

Graduate Student Writing Is Graduate Student Work: A Review Essay

Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition, by Meaghan Brewer. Utah State UP, 2020. 210 pp.

Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines: Identifying, Teaching, and Supporting, edited by Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Elena G. Garcia, Soo Hyon Kim, Katie Manthey, and Trixie G. Smith. WAC Clearinghouse / UP of Colorado, and CSU Open Press, 2020. 372 pp.

Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers, edited by Shannon Madden, Michele Eodice, Kirsten T. Edwards, and Alexandria Lockett. Utah State UP, 2020. 302 pp.

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Composition studies has increasingly displayed an interest in graduate student writing. Writing may be the most unifying experience of graduate students across programs, disciplines, and institutions, since writing is perhaps the most fundamental action of scholarship. Composition studies' growing interest in this writing is timely, as the guiding question of "what affects graduate student writing" that drives this interest overlaps with other trends in composition such as writing across the curriculum (graduate students write in all disciplines), translanguaging (graduate students write with a wide range of linguistic backgrounds and resources), and mentorship (graduate students often work closely with faculty mentors or seek other supportive relationships). Graduate students are also undergoing the significant challenges of enculturation in their chosen field(s), which has prompted increasing social critique and personal reflection on what is at stake in a graduate education.

I am also at an opportune moment in my own life to review the three books selected for this essay. I am a PhD student in a Rhetoric and Writing Studies program, I taught my first semester of first year composition while preparing this review essay, and I am working with a team on the inaugural year of a multidisciplinary peer writing groups initiative for graduate students at my institution. This points to the differing needs for research of graduate student writing. I read scholarship on graduate student writing to figure out how to write larger projects like my looming dissertation, to understand how my writing practices influence my pedagogy, and to make considered administrative choices about writing-related initiatives for graduate students. These are all practical, pressing concerns. I believe these books are written for those faculty and administrators who may also grapple with these concerns, especially

composition studies faculty, but my perspective as a current graduate student informs how I took in these authors' insights.

All three of the books I consider in this review essay share an interest in how graduate students are developing as writers, scholars, and teachers. I hope to expand the conversation with this review essay by encouraging us to also recognize graduate students as workers. What I mean by "worker" in contrast to those other titles is that composition scholars have not acknowledged the graduate student experience as a set of labor issues. Here it must be noted that I am writing in a United States academic context. In the US, graduate students are frequently employed by the same people who are researching how to support us, which should pose obvious ethical issues. Our pay is insufficient to live from, and our status in the academy is precarious. This economic precarity is exacerbated for graduate students who hold marginalized identities. Composition studies' growing interest in graduate student writing, then, must come with a growing interest in graduate student work and living conditions.

Meaghan Brewer's *Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition* follows a cohort of new graduate instructors through their first semester of teaching composition. This project is similar in spirit to Jessica Restaino's 2012 book, *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground*; both Brewer and Restaino work to apply an analytical lens to their qualitative research of graduate instructors in their first semester teaching. In *Conceptions of Literacy*, Brewer makes use of Peter Goggin's scholarship on literacy views to analyze how graduate student instructors' prior conceptions of literacy influence their initial pedagogies in the writing classroom. "Literacy views" refers to the theoretical frame that there are differing operative definitions of literacy that influence literacy cultures. Brewer diagnoses the guiding literacy view each research participant holds prior to their work as a graduate student. She uses these literacy views to explain the graduate students' teaching approaches and challenges. For example, Brewer discusses how three instructors' cultural literacy emphasis on engaging with and understanding assigned readings affected the time spent on students' writing in their classes. She explains that "although [the instructors] wanted to incorporate more writing, because they thought that texts were important and because their own past instruction had focused more on discussing literature, they felt unprepared for the differing curricular goals of the composition classroom" (80-81). Brewer's work offers a pedagogical model for graduate instructor preparation that honors students' prior knowledge and values through the lens of literacy views. Student instructors can better weather the storm of the first semester teaching with a clearer connection between their own educational experiences and their pedagogies.

Finding connections to one's own educational experiences as a learner is critical to communicating writing as an ongoing practice. A book I thought of frequently while reading through these three is the 2018 collection *Out in the Center: Public Controversies and Private Struggles*, edited by Denny, et al. The collection features reflections from scholars about their experiences working in writing centers and how their identities, such as race, language status, and gender, shaped that work. Because of many writing centers' reliance on student staffing, most of the contributors reflect on their work as graduate students in writing centers, and thus their broader experiences in graduate school. Identity, "fit," and vulnerability swirl as topics of concern for graduate students navigating their institutional roles.

The aim of *Out in the Center* to feature personal narratives as a means to explore concerns in writing studies parallels the focus of Shannon Madden, Michele Eodice, Kirsten T. Edwards, and Alexandria Lockett's edited collection *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers*. Personal narratives constitute the first of two major sections of *Learning*. I was particularly drawn to the co-written chapter, "Paying It Forward by Looking Back: Six HBCU Professionals Reflect on Their Mentoring Experiences as Black Women in Academia," by Karen Keaton Jackson, Hope Jackson, Kendra L. Mitchell, Pamela Strong Simmons, Cecilia D. Shelton, and LaKela Atkinson. The chapter is an exemplar of the dialogic reflection the *Learning* editors sought to encourage. Together, Jackson and others successfully blend small, individual reflections with a broader discussion of the need to create more support and mentorship of Black women. They highlight the successes of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in creating mentoring networks Black women scholars can thrive in. This is crucial to learn from because, as the authors explain,

there are so few African American PhDs in any academic field, finding one in a particular discipline at any institution can be rather difficult if not impossible... it is often necessary for students to go outside their institutions to connect with a mentor of color who resembles them. (119)

Questions of mentorship go beyond concerns of availability or engagement with students. Mentorship will determine who the next generation of composition scholars is. Jackson and others argue that mentorship, especially of marginalized groups, is a responsibility not to a particular program or institution, but to the field and to the graduate students within it.

There are also cross-cultural considerations to make for mentoring. *Learning* has two major sections, bridged by two "Interlude" entries, written by Alexandria Lockett and Amanda E. Cuellar. Cuellar writes about the Anzaldúan

notion of “atravesando,” crossing (borders), in her experiences moving from a Hispanic serving institution (HSI) in West Texas for her undergraduate studies to a predominantly white institution (PWI) for her graduate work. Cuellar describes how “the borders between my professors and me are so wide it is difficult, oftentimes nearly impossible, to cross them. Usually, I feel I am the one who constantly must do the *atravesando*” (133). Cuellar and other scholars in *Learning* argue that graduate students are often tasked with moving from the margin to center, rather than their instructors and mentors working to center the marginalized. This is another instance where the ability of students to connect with mentors outside of their department can be crucial.

Learning's second major section, titled “Approaches,” features articles that profile extracurricular efforts to support graduate student writing. Extracurricular support of graduate students is crucial, especially as writing instruction is not a part of all graduate programs' coursework. I am currently involved with establishing a peer writing groups initiative for graduate students at my institution. The lack of writing instruction, especially for many graduate programs in the sciences, is a primary motivation for us to create multidisciplinary spaces where students can connect to each other for peer support and engagement with their writing.

Contributors to both *Learning* and *Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines* highlight a number of different extracurricular approaches to supporting graduate student writing. Some of these are tailored for specific demographics, such as international and/or English-language learner graduate students, or students in the sciences. The most common approaches at the moment, judging by these collections, are focused on supporting students currently working on large writing projects like a thesis or dissertation. Short time-intensive writing camps or retreats are common, where graduate students are invited to convene for a predetermined length of time (e.g., an afternoon, a weekend, a week) to create a scheduled space to write in. Longer approaches include developing courses that focus on academic writing expectations and genre familiarization, and establishing a peer writing group initiative where students are able to meet regularly, often with a facilitator.

Anne Zanzucchi and Amy Fernstermaker describe a hybrid of these two approaches (a writing class and a writing group) in their *Learning* chapter, “Not Just Nuts and Bolts: Building a Peer Review Framework for Academic Socialization.” In the chapter, they outline the creation of an academic course that focused on developing graduate students' peer feedback skills in a writing workshop atmosphere that emphasized genre awareness. Zanzucchi and Fernstermaker argue that “peer review is a powerful professional activity that can be leveraged as an authentic practice with development and refinement over time—particularly by providing feedback to a variety of writers” (221).

Many of the approaches described in these books seek to put graduate students in conversation with one another. I encourage these peer conversations as it allows us as graduate students to make closer connections with each other, and also to practice the kinds of interdisciplinary scholarly conversations that are important to academic work.

Peer support is of course only one of many pedagogical strategies for graduate student writing. Marilee Brooks-Gillies, Elena G. Garcia, Soo Hyon Kim, Katie Manthey, and Trixie G. Smith's edited collection, *Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines: Identifying, Teaching, and Supporting*, has a sustained focus on approaches that faculty and administrators can consider for supporting graduate students with writing. The book divides these into four sections: first, coursework for graduate writing; second, professionalization and enculturation efforts to help graduate students better understand academic expectations; third, extracurricular graduate writing support; and fourth, genre familiarization. True to the spirit of writing across the disciplines, the contributors have diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This contributes to the variety of research methods used to analyze a writing initiative's effectiveness, making *Graduate Writing* a particularly valuable volume for anyone considering assessment options for a writing initiative. I personally benefited from Gretchen Busl, Kara Lee Donnelly, and Matthew Capdevielle's chapter, "Camping in the Disciplines: Assessing the Effect of Writing Camps on Graduate Student Writers," to develop a pre-/post-survey for participants in a peer writing groups initiative.

Jennifer Douglas' chapter, "Developing an English for Academic Purposes Course for L2 Graduate Students in the Sciences," serves as an excellent example of *Graduate Writing's* initiative overviews. Douglas discusses the pedagogic thinking underlying her development of a course in the sciences that sought to enculturate international graduate students to expectations for academic writing in English in their respective disciplines. Douglas sought to connect this writing work to graduate students' research interests to better illustrate how writing processes are a crucial and active part of developing scholarship. Douglas makes use of John M. Swales and Christine B. Feaks' *Academic Writing for Graduate Students* textbook to frame writing's value this way for students. Douglas' class focuses on genre familiarization through close article analysis, and "by introducing [this] model early [to frame] specific writing tasks throughout the course within the larger goals of the research paper" (85). This approach resonates with my own experiences as a master's student in a higher education studies program, where our research methods course also served as a process of repeated genre familiarization through analyzing the structure of articles to better understand what graduate students would need to plan for in their own research projects later in the degree.

The editors of *Graduate Writing* also include contributions in the reflective mode from the first section of *Learning*. In “Crossing Divides: Engaging Extracurricular Writing Practices in Graduate Education and Professionalization,” Laural L. Adams, Megan Adams, Pauline Baird, Estee Beck, Kristine L. Blair, April Conway, Lee Nickoson, and Martha Schaffer present a series of brief reflections discussing their efforts to transfer skills to the new challenges of academic writing for graduate students. Adams states this succinctly when she writes that “our pasts serve as extracurricular writing spaces and the ground from which—through care and passion—we bridge into new communities” (275). I parallel Adams’ insight about our past educational experiences with Brewer’s efforts to understand how graduate student instructors used their prior efforts as students in *Conceptions of Literacy*. All three of these books are interested in what knowledge students bring with them to graduate programs and how that knowledge is (not) valued in their graduate experiences. The focus here often remains on how to work with students to acquire new skills or acculturate to graduate expectations. With the risk of making an already-daunting task (preparing graduate students to succeed at writing) all the more difficult, I echo the fear of Janine Morris, Hannah J. Rule, and Christina M. LaVecchia in a recent *Peitho* article that “much of the graduate-level writing support we see increasing across disciplines emphasizes rhetorical features and scholarly genres—approaches that, while useful, can nonetheless atomize and contain writing, cleaving it from its dizzying affective, embodied, and material dynamics.” We can turn from the question of “what affects graduate student writing” to “what animates it?”

This animated turn would require a shift from the research priorities represented by these three books. Addressing writing as skill acquisition often obscures any social critique of how graduate schools operate, a kind of critique that is necessary to make sense of how our higher education institutions are failing to support half of graduate students to complete their degrees (*Learning* 4). The oppression of people becomes an abstracted concern when our eye is only on enculturation and genre familiarization. Graduate students are a diverse group of workers with different levels of access to power, even as we are flattened (temporarily and unevenly) by the precarity of our status in academia. We must imagine through practice how to mentor and support each other as such. The nextGEN group, dedicated to graduate student support and advocacy for justice and equity, is an example of a newer model in composition studies. In a conversation in *Composition Studies* in 2019, nextGEN contributing startup members Sweta Baniya, Sara Doan, Gavin P. Johnson, Ashanka Kumari, Kyle Larson, and Virginia M. Schwarz wrote how “justice work is often compartmentalized, and collaboration can be contingent upon having overlapping members... we need to be attentive to the whole of our

communities” (209). Practicing writing and scholarship in more nontraditional horizontal support structures can aid graduate students with the work ahead of us. We should understand graduate students as workers with a unique set of labor needs. Recognizing what we are experiencing as labor issues can connect us to the rich history of labor struggles—and yes, that needs to include serious conversations about graduate students unionizing. We can exercise collective governance as graduate workers to improve well-being, pay, and workplace conditions. We can dream of the self-destructive work that K. Wayne Yang (writing as la pperson) burns into us through his *A Third University Is Possible*—we can dare to re-animate our institutions for the work of undoing the white capitalist settler-colonial patriarchy that sustains them. Composition studies must be a part of this, both to exercise writing as a decolonizing force, and because graduate student writing risks becoming a matter of assimilation and acculturation otherwise. Reflect for a moment on the title *Learning from the Lived Experiences of Graduate Student Writers*. We have so much more to learn from each other than the university, as it exists, can bear. There is work ahead for all of us.

If you are currently a graduate student: we need to find each other. Supporting each other through this process will lead to greater success for all of us. If you are currently a faculty member mentoring graduate students: work with us to value the knowledge we bring to the table, and structure programs in ways that leverage our existing knowledge. What these three books offer are perspectives on what the field of composition is attempting toward these ends. What I hope they spark is the ambition to create new spaces and relationships for graduate students to work equitably and thrive in.

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Works Cited

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