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1

INTRODUCTION

A Framework for Understanding the Experiences of New Graduate Instructors

The blank page awaits the writer's first sentence, while new teachers, charged with the task of getting students to write and navigating new graduate programs themselves, are largely untrained, unsure of their responsibilities, and equipped with a syllabus that they did not design and perhaps a list of pedagogical procedures they do not understand.

—Jessica Restaino

The above epigraph points to a central tension in the field of composition: although scholars have worked hard to theorize the teaching of writing and develop best practices for educating composition instructors, most of the work of teaching writing is done by graduate students and adjuncts with very little formal education in pedagogy, many of whom would not identify as readers or writers of composition theory. Understanding the needs and attitudes of new graduate instructors is especially important given that they teach almost a quarter of composition classes, according to a study done by Anne Ruggles Gere (2009) of 643 writing programs in the 2008–2009 academic year (4). Extrapolating from these numbers, Dylan Dryer (2012) points out that graduate instructors taught “nearly a *quarter-million* undergraduates” in the institutions Gere surveyed alone (446n2).¹ Yet, as a field grappling with historical and institutional realities that are often not conducive to giving these new teachers the resources they need, gaps still remain in our understanding of the experiences of new graduate instructors, and there are very few

recent, in-depth empirically based guides for teacher education in composition.

Perhaps not surprisingly, studies on graduate-teacher education often address issues of identity, and, in particular, how graduate instructors² negotiate prior identities while being asked to take on a new identity as a teacher of writing. That is, implicit in these studies is the assumption that new graduate instructors arrive to their first semester of teaching already having a number of experiences with literacy and education that shape their conceptions of what kinds of teachers they should be. In their study of graduate instructors at George Mason and Boise State, E. Shelley Reid, Heidi Estrem, and Marcia Belcheir (2012) found that “TAs were influenced more strongly by prior personal experiences and beliefs . . . than by their formal pedagogy education” (33–34). Dryer (2012) argues that new graduate instructors “bring their cultural history” to their teaching and coursework (422). Barbara Cole and Arabella Lyon (2008) also found that graduate students come to their first semester of teaching with “well-established” but often “problematic ideologies” that affect their “*writerly*” and “*teacherly self*” (Cole and Lyon 2008, 194–95).

Despite this recurrent finding, very few studies on graduate-instructor education have attempted to define and operationalize this “identity,” “prior personal experiences and beliefs,” or “cultural history,” even as they identify the influence these constructs have on their teaching. In other words, more studies are needed that define what we mean by these terms, break them down into key, measurable concepts, and then test these concepts by applying them to data collected from participants in graduate-teacher-education programs. The goal of this book is to fill this void.

This book uses the lens of new literacy studies, and work on defining and categorizing different views of literacy, to argue that graduate instructors’ attitudes toward and beliefs about language and literacy (which are realized through and overlap with their identities) are an important source they draw on as they conceptualize what it means to teach composition in their first year. Graduate instructors’ literacy beliefs have long existed as

a faint thread throughout the research on composition teacher education. By this I mean scholars have noted these attitudes in passing or perhaps to characterize a particular graduate instructor participating in a study but have not made them the focus of their research. Rankin (1994), for example, describes graduate instructors who want to teach personal writing and help students claim an authentic “voice” (30–31). Wendy Bishop (1990) and Jessica Restaino (2012) both describe participants who view writing largely as grammar or a set of neutral skills. Much of this research attests to the importance of these conceptions in terms of how they translate to new graduate instructors’ teaching. Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir (2012), for example, describe how their participants’ teaching “principles” come from their identities as poets and writers (47). However, none of these studies have made graduate instructors’ conceptions of literacy the focal point of research.

By using a literacy studies framework, I hope to offer a fuller picture of the sets of values and beliefs new graduate instructors have when they enter our pedagogy courses or other teacher-education programs. Often, past experiences with literacy are not the main focus (Bishop 1990; Rankin 1994), or (as in Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir [2012] above) research examines graduate instructors’ attitudes only towards *writing*, and specifically academic writing, without discussing other aspects of literacy that might inform how they feel about their own writing or their students’ (see also Dryer 2012; Ebest 2005; Farris 1996; Reid 2009). While this research has been illuminating, it has stopped short of capturing how literacy experiences and sponsors beyond academic writing have shaped new graduate instructors. For example, one of the graduate instructors whose story I tell had lived in a yoga ashram, an experience that deeply shaped her understanding of literacy and writing pedagogy. Another was influenced by being homeschooled in a conservative Protestant home. Although many of the graduate instructors’ encounters with academic writing had also shaped them, the term *literacy* (and an orientation towards the insights of new literacy studies) more fully captures their participation in the various cultures

that would come to define how they viewed themselves as teachers of writing. Moreover, focusing on new graduate instructors' literacy conceptions allows those in mentoring relationships with new graduate instructors to more adequately account for and perhaps even anticipate some of the struggles they will have in coming to terms with the composition pedagogy explicitly and implicitly advocated for in graduate practica and standardized curricula for the first-year course (FYC).

In what follows, I describe an empirical study that examines the conceptions of literacy of seven graduate instructors, four women and three men, enrolled in graduate programs in English literature, rhetoric and composition, and creative writing who were teaching their first semester of composition at a large, public university in an urban area in the Northeast. I then turn to a theoretical framework for understanding these graduate instructors' attitudes and beliefs about literacy I call *conceptions of literacy* and give overviews of seven different conceptions that comprise this framework: literacy for personal growth, literacy for social growth, social/critical literacy, critical activism literacy, cultural literacy, functionalist literacy, and instrumental literacy. Finally, I situate this study and framework in the literature on graduate-instructor education and mentoring, focusing specifically on the two themes that appear most regularly in this research: identity and resistance.

Although past studies (Dobrin 2005; Ebest 2005; Welch 1993) have pointed to the ideological and identity-changing nature of the practicum course, in this book I argue, along with recent studies by Dryer (2012) and Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir (2012), that the practicum course has limited and uneven *visible* effects on graduate instructors' identities and pedagogy. I say *visible* because my interpretation of the data does show that the practicum has an effect but that it may not be easy to see for practica instructors or even the graduate instructors themselves. The graduate instructors in this study came to their first semester of teaching composition with ingrained literacy worldviews, and these sets of attitudes and beliefs appeared to guide them in their pedagogical decisions more than did their formal

pedagogy education. For example, Lily, the PhD student in rhetoric and composition I mention earlier, wanted her students to be “authentic” and “soulful” in what they thought, did, and said (pers. comm., October 15, 2010). On the other hand, Barbara, a second-year fiction MFA student, was influenced by her participation in online feminist communities to see literacy in more social, communal ways and to look for strategies to empower students by engaging their critical literacy. Often, the graduate instructors were only tacitly aware of how invested they were in these belief systems and the extent to which these systems were predetermining their decisions about how to teach composition.

As these statements suggest, these conceptions influenced how they encountered the concepts from composition studies presented in the practicum course and enacted them in the classroom. Whereas Barbara’s teaching seemed most in line with the ideas communicated in the graduate practicum, Lily often diverged from the master syllabus the graduate instructors were supposed to follow in order to match her prior assumption that engaging her students in their writing had to happen alongside a process of self-actualization. What I would like to suggest, and explore further in this book, is not the contention that any one conception of literacy is right or wrong but rather that practica instructors and writing program administrators must be aware of graduate instructors’ conceptions of literacy in order to better support them in the long, developmental process of becoming teachers. Because conceptions of literacy are learned over time, and because they are worldviews deeply entwined with and enacted through identity, understanding new graduate instructors’ conceptions of literacy offers a way of seeing them in terms not of deficit but rather of the understandings they bring with them to teaching writing.

THE SETTING: PUBLIC UNIVERSITY AND THE GRADUATE PRACTICUM

Public University is a large, research-intensive public university in an urban area near the East Coast. The English department

at Public University has over thirty tenured or tenure-track faculty, thirty-five non-tenure-track faculty, and over sixty adjunct faculty. Of the tenured and tenure-track faculty, around six teach graduate creative writing courses and identify as creative writers and only three teach and identify as scholars in rhetoric and composition. The composition faculty and the first-year writing program (FYWP) are both part of the English department, which could be considered “traditional” in that it maintains a heavy literature emphasis. This emphasis is important in the context of this study because it reinforces the sense of the practicum as a contested space, existing within but also on the outskirts of graduate students’ curricular requirements.

The graduate instructors were required to participate in a week-long workshop led by the practicum instructor, David, immediately prior to the start of the semester and then enroll in the practicum course concurrently with their first semester of teaching.³ The FYWP also provided a system of support and mentoring beyond the practicum. Graduate instructors in their first semester of teaching met weekly in small groups with one of two graduate mentors for more informal support. After this first semester, the FYWP required instructors to participate in teaching circles led by experienced instructors that met three times during the semester, with the final meeting acting as a norming and grading session.

Despite this continued mentoring, for many graduate students outside composition, the practicum would be the only exposure they would have to composition theory. Again, research on mentoring and educating graduate instructors suggests this is not particular to Public. As Albert Kitzhaber argues, the graduate practicum has historically been viewed as existing in the shadows of “the headier regions of the teaching of literature” (quoted in Dobrin 2005, 11). Sidney Dobrin (2005) attests that this course has always been a subject of contention, citing scholars who have argued it should either not have any place in the graduate curriculum at all or exist only tangentially. As a result, as Ebest (2005) argues, for many graduate students, “composition studies remains a boring, blurry sub-discipline”

(5). The graduate instructors in the current study confirmed that they often heard from English department faculty (outside composition) that their role as graduate students was to become scholars, not teachers, and that they should not invest extra time in learning composition pedagogy. This programmatic lack of emphasis on the practicum (even though it is a credit-bearing, graded course) and other aspects of graduate instructors' teaching by professors outside the FYWP is unfortunate, given its importance in providing an early foundation for their teaching (see Miller et al. 2005).

As at many other universities, the practicum and the FYWP had what I would describe as a strong social/critical emphasis. At its inception, the FYWP based its curriculum on David Bartholomae's (1985) conception in "Inventing the University" of writing as socially constructed within discourse communities and of the university as comprising several discourse communities, which students must learn to appropriate. To accomplish these goals, the course description in the handbook designed for FYW instructors emphasizes cross-curricular approaches to teaching writing, critical reading and writing, and instruction in rhetorical strategies. Although experienced instructors in the FYWP were invited to design their own syllabi, the program also created a "common" or standard syllabus for its first-year courses, which included four total courses, including two levels of composition, as well as ESL sections of each of these two courses. Most students entering Public University as undergraduates place into the second, non-ESL course, which the graduate instructors in the practicum taught and which I refer to as College Composition (CC).

The common syllabus for CC, which the graduate instructors in the practicum were required to use, was designed to have first-year students explore ideas such as nonviolent protest through the teachings of Gandhi and his followers; the legacy of westward expansion and historical rhetoric surrounding the American "frontier;" and slavery through the lens of science fiction. The text adopted by the FYWP was Bedford/St. Martin's *Cultural Conversations: The Presence of the Past*, a themed reader

whose readings were meant to encourage students to adopt a critical view of present cultural ideas by viewing them through the lens of the past (Dilks, Hansen, and Parfitt 2001). The final text for the class was Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (2003), a science-fiction novel in which two individuals from the 1970s, an African American woman and her Caucasian husband, travel back in time to a plantation in the antebellum South.

Like the course Dobrin (2005) describes, the practicum at Public University sought not so much to encourage graduate instructors to think "about how to teach, but about how they think of themselves as teachers and as writers" (20). By this, I mean that whereas the practicum exposed the graduate instructors to composition theory and pedagogy and modeled practical pedagogical strategies (like using small groups, having students arrange desks in a circle, and meeting with students one on one to guide them in revision), graduate instructors weren't pushed to assume any particular identity as an instructor or even necessarily to adopt a particular composition pedagogy. David facilitated graduate instructors' coming to their own teaching identities throughout the semester, in particular through in-class journal entries, such as one during orientation week that asked the graduate instructors to "write about an influential teacher" (field notes, August 25, 2010). Perhaps the most significant contemplation of themselves as teachers occurred in the autobiographical literacy narratives the graduate instructors wrote as an assignment for the practicum course, one shorter one that they turned in early in the semester and a longer, revised narrative they turned in as part of their final teaching portfolio, which they revised to reflect what they learned about themselves during the semester. David met with each of the graduate instructors to ask them questions about the first literacy narrative and to prompt them to think critically about the experiences they described.

The fact that the literacy narratives composed a large part of the writing for the practicum sent a message to the graduate instructors that the experiences they brought to this first semester of teaching were significant and that, moreover, reflecting

on these experiences would be essential to their growth as teachers and scholars. David was very different from the dogmatic, inflexible mentors described by Nancy Welch (1993), who repeatedly and contemptuously called her beliefs about writing and the world into question, promoting a “conversion” model of graduate-teacher education. Rather, David encouraged each graduate instructor to come to their understanding of literacy and pedagogy in their own way.

However, as Bishop (1990) states, “No teacher training program or pedagogy seminar can . . . be ideologically neutral” (xv). At some points, David expressed frustration when graduate instructors misinterpreted ideas presented by the practicum readings, displaying some of the “anxieties” Reid (2007) describes as an understandable by-product of the fact that graduate instructors are often not ready to learn ideas just because practica instructors are ready to teach them. This disconnect was especially the case during the two classes in which the graduate instructors discussed articles they had read by Bartholomae and Susan Jarratt. After both classes, David theorized that the graduate instructors simply did not have enough disciplinary knowledge of rhetoric and composition to interpret these readings. That is, like Douglas Hesse (1993), he traced their “resistance” to their inexperience with the terms, history, and values characterizing the discourse community of composition (227).

David also postulated that the graduate instructors thought Bartholomae’s “Inventing the University” was beneath them—that because it was about students learning to write, it should be easier and more straightforward than, say, an article about literary theory. David’s comments after these classes say a great deal about how much our (WPAs’ and pedagogy instructors’) anxieties about graduate instructor “resistance” are wrapped up in anxieties about our discipline and how it is perceived by outsiders. WPAs and other composition scholars have long had to defend the importance and scholarly nature of our work to outsiders, including members of our universities and even colleagues in our own departments. As Jennifer Grouling (2015) contends, “The inclusion of composition theory [in the

practicum] has to do with sharing our disciplinary expertise and being taken seriously.” Moreover, as other scholars have argued, the practicum course is a crucial site wherein new graduate instructors acquire disciplinary knowledge that can inform and help them reflect on their teaching practice (Ryan and Graban 2009; Stancliff and Goggin 2007).

However, Grouling (2015) also points out that our desire to get students to see composition as a not just a set of courses but as an intellectual field with its own content can also work against us, suggesting that some graduate instructors, in connecting to composition theory only “as graduate students,” make the common graduate-seminar move of looking for ways to challenge it without the balancing move of also considering what it would look like to enact these principles in their classrooms. WPAs may feel especially hurt by this “resistance” because they see composition theory as part of their own identities. David got past his frustration by realizing that what appeared to be resistance could more accurately be described as moments when graduate instructors were confronting their own tacit beliefs about literacy, moments that put their literacy ideologies and the ones being presented in the practicum on a “collision course” (to use Russel Durst’s [1999] terminology). That is, their “resistance” was not simply stubbornness, nor was it necessarily counterproductive. Rather, it signaled the understandable fear of having one’s worldview challenged and could even (as in the case of a graduate instructor I describe in the next chapter) act as a precursor to learning.

THE STUDY AND PARTICIPANTS

I recruited participants from the fall 2010 graduate practicum. Of the eighteen practicum students, ten were enrolled in the master of fine arts program in creative writing, six were in the PhD program in English with a concentration in literature, and two were in the PhD in English program with a concentration in rhetoric and composition. The fact that only two out of eighteen students identified with the field of rhetoric and

composition impacted the culture of the practicum. Although all the students were engaged in the subject matter of the course and many looked to David, the practicum instructor, for guidance beyond teaching in their first semester, the preponderance of graduate instructors did not identify the subject matter of the practicum as their primary field of study.

Sixteen of the eighteen graduate instructors volunteered to participate. Although I gathered data from all these participants to give me a broad sense of trends in their beliefs about literacy, I chose seven graduate instructors to focus most of my analysis on. I selected these graduate instructors with an eye to having participants representing all three disciplines (comp/rhet, literature, and creative writing) and to including different genders from each discipline.⁴ Because I was teaching on two campuses during the semesters I collected data, I also selected participants whose classes were scheduled at times I could observe them. All these focal participants identified as Caucasian. While I recognize this as an unfortunate limitation of the study, the participants represented the overall demographic of the class.⁵

The following table lists the participants and some of their demographic information. Under “Teaching experience,” I indicate whether the graduate instructors had any previous teaching experiences, even if it was tutoring or working as a teaching assistant, as is the case for Garrett and Jordi, who worked as assistants for large literature survey classes in their first two years in their programs. “Solo” indicates that the graduate instructor had experience planning lessons and managing their own classroom without the presence of a supervisor or other instructor.

My goal for the study was to collect data that would give me a detailed depiction not only of the conception of literacy each participant held but also of some possible influences for this conception. In order to triangulate graduate instructors’ attitudes towards literacy across different data types, I conducted three interviews with each participant, including an initial interview in the fall semester and two interviews (one in the fall and another the following spring) after observing their classes. I also

Table 1.1. Brief descriptions of the seven focal participants

<i>Graduate instructor</i>	<i>Program of study</i>	<i>Age at time of study</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>	<i>Year in program</i>
Lily	composition and rhetoric	26	solo, tutoring (adults)	1
Karen	composition and rhetoric	41	solo (secondary school)	1
Barbara	creative writing	27	tutoring (primary school)	2
Max	creative writing	22	no	1
Garrett	literature	27	literature TA	3
Blake	literature	23	tutoring (primary school)	1
Jordi	literature	27	literature TA	3

collected both their initial and revised literacy narratives and took field notes from my visits to the classes they were teaching and from the practicum. (For a more detailed list of these data-collection instruments, see appendix A.) In the following chapters, I use details from these graduate instructors' literacy narratives and interview data to tell their stories in more depth.

CONCEPTIONS OF LITERACY: DEFINITIONS AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Although the term *literacy* is ubiquitous in literature on teacher education in composition, to date, no studies have attempted to understand new graduate instructors' experiences through the lens of literacy theory, and none have attempted to understand these experiences specifically by exploring graduate instructors' literacy worldviews. This gap in the research is perhaps because the concept of literacy is inherently varied and slippery. Many today, even in professional educational organizations, describe literacy either as reading and writing or as knowledge of a particular area or field, as in math literacy or information literacy. However, these ways of seeing literacy fail to recognize the socially situated, multimodal, and multifaceted

nature of literacy practices. Sylvia Scribner (1984) argues that no universal definition of literacy can ever account for the various ways literacy is practiced, valued, or described. Most ways of defining literacy, Scribner (1984) asserts, assume literacy has an “essence” that can be defined and described (7). However, as Scribner states and this study confirms, literacy is “a many-meaning thing” (9).

While there is no one “thing” we can call *literacy*, there are multiple *views* of what literacy should be, all with their own agendas and “rationalizations of . . . [literacy’s] importance” (Knoblauch 1990, 74–75). To put it another way, questions of what literacy *is* are invariably questions of what literacy *should be*. Ways of seeing literacy are always ideological in that they are reflections of the worldviews of individuals and groups and always political in that they privilege certain groups or literacy practices while marginalizing or excluding others.

I define a *conception of literacy* as a set of values and beliefs about literacy that colors one’s way of viewing language and, consequently, the world. It is, to use Kenneth Burke’s (1966) term, a “terministic screen” that consists of the set of symbols we have for interpreting the world. Burke (1966) argues that we do not experience reality directly, that, rather, our sense of it is always mediated by language, which itself is a “*reflection* of reality” we use for “*selection*” and “*deflection*” (45; emphasis in original). A terministic screen always involves an element of sifting through, of choosing certain ideas or experiences and deflecting others. Burke says one’s terministic screen necessarily “directs the attention to one field [of language] rather than another” (50).

Similarly, a conception of literacy directs our attention to particular *dimensions* of literacy rather than to others. By *dimensions*, I mean aspects of the literacy, including the self or the individual, the social dimension, the text, and production. Two individuals viewing the same literacy event might come to very different conclusions about the event depending on the dimensions of literacy privileged in their conception. A conception, then, is a way of choosing, consciously or not, certain aspects of our experiences with language.

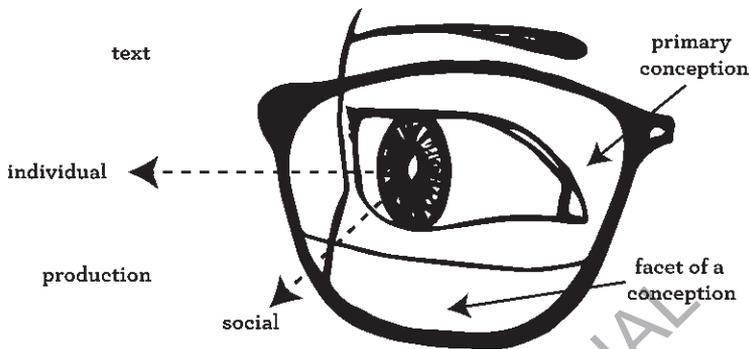


Figure 1.1. A conception of literacy

Although I like Burke's metaphor of the screen, I also think it needs updating given that we now gaze primarily *at* screens rather than *through* them. Consequently, I see a conception as a lens, similar to a bifocal or trifocal lens, in which the subject gazes mostly through their primary literacy conception but, depending on the situation, might also look through another part of the lens, which could represent another literacy *facet*. In figure 1.1, I depict a conception of literacy as a bifocal lens, which, when the individual gazes through it, sorts the viewer's attention to particular dimensions of literacy. For example, a viewer could see mostly how literacy can act as a vehicle for self-expression while not paying as much attention to how relationships (the social dimension) or texts enable this journey.

As with any literacy educator, when new graduate instructors profess literacy, they make choices about what to teach and how to teach it, choices that reflect their ideas and attitudes about what literacy is and who and what it is for. Graduate instructors are influenced by the kinds of texts (written, visual, aural, and electronic) they read, as well as familial and cultural literacy practices, current and prior experiences in school, and cultural commonplaces about literacy. These in turn influence the literacy practices they value and want to see replicated. In one of his continuations of Deborah Brandt's (1998) theory of literacy sponsorship, Eli Goldblatt (2007) argues that "the more

we know about where our students come from and what the literacy conditions are around our institution, the better chance we have of designing a program that truly fits our environment” (9). I argue that this is no less true of the graduate instructors we educate and the practica we design.

FROM LITERACY DEFINITIONS TO CONCEPTIONS

All scholarship dealing with literacy defines it, even if the definitions are implicit. However, only a few scholars have made explicit attempts to classify different views of literacy. James Berlin’s (1982) taxonomies, particularly his “current-traditional rhetoric,” have been the most influential in the field of composition. However, the most recent work on mapping the landscape of literacy views comes from Peter Goggin (2008), who articulates the most detailed synthesis of different literacy views. Although the corpus he is using is much different from this study’s,⁶ based on my past experiences with teacher education, this taxonomy makes the most sense as a starting point for understanding the views of new graduate instructors.

In the following descriptions, I also refer to overlapping classifications of literacy forwarded by two other scholars: psychologist Sylvia Scribner (1984) and compositionist C. H. Knoblauch (1990), both of whom Goggin cites in formulating his literacy categories.⁷

1. *Functionalist Literacy*

The most familiar way of conceptualizing literacy in the public sphere is what Knoblauch (1990) and Goggin (2008) term the *functionalist perspective*. Functionalist-literacy views see literacy primarily in terms of its practical value. Also termed *vocational literacy*, this conception argues for the necessity of equipping people with the literacy skills needed to survive in daily life (Scribner 1984, 9). This view, Knoblauch (1990) says, presumes “that the ultimate value of language lies in its utilitarian capacity

to pass information back and forth for economic or other material gain” (76). In other words, this literacy view assumes literacy does, in fact, have an essence or some set of basic skills that can be taught in a relatively straightforward way.

2. *Instrumental Literacy*

Goggin (2008) also adds a twin classification to functionalist that he calls “functional literacy,” which is, in his view, a more “reflective and critical” approach to literacy that attends to functional concerns while still maintaining “a multiliteracy view in which the acquisition of discrete learning skills can contribute to various forms of learning” (72). Though still practical, this view sees literacy as context based, flexible, and multimodal. Before I began gathering data, I renamed the functional literacy category *instrumental literacy* in order to prevent confusion between this and the functionalist view. Here I draw on Durst’s (1999) concept of “reflexive instrumentalism,” which he describes as accepting the practical goals of literacy instruction by recognizing the importance of “the world of work and career advancement” while also preserving “the intellectual rigor and social analysis of current [critical] pedagogies” (174, 178). This conception, then, “cultivate[s] a critical aspect within this instrumentalist framework” (178).

3. *Social/Critical Literacy*

Social/critical literacy sees literacy as socially situated and ideological (Goggin 2008, 70). Literacy in this view is a vehicle for social uplift, community advancement, and questioning existing power structures. Citing Paulo Freire, Scribner (1984) describes this conception as one that looks to literacy “as a means for poor and politically powerless groups to claim their place in the world” (12). In other words, literacy, in this conception, is a means for analyzing one’s condition through what Freire calls “critical consciousness” in order to engage in fundamental social transformation (quoted in Scribner 1984, 12). This

conception can be seen as a dangerous one because of its goal of disrupting the status quo (Knoblauch 1990, 79).

However, because of composition's acceptance of challenging hierarchy as part of our mission, this conception has become relatively mainstream to scholars of composition.⁸ In recognition of the strong pull of this and other social views of literacy within composition studies, Goggin adds two more categories to Knoblauch's and Scribner's classifications, both of which view literacy as social and context based: critical-activism literacy and literacy for social growth.

4. *Critical Activism Literacy*

Critical-activism literacy is, for Goggin (2008), a more specific classification of social/critical literacy; Goggin argues that "a literacy of critical activism will bring about radical political reform" (69). The difference between this and social/critical literacy is primarily in praxis. I interpret critical-activism literacy and social/critical literacy as occupying the same ideological category or as existing on a continuum, with critical-activism literacy emphasizing a higher degree of community involvement and requiring students to take part in their community rather than just writing to respond to social and community issues.

5. *Literacy for Social Growth*

Like social/critical and critical-activism literacy, literacy for social growth emphasizes social construction. Unlike the other two social categories, it "tends to avoid direct activism and maintains the status quo by creating an illusion of self/social determinism" (Goggin 2008, 68). Carol Jago's (2009) work, which cites the transformative power of reading literature and argues that it lets students in on the common web of human experience, aligns with this view. Literacy, in this conception, is about connection and empathy, but the political, ideological aspects of literacy are downplayed.

6. *Cultural Literacy*

Scribner (1984) describes cultural literacy (which she calls “literacy as a state of grace”) as “the tendency in many societies to endow the literate person with special virtues” (13). To be literate, in this conception, is to exist in a special sphere of society. Central to this conception is, as Scribner (1984) relates, “the concern with preserving and understanding scripture . . . at the core of many religious traditions, Western and non-Western alike” (13). Scribner’s connection between this tendency to endow the literate person with a certain almost religious aura and the emphasis on scripture, or, what I call more broadly *the text*, provides a way for understanding views of literacy that endow even secular texts with sacred qualities.

In Knoblauch’s (1990) description of cultural literacy, he foregrounds the view of language as “a repository of cultural values and to that extent a source of social cohesion” (77). Like literacy for social growth, this conception sees literacy as social, but unlike the social visions of literacy, which allow for multiple views and multiple literacies, cultural literacy strives for a unified culture. Using Knoblauch’s characterization of this conception and E.D. Hirsch as the exemplar, Goggin (2008) agrees that cultural literacy is “an ideology that conceives certain texts as having stable and timeless values” (68).

7. *Literacy for Personal Growth*

With its emphasis on Romantic views of language, the poet-writer, and the composing process, literacy for personal growth is the conception of literacy most oriented to the individual. Knoblauch (1990) characterizes this conception by saying, “The assumption of a literacy-for-personal-growth argument is that language expresses the power of the individual imagination” (78). Consequently, adherents of this conception advocate, in some cases, “expressive writing, personalized reading programs, whole-language curricula, and open classrooms” as “symbols of self-determination” (78). Writing, in this view, is depicted “as a mysterious process and a means to an internal truth” (Goggin 2008, 67).

GRADUATE INSTRUCTORS' CONCEPTIONS OF LITERACY

While I used all seven categories for my initial coding, only three were meaningful categories for describing the participants' conceptions of literacy: literacy for personal growth, social/critical literacy, and cultural literacy. Although I coded some data for functionalist and instrumental literacy conceptions, neither was a primary conception of literacy for any of the focal participants. I can't be sure, but this could be because of an ambivalence towards language instruction, as well as a suspicion of overtly or narrowly careerist notions of literacy. That is, they all saw literacy as being *for* something else, whether it was self-expression, critical engagement with the world, or knowledge of texts. They consequently framed the purpose of education, and literacy, in much different terms than do policymakers in the public sphere, pointing to a significant difference between what outsiders expect students to learn and what is actually going on in the classroom. I note this here because, while I do not devote a chapter to them, functionalist and instrumental conceptions of literacy can often seem like the soup WPAs and literacy educators are swimming in.

Besides social/critical literacy, the other two social categories (literacy for social growth and critical-activist literacy) were also not as useful in understanding the graduate instructors' conceptions. While some graduate instructors were intrigued by critical-activist views, most saw liberatory, community-based pedagogies as unrealistic or too burdensome for their students.⁹ Literacy for social growth had too many overlaps with other conceptions (especially, surprisingly, cultural literacy). Although the idea that literacy helps individuals develop empathy was intriguing for one graduate instructor, her desire to help students question existing power structures and language's role in gatekeeping made the social/critical category more descriptive of her views.

While Scribner (1984) and others have described literacy conceptions in connection with ethnographic research on literacy, this study is the first to use the conceptions I describe as a heuristic for understanding case studies of individuals, thus

providing an opportunity to see how individual conceptions map onto (or reject) broader cultural understandings of literacy's purpose, as well as how experiences and sponsors communicate and/or influence how individual conceptions of literacy develop. In applying Goggin's (2008) categories, I thus bring together two previously disparate sets of scholarship: graduate-instructor education and literacy taxonomies.

However, I am sensitive to critiques by Lisa Ede (2004) and David Gold (2012), who argue there is danger in taxonomizing the paradigms of our field, particularly when they are used to place scholars into opposing camps. As Ede (2004) states, quoting feminist scholar Donna Haraway, taxonomies tend to "police deviation," a serious danger when it comes to applying what we learn from studies like this to people we are educating (26). Ede thus argues that when we speak for others, we must take care not to overgeneralize, oversimplify, and decontextualize (169–71). Moreover, individuals' conceptions are enormously complex, influenced by various literacy sponsors and taking on different meanings according to context. Goggin (2008) recognizes the inherent hybridity of these conceptions in his study, pointing to the "fuzziness and leakiness of classification" (76). Because literacy sponsors come in the form of various individuals and institutions, each graduate instructor's conception of literacy was not only complex but also situationally dependent. Graduate instructors' literacy conceptions are, to use Restaino's (2012) words, the result of a "complex knot of competing and interlocked factors" (118). Thus, I saw the conceptions-of-literacy framework not as all-determining but rather as a heuristic device for making sense of the ingrained, complex views of these newcomers.

To honor this complexity whenever possible, I also read against the grain of the patterns I discovered in the data for each graduate-instructor participant, pointing to instances of complexity and hybridity. At the same time, I also make the case that each of the graduate instructors had one *primary conception*, which acted as a lens through which every other conception was viewed and filtered. In calling this a *primary conception*, I invoke

James Paul Gee's (1989) idea of a primary discourse because I see the primary conception as constituting part of what Gee calls our "home-based sense of identity" (8).¹⁰ This primary conception functioned as the graduate instructors' terministic screen for viewing literacy, and, in some cases, it also limited their ability to enact practices based on other conceptions. For example, Jordi, a third-year PhD student in literature, was intrigued by and used many of the pedagogical strategies presented in the practicum, including small-group work and collaborative, constructive activities aimed at helping students interpret texts by interacting with them. However, the way she viewed literacy was inflected by her primary conception, cultural literacy, in her understanding that literacy was primarily about interpreting texts. Consequently, although Jordi frequently referred to what might be described as *social/critical literacy goals*, goals that students develop an awareness of texts as ideological and have knowledge of current events, she had difficulty pinpointing *why* students should develop this awareness other than that it would help them interpret texts.

Of course, as Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street (2008) argue, "*Why* questions are teleological in nature and resist proof by empirical means" (35). It is thus understandable that Jordi, a newcomer to teaching, would have difficulty articulating the basis for beliefs that have become so naturalized for her they no longer seem to *be* beliefs. Thus, even as I posit that, in Burkean terms, graduate instructors' conceptions redirect their gaze to only certain aspects of the literacy experience, I also recognize and point to how their views and experiences could and did work as strengths. The goal of practica instructors should thus be not to work against graduate instructors' literacy views, which would surely backfire, as work by Welch (1993) and Jackie Grutsch McKinney and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater (2003) also confirms (Grutsch McKinney and Chiseri-Strater 2003). Rather, practica instructors can create situations that help new graduate instructors understand and denaturalize their conceptions of literacy, creating opportunities for them to examine how these belief systems inform their teaching practices.

IDENTITY AND RESISTANCE IN THE EDUCATION OF COLLEGE WRITING INSTRUCTORS

The conceptions-of-literacy framework described here also offers new ways of seeing the impact of two often-discussed aspects of graduate-teacher education: identity and resistance. As recent studies by Grouling (2015) and Rachel Gramer (2017) attest, graduate instructor “resistance” to aspects of their early teacher education has become somewhat an overdetermining narrative in the field. To name but a few, Hesse (1993) argues that graduate instructors “resisted material that was new” and, as a result, could not engage with it (225). Rankin (1994) concurs that her first-year graduate instructors “resist almost everything” and are particularly against the “theory” presented in the practicum course (ix, 45). Ebest (2005) and Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer (2005) both take up the subject of graduate-student resistance to specific aspects of the practicum course (e.g., decentered classrooms and critical pedagogy). Indeed, resistance has become such a well-established aspect of graduate instructors’ early experiences with teaching and pedagogy that Dryer (2012) states that their “resistance to the practicum may be a given” (423).

I should point out that resistance in the practicum isn’t always constructed as negative or as an impediment. Articles by Welch (1993) and Marcy Taylor and Jennifer Holberg (1999) locate graduate instructors’ resistance in their liminal position within the university, arguing against models based on indoctrinating or converting graduate instructors to a particular set of theoretical beliefs and practices (Taylor and Holberg 1999). Whereas studies by Bishop (1990), Farris (1996), and Ebest (2005) look to ways of overcoming graduate instructors’ resistance, Welch (1993) and Estrem and Reid (2012) explore ways it can be potentially productive.

I witnessed instances when the required curriculum of the FYWP and the recommended pedagogical strategies of the graduate practicum seemed at odds with what these new graduate instructors wanted to teach. However, I argue against framing this struggle as *resistance*, which has become a catchall term

for everything from outright rebellion to quiet noncompliance. The moments the graduate instructors in this study seemed most “resistant” centered around instances in which they were encountering difficulty in making sense of a particular pedagogical theory or theorist. What has been described as *resistance*, then, may in fact be moments when graduate instructors are grappling with what Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle (2015) call “threshold concepts,” or ideas many composition theorists have accepted but that appear to go against the common sense articulated by people outside the discipline (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015, xix). This view supports Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir’s (2012) conclusion that the “resistance” we see in graduate practica “may be more inertial than consciously directed” and that it stems from graduate instructors’ interaction with the “least familiar” of the “new-and-complicated ideas” they are exposed to in their practica (55). I agree with Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir, with the slight modification that the ideas new graduate instructors find most troubling are the ones that run counter to their conceptions of literacy. Revising this narrative of resistance, which has dominated scholarship on graduate-teacher education, may help WPAs and practica instructors be more empathetic to and understanding of the struggles graduate instructors face in their first year of teaching.

Thus, this book redirects our focus from resistance to the ideological positions of the graduate instructors. If, as theorists like George Hillocks (1995), Berlin (1982), and Wardle (2014) point out, our theories of language and literacy, and of who and what constitutes literacy, impact *who* we are and become as teachers, it becomes essential for graduate-teacher education to provide inroads for new graduate instructors that help them uncover their literacy conceptions.

Although past studies (Dobrin 2005; Ebest 2005; Welch 1993) have pointed to the ideology and identity-changing nature of the practicum course, my analysis suggests, along with recent studies by Dryer (2012) and Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir (2012), that the practicum course has limited and uneven effects on graduate instructors’ identities and pedagogy. Dobrin

(2005), for example, ascribes a great deal of power to the practicum course.

We must recognize that the manner in which the practicum disseminates cultural capital is a means of control. . . . By professing a particular cultural capital through the practicum, the program itself is able to maintain control over what can and should be taught not just in FYC classes but also in any other class students then teach. (25)

However, one of the findings of the study informing this book is that the conceptions of literacy the graduate instructors brought with them to their first semester of teaching were both persistent, even in the face of competing ideas about literacy from the practicum, and influential on what got taught in the individual composition courses. Thus, throughout this book, I question the idea that the practicum has the power to “maintain control” over what graduate instructors choose to teach and/or how they teach it.

This is not to say graduate instructors are either uneducated or deficit laden because they do not enter teaching methods classes as blank slates. Indeed, the conceptions-of-literacy framework points to understanding graduate-instructor “resistance” not in terms of stubbornness or rebellion but rather the very real and understandable challenges new graduate instructors face and what we (as teacher educators) can do to support them. The graduate instructors I profile here grew up in households that valued certain literacies, which were then reinforced by various literacy sponsors throughout their education, including, in some cases, other courses in their current and past graduate programs. It is thus understandable that they would persist with these literacy views. In addition, I argue, along with Gramer (2017), that graduate instructors’ conceptions of literacy (she uses the term “identities”) are “*enabling* as well as constraining, generative as well as limiting” (5). To return to Burke’s (1966) terms, as terministic screens, conceptions of literacy enable graduate instructors to see some possibilities when it comes to teaching, writing, and their students’ abilities while deflecting others. Throughout this book, I try to balance literature that has seen graduate instructors largely in terms of deficit. To do that,

I point to aspects of their conceptions of literacy that strengthened rather than detracted from their pedagogy.

The data from this study suggest the practicum *did* have an influence over the graduate instructors in that they appeared to be more conscious of and critical of their own literacy positions and prejudices by the end of the first semester. Although this was just the beginning of a process through which graduate instructors interrogated their literacy positions and started to make sense of what those positions meant for their teaching practices, it reveals the possibilities for the practicum's role in their development as teachers. However, the role of the practicum in graduate instructors' teaching trajectories is neither straightforward nor necessarily easy to see. In many ways, the practicum's influence wasn't as pronounced (and as recognizable) as other sources of learning for the graduate instructors, including past experiences, familial values, and even other graduate programs or other forces within their graduate program. While learning and reflection in the graduate practicum are possible, they are always inflected by past experiences and beliefs and may take longer than a single semester to solidify. Moreover, graduate instructors also must be willing to commit to the kind of intense self-exploration this learning entails.

GRADUATE INSTRUCTORS AND RESEARCH ON LEARNING: IMPLICATIONS FOR WORK ON TRANSFER

Looking at the learning trajectories of new graduate instructors also has implications for recent work in composition on student learning, which is often framed in terms of theories of transfer. Arguing that students' "prior knowledge . . . [and conceptions of literacy] plays a decisive if not determining role in . . . [their] successful transfer of writing knowledge and practice," Kathleen Blake Yancey, Liane Robertson, and Kara Taczak (2014) describe three different transfer practices learners use in encountering new tasks:

1. An *assemblage* model in which students graft new . . . knowledge onto earlier understandings

2. A more successful *remix* model in which students integrate prior and new writing knowledge
3. A *critical incident* model where students encounter an obstacle that helps them retheorize writing in general (5)

As the descriptions above indicate, Yancey, Robertson and Taczak see the remix and critical incident models of learning to be more successful, as they enable students, more so than in the assemblage model, to retheorize writing. Yet I argue that for graduate instructors in their first semester to first year of teaching, assemblage may be a more realistic model. For the most part, when the graduate instructors referred to ideas and practices they learned in the practicum, those ideas and practices were grafted onto previous understandings without significantly altering those understandings. This supports Estrem and Reid's (2012) claim that for new graduate instructors, "new learning does not replace earlier learning as much as it synthesizes with earlier understandings, sometimes wholly and sometimes partially, attaching readily when new and old principles match and perhaps less strongly when there are conflicting principles" (462).

Given the power of their literacy preconceptions and the difficult and often counterintuitive nature of writing pedagogy, I don't think we can expect graduate instructors to do much retheorizing in the space of a single semester, although it does appear that some of those grafted-on understandings eventually work their way into graduate instructors' conceptions of literacy once they have had the chance to consider those understandings more completely and gain additional teaching practice. I do, however, note moments when a critical incident forced a situation in which the graduate instructors began to question and retheorize more thoroughly. For example, her struggle with one of her seminar papers prompted Karen, a comp/rhet graduate instructor, to rethink how the experiences of her undergraduates might parallel her own, a relationship she had previously effaced.

One of the main feats of Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak's (2014) study, as well as other recent work on transfer, has been to acknowledge and identify the role of *prior knowledge* in students'

learning. For example, Mary Jo Reiff and Anis Bawarshi (2011) argue that although there has been increasing focus on how students in FYCs transfer their knowledge to other contexts, there has been relatively little research on what students bring with them to the course (313). My argument is essentially the same, but applied to graduate instructors. In other words, understanding the conceptions of literacy graduate instructors bring with them to their first semester of teaching might help explain how they take in pedagogy and rethink prior views (see also Qualley 2016).

However, I also think that in labeling what students bring with them to their learning as *knowledge* (as research on transfer often does), we might continue to underestimate its impact. For example, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) argue that “prior *knowledge* . . . plays a decisive if not determining role in students’ successful transfer of writing *knowledge* and practice” (5; emphasis mine). By viewing knowledge as imbedded in or interacting with *worldviews*, we might gain a more complete picture of why new graduate instructors sometimes resist new information when it is not consistent with these worldviews. To put it another way, it’s not simply what graduate instructors know but the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors they associate with this knowing. *Knowledge* is almost too neutral a term for the beliefs graduate instructors (and others) bring with them to their learning.

Scholars have also begun to question the use of the term *transfer* as helpful in understanding students’ learning trajectories. In a panel on transfer at CCCC 2018, Elizabeth Wardle stated that “we should stop talking about transfer,” explaining that while it is a useful shorthand, what we are often talking about are “complex transitions, repurposing, and generalizing” (Downs, Moore, and Ringer 2018). Moreover, Danica Schieber (2016) argues that much of the learning students bring with them from one situation into the next is “invisible to both themselves and their . . . instructors” because once learning has taken place, students no longer recognize what they have learned *as* something learned; it becomes naturalized (464).

This research complicates efforts to see how much graduate instructors learn from their graduate practica courses, as well as from other informal and formal sites of pedagogy education. However, I also think a potential way in is to tell more complex stories that might account for how graduate instructors' literacy experiences complicate, enrich, or make visible or invisible their learning trajectories as new teachers. Thus, I hope the case studies I present in the following chapters productively challenge work on learning by bringing graduate instructors' preconceptions to the fore and demonstrating how significant they are as the graduate instructors take up the concepts presented to them in their practica.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In order to highlight the importance of graduate instructors' conceptions of literacy in determining how they take in and interact with pedagogy, in the next three chapters, I present case studies of new graduate instructors, organized according to the following conceptions of literacy: literacy for personal growth, cultural literacy, and social/critical literacy. In chapter 2, "Yoga Ashrams and Mother-Teachers: Literacy for Personal Growth," I discuss this most individually oriented conception. In this chapter, I present case studies of Lily and Karen, the two graduate instructors whose field was composition and rhetoric. Through these case studies, I examine how their beliefs, including the idea that reading and writing are "natural" processes that happen best when teachers get out of the way, both guided and (in some cases) limited them in terms of the possibilities they saw for teaching in their first semester. I end this chapter by examining how we can best support graduate instructors who hold similar views, including ways to work within potential tensions between these beliefs and composition theory.

Chapter 3, "Texts, Hierarchy, and Ritual: Cultural Literacy," discusses the primacy of the text for the literature PhD students, Jordi, Garrett, and Blake, and its implications for their teaching practice. In this chapter, I argue that these three unknowingly

reify a problematic distinction between their students' writing and other "higher" texts. I also discuss how they seemed to view literacy in terms of ritual, imbuing a quasi-religious quality to texts and describing their own initiation into academia in religious terms. As in previous chapters, I analyze how these conceptions influenced their teaching, drawing connections between their tendency to focus on readings as opposed to writing in their classrooms and their felt sense of the importance of texts.

Although cultural literacy and literacy for personal growth appear to reflect commonplaces about literacy within our larger culture, social/critical ways of viewing literacy are largely alien to newcomers to the fields comprising English studies. This is the focus of chapter 4, "Graduate Instructors at the Threshold: Threshold Concepts, Disciplinarity, and Social/Critical Literacy," which examines the graduate instructors' initiation into the discourse of composition theory, with its heavy emphasis on social/critical ways of viewing literacy. In this chapter, I use the concept of threshold concepts, as well as work in composition about threshold concepts, particularly Adler-Kassner and Wardle's (2015) *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. The data in this chapter support the idea that these concepts can be "troublesome knowledge," as even the graduate instructors who held social/critical views of literacy at times struggled with how to enact a pedagogy based on them (Meyer and Land 2006, 9). I use the data in this chapter to point both to the value of articulating "what we know" for compositionists and to the difficulty of using these concepts as ways into writing pedagogy for newcomers.

I hope the case studies I present are useful to practica instructors and graduate instructors alike: both might recognize themselves, their students, and their colleagues in these descriptions, giving practica instructors insight into how to encourage their graduate students' strengths and also manage the difficulties and conflicts that might arise. To that end, in the concluding chapter, I point to the implications of these findings for reconsidering best practices for educating graduate instructors.

In this chapter, I argue that the goal of the practicum course should be to help graduate instructors come to an understanding of their literacy conceptions. In particular, I discuss asking graduate instructors to write and revise an autobiographical literacy narrative as a key tool for enabling the critical self-reflection needed to create a purposeful pedagogy.

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