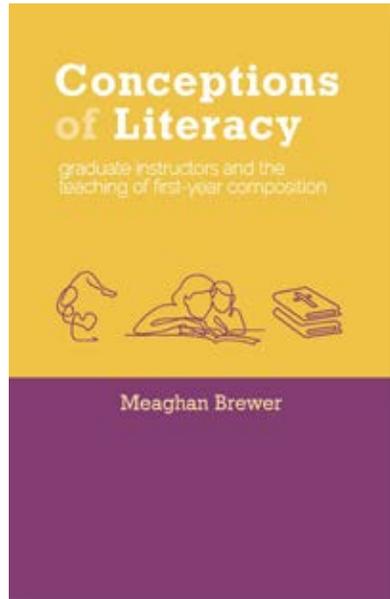
Utah State University Press, 2020, pp. 170

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Most teachers can likely recall a host of “rookie mistakes” they made as they began their careers. Indeed, while one’s level of preparedness for teaching varies depending on the context, Meaghan Brewer in *Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition* acknowledges the particular challenges graduate students face when teaching composition for the first time. As Brewer points out, graduate instructors often do not have a foundational understanding of composition theory, and in many cases, have never before taken a first-year composition course. Despite these challenges, Brewer points out that graduate instructors teach nearly a quarter of all composition classes, making her work in *Conceptions* particularly relevant to the state of the field (3). Too, well known within the discipline of rhetoric and composition, and another challenge for graduate instructors, is that there are many approaches to teaching first-year writing. Navigating the dynamics of a classroom for the first time, and also coming to terms with the multiplicity inherent to composition studies, can be daunting.

To help graduate instructors reconcile their past experiences in education, their personal ideas about teaching, and the myriad approaches to composition pedagogy, Brewer suggests providing graduate instructors with a background in literacy studies. Brewer makes the case that approaches to teaching composition stem from the individual teacher’s preconceived conceptions of literacy. In doing so, Brewer provides a nuanced, theoretical framework for helping new and seasoned teachers alike to reconcile what might initially seem like variations or inconsistencies in the discipline. While researchers have certainly articulated that identity and prior experience shape pedagogy, Brewer’s attention to literacy studies, and the dimensions of literacy, offers an original and innovative interpretation for how a metacognitive awareness of literacy practices can empower a graduate student instructor to begin to conceptualize his or her own framework for teaching writing. Brewer hopes that her book will be useful to graduate instructors and writing program administrators, and I have full confi-



dence in Brewer's ability to reach her intended audience. Beyond the audience Brewer addresses directly, though, I personally have been teaching composition for five years and still found that her work challenged my own conceptions of literacy in relation to teaching. Brewer's book is critical to composition pedagogy and literacy studies, as it makes visible the ways that personal beliefs regarding literacy—along with one's past experiences—impact the choices we make as teachers of writing.

Brewer defines conceptions of literacy by leaning on scholarship from Peter Goggin and focuses on three positions: literacy for personal growth, cultural literacy, and social/critical literacy. To illustrate these conceptions, Brewer presents case studies of six individual English graduate students who were teaching composition as instructors of record for the first time. Brewer acknowledges the limitations of the scope of her inquiry, pointing out that the small group of graduate instructors does not represent diverse perspectives in terms of race and gender, but rather that they reflect the demographics of the practicum course she observed at her "Public University." Interestingly, Brewer analyzed students with creative writing, literature, and rhetoric and composition foci to make visible the way that allegiance to a particular discipline influences one's perception of what it means to be "literate." Through conducting interviews, observing their teaching, and analyzing their literacy narratives, Brewer concludes that the prior experiences the graduate students had—experiences connected to their disciplines of choice and also personal life events—influenced how the graduate instructors took on the task of teaching composition. Indeed, even more than the theory learned from the teaching practicum course, prior conceptions of literacy dictated what graduate instructors privileged when teaching composition. With this knowledge, Brewer emphasizes the importance of recognizing the connections between an instructor's existing conceptions of literacy and composition pedagogy practices.

In examining the pedagogical perspectives of the graduate instructors, Brewer carefully strikes a balance of valuing the work done by new instructors, and also critiquing it, to model how a WPA or composition practicum professor might provide support. First, in a chapter titled "Yoga Ashrams and Mother-Teachers," Brewer explains that "literacy for personal growth" relates to expressivist pedagogy in that it foregrounds the personally transformative nature of writing in a quasi-mystical way. A teacher drawn to valuing this conception of literacy might avoid being formulaic or espouse that writing "cannot be taught" (39). Candidly, Brewer explains that she does not align herself pedagogically with the students she analyzes here; she instead mentions that the perception might be "problematic . . . particularly if [the instructors] implicitly believe composition courses can't foster 'real' writing (which isn't learned or learnable but inspired)" (35). Yet, in drawing connections between expressivist pedagogies and literacy for personal growth, Brewer helps to justify the viewpoints of the graduate instructors that she analyzes, even while simultaneously critiquing their methodologies; Brewer notes that these particular students are focused on the pursuit of doctorates in Rhetoric and Composition, and she posits that this disciplinary focus influences the conception of literacy made visible through pedagogical choices to enforce what she terms as "dated" perceptions of the power of writing (57). Brewer

analyzes the graduate instructors in action, and in a couple of instances, argues that a few teaching moments could have been reconstructed not to replace their expressivist proclivities, but to realign them with more critical, teachable notions of writing, such as genre awareness or the importance of workshopping (56). In the end, Brewer explains both the values and limitations of the conceptions of literacy for personal growth, and also provides advice for how to help further develop these ideologies to bolster instructors' efficacy as teachers of writing.

In addition to valuing and critiquing the graduate instructors' methodologies, Brewer is interested in the origins of the conceptions of literacy espoused, and also investigates how willing instructors are to challenge their own long-held beliefs about literacy. In "Texts, Hierarchy, and Ritual," Brewer moves on to showcase how perceptions of literacy as "cultural," as more rooted to textual analysis and, in some cases, the stereotypes of "ivory tower" academia can develop based on past experiences and personally held philosophical beliefs that privilege the superiority of literature. In particular, Brewer analyzes a graduate instructor who self-identifies as a conservative Presbyterian. This student happened to be studying literature for his PhD; as such, his religious reverence of biblical text had, according to Brewer, manifested in an ideology that seemed equate literacy with "salvation" (78). Brewer warns of the exclusionary nature of this kind of literacy, making suggestions that a focus on the perception of literacy as not just an ability to analyze literature could provide a broader appreciation of the many ways to be literate. Though Brewer followed these graduate students for only one semester, she tracks growth in their perceptions of literacy, but the growth did not necessarily develop based on their encounters with composition theory—she mentions that one student in particular "both changed and stayed the same" (60). Later in the book, Brewer mentions that the instructors had a "tendency to not mention the practicum" as being influential, which "suggests the power of their literacy conceptions" (138). Here, Brewer points out that the focus on providing the graduate instructors with theory in a composition practicum had less influence on their development of teaching practices than what the students already believed about literacy. In making the strength of conceptions of literacy visible, Brewer does not discount the work performed by practicum professors, but instead emphasizes the command of personally held beliefs about literacy.

In her final case study, "Graduate Students at the Threshold," Brewer discusses two creative writing graduate students and makes the case that their focus on creative writing allowed them to be more open to what Brewer calls "social/critical" conceptions of literacy. Quoting Goggin, Brewer explains that this line of thinking focuses on literacy as being "ideologically situated in social contexts" (99). For Brewer, this is the ideal perception of literacy to hold as a composition instructor; moreover, she makes the case that the creative writing students were more willing to adopt this ideological viewpoint than their peers in literature or rhetoric and composition. Brewer found that the creative writing graduate students were more willing to see identity as "fluid," and to think about how "literature can forward arguments" and be considered contextually (107). Brewer argues that composition engages with "practical and political concerns," and, therefore, thinking about the social constructions that deter-

mine literacy is key for composition instruction (107). Worth noting is that by situating the creative writing students as, perhaps, best suited to teach composition, Brewer advances an inclusive perspective regarding the teaching of composition. Brewer also emphasizes the ideological nature of literacy and underscores that literacy is situated socially, which she sees as a key perspective to embrace to teach writing well.

Though she values the work performed by graduate students, due to her focus on the ways in which literacy studies improves graduate student teaching, Brewer ignores labor concerns in First-Year Composition, particularly considering the instability of graduate student labor in general, and the misuse of adjunct labor in the field more broadly. Furthermore, Brewer neglects to develop an additional line of inquiry that might more carefully observe Harvey Graff's *The Literacy Myth* and Michael Harker's *The Lure of Literacy*. While Brewer mentions each of these works, she pivots each time, choosing a more optimistic perspective of literacy, especially in light of Harker's insinuation that debates surrounding compulsory composition are ever-present in higher education because we expect "too much" of both literacy and those who teach it (24). Further, Harker's outright criticism of systemic inequalities in higher education implicitly calls for a reimagining of what educators and administrators should expect to have students achieve in writing and rhetoric courses. While Brewer acknowledges Harker's position in the closing lines of her manuscript, a more in-depth consideration of literacy myths could be explored in her next book project.

Brewer begins and ends *Conceptions of Literacy* by discussing transfer theory and threshold concepts to make visible the challenges of being a new composition instructor. Generally, both transfer theory and threshold concepts are ways of thinking about the work undergraduate students perform as they encounter college writing for the first time. Yet Brewer does not align "novice" teachers with freshmen writers to demean their expertise. Instead, Brewer points out what is at stake if graduate students are not supported: the inherent difficulty of encountering threshold concepts involved with the teaching of reading, writing, and argumentation might cause graduate instructors to "abandon these views [of literacy] and the teaching that stems from them" (117). Worth noting is that Brewer's book, besides its omission of the labor crises and its optimism regarding the power of literacy, does empower graduate instructors, WPAs, and those who teach writing and rhetoric practicum courses to consider the factors—including literacy—that contribute to our long-held beliefs about what matters most in composition courses. In doing so, Brewer's book refreshingly explores writing pedagogy—and the voices of those teaching it—in meaningful and personal ways that will engage readers from start to finish.

Works Cited

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- Harker, Michael. *The Lure of Literacy: A Critical Reception of the Compulsory Composition Debate*. SUNY Press, 2015.