

Moving to the Front of the Classroom: English Graduate Students as Composition Instructors

Jacqueline Peña
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: This phenomenological study explores how graduate students in an English department perceive their new roles as writing teachers. The findings show that even though the participants went through the same professional development program, they constructed different teacher identities based on their other identities and their experiences as students and writers.

In university English departments, teaching assistantships are very common among students in MA, MFA, and Ph.D. programs who teach the required freshmen composition courses as part of their graduate program or fellowship requirements. Since most teaching assistants (TAs) have little or no classroom teaching experience, English departments provide some kind of professional development in the form of workshops, a course, or a practicum. These new teachers develop their teacher identities relying heavily on their experiences as students and members of the discourse community of their majors.

The goal of this study was to understand how TAs construct their new identities as composition instructors. My interest in this subject comes from my experiences as an English TA and eventual faculty member, during which time I struggled with the construction of my multiple identities within academia. Therefore, my primary research question was: “What are new TAs’ perceptions about their roles as composition instructors?”

Theoretical Framework

As humans, we continuously construct and re-construct our identities to fit our different social contexts. Gee (1989, 1996) names these identities Discourses (with a capital D) and defines them as identity kits that are equipped with ways of speaking, acting, dressing, and writing, as well as with a set of values and beliefs associated with the social context. Our first or primary Discourse is the one constructed in the home during our first years of life. As we move in and out of different social contexts, we construct other identities or secondary Discourses from our primary Discourses and our other secondary Discourses. Therefore, these multiple identities are tied to each other and scaffold the identity construction experience with each new social context. Composition TAs develop a secondary Discourse grounded in their disciplines within the field of English, and later construct another secondary Discourse or identity kit tied to composition instruction with certain ways of acting, speaking, and dressing as well as with certain values and beliefs.

Method

This phenomenological study “focuses on the essence or structure of an experience” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7). I used an interpretative constructionist approach with a focus on “how people view an object or event and the meaning that they attribute to it” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 27). I interviewed each participant for 60-95 minutes using a semi-structured interview approach with main questions to allow for comparable data across all four participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This format allowed my participants to become conversational partners with more active roles in our discussions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Peña, J. (2008). Moving to the front of the classroom: English graduate students as composition instructors. In M. S. Plakhotnik & S. M. Nielsen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventh Annual College of Education Research Conference: Urban and International Education Section* (pp. 111-116). Miami: Florida International University.

http://coeweb.fiu.edu/research_conference/

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded by (a) doing open coding to find emerging themes and (b) developing a coding map with themes and codes for all the data. The transcripts were shared with my participants for feedback. The transcripts and coding map were shared with colleagues who compared their analysis to my own during the peer review process.

The participants for this study were graduate students in the English department of a large four-year university and classified as TAs. The university was selected because it was convenient and accessible for the timeframe of the study; convenience sampling was used for obtaining the four participants because their contact information was available on the department's website. I emailed an official recruitment letter to all of the TAs in the graduate English program. Four of them agreed to participate and were interviewed at the end of the fall 2006 semester.

Jeffrey, an older second-year graduate student, retired from advertising and went back to school for a bachelor's and then a master's degree in English literature to teach writing part-time. The second participant, PC, was 30 years old and in his first year of graduate studies. Having previously dropped out of college, he later returned to the university because he wanted to get a Ph.D in literature. Elizabeth, the third participant, was a writer from the north who relocated to attend the MFA program. She is the daughter of immigrant parents and got her bachelor's degree in French. Johana, the fourth participant, was a second-year graduate student in the MFA poetry program, and, at 24, the youngest participant in the study. After majoring in psychology, she ended up completing her undergraduate degree in English at a large university in the northeast.

Findings: Constructing a New Identity

Even though all four participants came from completely different backgrounds, several themes emerged out of the interview data centered on the construction of their new identities as composition instructors. These themes revealed English TAs could not move up to the front of the classroom without constructing a new identity. In this section, the findings are organized around these themes of teacher identity construction in the composition classroom.

TAs as Undergraduate Students

Our teacher identities are connected to our other identities and our experiences as students. PC already had decided what type of teacher identity he wanted to construct for himself based on his experiences with certain literature professors when he was an undergraduate student. However, PC did not see all his learning experiences as positive, and perhaps some of those negative experiences helped him decide what type of teacher he wanted and did not want to be. He explained that he had some horrible English teachers, but the texts that were used in those classes were his motivation in school. Therefore, even when literature was not part of the curriculum, as an instructor, he brought a lot of poetry to his classes for discussion.

Elizabeth drew upon her experiences as a writing student when describing the type of teacher she was trying to become or the teacher identity she was still constructing. She stated: I've had many excellent teachers. If anything I just try to remember how they handle a classroom. I had one writing teacher who would kind of start a discussion, get a discussion going, and then he would always pull back and circulate around the periphery of the room. And he would always want us to talk to each other. So eventually it would be like students just talking to each other and he would interject sporadically... So I like to do a lot of discussions.

She relied on these student experiences when making decisions about classroom management, instructional strategies (discussion), and identity projection (excitement about writing).

Johana looked back at her undergraduate years as a psychology major, drawing on her experiences with those writing instructors who inspired her to go into creative writing.

My goal is to become what my graduate student teachers were in undergraduate.... I had these really impassioned writers who were so excited about what they were teaching us....I was very surprised when I was like, "Wow. I love this stuff." And that they could do that....I want to be able to do that. I want to be that person jumping up and down about a poem and getting other people to just know what's out there. So that was definitely a big inspiration for me.

Like Johana, all the participants drew upon their experiences as students from either the student perspective or the teacher perspective to inform their practices and their teacher identities.

TAs as Writers

All four participants touched upon their experiences as writers during the interview and made connections to their teacher identities. Jeffrey recognized how his experiences as a writer in the advertising agency developed his notions of writing and how he brought those notions into the classroom. He explained that, "It's in my language and I'm protective....I have my own standards that I look for, which is one of my major problems in teaching composition." Jeffrey was very protective of his formal, standardized language, which was part of his teacherly persona and a source of conflict in his teacher identity construction within the workshop teaching model.

With the MFA students, writing was a central part of their identities as students and teachers. Johana's love of poetry and dislike of essay writing affected her approach to teaching composition. As a teacher, she developed her course based on her dislike of essay writing, which was a common sentiment among her students as well. Elizabeth also explicitly brought her writer identity into the classroom. She explained, "Writing is my life so if anything I try to bring that enthusiasm of it to them more than maybe someone who's not a writer. I want them to love writing or I want them to hate it less." Therefore, she is very honest about her intentions and methods with her students as well.

Jeffrey first saw writing as a solitary activity, but then changed his mind through reflection during his professional development in the graduate program. He explained that when they first started talking about the writing process in the pedagogy course, he thought it was all "BS." However, on reflection of his own writing in advertising, he realized that writing was both a solitary and community affair. He explained:

I would have to do a lot of research...And then we would talk about the audience, the reader if you will... And there'll be discussion back and forth. So what I did, I never did on my own... At some point, I did lots of things on my own. I had a problem so I would brainstorm with myself....And then suddenly...something pops...and then you write and you rewrite....And then you have somebody who's a graphic artist....there's this give and take between the artist and the writer... So the writer is never alone.... and then you test it out against other people because you talk about it and discuss....It's this whole process...of community, of feedback, of interaction, of relationship.

As he taught, he reflected on his experiences as a writer and adjusted his course, leading him to reflect on new aspects of his writer identity in a cyclical relationship of identity construction.

TAs as Composition Theorists

The participants entered their teaching assistantships with their own theoretical foundations whether implicit or explicit for them. All participants underwent the same professional development program under the same leader yet moved up to the front of the classroom with variations even on notions such as rhetoric, which they all saw as the main goal of the composition classroom but defined and implemented differently.

Composition theory is also about the general approach to the teaching of writing. Elizabeth approached the writing curriculum by making it relevant to her students. She taught writing as a means of empowerment for her students and, therefore, made the curriculum as relevant to her students' lives as possible to show how it was a part of our everyday lives.

Jeffrey also entered the classroom with the theory of relevance, which organized his entire approach to teaching the composition course. He gave an example of helping a theater student find relevance in his classroom. Since she was interested in the business side of theater, he explained that at some point she would need to write letters, requesting funding, and if she didn't know how to write a decent argument, she would never persuade anyone to fund her projects. Relevance was a priority for Jeffrey and a goal he had for each of his students.

As part of their theoretical grounding, all four participants had their own beliefs of the role of literature in the writing curriculum regardless of the institution's policies. Some of the participants placed a boundary between literature and writing, seeing the composition classroom as more of a rhetorical realm than a literary one. Johana recognized this boundary when describing how the composition courses should, "go away from the heavy literature emphasis because it just wasn't practical...because students were struggling so much with the reading material that they couldn't actually get to the point where they could write anything." For Johana, the heavy literature emphasis was an impediment for the writing students.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, constructed her teacher identity around the relationship between reading and writing. She commented, "You can't become a better writer without reading. I believe the more you read, intuitively you become a better writer." PC, for similar reasons, felt that there was a need for the integration of literature and writing because then students could see the rhetorical devices writers use.

Besides having a clear theory on the role of literature in the writing classroom, each participant had a clear theory on issues surrounding language. Being a college-level composition instructor, Jeffrey expressed that students need to be at a certain language level because he was not teaching language, but writing:

This is not an English course. This is not a course of literature. This is a course in rhetoric and composition. And it's college level. It's not a remedial anything. It's not a grammar course. You're expected to bring a certain level of saline language to it.

He was very aware of the language issues present in his class, and he tapped into his language abilities as a younger student to construct this theoretical aspect of his teacher identity, hoping to have students at least meet his abilities at their age.

PC believed that part of the language issue among students came from a lack of literature in the curriculum. He believed that:

It's like they don't understand... I did Robert Frost, *By Design*, and the first line was, "I saw a dimpled spider, fat and white." It's a difficult poem, and I was like, "Look. You know guys, I know it's a difficult poem, but we're going to break it down. Let's look at the first line. 'I saw a dimpled spider, fat and white.' What's he saying?" I got blank stares....So just throwing the language off to suit a rhyme scheme throws them off.

PC examined how reading and literature affected his students' language abilities. He explained that reading builds up vocabulary, and with the lack of reading, the issue was clearly vocabulary. Elizabeth echoed this same idea when she insisted that reading in the writing classroom was essential for vocabulary development.

Beliefs about language issues are part of the theoretical base of composition instructors. PC was still deciding on this aspect of his identity as a composition instructor during the

interview. He struggled with a student paper that had good content but many grammatical errors. He was debating how to handle and grade such a paper, whether to give two grades (one for grammar and one for content) or just not grade grammar.

Elizabeth, who had already been a TA for nearly two years, had a more set approach to dealing with language issues in her classroom based on her students' abilities:

If it's punctuation or things like that, then I can mark them on the page, speak to them in conference. They'll get it. If it's more than that, I'll speak to them about it. I'll point it out, and usually I'll ask them to go to the learning center, and I'll have the tutor go over it with them and spend more time. But the thing is when those are things that they should have learned, I can't keep the whole class back by teaching a lesson on that. If it's something the whole class is affected by, then by all means I'll make a whole class out of it.

Having more experience teaching the writing course than the other participants might explain Elizabeth's confidence in dealing with language issues since she has spent more time actively constructing her writing teacher identity.

TAs Balancing Identities

As new teachers who have other roles to play, the TAs were all trying to negotiate their identities not just as teachers but, in more general terms, as human beings who take on multiple positions at a time. As Danielewicz (2001) explained in her study

No one has only a single identity. Every person is composed of multiple, often conflicting identities, which exist in volatile states of construction or reconstruction, reformation or erosion, addition or expansion. The bottom line is that no matter what the context, we are continually engaged in becoming something or someone. (p. 10)

However, identity is a more complex topic for the MFA TAs who saw themselves as writers, students, and teachers all at the same time and who were struggling to balance these three positions. Johana stated, "This semester I just had a bit of a struggle balancing my own writing and my own classes with teaching." Later on in the interview, she clarified her struggle balancing her multiple identities. She stated:

I think often I put [my students'] concern above my education and I actually have had some good conversations with other TAs, and they're like, 'Oh. You just care too much.' But I felt that I haven't really. This year I have not been writing as much and as well as I thought that I was doing last year before I was teaching. And so it is just frustrating, and at one point I was even thinking maybe I should give up the fellowship because the reason I am here is to be a writing student first and work on this book.

Balancing multiple identities was probably most difficult for Johana, but it was still an active process for all four participants.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, did not see these roles as being polarized based on her relationship as a student with her teachers and her knowledge of writers who have taken on the role of instructor in the past. To explain this phenomenon of identity, she explained that in the graduate program there was no gap between teachers and students because they were all writers at different levels and most writers teach at some point. This reasoning allowed Elizabeth to see her students as novice writers in the classroom.

Discussion and Conclusions

The concept of teacher training has been used in many institutions when referring to the preparation of people for the role of teaching. However, the notion of training implies that teaching can be taught to anyone like a set of skills taught in a workshop to a new employee on

the assembly line. Thinking of teacher preparation as the training of educators places the pedagogy of departments within the realm of the banking concept of teaching and learning that Freire (2005) tried to counteract. If we believe in the banking concept of education, then the construction of a teacher identity could be viewed as a passive act.

However, the findings of this study showed that unlike what the notion of training might emphasize, people preparing to become teachers are not empty vessels in need of filling with skills even though they participated in the same professional development program with the same leader. These participants all struggled with the construction of a new identity for themselves—a teacher identity. They revealed they are not only constructing and revising their new identities as composition instructors but also balancing that identity with other ones

These participants came into the field of composition with knowledge based on their experiences as students and writers. Their different life experiences and ensuing secondary Discourses prior to moving up to the front of the classroom inform or contribute to the development of their teacher identity, through which they make classroom decisions. Some of these decisions might be about the goals of the course, classroom management, assignments, and grading. All these decisions are different for each participant based on each of their teacher identities regardless of having gone through the same professional development program.

The emerging idea from this study is that teacher professional development is mediated through people's multiple experiences and identities to construct the teacher identity. Therefore, professional development of TAs should not exclude their life experiences and other identities or secondary Discourses. This curriculum should not just include but also make explicit these multiple identities and incorporate reflective practices before initial teaching.

New Questions and Further Research

Having started with a small pilot study, the next step is to increase the sample size and see how well the theory of primary and secondary Discourses holds within the framework of teacher identity construction. Future studies could look at the relationship among professional development, monitored reflective practices, and teacher identity construction or the effects that different types of professional development have on teacher dispositions and teacher identity construction. Future studies that employ various research approaches (quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) can enhance their contributions to the topic of teacher identity construction.

References

- Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Danielewicz, J. (2001). *Teaching selves: Identity, pedagogy, and teacher education*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: The Continuum International.
- Gee, J. P. (1989). What is literacy? *Journal of Education*, 171(1), 18-25.
- Gee, J. P. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. New York: Routledge/Falmer.
- Merriam, S. (2002). Introduction to qualitative research. In S. B. Merriam & Associates (Eds.), *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis* (pp. 3-17). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.