

2022

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Recommended Citation

Devey, Alyssa; Saidy, Christina; Iddrisu, Mohammed S.; Shah, Seher; and Tovar, Marlene A. (2022) "On Parallel Paths: Learning through Case Studies in the Writing Pedagogy Course," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 11: Iss. 3, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol11/iss3/8>

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On Parallel Paths: Learning through Case Studies in the Writing Pedagogy Course

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Writing teacher education for first-year teaching assistants (TAs) is a complex endeavor because it simultaneously accounts for the positioning of new TAs, disciplinary knowledge and conventions, and the realities of teaching and learning in the university. As such, “the field continues to struggle with how to prepare them [TAs] meaningfully for the teaching they will do in their immediate future as TAs and for the responsibilities they will take on as they move forward in their careers” (Obermark et al. 32). The challenge is aptly captured in the sheer number of texts geared toward TA preparation over the years (Glenn & Goldwaite; Lindemann; Roen et al.; Wilhoit). These range from textbooks to rhetorics directed at new TAs and intended to meaningfully shape their education and provide a lasting resource beyond TA training. Researchers and TA educators explore specific strategies for TA writing development, such as journals (McKinney & Chiseri-Strater). A number of other articles focus on ways TAs engage with new concepts, such as composition theory (Stancliff & Goggin) or multimodality (Duffelmeyer), or the introduction of theories, such as genre theory, in the writing pedagogy course (Tardy, Buck, Pawlowski, & Slinkard; Mapes et al.). Moreover, researchers have used research on the writing pedagogy course to ask questions about TA identity formation (Grouling; Restaino) and why TAs resist both TA education and foundational concepts and theories of composition (Ebest; Brown & Conner; Johnson). The literature demonstrates the range of considerations in TA formation.

More recent literature on the pedagogy course for new English TAs, such as E. Shelley Reid’s “Uncoverage in Composition Pedagogy,” calls for a focus on long-term learning for early career TAs rather than immediate competencies. This

is echoed by Obermark et al. who call for reflective and responsive TA education in an extended education model. Further, Estrem and Reid in their “What New Writing Teachers Talk About When They Talk About Writing” remind us that while writing teacher educators often focus on what TAs learn from us, we have much to learn from TAs. In fact, Estrem and Reid encourage writing teacher educators to communicate that “writing pedagogy really is a long-term process [so] ... they can approach it as a different kind of puzzle to work with -- a longer-term, ongoing, thousand-piece puzzle, not a quick teaching game” (475). As part of this puzzle, learning in the pedagogy course should include skills to help writing teachers to explore their multiple positionalities as teachers, researchers, and students in the training year and beyond. In this article, the authors describe a way they were invited to see themselves as teacher scholars in the writing pedagogy course.

Learning Through Teacher Research in the Pedagogy Course

The authors of this article are four teaching assistants and the professor who taught their writing pedagogy course. At our university, the pedagogy course for new teaching assistants is a 1.5-week summer intensive followed by a two-semester course. The fall course is 3 credit hours and the spring course is 1 credit hour and is taught by a mentoring team comprised of one tenured faculty member and two advanced graduate student mentors. Twenty new graduate teaching assistants were enrolled in the pedagogy course in the fall 2019 semester, representing the following graduate programs: Writing, Rhetorics, and Literacies; Literature; English Education; Linguistics and Applied Linguistics; and Creative Writing. All of the TAs were enrolled in PhD programs, except the six Creative Writing TAs who were enrolled in an MFA program.

The culminating six-week project for the practicum was a case study. This project is based on Saidy’s (2018) call to use case studies in the practicum as a way for new teaching assistants to more clearly understand the programs in which they teach and the students in those programs. Each TA wrote research questions, collected student work, and interviewed at least one student for the case study. At the end of the term, each TA prepared a mini research poster (11X17) for the class poster presentation and submitted a written case study write-up. The project was part of an IRB approved research study, and all names of first-year writers are pseudonyms. The goals of the case study assignment were to positively impact teaching and learning in FYW by: 1) connecting the learning in the pedagogy course to the TAs teaching in FYW; and 2) teaching and developing teacher-research skills that TAs could use both immediately and in the long-term.

In the following sections, the TA-authors detail what they learned in their case studies. They explain how they came to see the ways they were on parallel paths with the students enrolled in their first-year writing (FYW) courses. In this

paper, the authors will discuss the parallel paths they identified, the ways they learned from them, and the implications for writing teacher education for new English TAs.

Defining the Writer and the Writing Teacher: Seher's Experience

Born, raised, and educated in India, one of my major challenges as a new TA was to adapt not only as a new graduate student in an American university, but also to teach a class of students who belonged to an unfamiliar culture. The TA-orientation course was intensive and demanding and we were training to set many goals for FYW students that were both directly and indirectly related to writing. By the end of TA orientation, I was confident of the content of the composition course, but I was far less confident of my own position as a non-native English speaker in a writing classroom. It was in this environment of uncertainty and unfamiliarity that the case study during the practicum worked as a magnifying lens to examine our students and reflexively ourselves.

One of the first challenges of the case study was to choose a student whom I thought would give me some insight into how they approached writing. I chose Lupe for the case-study project because I had noticed he was very engaged in the class. In one instance, during a class exercise on 'wild connections' between junk food and mountains (the goal of the exercise was to find connections between unlikely things) he was the first one to draw a connection, namely that junk food wrappers litter the mountainside. He was a creative thinker and I thought it would be interesting to see how he saw writing.

After a casual conversation, I asked him if he would like to be a part of the project. He acquiesced, although later told me he was surprised that I chose him since he did not consider himself as a writer. During the formal interview, he told me about his struggle with language, that he is a first-generation college student in his family and he did not learn English until he went to school, where he felt singled-out as an English Language Learner (ELL). But despite feeling like an outsider (or perhaps because of it) he developed a certain resilience because he told me how his history teacher asked him not to take AP history, because "he could not write well," but he took the course anyway.

As he struggled with his position as a writer in FYW, I struggled as an instructor, thinking that students who are immersed in the English language cannot have much to learn in a writing classroom. My own path to writing in English came from a different cultural background as well. English is my learned language and I have engaged with it in mostly formal classroom situations. After the case study, I realized students may be seeing FYW as *writing courses* because they have to, as Lupe said, "do writing" for this class; whereas I saw writing as an everyday act. Pedagogically, I realized I had to draw connections to how writing skills went beyond the classroom; but culturally, I realized that students from America can

struggle with language as much as any non-native. I came into this field from outside, unclear about how to navigate the classroom and so did my student. Students who make it to college in an English-speaking country may struggle with the language just as much as those who don't. His claim that "I am not a writer" resonated with me because our paths to writing in the classroom were parallel but idiosyncratic.

At the same time, Lupe's engagement with the English language outside the classroom was not all that different from mine. Lupe had a rich music literacy. In his first major class assignment he described his literacy as "dissection of hip hop lyrics." He focused on a few hip-hop artists and broke down their song lyrics into various iterations and meanings, looking for patterns in rhyme schemes, expanding their contexts and references. It was a labor-intensive effort since it would take him 5-6 hours to analyze the lyrics of one song. This demonstrated his unique engagement with the English language, and it surprised me that he did not consider himself as a writer, or that he 'did writing' since he processed text in such interesting ways.

Lupe's case study highlighted our parallel paths; we were both outsiders – one learning to write and one learning to teach writing in the US composition classroom – his struggle as a first-generation college student resonated with my first experience as an instructor to US college students. His rich literacy and his expectations from writing helped me shape my pedagogy about what I valued in the writing classroom and impressed upon me the personhood of college students. By closely studying a student, I learned to navigate the classroom as an outsider both academically and culturally. I realized Lupe's literacy was less about traditional writing experience and more about strengths explored through writing. In the short term, the case study prompted me to think broadly about course design and feedback, and my role and position in the classroom as a facilitator rather than an instructor. In the long term, the case study gave me skills to connect with students and have a deeper regard for their backgrounds and work with an eye to develop their confidence in the writing classroom and in myself.

Pulling From Prior Knowledge: Marlene's Experience

Prior to starting as a PhD student and TA, I had taught as an adjunct lecturer at a Hispanic Serving Institution in another state. In my position as an adjunct lecturer, I taught multiple sections of FYW every semester for culturally and linguistically diverse students. Because of my prior teaching experience, I assumed I would easily adapt in my new teaching context, and I was unaware of how different my dual role as a writing teacher and PhD student was from my position as an adjunct lecturer.

When we started the case study project, two students, William and Alexander, stood out to me because they were struggling with their transitions to

college. I asked them to be the subjects of my case study and they agreed. I wanted to understand how their experiences in writing classes in high school were different from college. The research question guiding my case study was: How did their sociocultural and educational backgrounds affect their transition to college in general?

At the beginning of the course, William was talkative and responsive to the course material and to me. However, halfway through the semester, he began missing or submitting assignments late, coming to class tardy, accruing absences, and exhibiting disruptive behavior, such as whispering loudly to his peers while another student was speaking. When I interviewed William, I learned he was an out-of-state student living in the campus dorms, and that part of the reason he was struggling was because he was learning to take care of himself while also adapting to the demands of college coursework. Additionally, William had trouble tackling the assignments with a new mindset. He admitted he was accustomed to the five-paragraph essay structure he learned in high school, which Fanetti et al. has shown affects secondary students' transition to college (79). William viewed himself as a basic writer, and at one point in our interview even said he "was never in AP advanced English. It's never like [he] had to go above and beyond." Besides reinforcing what scholars like Fanetti et al. have demonstrated in their study, my findings of William's perception and attitude towards writing revealed that the formulaic structure and writing rules he learned in secondary school made him adopt a fixed mindset (Dweck) of himself as a writer.

Alexander, my second participant, was reserved and seemed indifferent in my class. He often submitted the low-stakes assignments below the word count and came to conferences with short, undeveloped paragraphs. In my interview with Alexander, I learned that he depended on writing rules he was taught in secondary school. For example, he had learned to avoid using FANBOYS, the acronym for the coordinating conjunctions, and to avoid using the first-person "I," a common rule learned in high school. I realized Alexander had a limited understanding of writing, so the feedback I gave him during our conferences confused him. In my FYW courses, I allow students to revise either one of their first two writing projects for a higher grade, and I was happy when Alexander expressed interest in revising his second writing project. The original version had an excessive number of quotes, and I advised Alexander to cut out some quotes and add his perspective to the issue he was analyzing. The essay he resubmitted looked identical to the original one, which was disappointing. Yet, I realized Alexander was still unsure how to revise his essay and did not have any strategies to draw on to organize and fully develop his ideas.

It became clear to me that while William and Alexander may have written in similar genres in secondary school, the types of strategies they were being asked to employ in college were different from what they had learned. Both students were

exhibiting what Reiff and Bawarshi call low-road transfer, by drawing on whole genres and limited strategies from their prior contexts (328).

I realized William and Alexander were struggling to adapt in their new learning context, and I, too, was struggling to adapt to my new teaching context. Like William and Alexander, I thought I could easily transfer the teaching strategies I was trained at my previous institution into the context of my new institution. While I was able to prepare lesson plans for the first two writing projects, the final writing project was a podcast, and despite my teaching experience, I had never taught this type of genre in FYW. Thus, I found it challenging to prepare lesson plans for the final unit, so I applied the pedagogical strategies I used to teach major writing projects in other genres, such as the argumentative essay or research-based solution essay. To an extent, I also was overly confident in my teaching experience, yet uncertain of what strategies to draw on to teach a multimodal project.

Halfway through the semester, students were participating more in class discussions in contrast to the start of the term, but once we reached this final unit, the students reverted to being quiet. In using old pedagogical strategies, I realize I did not consider the rhetorical effects they would have on my audience, and I imagine that neither William nor Alexander thought about the rhetorical effectiveness of their writerly choices either. Like William and Alexander, I also was resistant towards change, and just as they did not change their approach to writing projects, I also did not change my approach to teaching. In retrospect, I realize I was unwilling to modify my teaching practices because I was uncertain of *how* to modify them. Given that I was balancing my own coursework as a PhD student while teaching, I also felt that I did not have sufficient time to thoughtfully develop engaging class activities or consider adequate pedagogical strategies for my rhetorical situation. I imagine William and Alexander also must have felt the same kind of uncertainty when working on these assignments and that balancing multiple tasks for their other courses also affected how much time they spent revising their essays.

The case study project allowed me to learn about my students' writing experiences, making me realize that to properly guide and mentor students, it is crucial to understand what knowledge they have about writing to provide them with adequate strategies to tackle major writing projects. I also learned that while I do have valuable teaching experience, teaching is a process of ongoing learning requiring flexibility and openness to successfully teach in new contexts.

Navigating Linguistic Backgrounds: Mohammed's Experience

Like new TAs who enter the composition classroom with different uncertainties and vulnerabilities, students in the FYW classroom, having transitioned from high school to college, equally have their own uncertainties and vulnerabilities. As a multilingual international student and as a new TA in a new

university, I was required to take an oral exam at my university to test my English proficiency before I could teach in the classroom. Although I passed the test, a rather basic exam, I was still concerned about how the university itself had constructed my linguistic ethos. Accordingly, at the beginning of the semester, I entered the composition classroom with uncertainties about my linguistic identities, and my students had their own uncertainties as well. For traditionally underrepresented students, such uncertainties may include the place of their home cultures, languages, and literacies in the FYW classroom (Kells). This was the case for my participant, Gabriela, in my case study. The case study was my personal journey of getting to know Gabriela more deeply with regard to her perception of the permissibility and belongingness or otherwise of her Spanish language and culture in the FYW classroom. The case study was thus an opportunity to explore how a student was constructing her linguistic and cultural identity with the goal of creating a space that welcomes her native language (Spanish) and Latinx culture in her writing in particular and the classroom in general.

My choice of this student was not random. It was purposeful and grounded in my observation of how she was making efforts to exhibit and use her Spanish-English bilingual identity in the writing classroom. Despite her strong desire to include Spanish, as a rhetorical strategy, in her writing, she was unsure about whether that would be acceptable in a college composition classroom. It was a risk she was taking especially given this was her first semester in a class where she was not familiar with what her instructor would permit or disallow. This uncertainty about linguistic and cultural belonging constitutes a sort of vulnerability that students may have in the writing classroom.

Not only was Gabriela a traditionally underrepresented student whose parents migrated from Mexico where she was born, but she also was a first-generation college student. One of her lifetime goals is to change negative stereotypes of Latinx culture in general and Latinx females in the STEM field in particular. As such, she chose topics about Latinx culture and language and rationalized her choices along the lines of wanting to challenge negative perceptions about Latinx people and culture. She conceived of writing as part of her problem-solving toolkit. She never mentioned this in any introductory post on Canvas, during the first day of class, or explicitly in her writings before the case study. Yet by focusing on the cultural and linguistic moves she was making, I noticed the identity she had been trying to construct and it was only through the case study that I understood her rationale for making those moves: to use her Spanish-English identity as an asset for challenging stereotypes. Despite her identification of writing as a problem-solving tool, she remained uncertain if English was the only linguistic choice available to her or if she could combine Spanish and English as and when necessary to achieve certain rhetorical ends.

Having come to this realization and given the diversity in my classroom, I paid further attention to the linguistic choices of my other students. Linguistic identity was an exigency that needed an urgent response in my classroom because apart from Gabriela, one other student who was writing about her literacy in music had started her literacy narrative with the lyrics of a song in her native Liberian language. For me, these rhetorical moves my students were making demonstrated that they valued their native languages and so during my conference with Gabriela, for example, I provided feedback aimed at making her understand that how she was articulating and demonstrating her bilingual literacies was effective. My observations of Gabriela and conversations with her in conferences helped me realize I needed to make adjustments to my own teaching materials.

I reviewed my assignment sheet for any language in the prompt that could inhibit my students' abilities to express alternative ways of knowing and minimize any potential risks that may be associated with such desires to express those ways of knowing. For example, a part of my prompt indicated the final paper "must follow the conventions of Standard Edited English". For students, an uncertainty could be how their blend of native languages and English fits into the "Standard Edited English" designation. And a potential risk related to such imperative on the assignment prompt could be how their blend of native languages with English could affect their grades if that happens to be unacceptable in a writing paper. Yet, Gabriela and the other student took those bold steps. To show my own commitment to creating a classroom space that welcomes students' home languages and literacies, I clarified it was permissible for them to code switch/mesh in their literacy narrative. Given that the assignment focused on literacy narratives, I further expunged that imperative from the assignment prompt so students such as Gabriela whose narratives may include the use of languages other than Standard English could feel comfortable and confident in making those rhetorical decisions.

That my students were invested in exploring multiple linguistic resources in an English dominant writing classroom increased my own self-confidence as a new international and multilingual writing instructor. Despite my earlier uncertainties about my own multilingual identity in the classroom, the experience from the case study allowed me to engage in a critical self-reflection about how I can invoke relevant rhetorical resources from the other languages I speak to expand my students' knowledge about non-Western rhetorical traditions. Through that self-reflection, I further became more confident in my non-native accented English, a linguistic uncertainty that occupied my mind due to the English proficiency exam I took earlier as a TA and prior to conducting the case study. Indeed, the case study opened up a parallel space for my students and me to re-imagine and actualize the value of our multilingual identities in the writing classroom. Going forward, I anticipate that this learning experience from the case study will shape my approach to language diversity and my design of writing prompts in the FYW classroom.

Overcoming Setbacks: Alyssa's Experience

Even as an experienced instructor, my first semester teaching at a new university was different than my previous teaching experiences, and I was unsure how to meet my FYW students' needs who were often much more diverse than previous students I had taught. I was also transitioning to being a doctoral student, which made the teaching experience even more complex. When our teaching practicum course started talking about the case study project, I was nervous about the prospect of researching in this new setting. However, as we started to discuss how to do a case study in the seminar course, I felt some excitement at the prospect of researching in this new teaching situation. Yet as I did the case study, I encountered setbacks I hadn't expected and had to overcome, and I realized that, like me, students also have to overcome the setbacks they face as they complete the projects I assign them.

From the start, I was unsure about asking a student to be an interview subject. I still didn't feel like I had found my teacherly self at this university, and I didn't feel confident asking a student to be part of the case study because I didn't feel I had the ethos to do so. Nevertheless, I was encouraged by our professor's assurance that most students are excited to be interview subjects. So, with my professor's encouragement in mind, I asked one of my students if he would be an interview subject. He looked uncomfortable as I finished my question, and he paused for a little before saying he didn't want to. He told me he had too many other commitments and homework and didn't have the time. I left the classroom that day feeling particularly discouraged. How was I supposed to do classroom research when the student I wanted to interview didn't want to be interviewed? Was I a bad teacher because my student wasn't excited to talk with me in an interview? Now what was I going to do? I certainly didn't want to ask another student to participate and be rejected again.

As I walked across campus, I ran through potential new research questions, wondering which student I could ask who would actually say yes, especially since I wasn't ready to handle another "no" answer. As I rethought the project and considered other alternatives as I walked around campus, I realized that it was going to be okay and I was brave enough to ask another student. I would try again at the end of our next FYW class.

The next student I asked, Adam, is on the university's football team, and I wanted to know more about student athletes' experiences in FYW. I was nervous when I asked Adam if he would like to participate in the case study since I knew there was a chance he would also say no. To my surprise, though, he was very excited to be interviewed, and I felt a huge surge of relief. At least one student was willing to participate.

As I prepared to interview Adam, I wanted to know how I could better support athletes like him in getting their assignments turned in on time. Adam struggled turning in his assignments at the end of the semester despite being engaged during class sessions. I wondered if him being part of the football team, which traveled so frequently, was contributing to his trouble submitting work on time. As I interviewed Adam, I learned a lot about how online learning systems (like Canvas) can be a huge help for student athletes turning in work on time, and the interview helped me make my Canvas page more accessible; but what I learned most from interviewing Adam was how similar our situations were. Adam expressed how he felt the need to belong at such a big university, and how he wanted people to know his name. He wanted the ethos he'd had in high school and was trying to figure out how to achieve that in college. He was also facing setbacks later in the semester with turning work in because he was balancing sports and academics. Despite this, though, Adam always came to class happy, always participated, and ultimately got his work turned in and passed the class. He overcame the struggle and was successful in the end.

Like Adam, I was also trying to figure out how to regain my ethos in a new teaching situation. I was scared to do anything that would make me question my ethos even more, and when I asked the first student to be part of the case study and he turned me down, I was discouraged because I felt alone in my struggles. In my head, I was certain the other TAs were not having these problems. Yet Adam taught me that I was not alone in having to face difficulties I had not had at previous institutions. Like me, my students were also learning how to overcome setbacks and thrive in a new university. And if my students were feeling that way, then other TAs must have been going through the same process, which is true for many TAs (Bly; Restaino). I was not alone, and like Adam, I overcame my setback, held a generative interview, and ended up learning a lot from the case study project.

Ultimately, the case study offered me the opportunity to see that students and TAs are alike in many ways and that despite the struggles, we can always come through better as we work through the difficulties. I am now better prepared to understand why students might be struggling in class, why they might have to start a project over again, or why they turned in an assignment late. Just like how I found the case study assignment to be a hard but positive thing, as teachers we also ask students to complete projects that are hard at first though the learning is always worth it. My focus is now to better communicate to students how to work through difficult projects and situations, rethink a situation when there are setbacks, and ultimately come to understand how to adapt and succeed in academic contexts. In this way, the case study helped me be a more compassionate teacher who understands that, like me, students will have setbacks, but they can overcome them; and, as a teacher, I can help both myself and my students in that journey to continually grow and learn from challenges.

The Value in Seeing Parallel Paths

Through the case study project, the TAs came to see that their paths to developing as writing teachers were similar in many ways to the paths of their students as developing writers. By taking the time to get to know a student through an interview, the TAs were able to humanize their students and see students through similarities instead of through differences. For example, Alyssa became more aware of the persistence required in teaching and learning; Mohammed became more confident in his linguistic capital; Marlene learned about adapting prior knowledge into new contexts; and Seher recognized what it meant to be a writing teacher and a writing learner. Yet these individual takeaways are just a small part of what they gained from doing the case study.

Ultimately, the case study did not teach the TAs solely about the content they would teach, even though they had questions related to content. And while each of the TAs made changes to their courses and the way they present content based on their findings, the bigger changes were what they learned about themselves as teachers. As the TAs opened themselves up to teacher research, they saw that while they are not exactly like their students, they are all human and all learning and growing. The TAs realized they needed to be vulnerable and open with their students to recognize the parallel paths they are on with them.

Teaching with Parallel Paths in the TA Practicum

This frame of parallel paths is one that can be further employed as we consider the writing practicum for new TAs. As is often the case with teacher research as part of writing teacher education, this activity provided new TAs with opportunities to make meaning regarding teaching content and practice. The TAs undertook their own teacher research projects at the point in the semester that the first-year writers were undertaking research projects. These parallel assignments were coincidental in this particular semester, but may prove to be a useful strategy for the TA practicum. Having parallel learning experiences, TAs move through learning to teach as their students learn to learn in FYW, could be a fruitful model. Further, more explicit connections to the parallel paths of students might ease the stress for TAs who feel like they need to be experts over content and methods many of them are learning for the first time and in a new context.

In the TA practicum, we often pay close attention to the writing transitions of first-year writers. We encourage TAs to think about where their students are coming from and the prior knowledge they bring with them to the university. As a parallel activity, TAs might map their own transitions into graduate school, their studies, and their teaching. For example, Mohammed and Seher both discuss their uncertainties because of language and culture. Marlene and Alyssa both identified ways their experiences were shaped by their prior teaching. Offering space to map

transitions early in the semester may help TAs to see their own transitions and the transitions of their students more clearly and as more parallel. This has the potential to develop a more empathetic and grounded teaching.

As we saw in these examples, identifying the parallel paths helped TAs to reflect on their students' learning and their own experiences. This responds to the calls from Estrem and Reid "to create more opportunities for all TAs to solve (or at least untangle) their teaching 'challenges' through reconsidering them, through exploring multiple angles and approaches, and through drawing on resources that they have readily available to them" (466). Encouraging new teachers to question, compare, reflect, and see parallel paths builds a long-term practice for sustainable teaching that lasts beyond the pedagogy course.

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