A POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION: PEDAGOGY, LOCATION, AND TEACHING

ASSISTANT PREPARATION

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Kelly A. Kinney

November 2005
This dissertation entitled

A POLITICAL ADMINISTRATION: PEDAGOGY, LOCATION, AND TEACHING
ASSISTANT PREPARATION

by

KELLY A. KINNEY

has been approved for

the Department of English Language and Literature

and the College of Arts and Sciences by

Sherrie L. Gradin

Professor of English Language and Literature

Benjamin M. Ogles

Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences
This qualitative, participant-observation study examines the political dynamics that affect the preparation of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) by writing program administrators (WPAs) at a mid-sized public research institution, “Ridge University.” As my primary source of data, I recorded, observed, and participated in a teaching assistant preparation (TAP) seminar that prepared new teachers to teach college composition and that met twice weekly during the fall term of 2000. I also rely on data gathered in participant interviews and during GTA orientation, department meetings, graduate program colloquia, and public functions throughout the twelve-week data collection phase of this study.

Building most centrally on the scholarship of James Berlin, Bruce Horner, Margaret Himley, and Laura Micciche, I represent the experiences of graduate teaching assistants and writing program administrators and analyze their material, local, political, and emotional contexts. Examining formative events that took place in the teaching assistant preparation seminar I studied, I not only interpret the different ways GTAs and WPAs responded to political approaches to writing instruction, I explore how GTAs’ and WPAs’ respective institutional political locations affected their work. Through an investigation of research data and pertinent scholarship, I argue that GTAs’ lack of

---

I indicate pseudonyms by placing them inside quotation marks for their first appearance only.
institutional authority, teaching experience, and familiarity with political discourse negatively influenced their perceptions about their work. I also demonstrate the ways WPAs inhabited a split subjectivity, one that positioned them to be both disciplinary-activists and manager-disciplinarians and, as a result, caused tensions in their work. In order to combat the disaffection associated with teaching assistant preparation, I suggest that preparation initiatives proactively surface the pressures that erupt in work surrounding the teaching of writing by historicizing relationships among cultural, institutional, disciplinary, and pedagogical politics.

Approved:

Sherrie L. Gradin

Professor of English Language and Literature, Ohio University
For Rio Grande.

With me all the way.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful thanks to the members of my committee, Betty P. Pytlik, Jacqueline Glasgow, and David Descutner, and especially to my committee chair, Sherrie Gradin.

I am also grateful for the dedicated support of my amazing writing group, including Candace Stewart, Tim Vickers, Kurt Hartman, Guy Shebat, William Breeze, and Rachel Brooks-Rather.

Of course, I must also express my gratitude to the graduate teaching assistants and writing program administrators who agreed to participate in my study. Their willingness to share their experiences has taught me much—including that I still have much to learn.

I am indebted to all for their graciousness.

I would also like to acknowledge my parents, Patrick and Patricia Kinney, whose integrity and support inspire me, and my spouse, Scott Henkel, whose commitment to institutional critique helped to inspire this project.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION: Framing the Political</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: Literature Review</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: Research Methods</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: Pedagogy, Location, and the Vulnerability of Graduate Teaching Assistants</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: Pedagogy, Location, and Split Subjectivity in Writing Program Administration</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: Proactivity and the Possibility of Critical Administration</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A: Ridge University First-Year Outcomes Statement</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B: English [500]: Problems in Teaching College English</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION: Framing the Political

This qualitative, participant-observation study examines the political dynamics that affect the preparation of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) by writing program administrators (WPAs) at a mid-sized public research institution, “Ridge University.” As my primary source of data, I recorded, observed, and participated in a teaching assistant preparation (TAP) seminar that met twice weekly during the fall term of 2000. I also rely on data gathered in participant interviews and during GTA orientation, department meetings, graduate program colloquia, and other public functions throughout the twelve-week data collection phase of this study.

While I was beginning my fourth year of Ph.D. work in Rhetoric and Composition when I began this study, I initially became interested in GTA preparation and writing program administration when I enrolled in my first teaching assistant preparation seminar, an obligation for all new GTAs in the master’s program in which I enrolled in the mid 1990s. As is the case with many graduate students in English, my introduction to Rhetoric and Composition studies was a watershed experience: not only did it introduce me to the field that would become my professional home, it opened my eyes to the many preconceived notions I had about writing, the teaching of writing, and the ways in which my experiences meshed with and contradicted established theories of writing instruction. As with many first-time teachers, for me teaching composition was both invigorating and frightening, an experience that filled me with questions about my

---

2 I indicate pseudonyms by placing them inside quotation marks for their first appearance only.
career trajectory and teaching capabilities. Was it ethical to emphasize process over product in first-year composition, a place where students seemed to be pleading for structure and correction? To what degree was it appropriate or productive to bring political issues into the writing classroom? How would I earn students’ trust and my authority? Was I really qualified to teach this course? Of course, I did not answer these questions overnight. It took a good deal of prodding by mentors and classmates and intensive study and self-examination before I accepted the legitimacy of many of the discipline’s established theories of writing instruction, came to have convictions about my pedagogical approaches, and realized my professional calling. I recognize now that my attraction to Rhetoric and Composition studies developed in large part because of the exciting emancipatory potential I saw in the teaching of writing, the ways it melded politics with literacy, social activism with cultural critique.

Because my fascination with the field began during moments of conflict and questioning, controversies in the discipline capture my attention as a researcher. During both my MA and Ph.D. programs at separate universities, I became increasingly aware of the growing conflicts in the discipline over the marginalized positions of writing teachers in the academy. I was enlightened in large part by the dynamic works of James Berlin, whose scholarship was the first I had seen to show how educational institutions in general and English studies in particular worked to support elitist and discriminatory cultural and disciplinary values. It was not until I immersed myself in this study, however, that I began to recognize the conflicting, ambiguous, and sometimes disturbing realities associated with writing program administration. This recognition began to surface most
buoyantly when GTAs challenged the appropriateness of political approaches to writing instruction, a tradition of writing instruction I had come to accept as central to my teaching philosophy. What struck me was not that some were objecting to teaching writing through a political-rhetorical framework—certainly, such objections have been well publicized in Rhetoric and Composition studies and the larger culture. What struck me was that GTAs were arguing that their lack of teaching experience, institutional authority, and content knowledge made surfacing politics precarious, perhaps even dangerous, and certainly psychologically taxing. That is, they were suggesting that their institutional political location made using a political approach complicated. This was a perspective I had not yet fully contemplated, one that I came to believe deserved more scrutiny.

As I immersed myself in a local study of writing program administration, my research aims became clearer. As I observed and participated, reflected and interviewed, read and looked for patterns in my data, I realized that what was arising were interesting yet disturbing aspects of WPA work, aspects that led me to read further in the related literature of the field. What I present in this dissertation is an examination of moments of conflict in GTA preparation, moments in which participants in my study questioned pedagogical approaches and theoretical tenets of the field, moments in which I was left unsure of my ambitions to become a writing program administrator and uneasy with my

---

3 Political approaches to writing instruction is a term I use throughout the study to signify an approach to writing instruction that incorporates politically provocative texts in order to help stimulate critical thinking, reflexive inquiry, and preparation for a life of engaged democratic citizenship.

4 Institutional political location is a second key term I use throughout the study. It refers to the authority and autonomy granted to GTAs and WPAs within an institution.
pedagogical allegiances. I started this study an evangelical believer in the emancipatory potential of Rhetoric and Composition, a stellar advocate of political approaches to writing instruction, and an enthusiastic administrator-in-training. While I still support the fusion of politics with the teaching of writing, I now have a more complicated view of this practice, particularly in relation to graduate teaching assistant preparation.

What this study illustrates to me—and what I hope that I am able to convey to my readers—is that examining the politics of graduate teaching assistant preparation and writing program administration is a complex and complicated endeavor. Not only am I obliged to come to terms with multiple and elusive articulations of politics, I must establish with readers from the outset that my interpretations are selectively rendered and open to debate. Readers should recognize that this study is only one person’s perspective of a small corner of a larger program, that others could interpret the data I present in different ways with alternative frameworks or methods of analysis. While I will make arguments about relationships among politics and pedagogy and about the politics of institutional location, there are more complexities to these issues than I am able to surface in the space of this project. As such, I make no claims toward definitive truths. I choose to frame my research around elusive and shifting conceptions of politics because of my own interest in these conceptions and because of my own hypothesis that pedagogical and institutional articulations of the political are somewhat at odds. I am hopeful that this work will lead to further research and disciplinary debate, to a continued surfacing of the political realities writing teachers and program administrators face, and to a better
understanding of how those realities influence the emancipatory educational initiatives many Rhetoric and Composition scholars so adamantly defend.

Indeed, part of my overarching argument is that Rhetoric and Composition studies should more explicitly connect its discourses on emancipatory education to its discourses on institutional critique. By emancipatory education I am referring to trends in higher education dating back to at least the end of the nineteenth century, trends that work to alleviate discrimination by putting race, class, sex, and gender and civic participation at the center of American education. Following the progressive initiatives of educational advocates as diverse as Ida B. Wells, John Dewey, Fred Scott Newton, Paulo Freire, and bell hooks, emancipatory educators work to examine and transform systems of marginalization and exploitation through democratic and egalitarian educational practices. Writers, pedagogues, and theorists working in the emancipatory tradition have had much impact on Rhetoric and Composition studies and the teaching of writing, bringing cultural criticism and identity politics to the forefront of the discipline and political issues into the center of our classrooms.

As I acknowledge above, I see James Berlin’s work as having perhaps the most significant impact in emancipatory educational trends in the subfield of Rhetoric and Composition studies. As I explain in later chapters, his scholarship not only helps to show how English studies as a whole has participated in systems of exploitation, it argues for an explicitly political pedagogy\(^5\), one which prepares students to become critical actors in

\(^5\) A third term I use throughout the study, I distinguish between political pedagogy and political approaches to writing instruction in that teachers who adopt a political pedagogy explicitly embrace the mantle of the
their worlds, to become active citizens and ethical agents of change in the democratic spheres they inhabit. That is, Berlin argues for writing instruction that centers on the study and transformation of contemporary political culture, rather than on the study of the grammar, style, and the stimulating—but often-elitist—values associated with traditional literary interpretation. Because of the ways it implicates what many Americans assume are appropriate forms of writing instruction, Berlin’s scholarship is indeed groundbreaking.

Still, one key aspect that Berlin’s work does not fully explore is the way teachers’ institutional locations affect their ability to effectively implement political approaches to writing instruction. I would argue that a chief inhibitor to confidently surfacing political issues in the composition classroom lies in the unsanctioned institutional locations many workers in composition inhabit. These marginalized locations are thoroughly mapped throughout the scholarship of the discipline, not only by groundbreakers like Berlin, but by a cadre of scholars who argue for institutional reform in Rhetoric and Composition studies, including Eileen Schell, Patricia Lambert Stock, Jennifer Seibel Trainor, James Sledd, Marc Bousquet, and Donna Strickland, among others.

Even given the discipline’s emphasis on institutional reform, however, most scholarship that addresses the political location of composition workers rarely addresses how these locations affect teaching in general or political approaches in particular. This is a circumstance Bruce Horner illustrates in his provocative book *Terms of Work for transformative intellectual; that is, they use the classroom as a site to name and transform the discriminatory systems at work in culture.*
Composition: A Materialist Critique. Instead of focusing exclusively on the way classroom practice is shaped by political approaches to writing instruction, or exclusively on the way institutional and disciplinary politics influence writing teachers’ marginalized locations, Horner argues that

we can understand the politics of either site only by locating our work with and on the “political,” however conceived, in its specific material location, and by addressing the process by which that work is converted in value from one site to the next. We need, in other words, to examine how the politics of a pedagogy intersects and interacts with the politics of the profession, and the material circumstance of teaching, teachers’ professional positioning, and larger material circumstances of these, associated with the institutional and historical location of the course, teacher, and students. (77)

Connecting discourses on the politics of pedagogy with the politics of institutional political location, Horner suggests, will enable academic workers to better understand and contextualize the conditions of our work and how those conditions affect teaching and learning. Scholarship that connects both pedagogical and institutional levels of the political, however, is hard to find.

Two writers who successfully mesh both layers of politics are Margaret Himley and Laura Micciche. Himley’s Political Moments in the Classroom serves as a model for this project because it focuses on moments of disruption and dis-ease in order to theorize how politics, power, and pedagogy play themselves out in a writing program. As Himley
and her co-authors define it, a “political moment” is a classroom “episode that is immediate, perhaps disruptive, and that dramatizes the anger, sense of threat, and deep disagreement about difference that characterize contemporary culture and that inevitably now emerge in the classroom” (3). Several GTAs in my study reported similar moments emerging in their own classrooms, moments that they needed help coping with and processing. While the TAP seminar provided such a platform, other kinds of disagreement also emerged in the context of GTAs’ preparation at Ridge, disagreements about the value of surfacing politically provocative issues in first-year composition and the levels of power and autonomy GTAs should command in their classrooms and institutions. By showcasing these disagreements, these “political moments,” I offer readers a snapshot of what it is like to be a first-time GTA, as well as what it is like to be the WPAs who prepare them. I also uncover how the work of writing instruction and GTA preparation is often filled with challenges, frustrations, and disappointments.

Laura Micciche explicitly examines the debilitating aspects of writing program administration in her essay “More than a Feeling: Disappointment and WPA Work.” As Micciche argues, scholarship in the discipline often ignores emotion, and thus, leaves academics under-prepared to cope with and respond to the affective dimensions of their professional lives. In order to adequately prepare workers in the profession, Micciche claims, it is vital that we “begin to think more about how disappointment is woven into the fabric of our work lives and how we can combat destructive disaffection” (447). I would argue that disaffection may be particularly common for WPAs and GTAs whose programs embrace political approaches to writing instruction. While I remain committed
to such approaches because of the transformative public and private potentials they afford, because they can also fuel disagreement, discomfort, and even distrust, they can debilitate the spirit of students, teachers, and administrators. Through this candid exploration of GTA preparation, I hope to persuade readers of the importance of connecting discourses on political approaches to writing instruction with discourses of institutional political location. In other words, I hope to convince readers that writing teachers’ marginalized institutional locations have much to do with the degree to which they confidently embrace and effectively enact political approaches to writing instruction.

Political approaches to writing instruction are in keeping with a long tradition of educational practices dating back to the ancient Greek and Roman eras and continuing into the present. As I illustrate at length in Chapter One, rhetorical education has conventionally emphasized preparation for participation in civic life, and thus, traditionally been associated with political issues, public debate, and even social justice movements. Chronicling the works of Aristotle, Diogenes, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, and Quintillion, I illustrate how ancient rhetoricians combined instruction in rhetoric with the examination of salient political issues in the hope of preparing pupils to navigate within the democratic political arena. I tie these ancient practices to contemporary emancipatory initiatives, particularly Paulo Freire’s conceptions of education for critical consciousness as expressed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Briefly, Freire calls for a new kind of educational practice, a praxis which asks teachers and students to investigate what he calls “generative themes” (97) in order to perform together “a critical form of thinking about their world” (95). This reciprocal investigation is in contrast to what Freire
recognizes as “the ‘banking’ concept of education,” where students are receptacles to be filled with the teacher’s “deposits” of knowledge (58). By investigating important political issues or “generative themes” reciprocally, students develop a level of critical consciousness that will allow them to be engaged and empowered citizens within the civic spheres they inhabit.

Adapting both ancient rhetorical and contemporary Freirian models for composition instruction, many scholars in the field of Rhetoric and Composition currently use political approaches to writing instruction in order to stimulate the kind of critical thinking necessary for engaged citizenship. But as John Trimbur makes clear, the point of focusing on political issues is not to focus on politics for its own sake, but rather on “how arguments—forensic and deliberative—are framed to adjudicate problematical situations of social and cultural discrimination” ("Response" 248). Thus, writing teachers who adopt political approaches conceive of “first-year composition as rhetorical education for citizenship and place public discourse, as well as students’ composition process, squarely at the center of the curriculum” (Trimbur "Response" 248-249). Again, the point is not to “teach politics” using a banking model of education, but rather for students and teachers to investigate political issues reciprocally in order to inspire a level of critical consciousness in students and their writing, a level of critical consciousness that prepares students to be active, engaged, and effective agents in the political spheres they inhabit.

During the term my study took place, writing program administrators at Ridge University carried on this political-rhetorical tradition by adopting a textbook that
anthologizes politically provocative essays from a variety of disciplinary and personal perspectives, essays that challenge students and teachers to engage in personal reflection—and perhaps even social activism—in and through their writing. In this way, “Doing Public Writing” necessarily surfaced political issues. The textbook begins by introducing readers to key concepts, asking them to engage in reflection about the ideas presented in the readings, engage in reflexivity about the positions its authors take, and engage in action through writing and other public gestures. It then moves into process and rhetorical instruction, and finally offers teachers and students a host of essays and assignments that ask them to engage in public and private and informal and formal writing.

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of the textbook is its emphasis on reflexivity, the practice of stepping into an other’s shoes, of considering alternative perspectives and worldviews and, in turn, of reexamining one’s knowledge, beliefs, and values. In this way, the text follows a Freirian model, allowing teachers and students to co-investigate political issues in order to reflect on and examine the perspectives therein—that is, not in order to teach political issues per se, but in order to explore ways of thinking and acting in the world and through writing. Thus, many of the reading and writing assignments in the textbook pushed teachers and students to not only reconsider their political, social, cultural, civic, public, and private beliefs in general, but their beliefs about the teaching of writing in particular. Rather than following a banking model of writing instruction that would compel teachers to “teach” process, style, grammar,
structure, and form, the political approach to writing instruction embodied in *Doing Public Writing* was meant to foster discussions of writing and political issues in tandem.

I situate political approaches like those embodied in *Doing Public Writing* within a network of multiple, politically focused pedagogies including but not limited to *cultural studies pedagogy, feminist pedagogy*, and what is typically referred to as *critical, liberatory, or radical pedagogy*. While I examine these pedagogies’ definitions more explicitly in Chapter One, the distinguishing feature that separates a *political pedagogy* from a *political approach* is that instructors who adopt a *political pedagogy* embrace the mantle of “transformative intellectual” (Aronowitz and Giroux 36; Berlin “The” 11). That is, writing instructors who work to enact a *political pedagogy* believe that it is their duty to name the discriminatory forces that shape society and create a classroom space that challenges students to think critically about—and perhaps even work to transform—their worlds. In this way, *political pedagogy* can be characterized as *emancipatory*, as it works to both transform the inequitable social arrangements that restrict many students’ political agency and transform the social configurations that marginalize many race, class, and gender groups. As such, *emancipation* is one of the central aims of *political pedagogy*.

Still, I must make clear that *Doing Public Writing* did not mandate what might be referred to as a *political pedagogy*. While new GTAs could not escape politics in their classrooms because the essays in *Doing Public Writing* surfaced political issues, and while *Doing Public Writing* was compatible with *political pedagogy*, teachers could use the textbook in accordance with a variety of pedagogical approaches. In fact, WPAs encouraged new teachers to use *Doing Public Writing* in conjunction with Donald
Murray’s *Craft of Revision*, a textbook that is perhaps best described as expressivist in approach, guiding students through the writing and revision process gradually and systematically, emphasizing the cultivation of confidence and voice in students and their writing. As such, although GTAs were certainly using a political approach to the teaching of writing, they were in no way obliged to adopt an explicitly political pedagogy.

In addition to using *Doing Public Writing* and Donald Murray’s *Craft of Research* in their own classrooms and examining them in the TAP seminar, GTAs also read Donna Qualley’s *Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry* and excerpts from Victor Villanueva’s *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader*. As their titles express, *Turns of Thought* focuses on the notion of reflexivity and its relationship to the teaching of writing, while *Cross-Talk* draws on prominent journal articles from Rhetoric and Composition studies, cataloguing the discipline’s basic assumptions, major theories, and enduring controversies. Although both books played important roles, the essays in *Cross-Talk* served as the backbone of the teaching assistant preparation seminar, providing new teachers with a crash-course on composition theory by inundating them with the force and weight of the politics of the discipline.

But as this study later makes clear, the focus on politics caught some new teachers off guard. While most GTAs appeared to accept the legitimacy of raising political issues in relation to the field of Rhetoric and Composition studies, some were less comfortable embracing politics in their own classrooms. As the pages of this study attest, although a few GTAs enthusiastically embraced political approaches to writing instruction and even political pedagogy, others were more cautious, questioning whether they were qualified
to lead political discussions given their lack of teaching experience and lack of familiarity
with political issues. Because the scholarship they were reading often lauded political
approaches and political pedagogy for their transformative social and educational
potentials, however, and because the WPA who led the TAP seminar was also the co-
author of *Doing Public Writing*, several GTAs began to perceive that adopting political
pedagogy was a mandate.

Such perceptions are what led me to examine *institutional political location*: I
define this term as the authority and autonomy workers possess given their positions
within an institution. The fact that the new graduate teaching assistants in my study were
required to use a particular textbook shows one way their institutional status as teaching
assistants inhibited their academic freedom and classroom autonomy. The fact that some
appeared to perceive that they were obliged to use political pedagogy also complicated
their institutional authority.

It almost goes without saying that graduate teaching assistants garner less
institutional authority than full-time or tenurable academic workers. Like most GTAs
teaching composition courses across the country, graduate teaching assistants at Ridge
University performed the work necessary to teach their students, yet their institution did
not sanction them with the same levels of autonomy as their full-time, tenurable
counterparts. Although they benefited from the support WPAs provided them, GTAs
performed the vast majority of the labor that went into the day-to-day operations of their
classrooms on their own. Still, unlike fully sanctioned academic workers, GTAs new to
the university were obliged to use the common syllabus WPAs had prepared and the
common textbook they had adopted. In these ways and in others, GTAs had limited institutional autonomy. As I surface more specifically throughout the body of this study, the reality of graduate teaching assistants’ marginalized institutional locations led some to feel disaffection toward their work, and others to question whether they had the institutional capital and/or scholarly experience to carry it out effectively.

Writing program administrators occupied a different, but arguably no less precarious institutional location in the program I studied. As I reveal through an analysis of my research data, a central factor that complicated administrators’ ability to execute their work was that their institution had not clearly defined or delineated their job descriptions in relation to each other. While one held the title of “Writing Across the Curriculum Director” and the other “Director of Composition,” both collaborated in GTA preparation initiatives, leading to—among other things—confusion for GTAs and WPAs about lines of authority in the program.

Another factor that I argue complicates WPAs’ work was that their scholarly subjectivities were sometimes in conflict with their institutional roles. As such, writing program administrators maintain what I refer to as a *split subjectivity*, an identity that establishes them as both advocates of and authorities over the marginalized workers in their charge. In as much as GTAs require the preparation, mentoring, and advocacy WPAs supply, WPAs serve an important role as mentor-advocates of GTAs, a role that reinforces the emancipatory and activist allegiances celebrated in their discipline. Yet as critics have begun to point out, WPAs also serve as institutional managers over GTAs: as such, GTAs view them not solely as emancipatory agents and disciplinary-activists, but
also as institutional agents, manager-disciplinarians who help to reinforce GTAs’ marginalized status and lack of institutional autonomy. Because Rhetoric and Composition studies more often emphasize WPAs’ emancipatory roles than their managerial ones, however, the managerial realities of administrative work are frequently suppressed. As I show through an analysis of pertinent scholarship, because the discipline stifles the managerial realities of administration, it risks further alienating already marginalized GTAs and thus risks further exacerbating the disappointment often associated with writing instruction and WPA work.

Let me reemphasize, nonetheless, that by focusing on seemingly volatile or disappointing moments it is not my intention to exacerbate wounds, surface naïvety, or assign blame; rather, it is my intention to theorize opportunities for productive dialogue and progressive institutional action. Furthermore, readers should recognize that I am analyzing moments, not people or personalities: these moments are snapshots of how people interact, not the sum total of their worldviews or complete recreations of their experience. Indeed, throughout my examination of these moments, my data continually reminded me that so much was going on in every moment I studied, so much more than I could ever hope to express on paper. Countless multi-layered relationships, institutional considerations, and internal dramas were shaping the discourse acts I interpreted. I thank the participants in this study for the opportunity to showcase these events, an analysis that is carefully considered, examined and reexamined, triangulated and complicated, but nonetheless a subjective rendering. By reading through my lens of this local and selective history, I hope readers will complicate my analyses, rethink contemporary approaches to
teaching assistant preparation, and examine the relationships between writing program administration and institutional materialist critique. In order to give readers context for interpretation and analysis, below I give an overview of the programs and department I studied.

**Description of Programs and Department**

*Undergraduate Composition and Writing Program Administrators at Ridge University*

The primary home of the First-Year Composition Program at Ridge University has always been the English Department. Like most institutions in the United States, Ridge initiated a first-year writing requirement in an attempt to meet the increasingly diverse literacy needs of its student body. As Robert Connors attests, the need for writing instruction in the United States became particularly acute after World War II, when first-generation college students “poured into the colleges on the GI Bill, more of them than colleges had ever dreamed of” (*Composition* 204).

Also like most institutions across the nation, Ridge University’s English Department has been the home of the First-Year Composition since the requirement’s inception. Nonetheless, Ridge also has a University Writing Program housed in the Undergraduate College: while this program fuels campus-wide writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives, it is separate from the English Department. Although this arrangement makes for a complicated administrative scenario, WPAs in both academic units worked together to create cohesive links among these different, yet connected, writing programs.
In order to support these links, Ridge University began to hire faculty with specializations in Rhetoric and Composition in the 1980s. In 1982, the English Department hired Dr. “Sarah Allegheny” as its first composition specialist. On top of her regular teaching and research responsibilities, Allegheny also took on a variety of administrative duties, including sustaining the university’s writing-across-the-curriculum initiatives and directing the First-Year Composition program. Later in the decade, the department hired a second specialist in Rhetoric and Composition, who took over the Director of Composition post when Allegheny became Department Chair. Meanwhile, the English Department agreed to create graduate concentrations in Rhetoric and Composition studies, welcoming the first MA students in 1984, and the first Ph.D. students in 1996. The English Department also hired additional Rhetoric and Composition faculty throughout the 1990s, including tenure-track specialists in technical writing, computers and writing, and English education. After Allegheny became Department Chair, the Undergraduate College cycled through a series of writing-across-the curriculum specialists, administrators with backgrounds in Rhetoric and Composition and/or administration, but who did not have tenured positions in English. It was not until 1999 that Dr. “Eliza Marks” was hired as a tenured professor in English and became Ridge’s Director of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). The WAC Director at Ridge holds a .33 full time equivalent position in the English Department, with the rest of her position consisting of administrative responsibilities in the Undergraduate College. The new makeup of her position gave her more influence than previous WAC specialists who did not hold tenure in the English Department, allowing the University Writing Program
and First-Year Composition Program to build constructive ties, ties which allowed teaching assistant preparation and graduate programs in Rhetoric and Composition to continue to flourish.

Graduate Concentrations in English at Ridge

The English Department at Ridge has three graduate program strands, including MA and Ph.D. programs in Creative Writing, Literature Studies, and Rhetoric and Composition. Of the fifteen new graduate students joining the English Department in the fall of 2000, ten were beginning MAs with no teaching experience (six in Literature Studies, four in Creative Writing); three were Ph.D. students with limited teaching experience (one in Rhetoric and Composition and two in Creative Writing); and two were area high school teachers who had selected to join the department’s Visiting High School Teacher’s program, both with undergraduate degrees in English education.

Of the three graduate strands, the Program in Creative Writing is perhaps the best recognized, hosting a literary festival that attracts world-renowned writers each year. The Creative Writing concentration also sponsors a variety of journals of fiction, poetry, and prose. The opportunity to help publish these journals attracts many applicants to the program. Once admitted, MA and Ph.D. students compete to work with the talented faculty in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, many of whom have earned national and international awards and recognition. Of the fifteen new GTAs joining the teacher preparation seminar in the fall of 2000, five had enrolled in the Creative Writing concentration.
Undergraduate and graduate Literature concentrations also have strong histories in the department, attracting Ivy-League scholars from across the nation, several of whom have interests in postmodern, postcolonial, and multicultural studies. Among the recent faculty hires in Literature at the time of my study, the majority had received their Ph.D.s from elite institutions, including Duke, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and the University of Virginia. In addition to this younger generation of impressive tenure-line hires, senior faculty in Literature included two distinguished professors and a former dean of the Undergraduate College. Of the new graduate students joining the department the year my study began, seven had entered into the Literature Studies concentration, making it the largest graduate program in the department.

Although it was the newest of the three graduate concentrations, the graduate program in Rhetoric and Composition was increasing in popularity the year my study took place. Given the heavy administrative and programmatic responsibilities that most Rhetoric and Composition faculty at Ridge faced, however, as well as its relative newcomer status to the graduate program, the concentration in Rhetoric and Composition was the least developed. While only three of the new GTAs had entered the program with concentrations in Rhetoric and Composition that year, three more had either switched their concentrations or added a secondary emphasis in Rhetoric and Composition by year’s end.

In my observation, the addition of Dr. Eliza Marks to the faculty had much to do with the growth of the Rhetoric and Composition concentration, as she brought additional experience and some much needed labor support to the overworked Rhetoric and
Composition faculty. Although she had only been at Ridge one year when my study began, she had sixteen years of experience in a variety of Rhetoric and Composition positions and administrative posts. Like her, the other faculty in Rhetoric and Composition came from top graduate programs, giving the graduate students who enrolled in the concentration exposure to other well-known scholars from across the country. The Rhetoric and Composition faculty are particularly successful in their efforts to help GTAs participate in and interact with scholars at the national Conference on College Composition and Communication, Rhetoric and Composition studies’ premier academic conference.

But even given the benefits the department experienced because of its excellent faculty, by the fall of 2000 the Rhetoric and Composition faculty and First-Year Composition Program were in crisis. In the spring of 2000 the Director of Composition resigned her post. Although Sarah Allegheny was finishing a five-year stint as chair of the English Department and had planned to spend the following year focused on editing a book and teaching, she agreed to take over the Director of Composition spot once again, asking other faculty to help her negotiate the responsibilities of this post. While the resident English education specialist had originally agreed to teach the teaching assistant preparation seminar in the fall of 2000 and had even ordered the pre-press textbooks new GTAs would use in their classrooms, shortly after agreeing to take over this responsibility, she left Ridge to take a position at another university. Unfortunately, the textbook she had ordered made determining who would take over teaching assistant preparation complicated. As one of its co-authors, Eliza Marks was the only tenure-line
faculty member familiar with *Doing Public Writing*; because she had many years of experience preparing new GTAs, she was the obvious candidate to take over the teaching assistant preparation seminar. Given that Marks had a host of other administrative responsibilities, and given that she wondered how her co-authorship would affect the dynamic in the TAP seminar, however, the conditions she inherited as instructor of record for TAP were less than ideal.

While *Doing Public Writing* became the cornerstone text for first-time GTAs in the fall of 2000, in years prior the department had adopted a series of texts, most of which had emphasized process and collaborative pedagogies. When I entered the program in 1997, for example, the mandated textbook for new GTAs was Peter Elbow and Patricia Belanoff’s *Community of Writers*. Although the department had adopted other texts since then, including John Trimbur’s civically oriented *The Call to Write*, in my judgment none of the texts chosen for first-time GTAs had as strong a political slant as *Doing Public Writing*. Because my own interest in Rhetoric and Composition studies was sparked by political pedagogy, and because I had taught from and enjoyed using *Doing Public Writing* in my own classrooms, I was excited about its adoption. But as Marks had anticipated and as subsequent chapters attest, the adoption of *Doing Public Writing* proved to be a source of contention in the teaching assistant preparation seminar. This fact, as well as other unpredictable incidents, helped to inspire the conflicts that affected the graduate teaching assistants and writing program administrators I focus on in this study.
Description of Participants and the Material Conditions of their Work

Because this study highlights the professional subjectivity of writing program administrators in the teaching assistant preparation process, my two primary participants are WPAs: Dr. Eliza Marks, Writing Across the Curriculum Director, and Dr. Sarah Allegheny, Director of Composition. Both Marks and Allegheny served as readers and participant-triangulators of this study, adding their evaluations of my interpretations and providing their administrative, departmental, and institutional insights throughout. Three GTAs also play central roles in this study, and I likewise provide context about their academic histories and backgrounds. Readers should note, however, that I highlight details about my participants according to my own focus on and perception of events. In no way are my descriptions meant to reflect all-encompassing portraits of those featured in the study; instead, readers should think of these descriptions as careful but nonetheless subjective depictions, interpretations open to scrutiny and debate.

Dr. Eliza Marks

Dr. Marks joined the English Department at Ridge with nine years of tenure-line experience at two universities. Before her appointment at Ridge, her academic duties included composition and literature instructor, undergraduate and graduate faculty member, and writing program administrator. Marks began her undergraduate career in 1979, finishing her B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. requirements by 1990. With a background in

7 While the voices of additional GTAs also appear throughout this study, I provide contextual commentary for their remarks in the chapters where their contributions appear.
Rhetoric and Composition, Literature, and Feminist and Gender studies, Marks draws links in her scholarship among her personal and professional life and her social activism, grappling with the connections and fissures that exist between private and public spheres in American and academic culture.

Marks’ first years as an assistant professor were spent at a large public university in the south, where she co-directed an award-winning writing project in the impoverished public schools surrounding her university, taught undergraduate and graduate courses in English on a variety of subjects and periods, and handled a host of other administrative duties, including GTA preparation. Later she returned to an alma mater as an associate professor, teaching undergraduate and graduate courses in writing, Rhetoric and Composition theory and pedagogy, and gender theory. There she was also responsible for supervising writing courses and integrating writing into undergraduate general education requirements, as well as for overseeing the growth of a writing center, related writing across the curriculum initiatives, and graduate teaching assistant preparation.

When she arrived at Ridge University in the fall of 1999, Marks was in the midst of coauthoring the textbook the program would adopt for new GTAs, Doing Public Writing, a text that supports theoretical tenets elucidated in her scholarly publications. Describing how the framework of Doing Public Writing represents principles of her teaching philosophy, she attests:

My textbook illustrates my teaching theories in practice so it tells one story about who I am as a teacher: as a teacher I believe it is in the greater understanding of private experience and self that students can begin to
bridge into working with and through the many perspectives one finds in a university community. My text is about becoming engaged in civic discourse through re-engaging personal experience as public dialogue and argument and through community service to the university itself or to the community in which it is situated.8

Thus, Marks’ textbook reflects her scholarly and personal commitments, prompting the teachers and students who use it to engage in reflexivity in their writing, to articulate their own subjectivities and imagine what it might be like to embrace others’. What strikes me most about Marks’ positioning as a teacher-scholar-administrator is the way in which her writing reflects a commitment to social and university service, to fusing the public and the private to the academic, to embracing multiple levels of the political in her work.

While Marks emphasizes that her textbook can be used in conjunction with a variety of pedagogical approaches—and concedes that she herself does not always implement political pedagogy with it—her words reflect the ways she carries on the emancipatory, political, and rhetorical traditions of her field.

As reported in personal conversations before the beginning of the fall 2000 term, Marks anticipated that challenges might arise by implementing her coauthored textbook in the TAP seminar. The question of whether GTAs would feel comfortable engaging in critical dialogue about the book was a central concern for Marks, not so much because she worried they would reject its political content—certainly this was a common response for teachers unfamiliar with Rhetoric and Composition studies—but because she worried

---

8 From an unpublished teaching philosophy statement, cited with permission.
that her status as coauthor might make GTAs uncomfortable. Because Marks believed that pedagogical critique is central to GTA preparation, she reasoned that GTAs might not feel comfortable complicating the practices or critiquing the discourses espoused in the text. Still, she was eager to work with and get to know the GTAs new to the program: as she frequently attests, working with graduate students is one of the most satisfying aspects of her job, something that revives and energizes her.9

Dr. Sarah Allegheny

As she suggests in a career narrative, Sarah Allegheny’s professional life runs parallel to the history of the field in many ways. The way that Allegheny’s characterizations of her work speak to the political, however, are very different from Marks’. Receiving her Ph.D. just as Rhetoric and Composition was beginning to solidify its disciplinary foothold in the academy, Allegheny accepted her first tenure line job at Ridge University in 1982 and has remained a strong presence in the department and a strong advocate for Rhetoric and Composition ever since. According to her accounts, however, she fell into the profession the same way many Rhetoric and Composition scholars of her generation did. That is, she entered it by chance.

Allegheny began her undergraduate career at a state teacher’s college in the mid-1950s. She did not begin with aspirations to instruct college composition. Her first professional position was teaching English in a joint junior/senior high school. By the early 1960s, however, she left that small-town job to join the Peace Corp, and moved to

9 Ibid.
South East Asia. Later she accepted a Peace Corp positionstateside, directing a program to prepare volunteer teachers for their international assignments. While she took on a variety of college writing positions throughout the years she completed her graduate degrees—teaching first in an inner-city business college for predominately upwardly mobile African Americans, later at a large Land Grant institution in the rural Plains—it wasn’t until she reevaluated her personal and career trajectories that she entered a Ph.D. program in Rhetoric.

After finishing her degree and accepting a position at Ridge, she remained the only specialist in Rhetoric and Composition for a number of years. Like many in the profession during the 1980s, she shouldered most of the department’s WPA responsibilities, coordinating the bulk of both university-wide and department writing initiatives. Different from but no less political than Marks’ descriptions of her pedagogical work, what strikes me about Allegheny’s career narrative is the way it describes her political locations within the profession. Making points about her first experiences in the discipline as well as women’s larger place within it, Allegheny both reaffirms and disrupts popular conceptions of the politics in field. As she writes:

First, the discipline, well, before it became a discipline, was dominated by women who taught writing classes while men taught literature courses. Second, women, while we were marginalized in literature departments, worked hard at our teaching and at improving our teaching. When I read others’ narratives in tandem with my own, I see that many of us ended up in composition because we were following the men in our lives. I see that
we were overworked and we over worked because we didn’t want to go into the writing classroom every day without the possibility of seeing some change in attitude and/or improvement in our students’ writing. [. . . ] We got to experiment in the classroom—with one-on-one conferences, with individualized instruction, with freewriting—and no one bothered us. It was the next generation of women compositionists [. . . ] who told us that we had been marginalized—and we began to see the truth in their claims.  

While Allegheny concedes that many compositionists held and hold marginalized political spaces in the academy, her description of women compositionists as hard workers enjoying intrinsic rewards is an interesting twist on popular disciplinary narratives, accounts which I examine in later chapters and which typically emphasize the marginalized political positions of writing teachers and administrators. As her narrative illustrates, the politics that Allegheny emphasizes pertain not to pedagogy, as do Marks’, but to her place within the profession and the institutions where she has worked. That is, what interests me most about the political aspects of her career narrative are the ways it speaks to her institutional political location as a woman, a teacher, and an administrator, the ways it both reflects and disrupts popular perceptions of politics in Rhetoric and Composition studies and WPA scholarship. As I explore more clearly in later chapters, such disciplinary narratives help to uncover the institutional political locations and conflicted subjectivities compositionists inhabit.

---

10 From an unpublished manuscript, cited with permission.
Lucy Pierce, Amy Sutpen, and Don Buikema

As later chapters also make clear, three GTAs play significant roles in this study. While their participation may seem tangential given my emphasis on administration, through their voices readers see forceful arguments for and against political approaches to writing instruction, and see the politics of institutional location come to life. While all fifteen GTAs in TAP 2000 made significant contributions to the seminar, Pierce, Sutpen, and Buikema stand out as examples of why and how GTA preparation and writing program administration can be such a complex—and at times conflicting—endeavor.

All three GTAs, interestingly enough, came to Ridge to earn degrees in Creative Writing/Poetry. While both “Lucy Pierce” and “Amy Sutpen” were first-year MAs who recently had finished their undergraduate degrees in English, “Don Buikema” was a first-year Ph.D. with an MFA in Poetry and a graduate background in Philosophy. While all three had similar scholarly interests, each had different social and educational backgrounds.

Pierce grew up in what she described in interviews as a “relatively” liberal, middle-class white family. She attended a large state school in Florida before she entered the MA program at Ridge, admitting that as much of her undergraduate days were spent “having fun” as studying (Pierce personal interview March 2002). Sutpen—the daughter of a conservative, white, Southern Baptist preacher—attended a small and affluent private college in the East during her undergraduate years. She claims that this education afforded her the space she needed to distance herself from the values of her home
community, which she characterized as sexist and racist (GTA Reflective Response 10/24/00). Buikema, whose mother is a first-generation Japanese American, attended a number of different institutions, including a secular, politically progressive liberal arts college in the Midwest and two mid-sized public universities near the Atlantic seaboard. His diverse educational interests and passionate defense of political approaches (GTA Reflective Response 10/20/00) suggest his strong humanist values.

Although writing program administrators Marks and Allegheny were responsible for the preparation of GTAs and for ensuring undergraduates received sound writing instruction, the English Department awarded GTAs assistantships on their potential to do well in their prospective graduate programs, not necessarily on their potential to succeed as teachers. In other words, GTAs’ promise as writing teachers was a secondary consideration for admission into their graduate programs, as was their potential to fit into the writing program at Ridge. Thus, teaching assistantships were first and foremost meant to help support graduate students as they maintained sufficient progress toward their graduate degrees. I emphasize this point not to suggest that GTAs were deficient in teaching skills, but rather to stress that most entered the program with little experience in or knowledge of Rhetoric and Composition studies or writing pedagogy. In fact, several GTAs who participated in the study did not take composition courses as undergraduates, largely because they had achieved high scores on college entrance exams or aptitude tests. From my experience interacting with GTAs at several universities, such is often the case. Of the three GTAs featured in this study, only Buikema had previous teaching experience and exposure to Rhetoric and Composition studies, earning his MA from an
institution with a strong TAP program and renowned faculty in Rhetoric and Composition studies.

**Material Conditions of Work at Ridge University**

From my own observation, the material conditions new GTAs inherited at Ridge appear commensurate with those of most graduate teaching assistants in mid-sized and large research institutions. New GTAs taught one writing course per term during their first year of teaching, with roughly twenty students assigned to each section. During their second year and beyond, GTAs could opt to teach a second course, but with only an additional 50% in pay. The vast majority of GTAs at Ridge choose to teach two courses each term beyond their second year, which I believe is testament not only to their commitment to teaching, but to their desperation to earn a living wage. Teaching three courses during the regular school year (one each term/quarter), first-year GTAs made between $7,650.00 and $9,900.00 for nine months of work (depending on degree program and experience), received a full tuition waiver, and were required to pay basic health insurance and other university fees. Ridge does not provide dental plans for GTAs.

While the English Department does not monitor or track the total number of hours GTAs spend preparing for and teaching composition, the general expectation was to spend between fifteen and twenty hours per week on teaching, preparation, and grading, with approximately five of those hours spent inside the classroom. This expectation is not contractual, but rather a rule of thumb given to GTAs when they entered the program. But even given this unofficial expectation, many GTAs I have talked with—particularly
first-time teachers—report spending at least twenty-five to thirty hours per week on their teaching. As with most institutions, Ridge does not compensate graduate teaching assistants for additional time spent on teaching.

In order to prepare themselves for their positions as writing instructors, new GTAs participate in a number of mandatory preparation initiatives. In the fall of 2000, they attended a three-day orientation prior to the first week of classes (co-conducted that year by Marks and Allegheny); they enrolled in the five-credit TAP seminar during their first semester teaching (led by Marks); they took a three-credit follow-up seminar their second semester (led by a Ph.D. candidate in Rhetoric and Composition who was also the Coordinator of Ridge’s Writing Center); and they enrolled in an additional one-credit teaching colloquium every semester they held an assistantship (led by Allegheny). WPAs developed these preparation requirements in order to ensure the TAP program measured up to professional standards, which dictate that GTAs be given both practical and theoretical instruction in the teaching of writing. GTAs participated in these activities and courses in addition to enrolling in the graduate courses required of their concentrations. While this kind of academic regimen is typical of most GTAs teaching writing in American colleges and universities today, it is nonetheless a demanding routine, one they must complete with little institutional authority and on poverty-level wages.

Although compensated much better than GTAs, the working conditions WPAs experience are typically also quite challenging. Not only was WPA Marks responsible for leading the TAP seminar, she was in charge of developing the burgeoning Writing
Across the Curriculum Program, overseeing the university’s Writing Center, conducting composition placement exams, and directing writing initiatives at Ridge’s satellite campuses, among other responsibilities. All this, of course, was on top of her obligations to stay current on and produce research in her field. Similarly taxed, WPA Allegheny was charged with overseeing the teaching of GTAs and other non-tenure track composition faculty. Furthermore, she helped faculty manage problems they were having with First-Year Composition students, developed, supported, and implemented writing program policy, and handled the scheduling of writing classes in the department, among other duties. Both administrators also worked with graduate student administrative assistants and undergraduate students in work-study positions, in addition to teaching at least three classes per year, heading university and department committees, and working as liaison figures across campus and in the local community. While tenured WPAs typically have job security, better-than-basic health benefits, and reasonable earning potential—according to my research of job postings for entry-level and experienced WPAs, WPAs typically earn anywhere between $40,000 and $90,000 annually—their job descriptions and responsibilities are often misleading, amorphous, and nearly impossible to accomplish alone. What’s more, as WPAs in this study and in the profession at large continually underscore, their scholarly contributions to the profession and institution are frequently undervalued and misunderstood. All in all, the department and university required both GTAs and WPAs to take on what many in academe would recognize as unreasonable amounts of work. Nonetheless, their overburdened workload and under
compensated and undervalued contributions are similar to the working conditions many GTAs and WPAs face in institutions across the country.

Indeed, as this Introduction demonstrates, the tenuous institutional locations of composition teachers and administrators featured in this study make teaching assistant preparation a complicated and complex political endeavor. In the following chapters I focus more precisely on pedagogical and institutional levels of the political as they surfaced in the TAP seminar by examining the ways GTAs responded to various aspects of the profession, by exploring the ways two WPAs implemented policy and practice in a particular program, and by speculating how the discipline might theorize and critique the work of teaching assistant preparation and writing program administration more judiciously. While I base my research from my own point of view—a point of view that focuses on a particular part of a program at a particular point in history—this study speaks to some of the recurring problems and exciting potentials associated with scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition and the work of writing teachers and writing program administrators in the academy.

Overview of Chapters

Expanding on pedagogical and institutional levels of the political offered in this Introduction, Chapter One surveys bodies of literature that help to inform my study, including:

1. Scholarship that defines notions of “politics” in the academy and culture;
2. Scholarship that helps me define political approaches and political pedagogies;
3. Scholarship that outlines teaching assistant preparation in Rhetoric and Composition studies;

4. Scholarship that examines GTAs’ and WPAs’ institutional political locations.

Through an examination of this scholarship, I argue in Chapter One that researchers should work to surface how pedagogical and institutional levels of the political intertwine in teaching assistant preparation, writing program administration, and in Rhetoric and Composition studies.

Following Chapter One’s Literature Review, I explicate my Research Methods in Chapter Two. Although I describe my central aims of inquiry at length in this chapter, the questions that frame this study fall into one of three general categories:

1. How do GTAs respond to political approaches to writing instruction and to their institutional political locations?

2. How do WPAs respond to political approaches to writing instruction and to their institutional political locations?

3. How do the institutional political locations of GTAs and WPAs affect their perceptions of political approaches to writing instruction?

In addition to expanding on and framing these basic research questions, Chapter Two also discusses the feminist critical interpretive lens I use throughout this study, and presents my methods of data collection and analysis.

Chapters Three and Four focus on central episodes from the TAP seminar, events and interactions that exemplify the recurring conflicts arising in teaching assistant preparation in light of political approaches and GTAs’ and WPAs’ institutional political
locations. Entitled “Pedagogy, Location, and the Vulnerability of Graduate Teaching Assistants,” Chapter Three describes how GTAs characterized their students’ objections to the politically provocative issues surfaced in their course, how they responded to a series of conflicts between first-time teacher Lucy Pierce and one of her undergraduate students, and how these events may have influenced GTA Amy Sutpen’s opposition to and GTA Don Buikema’s support of political approaches to writing instruction. My analysis leads me to conclude that many GTAs were surprised by the political approach they were asked to use in their courses, and frustrated by the ways their institutional political locations complicated their work. Such analysis also indicates that GTAs’ vulnerable institutional political locations led many to express anxieties about—and in some cases resistance toward—political approaches to writing instruction. GTAs’ perceptions about political approaches and institutional political location take center stage in this chapter.

In Chapter Four, “Pedagogy, Location, and Split Subjectivity in Writing Program Administration,” I focus on the experiences of the WPAs who led teaching assistant preparation at Ridge. Therein I emphasize the emotional affects that accompanied the use of the political-rhetorical framework WPAs adopted, as well as the precarious institutional political location WPAs faced while supporting that framework. As the chapter argues, administrators in my study as well and the field as a whole project a split subjectivity, one which has the capacity to inspire ambiguity and, consequently, create frustration and animosity in teaching assistant preparation. While from my perspective as both a budding WPA and advocate of political approaches the levels of disaffection I
observed in the TAP seminar were unsettling, they also helped me to theorize ways of
acknowledging and tackling the disaffection associated with GTA preparation.

By emphasizing both pedagogical and institutional politics in preparation
initiatives, my Conclusion—“Proactivity and the Possibility of Critical
Administration”—argues that WPAs might better prepare GTAs for their work if they
proactively surfaced the psychological stress that often accompanies the use of political
approaches and the realities of institutional location. By proactively acknowledging the
confluence of pedagogy and location in writing instruction, I argue that WPAs might help
GTAs better situate their teaching practice, better navigate their institutional terrains, and
positively influence perceptions about the teaching of writing and the discipline of
Rhetoric and Composition studies.
CHAPTER ONE: Literature Review

As I present in the Introduction, three key terms help to frame my arguments in this study. I explore the definition of each more thoroughly throughout this chapter.

Political approaches to writing instruction, as readers recall, refers to writing instruction that incorporates politically provocative readings in order to stimulate critical thinking in students and their writing. While political pedagogies also typically examine politically provocative readings, they are distinguished from political approaches in that teachers who adopt political pedagogies explicitly name the discriminatory forces that shape society, using the writing classroom as a site of social transformation. Finally, institutional political location references the degrees of power and authority workers possess in relation to their job titles, responsibilities, and institutional autonomy. In order to demonstrate the value of connecting these different conceptions of politics, this literature review surveys a wide range of scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition studies, arguing that while the field has established an important body of knowledge, it has yet to fully examine or theorize how the politics of pedagogy and location intersect and affect teaching assistant preparation.

Before I expand and connect definitions of my key terms, however, I investigate and define various conceptions of the term politics, exploring how these conceptions are conceived in Rhetoric and Composition studies, the academy, and culture. I then map professional discourse in teaching assistant preparation, examining general trajectories and specific tropes in this scholarship and recognize important directions it has yet to
pursue. Finally, I survey scholarship on institutional critique in Rhetoric and Composition studies, arguing that in order to combat the disaffection common to writing instruction and writing program administration, WPAs should surface and emphasize different and sometimes competing conceptions of politics in teaching assistant preparation.

**Politics and the Rhetorical Tradition**

In the broadest sense of the term, *politics* refers to the study and uses of power, as in “the use of strategy in obtaining any position of power or control,” or “the exercising or seeking of power in public affairs” (“Politics” 1113). Also imbedded in the term, however, is the concept of administration, as in “the governance or administration of a body of people” (“Politics” 1113). Of course the ways scholars might define the politics of pedagogy or the politics of institutional political location are varied and complex.

Indeed, the problem with framing the politics of writing instruction and WPA work lies in the multiple and conflicting ways “politics” is defined in the culture, the academy, and the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Bruce Horner categorizes at least three different uses of the term in his *JAC* essay “Politics, Pedagogy, and the Profession of Composition: Confronting Commodification and the Contingencies of Power;” this piece also serves as one of the central chapters in his book *Terms of Work for Composition: A Materialist Critique*. Horner’s distinctions include 1) politics in connection to civil/public matters, 2) politics in connection to sectarian/personal interests,
and 3) politics as an unavoidable enterprise, that is, “not something to regret or attempt to escape, but to engage in as fully as possible” (Horner “Politics” 121; Terms 74).

Revising Horner’s categories slightly, I define politics in three ways as well: 1) uses that reflect the term’s classical rhetorical definition and emancipatory bent, 2) uses that reflect contemporary popular perceptions of the term and its repressive connotations, and 3) uses that reflect a materialist definition that, like Horner’s third classification, characterizes politics as potentially emancipatory or repressive, something that actors can engage in—or not—in order to affect or maintain the status quo.

Like Horner’s, my first categorization of “politics” reflects a classical rhetorical bent. In Aristotle’s Politics, for example, “polis” is actually a synonym for the Greek city-state, referring to the local community and its governance (Barker xlvii). The essence of the ancient use of the word emphasizes the interaction of people in the public sphere, most notably, people working together for the benefit of their local community and, by extension, the greater “body politic.” In the classical sense, the term reflects an isocratic understanding of the role of the rhetorician in public life, where a speaker is bound to public service and “must try both to be a useful citizen and to make useful citizens” of others (Bizzell and Herzberg 46). It also reflects an emphasis on equity, justice, and doing what is “right.” As Ernest Barker attests in the introduction to his definitive translation of The Politics of Aristotle, the concept of politics and the vocabulary Aristotle uses to define it are quite expansive. Not only do we have to remember that in ancient Greece politics had to do with the “‘right’ [ . . . ] thing to do,”
we have to remember that the association of the *polis* was a system of social ethics. [...] It has the overtones and suggestions of our own [contemporary] word “righteousness.” Whenever we meet the word “justice” in a translation from the Greek—particularly from the Greek of Plato’s *Republic*, but also from the Greek of Aristotle’s *Politics*—we have to remember that what we are meeting is something more than our “justice.” We are meeting a moral virtue as well as a legal quality. [...] The Athenian *dikasteries* [that is, politicians or council people] were not administering a strict legal style of justice. They were seeking to express, as samples and representatives of the civic community, an idea of what was “right,” or “straight,” or (we may even say) “fair.” They were seeking, in other words, to express a public opinion of what was generally *equitable*. (lxix-xx, italics in the original)

As such, when Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.) writes in *The Politics* that the just politician occupies “the state of character which constitutes a spirit of equity; and [that] spirit of equity is thus a sort of justice, [...] a sort of righteousness” (369), he lays the groundwork for a similar conception of politics in contemporary Rhetoric and Composition studies.

Although Aristotle was far from a champion of the kind of egalitarian educational activism many associate with writing instruction today, one of his predecessors, the Greek Cynic philosopher Diogenes (412-323 B.C.E.), better fits this image. Although during his day he was more associated with the lunatic fringe than with the academy,
Diogenes was well acquainted with the discourse of his age, and coined the term “citizen of the world” in order to reflect his loyalty to humanity above his loyalty to the state. Through transgressive acts including refusing to be identified by his city of birth and living in a public bath, Diogenes rejected many of the cultural codes of his day; like some contemporary political pedagogues, he violated convention in order “to get people to question their prejudices [, . . . and] consider how difficult it is to give good reasons for many [ . . . ] deeply held feelings” (Nussbaum 56-57).

Diogenes’ concept of world-citizenship later influenced Stoic philosophers, namely the Roman advocate of democracy Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.). Known for his idealism and empathy, one of Marcus Aurelius’ central philosophical tenets emphasized the importance of education and the centrality of maintaining connection with “common” citizens, including the poor and foreigners. As Martha Nussbaum argues in Cultivating Humanity, Stoics like Marcus Aurelius developed [the] image of the kosmopolitēs, or world citizen, . . . arguing that each of us dwells, in effect, in two communities—the local community of our birth, and the community of human argument and aspiration that is “truly great and truly common.” It is the latter community that is, most fundamentally, the source of our moral and social obligations. With respect to fundamental moral values such as justice, “we should regard all human beings as our fellow citizens and local residents.” This attitude deeply influenced subsequent philosophical and political traditions. (Nussbaum 52)
Other Roman philosophers whose teachings are also in line with emancipatory educational tenets include Cicero (106-43 B.C.E.) and Quintilian (35-95 C.E.).

While Cicero emphasized the importance of studying local histories and cultures in the educational process, his teachings also stressed the Stoic value of educating Romans to function in and appreciate the customs of foreign cultures (Nussbaum 61). In order to further the empire, Romans needed to communicate in the languages and dialects of others, needed to adopt styles of presentation that were transnational and transcultural. Cicero’s sensitivity to cultural difference was in part a product of having been educated in a (semi)democratic culture. Cicero’s life bridged the transition from the democratically ruled Grecian city-state to the imperialist-ruled Roman Empire, and his political allegiances eventually resulted in his assassination. Some seventy years later, Quintilian lived and taught rhetoric during an era of steady xenophobia. Even still, his conception of the speaker as a “good man” reflects a pedagogy of ethos and civic responsibility, perhaps precisely because of the corruption he witnessed within the Roman state (Bizzell and Herzberg 294). Quintilian’s fictional *bon virus* is the idealized perfect statesmen, a “good man” who is not only a gifted speaker, but a virtuous citizen, a loyal and ethical Roman who used his rhetorical talents for the betterment of his country (Meador 172-73).

As these ancient Greek and Roman figures’ work suggests, the roots of civic and political action and democratic access are firmly grounded in the rhetorical tradition. Indeed, contemporary Rhetoric and Composition studies relies on an equally emancipatory “just” or “right” notion of the political. For the purposes of this study,
readers should associate politics with these classical conceptions, as well as with their contemporary pedagogical manifestations.

**Politics and Writing Instruction: The Emancipatory Tradition Continues**

Contemporary scholars in Rhetoric and Composition and other literary and academic fields articulate a range of pedagogies that I have come to call political, pedagogies that build on ancient conceptions of politics as the pursuit of justice. Following Karen Fitts, I define *pedagogy* as the convergence of the theoretical and the practical in the maintenance of the writing classroom (“Pedagogy” 168-69), and thus use *political pedagogy* to represent a classroom praxis compatible with the instructional framework offered by *Doing Public Writing*. As I suggest earlier, *political pedagogy* serves as an umbrella term in this study, a term that names a hybrid of multiple, politically-infused pedagogies including *cultural studies pedagogies, feminist pedagogies*, and *critical/liberatory/radical pedagogies*. As I explain, all of these pedagogies justify their methods—at least in part—through their emancipatory, egalitarian potential. Because conflating these pedagogies would do each an injustice, however, I distinguish their emphases below.

**Cultural Studies Pedagogies**

Diana George and John Trimbur locate *cultural studies pedagogy* in the British New Left movement of the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to George and
Trimbur, British New Left intellectuals sought to “recover the culture of the common people,” to “reclaim culture from its monopoly by antidemocratic and elitist forces both inside and outside the academy” (“Cultural” 73). Rhetoric and Composition’s fascination with cultural studies flourished in the 1980s and 1990s, when James Berlin and others foregrounded the movement in their scholarship. Building on the understanding that knowledge is socially constructed, subjectively negotiated, and ideologically influenced, proponents of cultural studies pedagogies emphasize “a decentering of literary texts from their privileged cultural position and a reconceptualization of literature as an institution and a form of writing continuous with other forms of writing” (George and Trimbur “Cultural” 78). Because cultural studies pedagogies recognize the study and production of non-literary texts as important academic pursuits, they establish the teaching of writing and study of culture as more than remedial, “lowbrow” exercises, reconfiguring traditional disciplinary hierarchies in English Studies as a discipline.

While there are many different ways to enact cultural studies pedagogy, Mary Louise Pratt’s conception of “contact zones” has been particularly popular in the field. As she defines it in her essay “Arts of the Contact Zones,” the term refers to two different (but related) spheres of contact, one cultural, the other pedagogical. Pratt advocates the study of cultural zones of contact—that is, studying what happens when “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (76), and the transformation of the classroom into a contact zone itself, a place where students and teachers wrestle with the realities of difference. Many have lauded the conception of the contact zone, arguing, as Patricia Bizzell does, that by creating zones of contact, Rhetoric and Composition Studies creates
“a dynamic new direction to our profession[,]” one that combines literary, cultural, and literacy scholarship and “renew[s] efforts to make the United States a multicultural democracy” (“Contact” 169). Thus, cultural studies pedagogies can be said to support emancipatory, ethical ends in as much as they reconfigure traditional literary scholarship, support difference, and democratize educational practices.

Feminist Pedagogies

Like cultural studies pedagogies, feminist pedagogies also grow out of emancipatory movements of reform. Although varied and complex, most brands of feminist pedagogy seek to create classroom spaces in which disenfranchised populations feel empowered to voice their experiences using personal forms of expression.

Answering the question “What is Feminist Pedagogy?,” Carolyn Shrewsbury explains feminists’ emphasis on experience:

This is a vision of the classroom as a liberatory environment in which we, teacher-student and student-teacher, act as subjects, not objects. Feminist pedagogy is engaged teaching/learning—engaged with self in a continuing reflective process; engaged actively with the material being studied; engaged with others in a struggle to get beyond our sexism and racism and classism and homophobia and other destructive hatreds and to work together to enhance our knowledge; engaged with the community, with traditional organizations, and with movements for social change [. . .]. Such a classroom builds on the experience of participants. (8)
As Shrewsbury attests, most brands of feminist pedagogy work to transform inequitable social conditions, using the classroom as a site of resistance, and personal experience as a basis for expression. And, like the expressivist pedagogies so influential to the (re)emergence of Rhetoric and Composition Studies in the 1960s and 1970s, feminist pedagogies emphasize “personal voice, shared pedagogical authority, and collaboration” (Schell 97). By helping students “come to voice” by deconstructing the binary between public/private and personal/political” (Schell 98), feminist pedagogies help to empower students both academically and politically.

But while there are striking similarities between some brands of feminist pedagogy and traditionally conceived expressivist pedagogies, many feminist pedagogues reject the nurturing, non-confrontational classroom atmosphere often associated with expressivism. Eileen Schell notes that many prominent feminist pedagogues rebuff stereotypical nurturing conceptions of classroom practice (99). Susan Jarratt, for example, argues that feminist pedagogues “who avoid conflict minimize unforeseen possibilities for using argument to reconstruct knowledge” (263-64). In as much as many feminist pedagogies do not avoid conflict and do foreground the political, they can be said to embrace less comfortable, more confrontational classroom practice, practices designed—as bell hooks argues—to “encourage students to work at coming to voice in an atmosphere where they may be afraid or see themselves at risk” (hooks 53, Feminist qtd. in Schell 99). In this way, feminist pedagogies embrace the contact zone methodology of many cultural studies pedagogies and support larger emancipatory political ends.
Critical/Liberatory/Radical Pedagogies

Like both cultural studies and feminist pedagogies, critical/liberatory/radical pedagogies emphasize emancipatory ends as they rely on the analysis of popular texts and work to deconstruct social norms. Critical pedagogies remain distinct from cultural studies and feminist pedagogies, however, as Ann George attests:

critical pedagogy engages students in analyses of the unequal power relations that produce and are produced by cultural practices and institutions (including schools), and it aims to help students develop the tools that will enable them to challenge this inequality. In this, as in the controversy it has generated, critical pedagogy closely resembles and often overlaps with cultural studies and feminist pedagogies [. . .]. However, critical pedagogy can be distinguished from these two pedagogies by its usually explicit commitment to education for citizenship. Henry Giroux, arguably the foremost American theorist of radical education, claims that the task of critical pedagogy is nothing short of “reconstructing democratic public life.” (92)

According to Giroux, teachers are central to this reconstructive effort, central in supporting education for critical citizenship. Coining the term “transformative intellectual” with co-author Stanley Aronowitz, the two define transformative intellectuals as teachers who “advance emancipatory traditions and cultures within and without alternative public spheres” (36). As Aronowitz and Giroux explain,
Central to the category of transformative intellectuals is the task of making the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical. In the first instance, this means inserting education directly into the political sphere by arguing that schooling represents both a struggle for meaning and a struggle over power relations. 

In the second instance, making the political more pedagogical means utilizing forms of pedagogy that treat students as critical agents, problematizes [sic] knowledge, utilizes dialogue, and makes knowledge meaningful, critical, and ultimately emancipatory. In part, this suggests that transformative intellectuals take seriously the need to give students an active voice in their learning experiences. It also means working to create the ideological and material conditions in both schools and the larger society that give students the opportunity to become agents of civic courage. (Aronowitz and Giroux 36-37)

The distinguishing feature of pedagogies in this vein, then, is that they place on teachers the responsibility of naming the discriminatory power structures that shape our world. As such, like some cultural studies and feminist pedagogues, writing teachers working within this political pedagogical framework accept the mantle of the transformative intellectual: that is, they take on the responsibility of helping students adopt a critical, liberatory perspective that will allow them to be ethical actors for the greater social good.

The pedagogical philosophies of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire are key to understanding the role of the teacher in this politically-charged pedagogical environment.
Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* delineates between the traditional model of education and a more progressive one, distinguishing between what he calls the “‘banking’ concept of education” and education for critical consciousness, or “conscientização.” As Freire explains, education in the “banking” model becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. [. . .]

The “raison d’être of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive toward reconciliation [. . .] reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teacher and students. (58-59, italics in the original).

As I explore in the Introduction, Freire’s education for conscientização is specifically political, for it asks teachers to co-investigate political issues—Freire’s “generative themes” (97)—in order to develop in students “a critical form of thinking about their worlds” (95).

Ira Shor’s *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* encapsulates Freire’s teachings for the writing classroom, creating what Bizzell, Herzburg and Reynolds call the “most complete application of the ideas of Paulo Freire to American education” (*The* 127).

Offering a praxis for writing classrooms aimed at empowering working class and other marginalized populations, Shor asks teachers to help students become critical investigators of the problems that arise in their everyday lives. For Shor and others
working within this decidedly political educational tradition, critical consciousness can
develop in classrooms where “knowledge, perception, ideology, and socialization are
challenged” (xi). By emphasizing how literacy leads to political and personal
empowerment, these political pedagogues are the modern-day descendents of classical
rhetoricians, stressing the importance of civic education for the common good.

**Criticisms of Political Approaches and Political Pedagogies: Politics as Repression**

While the discipline has long cast civic education and participatory politics as one
of its primary goals, some argue that political approaches and pedagogies cause
unnecessary animosity in writing classroom, particularly between students and teachers.
These critics assert that the “contact zone” culture associated with such approaches
supports disciplinary and institutional hierarchies by reinforcing the notion that writing
courses are in need of “content” and by subscribing to an agonistic classroom models.
The debate over the use of politics in the classroom ignited potently in the early 1990s,
when Maxine Hairston published “Diversity, Ideology, and the Teaching of Writing,” an
essay I take up at greater length in later chapters. In her essay, Hairston insists that
“writing courses should not be *for* anything or *about* anything other than writing itself”
(180, emphasis in original). As she writes,

> I see a new model emerging for freshman writing programs, a model that
> disturbs me greatly. It’s a model that puts dogma before diversity, politics
> before craft, ideology before critical thinking, and the social goals of the
teacher before the educational needs of the student. It’s a regressive model that undermines the progress we’ve made in teaching writing, one that threatens to silence student voices and jeopardize the process-oriented, low-risk, student-centered classroom we’ve worked so hard to establish as the norm. [. . .] It is a vision that echoes that old patronizing rationalization we’ve heard so many times before: students don’t have anything to write about so we have to give them topics. Those topics used to be literary; now they’re political. (“Diversity” 180)

Because political models of writing instruction threaten to jeopardize the nurturing, confidence-inspiring atmospheres Rhetoric and Compositionists had fought so hard to secure, Hairston argues, they fly in the face of many of the basic tenets of process-centered writing instruction. This is not to say that political issues are taboo in writing classrooms, Hairston clarifies, but that students—not teachers—should get to decide the focus of their writing (“Diversity” 190).

Of course, critics of Hairston charge that she misses the point: everything is political. Whether students are writing about a “low-risk” student-chosen theme, cultural discrimination, or a mainstay of the literary cannon, students need opportunities to sharpen the critical tools they need to explore the political dimensions of their worlds. Hairston also seems to overlook the fact that political approaches to writing instruction are not about politics per se but about “calling on students and teachers alike to look at how the language we use constitutes the work we live in, the differences that separate us, and what we praise and blame in our hopes for a better future” (Trimbur “Response”
While a wave of responses defending the examination of political issues in the writing classroom flooded Rhetoric and Composition’s flagship journals in the months and years following Hairston’s critique, many scholars continue to speculate about the value of political approaches.

For instance, several critics argue that political approaches support the same kind of unilateral and authoritarian ways of thinking that they had originally hoped to supplant. Michael Murphy’s “After Progressivism: Modern Composition, Institutional Service, and Cultural Studies,” for one, traces how cultural studies pedagogies uncritically re-inscribe a faith in social progress, and as a result, embrace a service ethic that disenfranchises composition instructors. Taking political pedagogue James Berlin to task, Murphy explains:

The progressivist discourse of educational democracy—along with its allied sense of duty (“our responsibilities as teachers and citizens” [Berlin, “Rhetoric and Ideology” 493]) and social welfare (“the greater good of all” [490])—is so fundamental a part of the language of composition scholarship that it can effectively underwrite the work of even as guarded an anti-foundationalist as Berlin. (“After” 16)

While I do not wholeheartedly accept Murphy’s criticism—too often he underemphasizes the significant contributions Berlin’s scholarship has made to the field—I find this portion of his critique particularly cogent in the historical period in which I am writing, a time when the United States is using usually laudable conceptions like “freedom” and “democracy” to legitimate aggression against non-democratic countries. Murphy’s
complication of progress narratives and egalitarian tropes should give advocates of political approaches and pedagogies substantial pause.

Richard Miller takes a similar critical stance in “The Arts of Complicity: Pragmatism and the Culture of Schooling.” Here Miller argues that instead of requiring students to produce anti-hegemonic critiques of culture, teachers should help students work within the social structures they hope to change. As Miller explains, writing teachers are in a unique position to “assist our students in acquiring the skills necessary for persisting in the ongoing project of navigating life in a bureaucracy. Specifically, we can teach students how to work within and against discursive constraints simultaneously” (“The Arts” 27). Although to my ear Miller’s sentiments have a ring of Berlin within them—“in the mediating power of language,” Berlin writes, one sees “the possibility for the change and transformation of [present] conditions” (Rhetorics 98)—Miller’s critique has led many to re-evaluate the uses and aims of various brands of political pedagogy.

Of course, some have argued that critics like Miller uncritically echo a conservative pragmatism all too pervasive in American culture (Bousquet “Tenured” para. 9). Nonetheless, even left-leaning pedagogues have qualms about the uses of political approaches to writing instruction. For example, some feminist critics argue that because political approaches inevitably lead to classroom disagreements about difference, they support aggressive, male-dominated rhetorical styles that promote violence and exclusion. As Andrea Greenbaum notes, scholarship in the tradition of Mary Field Belenky et al.’s Women’s Ways of Knowing, Nancy Chodorow’s The Reproduction of Mothering, and Carol Gilligan’s In a Different Voice call “for a restructuring of the
phallocratic, oppressive classroom into a more nurturing one” (56), a restructuring that affords students of diverse gender and cultural persuasions authority in their classrooms, opportunity to express themselves, space to come to voice.

In as much as most brands of political pedagogy cultivate shared power among teachers and students in an effort to help students both come to voice and achieve increased levels of critical consciousness, political pedagogies challenge students and teachers to reject traditional configurations of classroom authority. Still, it should be noted that politicized classrooms that implement non-authoritarian pedagogical styles can be a problem for some novice teachers. Given that most scholarship on the teaching of writing argues that teachers should work to support student-centered classroom practices, practices that are in keeping with cultural studies, feminist, and critical pedagogies, it is surprising to me that more teaching assistantship preparation scholarship has not explored political approaches’ affects on novice teachers. One essay that does is Mary Anne Browder Brock and Janet Ellerby’s “Out of Control: TA Training and Liberation Pedagogy,” which argues that new teachers find negotiating student-centered classrooms particularly challenging, especially when the curriculum they are asked to implement works to inspire student resistance through its overtly political content. As the authors claim, “the ability to step out of that overdetermined role [of teacher as authority] into a space of dispersed authority, ambiguity, and empowerment for all members of the classroom” is a challenge (115), particularly when teachers deal with resistant-turned-aggressive students who want to claim authority over teachers (126).
Perhaps the most obvious and frequent criticism waged against political approaches and pedagogies—whether by undergraduates or their instructors—is that they neglect conservative perspectives in favor of liberal ones. This is a view held by many students I have taught, as well as by prominent intellectuals in the field. According to these arguments, political approaches and pedagogies have a tendency to estrange students who wish to gain or retain access to dominant cultural values and perceived concomitant upward mobility. Russel Durst makes this point compellingly in his work *Collision Course: Conflict, Negotiation, and Learning in College Composition*. As Durst claims, “first-year students typically enter composition with an idea of writing and an understanding of what they need to learn about writing that are dramatically at odds with the views and approaches of the teacher” (2).

C. H. Knoblauch and David Seitz complicate the use of political approaches in much the same way, and their work helps to examine the disappointment and volatile political moments that erupt in classrooms that implement political approaches. In his essay “Critical Teaching and Dominant Culture,” Knoblauch explains that “there is a powerful self-interest, rooted in class advantage, that works actively, if not consciously, against critical reflectiveness” (19), and thus undermines some of the basic aims of political approaches. As Knoblauch explains, middle and upper class students often recognize little to gain from the scrutiny of hegemonic forces that political approaches and pedagogies involve. Accordingly, such students recognize political approaches as a form of violence against the cultural values they support and aspire to emulate as professionals. Similarly, in “Keeping Honest: Working-Class Students, Difference, and
Rethinking the Critical Agenda in Composition,” David Seitz argues that working-class whites frequently reject tenets of political approaches and pedagogies, albeit for different reasons than their middle-class counterparts: according to Seitz, many working-class students see politics as a platform through which non-whites gain special privileges in society, thereby disenfranchising hard-working working-class whites, the less visible victims of poverty (71). From the point of view of many students, Durst’s, Knoblauch’s, and Seitz’s work suggest, political approaches are both an irrelevant exercise in political correctness and an unrealistic and biased socialist endeavor.

Of the three, Knoblauch most forcefully argues that political approaches are a worthy and important enterprise. Because students sometimes see these approaches as an assault on values they hold dear, however, Durst and Seitz worry such approaches may do more harm than good. One could argue that student perceptions of disenfranchisement in relation to political approaches are a form of disappointment for students and their teachers different from—but no less real than—the forms Micciche associates with WPA work. Indeed, it seems clear that both political approaches and the marginalized institutional political location of many writing teachers are sources of disaffection for many workers who teach college composition.

For me as a reader, Donald Lazere produces the most compelling criticism of—and case for—the use of politics in first-year composition. What I find compelling is his recognition and circumvention of the different forms of disappointment political approaches have been known to perpetuate. Like Hairston, he shares “the concern of critics that [politicized] courses can all too easily be turned into an indoctrination to the
instructor’s particular ideology” (195). Nonetheless, he sees significant value in teaching political conflicts within an overtly surfaced rhetorical schema. As he writes:

I am firmly opposed [. . . ] to instructors imposing socialist (or feminist, or Third-World, or gay) ideology on students as the one true faith—just as much as I am opposed to the present, generally unquestionable (and even unconscious) imposition of capitalist, white-male, heterosexual ideology that pervades American education and every other aspect of our culture.

I assert, then, that our primary aim should be to broaden the ideological scope of students’ critical thinking, reading, and writing capacities so as to empower them to make their own autonomous judgments on opposing ideological positions in general and on specific issues. [. . . ] By addressing [politics] through a distinctly rhetorical approach, writing courses can also become a vital part of the reorientation of English toward cultural studies. (195, italics in the original)

The emancipatory qualities of Lazere’s rhetorically focused approach help to address concerns of liberal bias in political approaches as they build a critical framework for students to scrutinize and make arguments about their own political values. In this way, Lazere’s essay can be said to make a distinction between political pedagogy and political approaches: in his rhetorically focused political approach, teachers are not professing a particular ideology or even naming discriminatory social configurations; instead, they are simply compelling students to broaden their ideological scope through and examination of rhetoric.
But even when faculty work to include multiple ideological perspectives within political approaches to writing instruction, courses that focus on “politics” remain suspect for many, both inside and outside of the academy. As Doug Hesse notes in his piece “Politics and the WPA,” both “[p]olitics and rhetoric share corroded connotations in the popular vocabulary[,]” these connotations reveal “that there is a real world of substance that politicians and rhetoricians only obscure or distort [. . .] for narrow personal advancement rather than for broader public good” (41, italics in original). For many, politics is a dirty word and engaging it is a dirty business. Indeed, contemporary assaults on liberal and liberatory education serve as a powerful reminder that concepts like politics and rhetoric carry widespread negative connotations. Dinesh D’Souza’s Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus is an illustrative example of how politics and similarly charged terms incite mistrust. While D’Souza offers his book as a defense of classical liberal education, its title casts suspicion on politics itself, and the book in its entirety represents political pedagogies as dangerous, un-American activities. As D’Souza claims in Illiberal Education, the threat posed by multiculturalism, affirmative action, and what he describes as the “victim’s revolution” is more than “mere rhetoric” (16): for D’Souza, these trends are a threat to the very foundations of western civilization and American democracy.

Although he concedes that the goals of liberal education are emancipatory, D’Souza’s notion of liberal education and politics are narrowly defined. As he describes it, liberal education is only valuable if it is “properly devised and understood” under a “classical” definition (23). In my interpretation, D’Souza’s classical definition is an
inherently uninformed one: the main claim of his book, in fact, is that instead of promoting equality and egalitarianism, multicultural curricula are promoting ignorance, intolerance, racism, and bigotry (227-28). From my perspective, sentiments like D’Souza’s reject emancipatory notions of ancient and contemporary politics and conjure up specters of chaos and perversity, phantoms frequently associated with radical movements toward social change. As he warns, any effort to politicize education “seeks a fundamental restructuring of American society” and “involves basic changes in the way economic rewards are distributed, in the way cultural and political power are exercised, and [. . . ] in privately held and publicly expressed opinions” (12). While I would agree with D’Souza on these points, I would argue that these changes be celebrated, not feared. Cast in D’Souza’s light, political pedagogy looks less like a movement to empower marginalized populations and more like a movement to incite violence, revolution, and censorship. Given his depictions, it is reasonable to assume that those sympathetic to D’Souza’s arguments have likewise internalized disparaging and repressive notions of politics and political approaches to writing instruction. Although many academics dismiss D’Souza’s work as hyperbole, his sentiments illustrate widespread suspicions of politics in American culture.

To be sure, sentiments like D’Souza’s may be unpopular in some corners of academe, but they should not be thought of as outside the realm of contemporary academic thought. As Himley attests in *Political Moments in the Classroom*, a neoconservative groundswell emerged in the academy parallel to the rise of critical race, class, and gender studies, a groundswell fueled by a number of controversial yet highly
successful academic writers who defend the traditional canon, including best sellers like Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*, and Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*. While each work has its own tenor and objectives, all three are written in a spirit of protest, bemoaning the changing face of the academy and its increasingly multicultural emphases.

Outside of academe the furor against politicized education is even more prevalent. Perhaps the most apparent example lies in conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh. Limbaugh’s star power soared during the Clinton administration, when he fortified his AM radio empire by criticizing liberal political agendas, educational and otherwise. FOX News and newsmagazine host Bill O’Reilly have more recently added their voices to the assault on “liberalism”: as a January 2004 segment from *The O’Reilly Factor* entitled “Why Are Rap Lyrics Being Used as Teaching Tools in Some High Schools?” makes clear, FOX programs like *The O’Reilly Factor* routinely call into question the legitimacy of political pedagogies: such questioning rises from the assumption that there is something inherently wrong with movements toward social change.

But while the conservative ratio and cable revolution purports to be “fair and balanced,” a cursory analysis of such programming proves otherwise. Indeed, although *O’Reilly Factor* guest Jeffrey Duncan-Andrade, Director of Urban Teaching and Development at UCLA, cited a six-year peer reviewed study from *English Journal* as evidence of the positive impact of bringing politically-infused texts into urban schools, O’Reilly repeatedly disregarded this study. As the transcripts note, O’Reilly continually
asserted that the analysis of popular culture and its multicultural emphases “dumb-down”
education and encourage students to defy mainstream social norms, regardless of the
National Council of Teachers of English peer-reviewed findings (Fox 3–4). Regular
viewers of O’Reilly’s show could cite numerous other examples in which he bemoans
“liberal” educational initiatives and evokes connotations of politicized education as
inherently exploitive.

Analogous accusations are frequently made by syndicated columnist and popular
ABC News personality George Will: as scholars in Rhetoric and Composition remember
well, Will’s attack of Linda Brodkey’s political curriculum gained national media
coverage during the 1990s. As Brodkey attests in her book Writing in Designated Areas
Only, Will “used his syndicated column to lambaste [her] course, about which he knew so
little that he described one at another university, and then took the occasion of his outrage
to remind his readers that teachers are supposed to teach grammatical correctness, not
political correctness” (148, referencing Will “Radical”). Certainly, criticism waged at
“liberal” and multicultural or “political” curricula are no new phenomena.
Representations of politics as repressive starkly contrast the emancipatory bent of ancient
and contemporary conceptions of politics, political approaches to writing instruction, and
political pedagogy.

Teaching Assistant Preparation: Scholarly Trajectories and Emancipatory Tropes

Although the field of Rhetoric and Composition has produced a wide body of
scholarship in the four-plus decades since its contemporary emergence, and while this
body of scholarship situates itself within the political, rhetorical, and emancipatory
tradition I survey above, research on teaching assistant preparation—and the political
dynamics that affect it—has been scarce. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the lack of
emphasis on graduate teaching assistant preparation in the history of English studies as a
whole. As Robert Connors notes in *Composition-Rhetoric: Backgrounds, Theory, and
Pedagogy*, although the use of graduate teaching assistants has been commonplace since
1890, few initiatives were executed to prepare GTAs until quite recently (195). Betty
Pytlik notes in “A Short History of Graduate Preparation of Writing Teachers” and
“Teaching the Teacher of Writing: Whence and Whither?” that neglect of GTA
preparation remained widespread until well into the second half of the twentieth century.
Even given their abundant employment after the college enrollment spikes that followed
World War II, Pytlik notes, teaching assistants have historically received little more than
a syllabus to prepare them to teach writing (“Teaching the Teacher of Writing: Whence”
7-8).

As such, the increased albeit slow growing publication of TAP scholarship in the
1970s and beyond was a welcome distinction from earlier eras. Kenneth E. Eble’s 1972
“Preparing College Teachers of English” is among the first full-length essays published
in a major English studies journal. Like Eble’s piece, snippets by Maxine Hairston
(“Training”) and Richard Gebhardt in *College Composition and Communication* and by
Frank D’Angelo and Michael Flanigan in *ADE Bulletin* also help to describe best
practices in teaching assistant preparation during the 1970s. While these contributions
focus mainly on institution-specific, nuts-and-bolts methods of GTA preparation, they give historical context for TAP initiatives during the 1970s.

As Richard Fulkerson notes, interest in teaching assistant preparation emerged more enthusiastically in the 1980s. In his forward to Betty Pytlik and Sarah Ligget’s *Preparing College Teachers of Writing: Histories, Theories, Programs, Practices*, Fulkerson identifies three waves of teacher preparation scholarship in the history of writing program administration, all spearheaded by book-length collections devoted to the practices and theories of preparation programs. The Modern Language Association sponsored the first of these collections in 1981, Joseph Gibaldi and James V. Mirollo’s *The Teaching Apprentice Program in Language and Literature*. Like preparation scholarship from the 1970s, this first wave TAP volume emphasizes program description. Although useful for its statistical data on “teaching apprentice activities” across the country (1), because it is written by administrators in a wide variety of modern language emphases, it lacks substantial focus on preparing teachers of writing. Even so, the volume is an important historical artifact for writing program administrators: readers can see through it that, even into the 1980s, many TAP programs were “structurally separate from the academic programs in which the TAs” earned degrees (Richard Lloyd-Jones 73). Such separation supported the low status of composition in the academy during the era, reinforcing the notion that the teaching of writing did not coincide with traditional aims of graduate preparation in literature and language. As a whole, Gibaldi and Mirollo’s volume helped to pique interest in TAP in Rhetoric and Composition studies, spurring on the 1982 *College Composition and Communication* issue featuring Gene

In fact, Parker’s piece sets the trajectory for a second wave of TAP scholarship, arguing for an emphasis on theory in teacher preparation initiatives. Given the rise in composition theory in the 1980s, as well as Rhetoric and Composition’s struggles toward disciplinary legitimacy during the same period, teacher preparation scholarship began to emphasize the theoretical. Such an emphasis suggests the ways in which teacher-scholars yearned to professionalize their work, gain respect, and expand the knowledge base of workers in the discipline. Other essays emphasizing composition theory published during this period include: Tori Haring-Smith’s “The Importance of Theory in the Teaching of Teaching Assistants,” which categorizes traditional TAP initiatives; David Foster’s “Training Writing Teachers in a Small Program” and Sally Barr Reagan’s “Practicing What We Preach,” which emphasize collaborative classroom pedagogies for GTAs; and Mary Kay Tirrell’s “Teaching Assistants as Teachers and Writers: Developmental Issues in TA Training,” which argues for GTAs’ exposure to cognitive and developmental theories of writing and writing instruction.

Second wave, theory-rich TAP scholarship materialized most forcefully in the 1986 publication of Charles Bridges’ anthology Training the New Teacher of College Composition. As its title predicts, Bridges’ collection focuses exclusively on preparation in the teaching of writing. This collection sets itself apart from the Gibaldi and Mirollo collection in that it is written for the dual audience of both administrators and new
teachers. Several chapters, in fact, address new teachers directly. Maxine Hairston’s “On Not Being a Composition Slave” is perhaps the best example, which urges novice instructors to adopt process theories of instruction: process pedagogy will not only benefit students, Hairston argues, it will help graduate students better balance their coursework with the paper load (“On” 22). Similarly, Charles Bridges’ “The Basics and The New Teacher in the College Composition Class” and Ronald Lunsford’s “Planning for Spontaneity in the Writing Classroom and a Passel of Other Paradoxes” both emphasize how peer collaboration helps teachers manage their classrooms as they reinforce good writing habits in students. For me as a reader, *Training the New Teacher of College Composition* typifies the way process theories of instruction commandeer second wave scholarship in teaching assistant preparation.

Ushering in the third wave of teaching assistant preparation scholarship, Betty P. Pytlik and Sara Liggett’s *Preparing College Teacher of Writing: Histories, Theories, Programs, and Practices* expands on a variety of trajectories in TAP research, focusing not only on theories of teaching assistant preparation, but on history, programs, and practices. Pytlik’s plenary chapter, “How Graduate Students Were Prepared to Teach Writing—1850-1970,” provides a comprehensive overview of teacher preparation in American colleges, asserting that a recurring theme in this history of TAP is a focus on the writing skills of GTAs themselves.  

Stephen Wilhoit’s chapter picks up where

---

11 For more examples of TAP scholarship that emphasize GTA writing, see Lynn Z. Bloom’s “Finding A Family, Finding a Voice: A Writing Teacher Teaches Writing Teachers,” Charles Moran’s “Teaching Teachers of Writing: Steps Toward a Curriculum,” Patricia A. Sullivan’s “From Student to Scholar: A Contextual Study of Graduate-Student Writing in English,” and Sue Seyfarth’s “The Professional Development Program: More than One Opportunity at Iowa.”
Pytlik’s ends, outlining what he sees as the major trends in TAP instruction post 1970: namely, teacher preparation curricula that focus on 1) observation, 2) role-playing, 3) reflection, 4) research, and 5) administration. Other historical contributions to Pytlik and Liggett’s collection chronicle TAP instruction and its relation to the job market (Sandy), account for the use of experienced TAs in the preparation process (Weiser), and emphasize the role of the National Council of Writing Program Administrators in GTA preparation (Payne and Enos).

In addition to this historical bent, I see recurring tropes in third wave scholarship, particularly emancipatory noun-tropes such as collaborator, mentor, and change agent. As I explore more thoroughly later in the study, each of these concepts characterize teacher preparation as a democratic process involving an actor (usually a WPA) who provides advocacy for new teachers of writing through mentoring, who asks for GTA input on the preparation process through collaboration, and who works for more egalitarian practices by instituting change in writing programs. Four essays in Preparing College Teachers of Writing include one or more of the three tropes in their titles explicitly, including Rebecca J. Rickly and Susanmarie Harrington’s “Feminist Approaches to Mentoring Teaching Assistants: Conflict, Power, and Collaboration,” Sally Barr Ebest’s “Mentoring: Past, Present, and Future,” Wanda Martin and Charles Paine’s “Mentor, Models, and Agents of Change: Veteran TAs Preparing Teachers of Writing,” and Gita Das Bender’s “Orientation and Mentoring: Collaborative Practices in

12 For an earlier piece that argues for the use of experienced GTAs in the TAP process, see Constance J. Gefvert’s “An Apprenticeship for Teaching Assistants.”
Teacher Preparation” (my italics). Seven other essays from the collection also use these or other closely related terms in the body sections of chapters (see Payne and Enos; Weiser; Powel et. al; Gottschalk; Anderson, Deluca, Rosenberger; Harris, Muriel; Flanigan “From”).

As I see it, an underlying motivation behind the use of these tropes lies in the ways writing programs and WPAs work to combat the dissatisfying working conditions that many GTAs and other writing teachers face. Although these figurative tropes support the literal ways WPAs enact egalitarian practices in writing programs, the scholarship that employs them often does not name the poor material conditions and marginalized institutional locations of GTAs. Kathleen Blake Yancey’s “The Professionalization of TA Development Programs: A Heuristic for Curriculum Design,” however, is one of the few essays in the Pytlik and Liggett collection to explicitly surface the institutional marginalization of GTAs. There Blake Yancey asserts that while Rhetoric and Composition studies has “focused on how to teach students to write,” it has thought “very little, at least systematically, about the kinds of assistance we might offer the graduate students—the so-called TAs, the teaching assistants who by any other name are instructors who teach a considerable number of the first-year composition courses offered in this country” (63). According to Blake Yancey, in order to theorize an adequate teaching assistant preparation heuristic, WPAs must explore the material conditions of their local programs and in turn develop models out of the contexts of those explorations (65). Although Blake Yancey’s essay begins this conversation, my own
project serves to extend it, focusing on the institutional political location of GTAs and WPAs in a particular teaching assistant preparation program.

In addition to extending discourse on institutional political location in relation to teaching assistant preparation, my study uses ethnographic methods common to much third wave scholarship. Since the early 1980s, in fact, educational ethnography has gained popularity in the field of Rhetoric and Composition. Still, while many studies have been devoted to K-12 and undergraduate education, it is in smaller number that researchers have studied graduate classrooms, and even fewer have focused on teaching assistant preparation. Ethnographic studies like Patricia A. Sullivan’s “From Student to Scholar: A Contextual Study of Graduate-Student Writing in English” and Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman’s “Conventions, Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D. Program” focus on an individual graduate student’s enculturation into the field of Composition and Rhetoric, but not teaching assistant preparation per se. An exception comes in Pytlik’s 1991 “Teaching the Teaching of Composition: Evolving Theories,” which analyzes how four new GTAs developed theories of writing instruction. A handful of qualitative dissertations have also been devoted to teaching assistant preparation, including Kathleen Boardman’s (1992) “Teaching Experience: New Writing Instructors in a College Program,” Zhuan-Zong Lehmberg’s (1995) “Graduate Teaching Assistants Talking About and Teaching Writing: An Ethnographic Study,” and Lauren Sewell’s (1998) “First Year Teaching Assistants and the Quest for Capital: A Bourdieuan Reading of Authority Negotiations Among
New Instructors of Writing.” All three center on GTA authority construction, an issue central to teaching assistant preparation.

Boardman’s project, for instance, observes how new teaching assistants came to “view and enact their roles as teachers and writers” and concentrates on how experience helped to validate new TAs in their teaching and their writing (1). Boardman’s study is a compelling look at the social lives of GTAs, describing how they came to form a pecking order through their sharing of experience. Her findings conclude that writing program administrators should recognize the significant differences in experience that new GTAs bring with them to teacher preparation seminars. By doing so, Boardman argues, WPAs help new GTAs reconcile the conflicts between their past experiences as students/writers and the new discourse(s) that they encounter as teachers/professionals.

Lehmberg similarly focuses on the roles GTAs play as students and teachers of writing. She differentiates her study from others, however, by focusing on how GTAs discussed their writing and their teaching. Using theories of identity construction, Lehmberg analyzes the speech of twelve graduate teaching assistants, and devotes individual chapters to one woman and one man from this group. Her study is useful in that it examines the enculturation process GTAs go through, charting how those she observed evolved from anxious first-time instructors into more competent and confident teachers.

---

13 See also Pytlík’s “Teaching the Teaching of Composition: Evolving Theories” for a look at how “talk” plays an important role in GTA enculturation.
Relying on the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Sewell’s dissertation examines how new TAs negotiated cultural and social capital in order to assert authority within their writing program. In this way, her study is not unlike Boardman’s, who also explores issues of authority construction through TAs’ sharing of experience. Like second and third wave precursors, Sewell’s study emphasizes the importance of theory in TA preparation, and concludes that lack of theoretical instruction greatly frustrated the GTAs in her study, “which led in turn to an abiding sense of being unprepared and ineffective in the classroom” (206). In as much as all three of these ethnographic dissertations examine how teacher preparation can be an anxiety-ridden experience for GTAs, they lay the foundations for my own explorations of the affective dimensions of teaching assistant preparation and WPA work.

A number of studies published in monograph form also focus on GTA authority construction as a part of the teacher preparation process. For instance Wendy Bishop’s *Something Old, Something New: College Writing Teachers and Classroom Change* is the first book-length ethnography to deal specifically with graduate teaching assistant preparation. While the participants in her study largely had teaching experience, Bishop emphasizes how seasoned teachers repositioned their pedagogical styles according to what they learned in the teacher preparation program she studied (134-144). Bishop’s work is one of the most thorough in emphasizing how and why new teachers come to accept or reject the pedagogy advocated within their preparation seminar. It not only describes the seminar and the WPA who created and led it, it follows five teachers throughout their first college teaching experiences, analyzing to what degree they
incorporated the pedagogy advocated by their WPA. Bishop concludes that the writing teachers she studied adapted their teaching styles selectively, in accordance with what they learned in the preparation seminar, their own notions of good teaching, and their developing identity as teachers of college writing.

Another book length publication on teaching assistant preparation is Elizabeth Rankin’s *Seeing Yourself as a Teacher*. A case study of five new teaching assistants, Rankin’s work focuses on conversations she had with GTAs, emphasizing how new writing instructors make the difficult transition from feeling like an imposter—that is, something less than an expert—to feeling like a fully authorized teacher. Particularly helpful is Rankin’s chapter “Thinking Theoretically,” which argues that novice teachers need administrators to make theory “more everyday.” In this way, Rankin re-examines the use of theory in TAP seminars, and like other studies, illuminates GTAs’ resistance toward established theories of writing instruction, an issue at the heart of my own exploration of so-called “political moments” in the TAP seminar I studied.

As discussed in the Introduction, Margaret Himley’s *Political Moments in the Classroom* serves as a model for my study by examining how administrators, graduate teaching assistants, and other faculty negotiate the political moments that arise through the use of politics as an apparatus to elicit critical thinking and reflective writing in first-year composition. From my perspective, Himley’s book is at its best when it emphasizes the different kinds of power and different levels of politics working in writing classrooms. As Himley and her co-authors argue, “As teachers we become more effective when we understand how we are positioned, both positively and negatively, in
terms of power dynamics at work during different times in the classroom. We are more effective when we understand specifically how we both do and do not have power to affect classroom experience and learning in certain ways” (59). Another way Political Moments serves a model for my research is in the way it grounds much of its analysis in actual classroom transcripts. Like Himley’s study, my research questions seek to explore how new writing teachers respond to and perceive the political dynamics of their teaching, both in relation to their own classrooms and the institutions in which they work.

Another piece that helps to serve as a springboard for my research is Laura Micciche’s “More than a Felling: Disappointment and WPA Work.” While Micciche focuses more specifically on the disaffection arising from WPAs’ work with contingent labor in general—not GTAs in particular—her points are still relevant to teaching assistant preparation (439). Specifically, Micciche’s essay focuses on the emotional turmoil many WPAs experience because of the relationship between their work and the work of marginalized academic laborers. As she argues, the exploitation of workers “whose primary duty is the instruction of required first-year writing courses” is one of the central sources of disaffection for WPAs (432). In as much as my own study concentrates on the emotional, often disaffecting flashpoints that accompany writing program administration, the implementation of political approaches to writing instruction, and the status of graduate teaching assistants and writing program administrators, it builds on Micciche’s work. By examining how both political approaches to writing instruction and the institutional political location affect the TAP seminar I studied, this research both extends Himley’s and Micciche’s foundations and breaks new ground. In
order to delineate the dimensions of institutional political location I surface throughout the study, the final section of this chapter examines institutional critique in Rhetoric and Composition studies.

**Institutional Political Location: Institutional Critique in Rhetoric and Composition**

Still, many Americans—academic and otherwise—categorize “politics” in less static ways. As Horner makes clear in *Terms of Work in Composition*, these people view politics as an inescapable dimension of human existence, a fact of life as inevitable as breathing. Those writing from this broader conception reveal how institutional forces, belief systems, and social habits affect everyone and depend on cultural positioning. Scholars examining what I have come to call *institutional political location* have most often relied on materialist critique, helping to map Rhetoric and Composition’s landscape by charting power relations at play within English studies as a whole. As Richard Bullock and John Trimbur explain in the preface to their collection *The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary*, such writers “tackle a wide range of perplexing issues,” including

the role of literacy, the history of our field, public perceptions of writing instruction, the status of part-time composition instructors in English departments, the relations between composition and literary studies, tenure and promotion, writing assessment as institutional practice, writing across the curriculum, the impact of feminism and radical pedagogies, [and] the
implications of scientistic and positivist assumptions in the development of research in writing. (xvii)

As the quote attests, those examining institutional facets of the political often view the teaching of writing as a unique, albeit marginalized site of power in the academy and culture, and thereby openly embrace the connections among politics, institutional location, pedagogy, and English studies.

Indeed, the texts that have been the most influential in my own political education have been those that explode more comfortable, emancipatory perceptions of politics in the field, revealing how the institutional political location of many compositionists are marginal at best. These texts include Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Sharon Crowley’s *Composition in the University: Historical and Polemical Essays*, and the collective body of James Berlin’s work, but particularly *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures: Refiguring College English Studies*. For me, these works stand out for the ways they expose Rhetoric and Composition’s marginalization within English studies and the academy. Although all three of these authors focus more on the politics of the profession than on politics in the classroom, their scholarship is central to an understanding of how those working on the margins of the academy fare in perspective to those at the center—and—how literacy education can work to support both repressive and emancipatory power structures.

Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals* was among the first to survey the field’s social positioning and subordination. At the center of her argument, Miller asserts that writing teachers have internalized negative attitudes about their work, attitudes imposed by
English studies proper as well as the larger academy and culture. By helping to sustain a mythology of low status, Miller argues, compositionists participate in and maintain their own marginalization (121-141). Using Bakhtin’s metaphor of the carnival as her primary conceptual vehicle, Miller traces how Rhetoric and Composition has assumed a place outside of the traditional “city-limits” of the academy. She substantiates this claim with a survey of professionals in the field, verifying that writing teachers “identify a symbolic issue of alienation” in their professional lives and feel “an unsettled and uncomfortable sense of dislocation” (260). Miller also recognizes a shift taking place in the identity construction of professionals in the field, however. Her final chapter suggests that in order to rise above subordination, Rhetoric and Compositionists must re-script their professional narratives to create and influence their own agency.

While Susan Miller’s work argues writing instructors should recast their narratives, Sharon Crowley’s Composition in the University argues something quite different. Like Miller, Crowley recognizes the low status of Rhetoric and Composition, its institutional isolation and overall “toadishness” in the proverbial garden of literary studies (19-29). Instead of concentrating her critique on the status of Rhetoric and Composition in English studies, however, Crowley turns the tables on the teaching of writing itself: taken as a whole, Composition in the University argues for the abolition of the first-year requirement. Along this line of reasoning, Rhetoric and Composition would better serve itself and its students by expanding its disciplinary knowledge rather than by serving as academic rent-a-cops in the mega mall of higher education. According to Crowley, the universal requirement not only exploits teachers of writing with its
piecemeal positions and lowly professional status, first-year composition has negative curricular, disciplinary, institutional, and professional effects (241-243). As Crowley explains:

Since faculty who are not professionally associated with composition instruction still assume that the required introductory course teaches grammar, spelling, punctuation, and organization, they view composition faculty as literacy gatekeepers rather than as intellectuals and teachers. Despite its radical and groundbreaking discoveries about pedagogy, composition studies nevertheless remains almost invisible within academic hierarchies, primarily because of its association with the traditional required course. I suspect that the effort required to maintain the required course has kept those of us who profess composition studies from thinking of our discipline in more expansive curricular terms. (243)

In other words, if we associate the teaching of writing with an ethic of service—or, so Crowley’s argument goes—we bastardize the discipline. While such a proposition might spell the end to first-year composition as we know it, the potential it entails is potentially invigorating for the discipline.

Although their commentaries illustrate how compositionists’ marginalized institutional political location affects their professional lives and attitudes about their work, their scholarship seems to raise more questions than answers. For me, Berlin’s work helps to bring pedagogical and institutional politics into better focus. The collective body of his scholarship contextualizes the marginalized institutional political location of
writing teachers and conceives of an intentionally political pedagogy, one he adapts from British cultural studies advocates like Stuart Hall and others among the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures xix). For Berlin, cultural studies pedagogy seeks to refigure English studies by asserting that writing and the teaching of writing are “inescapably political act[s,] the working out of contested cultural codes that affect every feature of our experience” (“Composition as Cultural Studies” 51). As Berlin writes, the aims of bringing the study of culture into the first-year composition curriculum are explicit: “The intention of forwarding this method is frankly political”—it is “an effort to prepare students for critical citizenship in a democracy” (“Composition as Cultural Studies” 51). Although I am aligning a variety of political approaches and pedagogies alongside Berlin’s, in as much as they reject traditional canonical study in favor of the interpretation of culture, the production of texts, and the study of rhetoric in the first-year composition curriculum, Berlin’s work helps to establish the legacy of what I am calling political approaches and political pedagogy.

Perhaps most importantly, Berlin’s work is one of the best known to demonstrate the marginalized position of scholars of rhetoric in relation to scholars of literature. Of course, demonstrating this marginalization is one of the chief aims of his posthumously released work Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures. As Berlin attests, the study of rhetoric has traditionally been an expansive enterprise—a kind of master category of academic investigation with subcategories including literary, political, and scientific discourses. In contemporary eras, however, English studies has separated the study of “high” art forms
and culture (i.e., poetry, literature, and other forms of “fine” art) from the study of “low”
art forms and culture (i.e., political and scientific discourse and other forms of popular or
“base” discourse). Berlin argues that while this separation was a product of a Romantic
vision that “resist[s] the actual lines of power in a society” (Rhetorics 3)—and is thereby
in keeping with democratic social thought—the suppression of the political helps to
reproduce hierarchical power structures, obfuscating the importance of politics in the
interpretation and production of texts. Going a step further than Miller and Crowley,
Berlin argues:

[T]he English department’s abhorrence of the rhetorical, of political and
scientific texts, does far more harm than creating a permanent underclass
of department members whose putative role is the remediation of the
poorly prepared. It also works to exclude from the ranks of the privileged
managerial class those students not socialized from birth in the ways of the
aesthetic response, doing so by its influence on the materials and methods
of reading and writing required for success in secondary schools, college
admission tests, and the colleges themselves.

Thus, the English department both serves an important
exclusionary function and mystifies the role it plays in precluding reading
and writing practices that might address inequalities in the existing social
order. In other words, by excluding reading practices that might discover
the political unconscious of literary texts and by refusing to take seriously
the production and interpretation of rhetorical texts that address political
matters, English studies has served as a powerful conservative force, all the while insisting on its transcendence of the political. The enforcement of this invidious division of the literary from the non-literary has served to entitle those already entitled and to disempower the disempowered, doing so in the name of the sacred literary text. (*Rhetorics* 14-15)

In sum, not only does the separation of the political from the poetic work to marginalize Rhetoric and Composition teachers and scholars, it works to repress the already economically disadvantaged, reinscribing and reproducing power and prestige for the privileged. By detailing the suppression of rhetoric and politics in English studies, Berlin’s work clearly shows the polarized conceptions of politics in the academy and in the culture.

What’s more, through its refiguring of English studies to include both the interpretation and production of texts, Berlin’s *Rhetorics* helps to expand the foundations for political approaches to writing instruction, offering cultural studies as a promising alternative to traditional literary study in composition curricula. Like in his earlier publications, including “Composition and Cultural Studies” and “Rhetoric, Poetic, and Culture: Contested Boundaries in English Studies,” Berlin argues in *Rhetorics* that, because of the way it surfaces the politics of culture, “cultural studies provides a way to redress the problems afflicting the profession. And, as a basis for composition courses, [ . . . ] it equips students to expose the ideological forces and codes that shape their subjectivities” (*Rhetorics* 182). In order to transcend the disciplinary and cultural forces that marginalize various socio-economic classes, Berlin’s work connects the politics of
institutional location with political approaches to writing instruction and political pedagogy.

To be sure, Berlin’s contributions to Rhetoric and Composition’s political discourse are immense. But even given the great breadth and depth of his scholarship, his work did not recognize how the politics of institutional location might affect the implementation of political approaches to writing instruction. Said another way, while Berlin documents the marginal institutional political locations of Rhetoric and Compositionists, and while he points to cultural studies and likeminded pedagogies as emancipatory alternatives for English studies and first-year composition faculty to pursue, he doesn’t do the connective work that complicates their union. Indeed, one key aspect Berlin’s work does not explicitly address is the ways that writing teachers’ abilities to effectively surface political issues in their classrooms are compromised by their marginalized institutional political locations. In the bulk of subsequent chapters, I pick up where Berlin and others left off.

Indeed, while Horner and Berlin are among the few scholars to address pedagogical and institutional politics in tandem, and while Himley and Micciche help to highlight the pedagogical tensions and institutional disappointments that surface in the course of WPA work, my study seeks to examine how political approaches to writing instruction and institutional political location affect teaching assistant preparation. In subsequent chapters, I work to better connect these levels of the political through my examination of Ridge University’s teaching assistant preparation seminar. Following the lead of ethnographic researchers, this study focuses on the “local system” (Blakemore
142) in place for teaching assistant preparation, where as “practitioner-on-the-scene” I dig into details and study layers of action (Tremmel 57). As the next chapter illustrates, the methods that I employed to conduct this study build on those of feminist critical ethnographers in Rhetoric and Composition studies and academe as a whole.
CHAPTER TWO: Research Methods

As I indicated in my Introduction, this project evolved out of a longtime interest in writing program administration, particularly in the ways in which WPAs introduce and attract other scholars to the field. I was both introduced and attracted to Rhetoric and Composition through the teaching assistant preparation seminar I took during my master’s degree program, and I am intrigued by the various responses new teacher-scholars have to the political debates thriving in the field. As such, this study began with a single, rather general research question: How do new teachers of writing respond to the politics of the profession? After I spent a few weeks as a participant-observer in the teaching assistant preparation (TAP) seminar, more specific questions began to emerge, ones that focused on the roles of pedagogy and power in writing instructors’ work. Given this new, layered focus, my specific research questions fall into three categories:

1. How do GTAs respond to political approaches to writing instruction and their institutional political locations?
2. How do WPAs respond to political approaches to writing instruction and their institutional political locations?
3. How do the institutional political locations of GTAs and WPAs affect their perceptions of political approaches to writing instruction?

Although these questions are the foundation of the project, they serve to open up a wide range of discussions surrounding politics, teaching assistant preparation, and WPA work.
While I attempt to answer these questions throughout the study, I also allow other questions, controversies, and issues to complicate my research.

Using these three primary research questions as my guide, I chose to embrace an ethnographic research design for several reasons. First, I believe the integration of research participants in the interpretation process makes ethnography a practical and ethical brand of qualitative research: in my mind, participant feedback is practical because it allows researchers additional data sources to help fuel their projects; it is ethical because it gives the human subjects of the study a voice in the interpretation process. In order to ensure that my own renderings did not conflict with participants’, I asked WPAs Marks and Allegheny to serve as readers. Their perspectives help to balance and complement my own. Although I interviewed WPAs and GTAs about their perspectives on key issues throughout the research process and include those perspectives throughout, GTAs did not serve as readers. Instead, their written assignments and spoken comments represent their voices in the project. While not all ethnographers choose to triangulate their findings with participant contributions such as these, Wendy Bishop notes that “[m]ost of us would agree that the ideal ethnography would be one in which we can continuously reground our observations with the help of those we study” (Ethnographic 119). By sharing research aims, objectives, and interpretations with the WPAs in my study, and by allowing GTAs’ voices to take center stage in my chapters, I hope to bring validity, authority, and resonance to this work.
A second reason I chose to adopt an ethnographic methodology is it is a human-centered form of research. In my mind research in Rhetoric and Composition studies is at its best when it derives its legitimacy from human experience, not statistics or abstractions. While quantitative and theoretical perspectives contribute to Rhetoric and Composition Studies in important ways, some argue they too often divert focus away from teacher and student interactions, and thereby devalue pedagogy. Ruth Ray makes a similar argument in *The Practice of Theory: Teacher Research in Composition*, which maps out how the field has downplayed its practitioner status in an effort to gain legitimacy in the academy and American culture. Moving away from the soft science of “teacher lore,” (North *Making 23*), Rhetoric and Composition began to embrace more quantitative and theoretical research as a way of becoming “more rigorous.” But through this effort to gain legitimacy as a discipline, Ray argues, the field has inadvertently supported a perceived binary, one that separates theory from practice and research from teaching (3). Like Ray, I celebrate the returned enthusiasm for classroom-based research. From my perspective, educational ethnography is valuable because it highlights the blending of theory and practice, a mixture I work to achieve throughout the chapters of this study.

A third reason I chose ethnographic research methods is that they resonate with the experience-based curriculum taught in the teaching assistant preparation seminar I studied. Like the writing program that Kathleen Boardman researched—a program which “centered on practice rather than precept, on expression in one’s own authoritative voice, and on reflection on the knowledge one [had] already constructed through
“experience” (9)—the TAP program I studied encouraged both GTAs and the students they taught to rely on their own experiences in their writing, thinking, and speaking. Writing program administrators at Ridge University encouraged first-year and graduate students to reflect on their own notions of the world and to use their own experiences in their writing and teaching. As faculty of record for the TAP seminar, Eliza Marks recommended that GTAs “teach their strengths” (Video transcript 9/14/00), that is, emphasize their own knowledge of writing and theories of composing in the classroom. Although Marks asked GTAs to center their strengths within the framework of the political approach to writing instruction the First-Year Composition Program at Ridge embraced, she urged GTAs to reflect on and develop their own teaching philosophies and pedagogical practices, and prompted them to consider how their own conceptions of good teaching supported or contradicted established theories of composing and instruction. In as much as ethnographic methodologies emphasize experience-based knowledge, reflection, and the authorizing of individual and divergent perspectives, they complemented the theoretical concepts that supported the teaching assistant preparation seminar I studied.

Still, while many factors guided my choice of research methodology, I am most drawn to ethnographic methods because they are compatible with my feminist, postmodern philosophical positioning. Below I explain the interpretive lenses I use to analyze my findings and map out my data collection and analysis processes.
Interpretive Lenses: My Roles as Feminist-Critical Ethnographer, Student of Politics, and Academic Worker

Feminist-Critical Ethnographer

My primary interpretive role throughout this study has been that of feminist-critical ethnographer. As a movement to end oppression on all levels (hooks Feminist 2), feminism emphasizes individual authority and values experience-based knowledge (Shrewsbury 4). As such, feminist theory supports a non-foundational view of knowledge construction, asserting that knowledge is created through individual and social consciousness. Following Beverly J. Moss, I define ethnography as “a qualitative research method that allows a researcher to gain a comprehensive view of the social interactions, behaviors, and beliefs of a community or social group. In other words, the goal of an ethnography is to study, explore, and describe a group’s culture” (155). As participant-observers immersed in the culture being studied, ethnographic researchers authorize their findings through experience-based, socially constructed interpretations of groups. Instead of a scientific rendering or a literal reenactment of events, ethnography is an interpretation, an informed gist of what happened (North Making 277). By freely admitting that their “chief investigative tool is their own consciousness” (North Making 303), ethnographers embrace postmodern conceptions of research and knowledge making.

As a feminist-critical ethnographer, I focused on unequal power relations in the research site I studied. Corrine Glesne articulates the aims of both critical ethnography
and feminist ethnography in her work *Becoming a Qualitative Researcher*. As she writes:

Critical ethnographers focus on how knowledge is both powerful and political. Focusing on groups marginal to the dominant culture, researchers attempt to understand and describe the experiences, consciousness, and cultural contexts of people living in asymmetrical power relations. [. . . ] Like critical ethnographers, feminist ethnographers also focus on issues of justice and power and are committed to uncovering and understanding the forces that cause and sustain oppression. They, too, hold as a primary focus of their work the transformation of asymmetrical power relations, particularly as applied to women. [. . . ] This does not mean, however, that the focus is exclusively on gender because “gender oppression is not experienced or structured in isolation from other oppressions” (Maguire 1996, 108). Consideration and analysis of race, class, culture, ethnicity, and other identities play a primary role in feminist research as well. (11-13)

Since my own study came about because of my interest in the political dynamics that affect the teaching of writing and the asymmetrical power relations of teaching assistants and writing program administrators in their institutional contexts, feminist-critical ethnography was an obvious methodological choice. Although qualitative research methods have historically been undervalued in relation to quantitative or traditional
theoretical approaches, because of the ways they reflect Rhetoric and Composition’s emancipatory political allegiances, they nonetheless enjoy respect in the field.

As Patricia A. Sullivan suggests, the move toward feminist qualitative research was a welcomed change from the quantitative research methods popular in the 1970s and early 1980s; as a scholarly method of inquiry, many appreciate feminist qualitative research is appreciated by many because it surfaces how an investigator’s findings are always subjective. As Sullivan explains:

The realities recorded and reported via so-called objectivist methodologies are always versions of a reality that is subject to revision; reality “as it is” is always someone’s perception, even if a collective perception or representation. The perspective from which this reality is glimpsed, moreover, is always a situated perspective. There is no “view from nowhere,” as Susan Bordo writes, no “God’s eye-view” from which “one can see nature as it really is, undistorted by human perspective” (143). The researcher’s own race, class, culture, and gender assumptions are not neutral positions from which he or she observes the world but lenses that determine how and what the researcher sees. (“Feminism” 56)

Indeed, both feminist praxis and ethnographic methodology emphasize the notion that lived experience contributes to the making of knowledge. A feminist-critical ethnography, then, joins the aims of feminism with the aims of critical ethnography in hope of making discrimination visible in culture. My primary research goal is to explore
the politics of pedagogy and institutional political location in the site of the TAP seminar: as a feminist, I am committed to surfacing the struggles of the disenfranchised as they emerged in the particular classroom and institutional culture I studied.

But despite the rise in feminist-critical ethnography over the decades, it nonetheless has its share of critics, writers who warn that many forms of ethnography have the potential to objectify research participants. bell hooks, for example, argues that speech related to the “other” has a latent destructivity: “Often this speech about the ‘other’ annihilates, erases: ‘no need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself’” (from Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics, qtd. in Brueggemann 18). While the dangers hooks underscores are important to acknowledge and work against, Sullivan in her essay “Ethnography and the Problem of the ‘Other’” argues that risk is necessary in order to invoke change. Ethnographers run less of a risk of conflating their own world-views with their participants’, Sullivan argues, if they are committed to being both reflexive about their practices and sensitive toward their participants’ subjectivities (109).

Describing her ethnography on Taiwanese women, A Thrice Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility, Margery Wolf describes the risk involved with feminist-critical ethnography in another way: “When I began my research, there were no Taiwanese scholars who were the least bit interested in women’s lives. I may not have always gotten it right, but Taiwanese women were taken seriously as agents as a result of my research and writing” (14, qtd. in Sullivan “Ethnography” 112, italics in
original). I hope that my own ethnographic representations of teaching assistant preparation culture will be empowering for GTAs and administrators, even if I run the risk of not always “getting it right.” While Rhetoric and Composition recognizes the marginalization of both GTAs and WPAs in statements like the Wyoming and Portland Resolutions, further activist-reflection and action is critical if the institutional locations and professional identity of GTAs and WPA are to be taken seriously. As someone who began this study hoping to someday work as a WPA—and who now does—this project allowed me to better understand how administrative work can become a platform for advocacy.

But my role as feminist-critical ethnographer is not the only role that influences my analytical positioning. My previous roles at Ridge as a graduate student, GTA, and writing program administrator-in-training influenced my interpretations, as have subsequent positions at other institutions. Perhaps even more so, however, my role as a life-long student of politics helped to shape this study.

*Student of Politics*

While my interest in politics certainly peak in the writing of this dissertation, I became intrigued with politics at an early age, when a close friend introduced me to the excitement of local campaigns. Along with her mother, a campaign manager for our local state representative, we contributed to the campaign scene by handing out election literature as children and, in our teens, driving from precinct to precinct on election night,
eager to return to election headquarters to report the latest vote tallies. This work was not only exciting, it instilled in me a sense of civic responsibility and pride in participation. It is clear to me that my early life impacts my interest in politics, my formulation of research questions, and my allegiance to political approaches, political pedagogies, and activist struggle in a variety of ways.

Growing up in a working class family in a rust-belt town, I know my interest in politics primarily stems from my class affiliations. I attended racially integrated public schools in the 1970s and early 1980s, a period of economic stagnation in my hometown, Muskegon, Michigan. My parents struggled to keep our family afloat financially, and made monetary and personal sacrifices to ensure that my three brothers and I didn’t slip through the educational cracks. Although my mother was very committed to public education, serving as a parent volunteer and PTA president where my brothers and I attended grade school, our public school system suffered from the under-funding common in many urban areas today. This, along with our religious identification, led my parents to send us to the neighborhood Catholic junior/senior high school. It was there that I began to recognize the sharp class lines that divided my hometown, to realize that my family was on the disadvantaged side of those lines.

When I was in the tenth grade the semi-engine plant where my father worked went under. As a result, my family was forced to move to the central Indiana town where my father’s company transferred him. While he was one of the lucky few to be offered a position—most of people simply lost their jobs—it was a frightening and uneasy transition for our family.
Indeed, while my father was fortunate to remain employed in the economic
time that hit the automotive industry in the mid-1980s, the move seemed to magnify
my family’s class struggles. The small Indiana town where we moved was affluent,
housing the corporate headquarters for three Fortune 500 companies and boasting the
nation’s largest per capita percentage of executive vice presidents. While many of my
classmates drove their own sports cars, I rode the bus to school; while they ate lunch in
the fast-food restaurants that lined the streets adjacent to our multi-million dollar high
school, I sat next to them and went without, too prideful to eat my sack lunch in a
restaurant.

In as much as my class affiliation shapes my interest in politics, so does my
family’s ethnic heritage. Both of my parents are the children of first-generation
Americans, my grandmothers both Polish, my grandfathers both Irish. Even two
generations later, however, I have a strong knowledge of my heritage, particularly of my
eastern-European ethnicity. I can swear in Polish, make traditional foods, participate in
holiday customs. I am also familiar with the alcohol abuse prevalent in working class
immigrant culture. Sober for twenty-five years as of the date of this writing, my father
has won his battle with alcohol, though not all members of my family are as fortunate:
their dependency is a reminder of the emotional turmoil many working class people face
in American society.

While my dad has been a strong presence in my life, my mother’s energetic and
optimistic spirit also guided me to pursue a college education, through which I became
increasingly aware of the many levels of politics in our culture. Even though she and I
were in the gender minority in our household, she was not the stereotypical full-time mom I often saw depicted on television. Her biting wit and bawdy personality made her a striking role model: she is a woman unafraid to tell dirty jokes or to reprimand her grown children in public. Because she was nothing like the mothers on the *Brady Bunch* or *Happy Days*, I knew that my future could be more than a stereotype. Through the emotional and financial support of my parents, I entered and graduated from college, the first in my family to do so.

Pushed forward by my passion for politics, I majored first in political science, later adding a second major in English to help increase my degree’s cache. But throughout my undergraduate studies I became more and more suspect of the bureaucracy of American politics. So, a year and a half after completing the BA and unsatisfied with waiting tables, I began a master’s program in English at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. It was at this time that I applied for a teaching assistantship and was introduced to Rhetoric and Composition studies.

*Academic Worker*

When I started graduate school, I had virtually no knowledge of composition theory or about the discipline with which I was about to become enamored. In fact during the weeklong orientation for GTAs I attended, I was taken aback by the emphasis on “process” over “form.” In high school and college I recognized that learning “forms” had opened up opportunities for me: I worried that by not teaching modes exclusively, I
might rob students of the ability to succeed. But while I resisted process pedagogy at the start, I soon became a convert to Rhetoric and Composition studies, recognizing it as a unique combination of what I loved best in both political science and English: civic activism, cultural critique, an emphasis on empowerment. I credit Irv Peckham, my then Director of Composition, for introducing me to the political, cultural, and pedagogical debates that continue to thrive in Rhetoric and Composition studies today.

I decided to examine levels of politics in the field and how they affect writing program administration at the end of the third year of my Ph.D. program. Although I had earlier considered other research projects, I gravitated toward this one because of my increased awareness of the political intricacies of WPA work. As both a GTA in the English Department and the assistant director of Ridge University’s Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program, my understanding of the political issues that affect writing instruction had been heightened. My administrative work not only allowed me insight into how faculty across campus viewed writing and theories of writing instruction, it also taught me about the political dance most administrators perform, about the shifting roles and subjectivities they must assume in their various institutional positions. During my fourth year as a GTA and my second year working with Eliza Marks on WAC initiatives, I gained permission to conduct a participant-research study in the TAP seminar. When Marks was eventually assigned to teach the seminar, it seemed that my interest in the politics of pedagogy and program administration would lead to a compelling research opportunity. Although Marks’ taking over of the TAP seminar also complicated my
research—after all, she was both my boss and my disciplinary mentor—it also provided me with a chance to observe her in another dimension of her administrative work.

But while my roles as student of politics, graduate student of Rhetoric and Composition, and assistant director of Writing Across the Curriculum influenced me before and during the data collection phases of this study, my positions as a visiting assistant professor/composition fellow and writing program administrator greatly affected my analysis and interpretation of data. At the end of the 2000-2001 academic year, I decided to apply for a position away from Ridge, hoping to relocate closer to my soon-to-be spouse and earn a more substantial salary while completing the dissertation. When a full-time, non-tenure track position in a newly formed Writing Department opened up—in the right area, no less—I leapt at the chance. Not long after I arrived I answered a call for publication that asked for perspectives on the place of full-time, non-tenure track faculty in composition programs: immersing myself in this area of research, I became increasingly aware of how the politics of institutional location play themselves out in graduate programs, how they lead many GTAs to pursue other kinds of work as they finish their degrees. Much of the research I began combing through was describing my institutional location very accurately. While the composition fellowship afforded me a respectable salary—more than three times the amount I was making as a GTA—it also introduced me to the heavy teaching loads that most non-tenure track faculty face, another factor that urged me to emphasize the ways institutional political location affect the teaching of writing. After this three-year fellowship was complete, I again went on the job market, scrambling to finish the dissertation in the process. My current position as
a non-tenure-track writing program administrator helped me see more clearly the ways in which WPA work can affect positive institutional change, as well as the ways Rhetoric and Composition studies continues to be marginalized in the larger discipline of English and the academy as a whole. As the administrator responsible for teaching assistant preparation, my current position and institutional perspective also influence the conclusions I draw in this study.

Indeed, I see all of these roles—both past and present—shaping my perspectives on teaching assistant preparation, political approaches to writing instruction, and institutional political location. While I am sensitive to the fact that not all researchers find it conventional or appropriate to integrate personal narratives into their work, as a scholar committed to the experienced-based tenets of both feminist research and critical ethnographic methodology, I find it important to surface some of my history here. Not only do I believe that this personal (albeit incomplete) account of my personal history and professional subjectivity is important to readers’ comprehension of my work, it is vital to my own ability to make meaning out of my research.

**Data Collection**

As I stated in the Introduction, my research has been shaped by my desire to gain experience in teaching assistant preparation and by my curiosity about how others perceive the political consciousness Rhetoric and Composition Studies embraces and emits. Following Judith Preissle Goetz and Margaret Diane Le Compte, I chose ethnographic methods because the triangulation process allowed me to answer my
research questions with authority (32). Specifically, participant-observation strategies allowed me to become immersed in (and in many ways a member of) the teaching assistant preparation culture, creating a window for me to explore the politics of GTA enculturation and writing program administration. Field-notes from my observations made it possible for me to record my initial perceptions, and my Research Journal allowed me to expand and reflect upon events I recorded while they were still fresh in my mind. Audio and Video Recordings of classroom discussions allowed me to reference day-to-day proceedings, prompting me to reexamine events based on findings from other data sources, including GTA Written Assignments and GTA and WPA Interviews. These multiple data sources contribute to the validity of my findings by helping me to substantiate my interpretations from a variety of perspectives.

In the strictest sense of the term, however, my study is not a full-blown ethnography. Macroethnography, after all, is a project that involves total immersion into a culture, sometimes for several years. As Wendy Bishop explains:

The ethnographic mode, based in a cultural context, presents a phenomenological and empirical approach to research. It is holistic and naturalistic. Macroethnographies report research on multiple sites and involve larger or longer projects than do microethnographies. Microethnographies can report on the culture of the single classroom, the single learner, and even the single learning event. (Ethnographic 13)

In keeping with Bishop’s definition of microethnography, my study focuses on the culture of a quarter-long seminar. While I draw from twelve weeks of data to make
conclusions in this study, I highlight key events that speak to my research questions and help me make meaning out of the specific events I witnessed and larger culture I studied.

This study commenced in the fall 2000. From orientation until winter break, I immersed myself in teaching assistant preparation culture at Ridge University. Most of my data collection took place during the seminar itself, which met twice weekly, two hours each class session. I also attended departmental and social functions with new GTAs and had informal one-on-one discussions with them and administrators. Below is a focused description of my data collection methods, followed by an explanation of corresponding analysis methods.

Participant-Observation: My role in the TAP seminar was one of participant-observer. At the beginning of the term I obtained permission from WPAs and GTAs to conduct research in the seminar, and explained that I would be using the results of my research in the dissertation. I attended TAP seminar meetings along with GTAs, jockeying between the roles of passive observer and active participant. While I felt it vital to be more than a spectator in the seminar, I also tried to be sensitive to GTAs’ newly developing pedagogical and theoretical perspectives by not interjecting my own biases too forcefully. Regardless of these efforts, however, I surmise that my advanced standing in the graduate program and administrative affiliation with Eliza Marks led many GTAs to position me as “assistant-to,” and/or “complicit with” the TAP instructor and Director of Composition. Similar to findings reported by graduate student administrators in Diana
George’s collection, *Kitchen Cooks, Plate Twirlers, and Troubadours: Writing Program Administrators Tell Their Stories*, I often found myself in an uncomfortable juxtaposition between my roles as graduate student and administrator: like Joanna Atwood Brown, I felt like a “peer who wasn’t a peer;” like Stephen Davenport Jukuri and W. J. Williamson, I felt both “undefined” and “overdetermined.” Nonetheless, by injecting myself into the community I researched, participant observation—at least from my perspective—helped me to become better integrated into the community of new graduate teaching assistants at Ridge.

*Fieldnotes*: During class time I alternated among passively observing, actively participating, and writing down *Fieldnotes*. At the beginning of the quarter these notes were quite copious, as I wanted to describe the participants and their actions in detail, and had yet to perfect my video and audio recording techniques. As the quarter wore on and I became more familiar with participants and technologies, I began to see the value of writing down only the comments/ideas that I felt related to my interest and inquiry into the political. Generally, I began each entry with the date and a summary of the readings and activities covered in class. Throughout, I allowed pertinent topics to dictate my observations, and intermittently recorded notes and participated in class discussion.

*Research Journal*: Throughout the course of the term and the entire research and writing process, I would review my *Fieldnotes* and comment more extensively on the threads therein in my *Research Journal*. Journal entries were informal, stream of consciousness
writing activities that helped me elaborate on issues that I began to see cropping up in my Fieldnotes providing me with an opportunity to reflect even further. It was through these journal entries that I began to focus my research questions and explore how the politics of the field affected teaching assistantship preparation. It was also in the Research Journal that I began to sketch out the focus and organization of each chapter and explore different levels of the political that I saw surfacing in the TAP seminar and literature I was reviewing.

**GTA Written Assignments:** All GTAs who enrolled in the seminar gave me permission to collect and use the Reflective Responses they were assigned each week. Based on seminar readings, these reflections were approximately 500 words and informal, but were designed to prompt GTAs to analyze and synthesize information. Most GTAs used these reflections as a freewriting forum to discuss the reading assignments, although as the quarter wore on, many used them as an opportunity to comment on departmental events, continue class discussions, or speak directly to the ideas and comments brought up in the seminar and their classrooms. In order to support my findings, I use GTAs’ Reflective Responses, particularly those that surface their reactions to their institutional political location as graduate teaching assistants. In addition to the Reflective Responses, I also obtained copies of GTAs’ Teaching Philosophies, a formal assignment in which GTAs reflected on the theories and assumptions that guided their teaching practice. While I do not use this data source in the body of my research, reading the Teaching Philosophies
helped me to reflect on GTAs’ evolving responses to political approaches to writing instruction.

*Interviews:* I use *Interviews* in this study in two ways. First, *Interviews* allow me to gather historical information, not only about the personal histories of the writing program administrators and GTAs I feature in the study, but also about the program and institution where the study took place. *Interviews* also serve as an important method of triangulation, allowing key participants to function as knowledge-makers in the project. While I formally drafted questions before meetings with interview participants, I allowed interview conversations to unfold organically, often deviating from questions as participants’ comments steered me into new or unanticipated directions. With participants’ permission, I tape recorded face-to-face *Interviews*, using email to ask follow-up questions. While I integrate portions of interview transcripts into this study, I did not transcribe each *Interview* in its entirety. In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, I do not cite *Interviewees* in my Works Cited.

*Informal Conversations:* While I try to use them sparingly, *Informal Conversations* also serve as a way of validating and surfacing my findings. To the best of my ability, I would transcribe portions of these conversation from memory into my *Research Journal*. Because these *Informal Conversations* were written from memory, I cross-checked for content accuracy with conversation participants, who confirmed the gist of these conversations and my representation of them.
Participant Feedback: In keeping with the ethnographic tradition of involving participants in the interpretation process, both writing program administrators featured in this study reviewed and critiqued my findings throughout various stages of writing. While each extended analytical license to me as the primary researcher, both complicated my findings and called into question my renderings when their own memories and interpretations conflicted with my analysis. Their feedback was a vital part of my interpretation process, as it forced me to recognize how my observations, memories, and “truths” conflicted with their own. Their help in providing insight into their personal histories and professional subjectivities allowed me to expand my analysis in ways that would not have been possible without their active and critical feedback.

Audio and Video Recordings: I began the study using only an audio recorder to document seminar sessions. Because I worried that videotaping might make the participants self-conscious, I did not videotape the first two weeks of the TAP seminar. By the end of week two, however, my dissertation advisor persuaded me to videotape class proceedings, and with the permission of my research participants, I documented the TAP seminar using both audio and video from that point until the end of the term. After week two, I used the Audio Recordings strictly as a backup device in case the camera malfunctioned or I needed to replace used videotapes. While I do not think that participants ever became completely comfortable with the presence of the camera, they adjusted to it. The visual and oral records that both technologies provide help to verify my reporting and analysis.
Data Analysis

During the winter quarter 2001, I began to comb through data sources, reviewing my Fieldnotes, Research Journal, GTA Written Assignments, and Video Recordings. Throughout my initial review of these sources, I adopted the role of reflective consumer of texts, reading through the data at a leisurely pace, keeping informal notes on themes I saw, and reflecting on all of the information in its various forms. This synthetic review of data permitted me to ruminate on all of the information I was digesting. Throughout my analysis, I used the various data sources to triangulate my findings and test my interpretations and assumptions.

In order to make better sense of some of my data sources, I sketched an informal timeline of the term. In it, I briefly annotated topics of discussion and referenced data sources; this process helped me track events of significance. In essence, this timeline established a loose chronology of discussion topics and events by date. The timeline allowed me to effectively reduce my data into a cohesive, visual document; it also served as an easy reference for data sources. I used my Research Journal to expand on the themes I saw developing in the timeline. While I used the Research Journal during the data collection process primarily as a space for broad speculation, after the timeline was finished, I began to use the journal to narrow the scope of my study. This is in keeping with Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas N. Huckin, and John Ackerman’s use of a “dissemination notebook,” a diary of brief summaries or “gists” of data written in chronological order and detailing themes which evolved from my observations (14).
These written reductions allowed me to formulate concrete hypotheses out of large amounts of data.

In order to analyze GTA Written Assignments, I used a qualitative, deductive method. I read through these assignments in chronological order. Because they often focused on required readings from the TAP seminar, I re-read the primary texts GTAs referenced, most of which came from Victor Villanueva’s Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader. Prior to reading, I also reviewed the videotapes of seminar sessions in which the Cross-Talk articles were discussed. Then, as I read through each document, I made notes on index cards using descriptive titles that referenced the theme of discussion, indicating the date of the response and naming the respondent. Jotting down observations on issues like “politics in the classroom,” “politics in Composition,” “theory vs. practice,” or “student resistance,” I compiled stacks of cards devoted to the same themes and used these stacks to compare and contrast GTA and WPA reactions to the subject matter. This process, while time consuming, was crucial in allowing me to conceptualize the conflicting discourses I saw arising among WPAs and GTAs and between conflicting discourses on political approaches and institutional political location. Although I do not reference these note cards formally in my analysis, they were invaluable in helping me choose “political moments” for analysis and formulate research hypotheses and findings. Along with my Research Journal these index cards allowed me to detect patterns and themes in my data, guided me in answering research questions, and directed me in shaping results.
Following designs outlined by Wendy Bishop (*Ethnographic*), Corrine Glesne, Judith Meloy, and Harry F. Wolcott, I constructed interview questions to triangulate my findings. These tools allowed me to establish whether or not—and/or to what degree—participants agreed with my initial interpretations. I repeated portions of the analysis process in a recursive fashion, crosschecking my assumptions against different data sources, and re-envisioning my interpretations throughout the process.

All of these data collection and analysis procedures work to form the narrative I present of the Ridge University teaching assistant preparation seminar in the fall of 2000. In the remaining chapters of the study, I describe and analyze political moments from that seminar. Throughout, my descriptions are guided by how GTAs and WPAs respond to *political approaches to writing instruction* and *institutional political location*. 
CHAPTER THREE: Pedagogy, Location, and the Vulnerability of Graduate Teaching Assistants

In order to demonstrate the value of examining political approaches to writing instruction within the framework of institutional political location, this chapter showcases discourse events that highlight how both pedagogy and location play out in the teaching assistant preparation seminar I studied. Examining discourse excerpted from a variety of sources—including seminar transcripts, graduate teaching assistants’ written artifacts, and interviews with research participants—this chapter describes how GTAs responded to political approaches to writing instruction and their institutional political locations.

As my analysis will show, many GTAs in the teaching assistant preparation seminar I studied commonly discussed their first-year students’ resistant reactions to political texts: these reactions were sometimes sources of anxiety and/or frustration for GTAs given their inexperience as teachers and their lack of institutional authority. While a host of studies on graduate teaching assistant preparation assert that first time teachers commonly experience levels of anxiety about their performance (see Boardman, Sewell, and Rankin as discussed in Chapter One), because little research focuses on the intersections of political approaches and institutional political location, this chapter adds new dimensions and perspectives to teaching assistant preparation research.

I begin this chapter by familiarizing readers with the activities associated with the teaching assistant preparation program at Ridge during pre-term orientation and the first three weeks of the term. Following, in Section One, I showcase the range of responses
GTAs had toward political approaches to writing instruction, exploring GTAs’ general anxiety about students’ resistance toward the political content of the readings featured in the course. Section Two explores one GTA’s experiences more specifically, analyzing Lucy Pierce’s conflict with a first year student, how this conflict converged with discussions in the TAP seminar about political approaches, and how GTAs began to recognize and respond to their marginalized institutional political locations. Section Three explores how, as the semester progressed, several GTAs began to question the value of political approaches, while others vehemently defended them. Finally, I reflect on the significance of my findings in relation to the seminar I studied and suggest general implications for teaching assistant preparation and the field of Rhetoric and Composition as a whole.

**Introduction to the TAP Seminar**

Like many programs across the country, Ridge University’s teaching assistant preparation initiatives began with a pre-term orientation. In the fall of 2000 the orientation was a three-day event, kicking off on the Wednesday before Labor Day, six days before GTAs would begin teaching. Although the administrators who inherited TAP responsibilities in the English Department that year would have preferred a longer orientation, because timelines were already in place when Allegheny and Marks assumed responsibility, orientation remained a three-day event (Fieldnotes September 2000).

Day One began with a series of introductions: not only were new GTAs introduced to the WPAs they would be working with throughout the term, they met the
English department chair, graduate director, and office staff, and became acquainted with various departmental frameworks, practices, and policies. At this time office staff circulated a GTA Handbook outlining the questions new GTAs frequently ask (and where they could find the answers), and also passed out the *University Handbook of Policies and Procedures*. While only a few minutes were spent reviewing these materials, department officials asked GTAs to become familiar with these materials and contact them if they had any questions about implications for classroom policy (Fieldnotes September 2000).

Preliminary introductions to people and policy took up most of the morning, followed by an afternoon of workshop-style preparation activities. Using their own models as well as guidelines outlined in John Bean’s *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, WPAs introduced GTAs to foundational principles in the teaching of writing, including how to comment effectively on student papers, manage the grading process, and apply the department’s First-Year Outcomes Statement. Although these workshops were concentrated, they provided GTAs with the building blocks they would need to teach “English 101: Rhetoric and Writing” in Ridge’s First-Year Composition Program (Fieldnotes September 2000).

On Day Two GTAs participated in the university-wide orientation for new teaching assistants in all departments, during which GTAs attended both large- and small-group sessions designed to familiarize GTAs with the policies, procedures, and

---

14 See Appendix A.
support services Ridge University asks faculty to utilize in their work at the institution. Among the day’s activities were large-group sessions on how to prepare a syllabus, how to communicate course policy, and how to apply the University’s grading system. Small-group breakout sessions included topics such as best practices in teaching, how to adapt to different learning styles, and how to respond to problem students.

On Day Three of the orientation GTAs were back in the English Department for more practice evaluating student texts and designing classroom activities. Friday’s orientation started with an additional series of in-depth activities developed to help GTAs internalize program evaluation guidelines. WPAs then helped GTAs brainstorm collaborative learning and peer critique exercises that they could bring into their classrooms, and elaborated on ways GTAs could work with their common syllabus and principle textbook, *Doing Public Writing*. All in all, pre-term orientation was a crash course in University and Department policies and process theories of composing and instruction. Given the limited time allotted to GTA preparation prior to the beginning of classes, however, WPAs had virtually no time to help GTAs come to terms with the disciplinary conversations that support political approaches to writing instruction. Eliza Marks would work to expand GTAs’ knowledge of Rhetoric and Composition studies and composition theory and pedagogy throughout the fall term in the TAP seminar.

To be sure, “English 500: Problems Teaching College English” was a theory-rich course, although University Writing Across the Curriculum Director Eliza Marks also built into it time for discussions of teaching practice and institutional policy. As its
syllabus suggests, the TAP seminar asked GTAs to write a series of formal assignments and informal responses, discuss theory and pedagogy in Rhetoric and Composition studies, and engage in dialogue about their teaching throughout the term. During the first week of the seminar Marks also asked GTAs to begin analyzing the initial series of essays their students would read from Doing Public Writing; this gave GTAs additional practice in how to use the textbook as a pedagogical guide in their classrooms. In Weeks Two and Three GTAs also read and discussed parts of Donna Qualley’s Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflexive Inquiry, which, like Doing Public Writing, asks students and teachers to develop writing that fosters an “essayistic stance”—that is, “a way of thinking about ideas that is dialogic and reflexive” (Qualley Turns 3). In this way, Qualley’s book served as a theoretical model for the pedagogy Doing Public Writing worked to enact, as both texts emphasize the value of exploring the personal in relation to the academic. In addition to Doing Public Writing and Turns of Thought, GTAs also began to read Donald Murray’s The Craft of Revision and selections from Victor Villanueva’s Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader. The Craft of Revision gave them a wealth of pedagogical strategies on how to engage students in the writing process, while Cross-Talk worked to give GTAs an overview of composition theory.

As I note in the Introduction, while all four of these texts played important roles, in many ways Victor Villanueva’s Cross-Talk severed as the backbone of the TAP seminar. Introducing GTAs to a range of debates, the reader is a primer for Rhetoric and Composition studies, a literal site where debate, where disagreement, where “cross-talk”

---

15 See Appendix B.
on theory and pedagogy in the field come to life. Although GTAs read many of the essays anthologized in the text, perhaps most central to my study are those that highlight pedagogical and institutional debates that speak to both levels of politics in the field, including “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” by John Trimbur; “The Language of Exclusion: Writing Instruction at the University, by Mike Rose; “Considerations for American Freireistas, by Victor Villanueva; “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing,” by Maxine Hairston; and James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class.” While I do not examine all of these essays or GTAs’ reactions to them, readers should recognize that they served as a political introduction to the field by highlighting the diversity of perspectives even often likeminded scholars embrace.

From my assessment of the literature on teaching assistant preparation programs in the field, the preparation initiatives at Ridge University in the fall of 2000 appear commensurate with those offered by many graduate programs in English across the country. While some programs have the benefit of longer orientations or preparation seminars offered the term prior to GTAs’ first teaching assignments, a variety of TAP programs—such as those showcased in collections by Gibaldi and Mirollo, Bridges, and Pytlik and Liggett—indicate that Ridge’s preparation program was quite comprehensive. Even as I recognize the strengths of the preparation initiatives at Ridge, however, I also recognize the ways in which the teaching of writing is denigrated in many if not most institutions of higher learning. This denigration is exhibited by the dearth of time and resources most institutions commit to preparation in the teaching of writing. The fact that it is common for universities across the United States to spend less than a week preparing
first-time instructors to teach writing is indicative of the marginalized status writing holds in the academy. Indeed, given the short-term exposure GTAs at Ridge had to political approaches to writing instruction, many experienced anxieties about their teaching practice and performance, anxieties at least partially spurred by their lack of familiarity with political issues raised in their textbook. Even though I anticipated GTAs would experience insecurities given their lack of teaching experience and exposure to composition theory and pedagogy, the fact that many associated much of their anxiety to the use of political texts caught me off guard. As Section One of this chapter will illustrate, debates about political approaches to writing instruction often arose when GTAs expressed anxiety about their teaching. In this section I work to answer part of my first research question: namely, how do new GTAs respond to political approaches to writing instruction? That is, how do they respond to a preparation seminar, syllabus, and textbook that compel them to use politically provocative texts as an apparatus to stimulate critical consciousness in their students and their students’ writing.

**Section One: Responses to Political Approaches to Writing Instruction**

As I reflect on the data I collected from the early days of the TAP seminar, it is clear that we were all in a period of transition. I was adjusting to operating my technical equipment, to refining my data collection techniques, to defining the role I would play in the seminar; WPA Eliza Marks was getting to know GTAs and setting the tone for the term; while Sarah Allegheny was not a member of the seminar, she was reacquainting herself with the Director of Composition position, which entailed helping GTAs cope
with the myriad policy issues that erupt in most composition programs; and of course, GTAs were adjusting to their roles and responsibilities as graduate students new to their programs and teachers new to the teaching of writing. As we all settled into the term, what became increasingly evident to me were the ways in which political approaches reinforced and perhaps even enflamed GTAs’ anxieties about their teaching (Fieldnotes September 2000).

A handful of GTAs, for example, expressed feeling awkward about the way their mandated textbook’s essays and assignment prompts asked students to delve into the personal: “I feel like I am grading their life,” commented one MA in literature. Another good-naturedly quipped, “If I have to read one more [student] essay about a dead grandmother, I think I’ll keel over myself” (TAP Fieldnotes 9/14/00). As Karen Surman Paley suggests in *I-Writing: The Politics and Practice of Teaching First-Person Writing*, uncomfortable responses to students’ personal narratives are typical of teachers of all ranks (17; 41-42). I would argue that uneasiness with the personal is particularly prevalent in new teachers of writing, or at least for those who have little exposure to feminist and expressivist theories of writing instruction and/or little experience using personal genres in their own academic work. As several Master’s students in the seminar reported, many of their undergraduate instructors had discouraged them from engaging in personal reflection in their academic writing, sometimes even prohibiting the use of personal pronouns altogether (Fieldnotes September and November 2000; Research Journal November 2000). Given their lack of familiarity with essayistic writing, many GTAs expressed uneasiness with the personal writing prompts students were tackling.
A larger number of GTAs, however, appeared more uncomfortable with their students’ resistance toward required readings that emphasized political issues. Because many of the essays in *Doing Public Writing* emphasize critical-political postures, GTAs reported that some of their students were exhibiting a wide range of responses, including resistance to and rejection of these texts. Of course a good number of scholars in Rhetoric and Composition studies highlight the reality of student resistance toward critical-political subject matter: while these scholars are not naïve to the difficulties student resistance can pose to teachers, the majority of authors who write about political approaches argue that student resistance should be cultivated, not overcome. As these writers attest, student resistance helps to elicit critical thinking and intellectual growth in students (Himley 119; Berlin “Composition and Cultural Studies” 51; Fitts and France “Advocacy” 14). From my observations, however, it seems clear that many new teachers fear student resistance, that they recognize it as a manifestation of disorderly conduct, rather than of intellectual growth.

Anticipating that GTAs would need a platform on which to process students’ varied reactions to the essays in *Doing Public Writing*, Eliza Marks reserved time in the TAP seminar for troubleshooting rough spots and fielding questions (Private conversation September 2000; Research Journal September 2000). In order to focus these conversations during Week Four, Marks asked GTAs to discuss their students’ reactions to an essay from *Doing Public Writing* that surfaced gender hierarchy and sexual discrimination in family roles. While two GTAs expressed that they had had productive classroom discussions surrounding the text, others voiced their dis-ease over and
dissatisfaction with their students’ responses. For instance, one GTA commented that a significant percentage of her students were “simply confused about what it means to be a feminist.” MA in literature “Wendy” noted that some of her students equated feminism to “man-hating” and “bra-burning” (Fieldnotes 9/28/00). While she tried to dispel these assumptions in her own contributions to classroom conversations, Wendy argued that her students “weren’t buying it” (Video recording 9/28/00).

Also an MA in literature, “Patrick” surmised that his students simply were not interested in engaging in discussions about gender hierarchy. He observed that his students saw widespread sexual discrimination as a problem of the past: gender oppression may have been relevant in the 1950s and 1960s, but according to Patrick’s students it was “not relevant to women today” (Video recording 9/28/00). As a result of this prevailing assumption, Patrick postulated, many students dismissed the piece altogether. Given that many people perceive the feminist movement as both irrelevant and hyperbolic, Patrick’s students’ responses are not surprising. As a host of scholars argue, not only do class values affect the way students respond to activist sentiments (Knoblauch 13; Seitz 77), consumer-oriented conceptions about writing instruction and university education compel many students to deny the relevance of cultural critique altogether (Durst 3; Macedo 65-66). Likely unaware of some of this research, Patrick and others appeared anxious over this kind of reaction—or at least unsure of how to work within or through it.

During Week Four of the TAP seminar, two GTAs in particular seemed to be experiencing significant problems in compelling students to engage in the politically
provocative essays there were assigned. They described these struggles in relation to the essay on family roles Marks had used as a touchtone for the day’s discussion. From the following classroom episode that MA in literature “Nancy” describes, it appears that strong voices in her class were refusing to engage in the discussions of gender hierarchies that the essay required. Even when Nancy tried to mediate and engage these voices in related but perhaps more familiar or comfortable contexts, students continued to resist. Recounting her experience in a timid voice, Nancy conceded that like other GTAs, she was having trouble engaging students in this essay in particular and political approaches in general. Offering questions in a spirit of support, Eliza Marks worked to find the underlying cause of Nancy’s anxiety.

**GTA Nancy:** I had a horrible time teaching this section. I don’t know if they were just collectively in a really pissy mood, but occasionally I will have a lot of backtalk and things like that in my class.

**WPA Eliza:** When you say backtalk, you mean at you?

**Nancy:** Yes, at me personally. And sometimes it gets, you know, a little bit too personal. Some days it’s funny and we all sit around and laugh and it’s fine. But this [essay] was really tough for me. It was horrible. I could not get them to engage at all and it was to the point where they kept saying, “We don’t want to talk about this. We don’t want to talk about this.” And so then I changed the discussion to gender constructs [in general], and that didn’t work, and then I brought up Mick Jagger, and
they got into a huge brawl with each other about that. I don’t know if it is just the chemistry in the classroom or what, but I had a really hard time.

**Eliza:** So they didn’t respond at all well even to the narrative [of the essay] and what [the author] was going through?

**Nancy:** Some did, but in very small voices.

**Eliza:** What it sounds like what may be going on with you is an issue of your authority.

**Nancy:** Yeah, I feel like it is really corroded. And I’m sure it has something to do with the way I am presenting myself in class. But I don’t know. Some days it’s just great and others it’s like I have no [trails into silence].

**Eliza:** [Nancy,] one of those things you might do is to ask me or [Sarah Allegheny] or Kelly[^16^] to come visit your class and see if we can put a finger on what is going on. So [that one of us might] observe this as an outsider to help you reconstruct your authority.

**Nancy:** I get e-mails of encouragement from some of my students saying “We know it’s rough” and “We think that what people are saying to you is wrong,” but there are still people saying stuff and it’s just [trails into silence].

**Eliza:** And these are direct attacks on you?

[^16^]: I use my name to indicate references to me as well as to reference my own contributions to TAP conversations.
Nancy: Yes. They know very little personal information about me, but somehow it is spread around the classroom. For instance, they know I don’t have a TV and they think that’s just ludicrous.

[Room erupts with laughter.]

Eliza: [In a joking tone:] Ah, you should be ashamed!

Nancy: And they make fun of me, they make fun of me and it is kind of joke-y, but then at the same time it [trails into silence].

Eliza: There is a lot about authority and the position you are in right now and being a woman only a couple of years older than they are that makes this extremely difficult.

Nancy: I know.

Eliza: I would recommend having someone come in and see what [we] can figure out as far as [this] dynamic [is concerned].

Nancy and Eliza’s interchange reflects many different things in light of my research questions. In my eyes, it most significantly reflects how dealing with political texts complicates GTAs’ authority.

Although Nancy reasons that her self-presentation may likely have been affecting the dynamics of her classroom—“I’m sure it has something to do with the way I am presenting myself in class”—her representation of her students’ comments reflects that they were resistant to the political issues the essay in question was raising. While Nancy seems to hint that her students were more resistant to her authority in general than to political texts in particular, both elements of resistance work to derail Nancy’s ability to
focus classroom discussion. As her comments reflect, although there were days when her class was “just great,” in relation to the essay in question, Nancy represented her experience in the classroom as “horrible.”

Indeed, Nancy’s characterization of her students’ rejection of the essay—“We don’t want to talk about this. We don’t want to talk about this”—suggests not only their resistance to engage in the political, but also their resistance to Nancy’s authority. Not only did students resist examining the politically charged text under discussion, they also refused to engage in a perhaps less charged examination of politics in popular culture: i.e., Mick Jaggar. While the encouraging e-mails Nancy received from some students suggest that not all were equally resistant to the activities of the class, they fortify Nancy’s suspicion that her authority was “corroded”: in my mind, the confidential nature of the e-mail messages reinforces the tenuous dynamic forming in her classroom, as “encouraging” students chose to offer their support in private correspondence rather than through public classroom gestures. Viewed in this light, these e-mails might be another indicator that resistant students were unproductively dominating Nancy’s classroom environment.

What’s more, Nancy’s repeated negative characterizations of her classroom experiences indicate to me the levels of anxiety and frustration she was experiencing in light of her students’ reactions to the political texts they examined. Nancy not only uses the word “corroded” to describe her authority, she uses other negative adjectives to describe her classroom and students, including “horrible,” “pissy,” “tough,” “rough,” and “hard.” Although it appears Nancy put forth repeated efforts to engage students in a
discussion of the text, their resistance to her authority and the text made for an uncomfortable teaching experience. While the student-centered and liberatory teaching methods supported by radical pedagogues in the tradition of Paulo Friere, Ira Shor, and Donald Macedo point to episodes of student resistance as exciting opportunities for critical discourse and student empowerment, Nancy’s characterizations suggest the vulnerability she experienced in her classroom.

Taken in light of Noam Chomsky’s understanding of academics’ propensity toward submission to authority, Nancy astonishment was unsurprising. As Chomsky explains in an interview conducted by Gary Olson and Lester Faigley and published in (Inter)views: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Rhetoric and Literacy, because the culture of schooling socializes students to submit to authority, aspiring academics learn how to be submissive, commonly correlating obedience as indicative of educational success, if not psychological well-being altogether.

Let’s be concrete about it. You and I went to good graduate schools and teach in fancy universities, and the reason we did this is because we’re obedient. [. . .] We came from the kind of background where we’d say, “Look, do it, forget about it, so the teacher’s a fool, do it, you’ll get ahead, don’t worry about it.” That goes on all through school [. . .] [Y]ou allow yourself to be shaped by the system of authority that exists out there and is trying to shape you. Well, some people do this. They’re submissive and obedient, and they accept it and make it through; they end up being people in high places—economic managers, cultural managers, political
managers. There are other people who were in your class and in my class who didn’t do it. When the teacher told them in the third grade to do x, they said, “That’s stupid, and I’m not going to do it.” Those are people who are more independent minded, for example, and there’s a name for them: they’re called “behavior problems.” (79)

Because Chomsky’s remarks describe the socialization of academic professionals, they help to explain one reason why graduate students new to the teaching of writing are uncomfortable with student resistance: as their own academic careers have undoubtedly made clear, “good” students submit to authority—it follows that many academics have a healthy suspicion of students who do not. Of course, it would be unreasonable to suggest that all new teachers fear student resistance or see it as “bad.” Still, if one is to accept Chomsky’s premise, it is predictable that some GTAs might recognize student resistance as indicative of inappropriate classroom behavior.

In her essay, “The GTA Experience: Grounding, Practicing, Evaluating, and Reflecting,” Meg Morgan makes a related point. Reporting on her own experiences as a faculty-administrator in charge of teacher preparation, Morgan writes: “For many understandable reasons, new teachers, [ . . . ] fear the disruptive, unmotivated, or hostile student, the challenges to teaching such a student, and their making inappropriate responses to the student” (399). Because they have yet to master teaching what Chomsky characterizes as the typical “submissive” students, the task of teaching resistant students is even more overwhelming. As transcripts above indicate, both Morgan’s and Chomsky’s insights hold true in my own observations of the TAP seminar. Although not
all GTAs reported experiencing student resistance in their classrooms, many frequently expressed their anxieties on how to handle resistance, whether students directed that resistance toward required readings in particular or GTA authority in general (Research Journal September and October 2000).

What’s more, because most GTAs had little familiarity with scholarship on how to cultivate and manage student resistance, many appeared under-prepared to process and cope with it. While Marks was able to articulate for GTAs the cultural conditioning that underlie students’ resistance to GTA authority, the TAP seminar was also an introduction to the subfield of Rhetoric and Composition studies. Thus, Marks had many disciplinary bases to cover, and therefore a limited amount of time to focus on student resistance and political approaches *per se*. At this early point in the semester, GTAs were still internalizing the fundamentals of writing and rhetorical instruction, including essays like James Kinneavy’s “The Basic Aims of Discourse” and Janet Emig’s “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” written in 1969 and 1977 respectively. While such scholarship is certainly integral to new teachers of writing and new scholars of Rhetoric and Composition studies, because it predates what Greenbaum indicates as the field’s gravitation toward emancipatory movements in writing instruction, it is far-removed from contemporary discourse on political approaches to writing instruction. I suspect that the pressure writing program administrators feel to cover an exorbitant amount of historical, theoretical, and pedagogical ground in teaching assistant preparation seminars results in many GTAs feeling less than prepared to implement political approaches to writing instruction.
Given my own belief in the power of political approaches to help students develop critical consciousness in their writing—and by extension—their lives, situations like Nancy’s are disconcerting to me. My own attraction to the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, after all, came about because of its emphasis on the political, because of the way it accentuated the connections among rhetoric and politics and empowerment. Conceivably because of my allegiances to political approaches, I believed there was something off-kilter going on in Nancy’s classroom, something more than or different from appropriate resistance to authority and texts. Marks’ contributions to TAP discussions indicate that she was also worried about the classroom dynamic Nancy was describing. In my observation, Marks’ comments helped Nancy and other GTAs process their students’ behaviors in constructive ways (Research Journal September 2000).

More specifically, Marks’ contributions emphasized for GTAs that student resistance toward inexperienced teachers is common. As Marks offered, “There is a lot about authority and the position you are in right now and being a woman only a couple of years older than they are that makes [teaching] extremely difficult.” Jennifer Meta Robinson makes a similar argument in her essay “A Question of Authority.” As she writes: “Graduate-student instructors in particular may face problems because they may be perceived as less qualified” (120). I would argue that the title “teaching assistant” clearly indicates a lack of professional and institutional clout; when one couples this less-than-authoritative title with obvious physical and/or material indicators that suggest a

---

17 As I note in the Introduction, GTAs at Ridge were technically classified as teaching associates. Because the title teaching assistant was more widely used in the department, however, I use it throughout this study.
lack of authority, it becomes clear that GTAs hold many disadvantages in constructing their classroom ethos. As Meta Robinson explains, undergraduates are “[acutely] aware of their own status in the educational hierarchy[:;]” as such, they “can be adept at determining others’ through such indicators” (120). Given the fact that many GTAs resemble their students—in physical stature, dress, age, economic status, etc.—undergraduates recognize in GTAs many of the indicators Meta Robinson acknowledges. The institutional, material, and corporeal spaces GTAs typically inhabit cannot help but complicate their ability to maintain productive authority in the classroom, regardless of the pedagogy they use. Thus, it can be argued that GTAs are vulnerable to challenges to their authority that institutionally authorized, materially sanctioned faculty do not forego as often.

With this vulnerability recognized, one might argue that episodes like the one Nancy described are somewhat unavoidable, particularly in the face of a political approach to writing instruction that works to cultivate critical consciousness. I would suggest, however, that Nancy’s situation also illustrates the ways GTAs’ institutional political location creates obstacles to their use of politically provocative texts consistent with political approaches to writing instruction. Not only does their lack of familiarity with the teaching of writing compromise their positions in the classroom, GTAs’ status as assistants, coupled with their physical and material status, makes challenges to their authority predictable. While I had no statistical method to gauge the degree to which politically charged readings affected Nancy and other GTAs’ authority construction, my analysis of data above leads me to conclude that this approach complicated Nancy’s
already tenuous classroom authority. Indeed, while Marks duly recognizes that “being a woman only a couple of years older than they are” likely has something to do with Nancy’s students’ challenges to her authority, students’ refusal to engage in political discussions—“We don’t want to talk about this”—appears to also be indicative of their challenges to Nancy’s authority.

Still, let me be clear: multiple factors appear to have contributed to the erosion of Nancy’s authority in the situations she describes, factors including (as Nancy concedes) self-presentation and gender- and age-biased responses to authority. Although it would be too far a leap to suggest that Doing Public Writing’s politically-charged essays were the main dynamic affecting Nancy’s ability to maintain productive control over the activities in her classroom, her contributions to the TAP seminar reflect that Nancy was surprised and disappointed by her students’ resistance to readings in the textbook and her authority. As contributions from other GTAs make clear, Nancy was not alone. Others were also meeting a resistance to their authority and politically provocative essays in tandem.

Indeed, one of MA in poetry Lucy Pierce’s students appeared to be exhibiting an even more nocuous reaction to GTA authority and political approaches than Nancy described in her classroom. Lucy first began to discuss her conflicts with first-year student Jeff Hogan on the same day that Nancy described her classroom situation. As Lucy explained, Jeff was angered by the political content in many of the essays in Doing Public Writing, and this anger appears—at least in part—to have inspired his challenges to Lucy’s authority. As Lucy claimed, Jeff offered up angry comments in reference to
several of the required readings in the course, comments such as “Why do we have to read this shit?” and “What’s the point of doing this?” (TAP Fieldnotes 9/28/00; Video recordings 9/28/00; Personal interview March 2002). While I have only Lucy’s representations to guide my analysis, her depictions suggest that Jeff was offended by what he perceived to be anti-male sentiments offered in some of the essays in Doing Public Writing. As Lucy described:

**GTA Lucy:** I have a kid in my class that every time we discuss essays he always accuses me of making it a feminist class. He thinks that everything we have read so far is feminist, with the exception of [an essay that discusses the representations of men in film and literature].

**WPA Eliza:** Which of course is written by [author X] who explicitly claims to be a feminist and claims that his reading [of film and literature] is informed by feminist critique. You know, one of the things you might even do is say to [Jeff] that [author X] explicitly admits to being a feminist, but this other essay [in Doing Public Writing] by [author Y] makes no claims to feminism. Of course, [Lucy], I know what I would do [in response to Jeff], but I’m in a different situation than you: what I would say to [Jeff] is, “Yeah, I’m a feminist, and damn proud of it.”

**Lucy:** I mean, he didn’t even read the essay he’s complaining about. He didn’t even read the essay.

**Eliza:** That’s the kind of student [who can really make teaching difficult].
Lucy: I have another question. [Jeff] is the same kid that comes into class everyday late—I mean, really late—and I’ve talked to him about it twice and he came in one day on time, and then came in the next time really late again.

GTA/MA in literature Megan: Lock the door!

Lucy: I can’t.

Megan: Mmhmm. [indicating “Yes you can.”]

GTA Patrick: [In a joking tone:] Slam the door right in his face!

[Laughter erupts, and GTAs ask questions about how to handle disruptive behavior in relation to Jeff’s actions. In response to these questions, Marks interjects.]

Eliza: There is a way in which [Jeff’s late arrivals and disruptive behavior] need to stop. How much you can really do to stop that disruptiveness is another question. You have in your syllabus the fact that tardiness is [not acceptable].

Lucy: I pointed that out to him twice, he says, “Yeah, I’ve just read that in the syllabus,” and then I say, “Well, good.”

Eliza: And you’ve had talks with him asking him to respect you and the rest of the class?

Lucy: Yes. [Lucy explains one of these confrontations, which appears to have effected little change in Jeff’s behavior.]

Eliza: Well [gesturing to the rest of the class], you guys have any ideas?
**Participant Observer Kelly:** Do you teach very early or is it just the regular part of the day?

**Lucy:** No, it’s at three o’clock in the afternoon, and he told me that [ours] is the only class he has on Tuesday/Thursday. I feel like telling him that if he comes to class late everyday just not to come.

**GTA/MA in Literature “Rebecca”:** I have a time limit, and I tell them if they are going to be later, not to come to class.

**Eliza:** And the way he enters is a problem as well?

**Lucy:** Yes. He’ll smirk at me when he comes in, look at his watch, and then he’ll sit down and make a big deal of opening his book bag. He just doesn’t care.

**Eliza:** I suspect that what he is doing is challenging your authority, that he’s making a clear challenge to your authority.

**Lucy:** [Nodding in affirmation:] It started up again after he got his paper back and got a “D” on it. Of course he’s missed all my lectures on thesis statements and paragraphs and . . .

**Eliza:** And what your expectations are?

**Lucy:** Yes.

**Eliza:** You’ve got yourself a really [un]pleasant situation. And I would be inclined to continually keep track of those tardies and mark his grade down as you go. One of those things I think you have to decide is what is the most [productive way to handle this situation]. [Should you] just let
him come in and pull this stuff and ignore him, or challenge him? My gut feeling is that the best thing to do is to completely ignore him.

**Lucy:** [Nodding in affirmation:] That’s what I’ve been doing.

**Eliza:** Because in terms of the challenge to your authority—that’s going to happen—that’s going to happen probably for a really long time, that somebody is going to decide to do that in your class. My best advice, and I know it sounds silly, but stay centered and take your authority. You are the teacher of the course. You are in there for a reason and you just have to stand in that spot and not give him the power. And you’re not the Lone Ranger in this. There is a tremendous amount of literature out there about authority in the classroom and the way that some students resist. And it is more difficult for women than it is for men to get authority from your students.

In my analysis, this excerpt represents the kinds of authority challenges and disruptive behavior that many GTAs generally face in a variety of pedagogical environments. More specifically, however, I believe that in it readers can detect how politically provocative readings appear to influence Jeff’s resistant, turned inappropriate, demeanor. While collections like Blitz and Hurlbert’s *Composition and Resistance* indicate that undergraduates commonly reflect resistance to political subject matter—indeed, that such resistance is a sign of intellectual growth—Lucy’s descriptions represent resistance to political approaches and challenges to instructor authority in tandem. Although playing out to different degrees, both Nancy’s and Lucy’s comments
suggest that political approaches to writing instruction reinforce undergraduates’ propensity to challenge the authority of GTAs. Rather than being productive markers of intellectual growth, one could hypothesize that such challenges are a side-effect of GTAs’ marginal institutional political location.

As illustrated in the transcript above, Lucy begins her description of Jeff’s behavior by asserting his resistance to political texts, a source of frustration for Lucy: as she describes, Jeff “always accuses me of making it a feminist class. He thinks that everything we have read so far is feminist.” Not only does Jeff appear not to have read the texts he rejects, Jeff frequently came to class late, arrived in disruptive fashions, and apparently mocked Lucy in the process. As far as Lucy was concerned, “He just [didn’t] care.”

While it is impossible (and perhaps counterproductive) to gauge the degree to which resistance to political texts is incited by GTAs’ vulnerability, I think it would be irresponsible to suggest that political approaches had no affect on Jeff’s antagonistic remarks and challenges to Lucy’s authority. Perhaps it is helpful to distinguish between students’ productive resistance toward authority (which signals movement toward critical consciousness) and students’ inappropriate challenges to teacher authority (which signals movement to derail classroom activities). While I do not want to suggest that political approaches to writing instruction necessarily provoke inappropriate behavior, one could argue that, 1) because GTAs have little experience managing both appropriate and inappropriate forms of resistance and, 2) because political approaches work to incite resistance, teaching assistants face special challenges when adopting political approaches
to writing instruction. Lucy’s comments illustrate how these challenges induce frustrations with and vulnerability in her work in complex ways.

Indeed, the challenges to authority Lucy faced were a source of frustration in her work life as a teacher. A signal of this frustration surfaces in Lucy’s lack of response to Marks’s suggestion that she might embrace a feminist subjectivity in order to disarm Jeff. As the transcript reflects, Lucy does not specifically acknowledge this option; instead, she offers further proof of Jeff’s inappropriate behavior.

**Eliza:** Of course, [Lucy], I know what I would do [in response to Jeff], but I’m in a different situation than you: what I would say to [Jeff ] is, “Yeah, I’m a feminist, and damn proud of it.

**Lucy:** I mean, he didn’t even read the essay he’s complaining about. He didn’t even read the essay.

As Lucy later explained in an interview, she did not feel comfortable embracing a feminist subjectivity in her classroom because she felt it might provoke more of Jeff’s inappropriate behavior (Personal interview March 2002). That is, she saw Jeff’s behavior as something more exaggerated than the typical kinds of resistance some students display against feminism or toward authority figures who, like Lucy, may be inexperienced, under-credentialed, young, female, etc. In Lucy’s mind, Jeff’s behavior should not have been labeled “predictable.” What was frustrating to Lucy was not only that Jeff was negatively affecting the environment of her classroom, but also her perception that she could have somehow handled the conflict better (Personal interview March 2002). While Lucy agreed that TAP seminar discussions of her conflict helped to ease her anxieties,
expectations about her teaching performance left her feeling she had somehow responded to Jeff inadequately. And though she herself was a growing advocate for the importance of political approaches to writing instruction, she also wondered the extent to which the focus on politics in her classroom exacerbated her conflicts with Jeff (Personal interview March 2002).

The fact that Lucy internalized at least some responsibility for the developing conflict with Jeff reveals how political texts can instill negative perceptions in GTAs about their teaching performance and work. Again, let me be clear that there is no direct evidence to suggest that Lucy’s conflict with Jeff resulted because of the political issues her class raised. Further, the vast amount of research in teaching assistant preparation suggests that feelings of inadequacy and anxiety are common for new teachers of writing regardless of the pedagogical approach used in their programs. Even still, Lucy’s comments from the seminar and personal interviews suggest that political approaches can lead to additional kinds of anxiety and vulnerability for new teachers of writing.

Classroom episodes like the ones described above prompted my interest in the affects of institutional political locations on the work of teachers of writing. Specifically, Lucy’s experiences helped me begin to wonder about the extent to which political approaches to writing instruction exacerbated GTAs’ feelings of vulnerability, how such approaches prompted them to recognize their marginalized locations both inside their classrooms and within their university communities. Thus, in the next section of this chapter, I explore another facet of my initial research question: How do GTAs respond to their institutional political locations? More directly, I examine the extent to which
GTAs’ marginalized institutional status affect feelings of under-preparedness and vulnerability. To find the answers to this second question, I turn to additional seminar transcripts and Reflective Responses written by GTAs.

Section Two: GTAs’ Responses to Institutional Political Location

As I continued to reflect on Lucy’s conflict with Jeff and its greater implications in the program(s) I studied, I began to consider how GTAs’ perceptions of their institutional political locations affected their work and their perceptions of their work (Research Journal October 2000). As subsequent transcripts indicate, there was growing debate among TAP participants about the appropriate way to handle disruptive students in general, and Lucy’s conflict in particular. Many GTAs, for example, believed that Lucy should have the authority to permanently remove Jeff from her class given his behavior, and some GTAs became frustrated when Marks complicated this assumption (Fieldnotes 9/28/00). To be sure, there was an emerging difference of opinion among GTAs on the degrees of autonomy they had—or should have—in handling problem students.

On one side of the spectrum was GTA “Carole.” A former lawyer, MA student in Rhetoric and Composition, and experienced community college teacher, Carole complicated the idea that Jeff’s late arrivals were a form of disruption: after all, many of her former community college students had to juggle a variety of responsibilities in order to make it to class, and few of their instructors regarded late arrivals—or student resistance to texts, for that matter—as cause for disciplinary action (TAP video recording
and Fieldnotes 9/28/00). Was entering late and showing disdain for texts really inappropriate? Did Jeff’s behavior really constitute a threat to Lucy? Questions like these led to a provocative interchange about institutional political location among members of the TAP seminar, an interchange in which I participated.

**GTA Carole:** Well, I mean if you ask him not to be disruptive and take it as a given that he’s going to be late for some reason, then [shrugs]

**Participant Observer Kelly:** I don’t know how you feel about this, Eliza, but I think that if [Lucy] think[s] that this [behavior] is intentional and [she’s] given him warning after warning, then I think that it is perfectly ok to say “Don’t come to my class late anymore.”

**WPA Eliza:** Well, yeah, you can say that.

**GTA Lucy:** That’s where I feel I’m at right now.

**Eliza:** Yeah, you can say that, that it is expected that he be there on time.

**Lucy:** Should I say that when he comes in, in front of everyone, or should I wait and say it after class?

**Eliza:** I would do it afterwards and I’ll tell you why. [Given his past responses to you,] my sense is that he is going to do everything possible to further erode your authority [. . .], and you don’t need to go through that yourself in order to tell him this. So I would [confront him in private].

**GTA Don:** What happens if he shows up late after you have told him this?

**Eliza:** I’m not sure what the policy is here at [Ridge University]; I think this is a question you might ask [the Director of Composition, Sarah]
Allegheny]. At [my old institution] my TAs had every authorization to call campus security and have [a student] removed.

Lucy: Excellent! [Class erupts with laughter]

Eliza: Now, I don’t know that that is the case at [Ridge University], so we can’t do that without finding out first.

Lucy: He’s been late so many times it has got to constitute more than four hours of class time [the limit a student could miss and still pass the course].

Eliza: Ok. Let’s raise this with [Director of Composition Sarah Allegheny] and see what there is to be done from that angle.

While Carole’s initial comment indicates that she believed students should be given some leeway in response to arriving late, my own reaction was quite different. As a teacher with experience at Ridge as well as one other institution, I deemed it reasonable to require habitually late and duly warned students to arrive on time—or not at all.

Although Marks did not object to this sentiment when I voiced it, she cautioned Lucy to engage in her interactions with Jeff diplomatically, repeatedly indicating that Lucy should not take any action without contacting the Director of Composition, Sarah Allegheny.

Such policy discussions were an important part of TAP, but my observations led me to believe that the ambiguity over policy was a bit overwhelming to some GTAs. To help straighten things out, one GTA retrieved from his backpack a copy of the University Handbook of Policies and Procedures and read aloud the protocol on how to handle disruptive students. The handbook made clear that a faculty or staff member faced with a
disruptive student could remove the student from a class, although not permanently without a judicial hearing. In the event a faculty member felt that a student was a safety risk, the instructor was to contact the Ridge University Department of Safety (Fieldnotes 9/28/00). Even given these written policies for faculty faced with problem students, however, Marks emphasized that GTAs should not remove a student from class without the approval of their department supervisor, Sarah Allegheny.

But even given this directive, GTAs remained persistent in debating the finer points of their classroom autonomy. This debate helps to spell out some of the unfounded assumptions many GTAs had about their institutional authority. Carole again entered the conversation, continuing to complicate representations of Jeff’s behavior.

**GTA Carole:** I have some problems [. . .] with labeling a student who is late even though it is a challenge to authority as disruptive. He hasn’t . . . I come from a community college background at [Gateway] State where we have students who actually are threatening, and I don’t know, he is not a physical threat. It is not assault.

**GTA Lucy:** I never said he was threatening.

**Carole:** But it’s not as small as that. I don’t think we should be so loose with the definition “disruptive” [. . .] [There is a] way of doing this without involving security—because that also scares all the other students in the class. I’ve had to do that at [Gateway] State and it is miserable—it’s just the worse thing you can possibly imagine once you do that. And if you tell them “Don’t come late again or I’m going to ask you to leave,”
you are setting up this confrontation that takes up so much time and energy for you as a teacher. I mean, you have to continually process this and have to help your class process this.

**WPA Eliza**: I think at some level... There are two things I’d say about that. One, it is at one level an individual decision as to the nature of the disruption. And [two] I agree with you, [Carole,] that this is a non-violent situation. It is still a real pain. But the call that [Lucy] has to make is: Does it interfere with the learning of my other students? And that is sometimes a call hard to make.

As an experienced teacher, Carole’s remarks helped to illustrate for GTAs how policy decisions were less black and white than some had anticipated them to be. On the other side of the spectrum of GTA responses to Lucy’s plight, however, several GTAs felt that it was reasonable to demand students conduct themselves with a certain amount of decorum and respect. If they did not, these GTAs reasoned, faculty should have recourse—no matter their rank.

**GTA/MA in literature “Rob”**: Why can’t we just tell a student like that to get out and not come back to class? They don’t need to come in and slack. Why can’t we force them into some responsibility? I feel like we are setting up all these little [trails to silence]. I mean they’re adults now. They keep pushing us and we have to keep bending over.
**GTA Don**: But they’re not adults, [Rob]. [We have to give them more chances] because something we say might stick, because we’re here to help them learn.

**WPA Eliza**: There is due process, [Rob], so make sure if you handle it, you handle it according to due process. And you better make sure that your Director of Composition knows about this, because when this kid comes back and you haven’t followed due process you’re in a world of ugliness. Because there’s a good possibility that that student will be back in there [to challenge your decision] and you’ll be in trouble. [. . . ] I understand your frustration, but I tend to [believe] like [Don] that you give [a student] as many chances as possible, that this person actually is in need of something from us.

As Rob’s remarks suggest, he was uncomfortable with what he perceived as GTAs’ lack of authority in handling disruptive students. As a college instructor with responsibility for the day-to-day operation of a classroom, I too felt frustrated about Lucy’s lack of agency. As perhaps Rob did, I performed my teaching duties under the assumption that I could remove a problem student from my classroom if the circumstances called for it, and that in some extreme cases I might have to make this decision without the approval of my Director of Composition. Unfortunately, as Marks’ comments again suggested, making this kind of a call is a complex process. What’s more, negotiating these discussions was complicated for Marks, who was not yet fully aware of her purview to give GTAs advice on matters of discipline.
Given her own precarious institutional location and GTAs’ lack of experience in handling problem students, Marks reemphasized the importance of consulting the Director of Composition, Sarah Allegheny: this was necessary not only to make sure that Lucy did not violate Jeff’s rights, but to ensure that Lucy received the proper guidance, support, and protection only a Director of Composition could provide her. Given GTAs’ lack of experience, WPAs provide a necessary form of protection for GTAs, who require mentorship in negotiating classroom policy, particularly policies on student behavior. As Julia Ferganchick argues in “Contrapower Harassment in Program Administration,” faculty of all ranks are at a disadvantage when it comes to sanctioning students for bad behavior: indeed, it is a common misperception that “students cannot harass teachers” because teachers are perceived as more powerful than students (334). Unfortunately, the pervasive belief in this perception helps to conceal the vulnerability of GTAs, instructors who have less institutional power than tenure track or more experienced faculty. Student codes of conduct often do not address the reality of “student-to-teacher harassment,” making it difficult for all levels of faculty to bring charges against “less powerful” students (334).

From my analysis of her comments, Marks’ experience gave her insights into these complexities. Her comment to Rob suggests as much, cautioning him to avoid the “world of ugliness” that can result if GTAs don’t follow proper institutional procedures.

To put some closure on the matter, Marks gave some additional advice:

**WPA Eliza:** Every university has a set of rights and responsibilities for students. I’ll work to dig that up and get back to you. But you know you
guys, this is all sticky stuff. I don’t have the perfect answers for all this. I’ve faced this a million times and there are a million different things [you could do] depending on the circumstances, depending on the issue, depending on the student, and I can’t judge for you the severity of the issue all the time. It sounds though, in what you’re saying [Lucy], that you may be able to contain him the way you are, keeping a very tight paper trail, throwing him out when he is disruptive, when he’s not ignoring him, letting him [come in late] and do what he is going to do. [. . .] I’m sorry you’re having to face this your first time in [the classroom].

There will be plenty of classes when no one acts like this.

In as much as they require GTAs to cultivate their own judgment and reflect on their own experience, Marks’ comments reflect her faith in GTAs’ discretion, and indicate her reliance on a feminist, experienced-based pedagogical style. They also help reveal the vulnerable institutional location GTAs occupy: as Marks cautions, disciplinary procedure is “sticky stuff,” something that no GTA should attempt to handle without the authority of a Director of Composition. Still, sentiments like Rob’s illustrate the ways in which GTAs were becoming impatient with—and increasingly cognizant of—their lack of institutional authority.

Unfortunately, directly after the TAP seminar—as if on cue—Jeff again arrived late to Lucy’s class, and in disruptive fashion (Pierce personal interview March 2002). The following week, when Jeff arrived late once more, Lucy reported that she “had had
“enough” (Pierce personal interview March 2002). In response to his behavior, Lucy told Jeff that he had accumulated enough absences to fail, and that he should therefore “no long consider [himself] a member of the course” (Pierce personal interview March 2002). It was in this last sentiment that Lucy overstepped her institutional authority.

The Lucy/Jeff Conflict

The remaining details of Lucy’s conflict with Jeff have since become part of TAP 2000 lore. Unfortunately, I did not witness any of the events that I describe in this section. As such, I rely on information I collected from interviews and private conversations with GTAs and WPAs to reconstruct these representations. I caution readers to take my versions of reality not as reflections of observed events, but as one researcher’s attempt to make meaning out of happenings that influenced her research findings.

As my research journal and interview data illustrate, although Jeff left Lucy’s class that day without incident, he returned directly after class, requesting that she accompany him to his athletic advisor’s office. As Lucy later reported, she imagined that the advisor wanted clarification about Jeff’s failing performance, and she was willing—if not thrilled—to discuss the situation (Pierce personal interview March 2002). When Lucy reached the advisor’s office, she reported being greeted with antagonism and veiled threats: according to Lucy, the advisor told her that as a teaching assistant she had no
authority to fail a student, that a complaint would be filed against Lucy if she didn’t reconsider (Pierce personal interview March 2002).

The day after her confrontation with the athletic advisor, Lucy informed Director of Composition Sarah Allegheny of the scene of intimidation she had faced. This was the first time Allegheny had heard anything about Lucy’s recurring problems with Jeff, and was taken aback to hear the extent to which the conflict had escalated. While Allegheny was disturbed about the way Jeff’s advisor had treated Lucy, she was also upset that Lucy had not informed her sooner of the problems she was experiencing (Allegheny personal interview June 2003).

Given that Lucy had not followed due process procedure, bypassing the Director of Composition and evicting Jeff from her class of her own accord, Allegheny and other department officials were in a tenuous bind. While they wanted to support Lucy’s authority, the athletic advisor had a point: Lucy’s actions were not institutionally sanctioned (Allegheny and Marks collaborative interview, June 2003). As such, department officials felt obliged to offer Jeff another chance to redeem himself, and placed him in an alternate section of the course. In order to ensure Jeff’s behavior improved and to give the department recourse if it did not, Allegheny asked him to sign a document promising that he would arrive to class on time, conduct himself in a respectful manner, and complete all assignments in a timely fashion (Allegheny personal interview June 2003). Although Allegheny had originally considered placing Jeff back in Lucy’s class, Marks objected: given Jeff’s previous behavior, Marks worried that he might
negatively affect Lucy’s ability to maintain a productive classroom environment (Marks personal interview June 2003). I suspect that Marks’ growing awareness of GTAs’ anger over the situation also influenced her objection (Research Journal October 2000 and June 2003).

Even though department officials had worked to make the best out of a bad situation, GTAs were angry about their decision. Many felt that placing Jeff in another section undermined Lucy’s authority, and by extension their own (Personal conversations, September 2000; Research Journal October 2000). Because of the growing animosity, MA in literature Nancy requested that officials publicly address the department’s decision-making process. The department complied, inviting a staff member from University Judiciaries to address the TAP seminar and explain the many legal and ethical complexities that prompted the department to place Jeff in an alternate section.

Although I was not present the day of the open forum, from GTAs’ accounts it did not accomplish what most had hoped it would. GTAs left the forum upset because Lucy Pierce’s actions had been held up as examples of what not to do: during the forum department officials explained that expelling students from class could not be done without the authority of the Director of Composition, and that GTAs should not attempt to negotiate such situations with students or university advisors on their own. Many GTAs interpreted this pronouncement as a form of public humiliation for Lucy, an
insensitive way to treat a GTA who had had to handle a difficult student her first term teaching (GTA Reflective Responses 10/12/00; Research Journal October 2000).

To inflame the situation even more, the day following the open forum, Lucy reported being assaulted by Jeff. According to Lucy’s testimony, Jeff shoved her from behind, which caused her to spill the drink she was carrying. As Lucy described, Jeff uttered to her, “God, get out of the way,” as he backed down the hallway, “leering” at her. There were no witnesses to the alleged assault (Pierce interview March 2002; Allegheny interview June 2003).

Not surprisingly, Lucy said the physical confrontation had shaken her (Pierce personal interview March 2002). Returning to the GTA office immediately after, she discussed what had happened with GTA Carole, who helped her compose a letter describing the assault, and together they went to Sarah Allegheny’s office (Allegheny follow-up interview, June 2004). Conferring with judiciaries over the phone and given the option to “inform the police or not,” Allegheny and Lucy worked to file a complaint against Jeff that same day, but did not call police (Allegheny personal interview June 2003). Later in the week, when Jeff was spotted sitting outside of Lucy’s office space, Allegheny called police, who contacted Jeff and warned him to stay away from Lucy (Ridge University Composition Committee Minutes, October 16, 2000). A few days later, Lucy walked out of her office to find Jeff yet again, this time pointing at her. Although Jeff later claimed that he was reenacting the scene of the incident to prepare for his defense, Lucy felt as if Jeff were stalking her. She reported that her fear of Jeff
caused her to lose sleep, experience nightmares, and dread walking through campus alone (Pierce personal interview March 2002; Allegheny personal interview June 2003).

Certainly, Lucy and Jeff’s conflict cannot be blamed on political approaches or GTAs’ lack of institutional authority. Unfortunately—even though it is not widely acknowledged—student harassment of teachers is a common occurrence (Ferganchick 334). Still, as I have posited before, it would be irresponsible to suggest that political approaches and Lucy’s vulnerable institutional political location had no affect on her experiences with Jeff. While the degree to which these levels of the political did influence the conflict between Lucy and Jeff cannot be quantified, the ways in which their conflict influenced the TAP program at Ridge are quite easy to establish. I do so below through an analysis of GTAs’ reactions to Lucy’s situation, which they voiced in their Reflective Response papers.

**Will, Rob, and Nancy: GTA Responses to Marginalized Institutional Political Location**

From my standpoint, I could see that many GTAs were resentful about department officials’ handling of Lucy’s case; they were dissatisfied with both the way the open-forum was handled and how Lucy’s conflict with Jeff was resolved (Research Journal October 2000). I have chosen to reproduce portions of three response papers that discuss GTAs’ feelings about the situation, as each represents common complaints GTAs had over the handling of Lucy’s conflict. These responses convey a wide range of sentiments. In light of my research questions, they are significant for the ways they
display GTAs’ dissatisfaction with and anger over their lack of institutional authority and classroom autonomy.

An attorney in his early thirties and someone who I would characterize as both even-tempered and good natured, MA student “Will” wrote the following in his response paper:

I would like to bring up something that a few of us have been discussing since the [judiciaries] forum in our last class. I learned a great deal about the university judicial procedures and what to do, in general, if a situation like [Lucy’s] were to happen again. As I brought up in that class, I think how a TA handles such a situation depends somewhat on life experiences. For instance, I probably would not have gone down to the athletic advisor’s office with the student because my past experiences would have told me that I was walking into an adversarial position and that another avenue should be pursued. However, if I were twenty-two with only an undergraduate degree behind me, I really can’t say what I would have done—I might have thought it would have been helpful in resolving the matter to go to that office with the student. In any event, just as a suggestion, it might be useful to spend a bit of time in orientation on these types of procedural matters (although I think much of it is spelled out in the Code of Conduct booklet that most of us need to read more carefully). (GTA Reflective Response 10/12/00)
As I see it, Will’s evenhanded response shows that he recognized Lucy’s handling of her situation was somewhat naïve; still, he indicates his solidarity with Lucy. As he conceded, “if I were twenty-two with only an undergraduate degree behind me, I really can’t say what I would have done.” While it appears Will is cognizant that Lucy’s decision to take disciplinary matters into her own hands complicated the way the department responded to her situation, he urges administrators “to spend a bit of time in orientation on these types of procedural matters.” As I read over the bulk of GTAs’ responses from that week, Will’s is among the few to suggest a nuanced understanding of how both WPAs’ and GTAs’ precarious institutional political locations affected the situation. By alluding that “the Code of Conduct booklet” would ultimately determine the way officials handled Lucy’s situation, Will suggests that the department had little discretion in its decision to reassign Jeff, and that GTA arguments to the contrary were moot. Nonetheless, his response ends by eliciting a common reaction among GTAs: both Lucy and department officials may have circumvented negative outcomes had WPAs spent more time on “procedural matters” in their preparation initiatives. In essence, one could say that Will’s response reflects a gradated perception of the institutional political location GTAs inhabited in the university authority structure, but that he also believed WPAs and other department leadership had not properly prepared GTAs to handle such situations.

Rob wrote an even more strongly worded response. As readers remember, he was the master’s student in literature who earlier voiced his frustration over GTAs’ lack of disciplinary authority:
I would like to direct my comments to the meeting last Thursday [with judiciaries]. I must say I was rather shocked about the manner in which the department handled the entire situation. First, the department did not set up a very welcoming or open environment to discuss the issues at hand. The presentation did not address TA questions on discipline. Throughout the presentation I heard the phrase, “academic freedom” mentioned. Faculty members have this supposed “academic freedom” in designing course material and controlling the classroom environment. However, the whole presentation gave me the impression that we really do not have this freedom in controlling our classroom environment. If we had this freedom, I feel this whole event would not be an issue to be debated. It would have been handled according to the instructor’s discretion. The whole judiciaries system, like the presentation itself, tries to act as a security blanket. It is supposed to make us feel good, as if things really support this “academic freedom.” However, this is a false sense of security. (GTA Reflective Response 10/12/00)

Rob’s comments on academic freedom bring up a provocative point. As his reflections suggest, the judiciaries official had argued that GTAs have academic freedom and therefore garnered forms of professional discretion in their classrooms (Research Journal March 2002). According to Rob’s reasoning, however, such academic freedom was a ruse, a “security blanket” that offers only “a false sense of security.”
Unlike Will’s response, Rob’s words convey a clear sense of anger at GTAs’ lack of institutional authority. Further, his argument about academic freedom deserves attention. After all, if Lucy actually had discretion in determining how she would handle Jeff’s behavior, Jeff’s performance would have dictated his failure in the course.

Because Lucy did not have the institutional authority to bar Jeff from her classroom, she did not garner the freedom necessary to control her classroom environment. Had Lucy been a tenure-track or more experienced faculty member, I suspect the situation may have been resolved in very different ways: indeed, a fully-sanctioned faculty member would likely not have been asked to consult the Director of Composition before permanently removing a student from her classroom. While Rob does not imply this suspicion, his statement intimates that the institution inequitably denied Lucy the level of classroom authority proportionate with her position as instructor of record.

When I reflect on Rob’s comments, they indicate his sense of frustration over Lucy’s situation, a frustration that appears to be intensified by his growing awareness of GTAs’ lack of institutional power. As he continues:

When an institution, whether it be a university or corporation, goes through the process of screening and hiring employees, the institution is affirming its faith and trust in the new employee. The institution would not hire people whose judgment is questionable at best. That is why the whole interview/application exists: to select candidates who can exercise sound judgment in the work environment. Why hire an employee the institution cannot trust? The presentation gave me the impression that the
university/department does not trust our judgment. Dr. [Allegheny’s] frequent comparison between the [Amy] and [Lucy] situations only made matters worse. Dr. [Allegheny] seemed intent on showing all of [Lucy’s] mistakes, and conversely, everything [Amy] did “right.” From my perspective, the only difference between the two situations is that [Amy] went to Dr. [Allegheny] first. If this is the way things should be handled, why not leave it at that? Why bring in all the heads of department and set up a scene of intimidation? I apologize for the venting session. I feel the whole situation snowballed; both sides failed to handle it properly. Yes, as TAs, we should have gone to Dr. [Allegheny] immediately. [. . . ] Conversely, the department should have informed us how to handle situations of the like according to their policy. (GTA Reflective Response 10/12/00)

This portion of Rob’s response reflects much of the same resentment other GTAs were experiencing, resentment intensified by GTAs’ growing recognition of their lack of institutional agency. While Rob reasons that an institution should act logically—that is, should allow “the process of screening and hiring employees” to affirm “its faith and trust in” employees—he argues that in Lucy’s case, the institutional acted illogically: as Rob asserts, “The presentation gave me the impression that the university/department does not trust [GTA] judgment.”

18 An MA in poetry, “Amy” had also experienced problems with a disruptive student. Unlike Lucy, however, Amy had informed Allegheny about her situation, and it was resolved to Amy’s satisfaction.
Rob was also angry that Lucy’s behavior had been held up publicly as an example of how not to act. This is a sentiment many GTAs expressed in their response papers, which they turned in just days after Lucy’s assault occurred. Readers should note, however, that at the time of the judiciaries’ forum, Lucy’s alleged assault had not yet taken place. Lucy’s run-in with Jeff happened later, as GTAs were preparing to write the responses I cite in this section. From my analysis, it appears that many GTAs may have been aligning aspects of both events in their reflections, and that their perceptions about each event influenced their feelings on the other (Research Journal October 2000).

In my analysis, GTA Nancy’s response below exhibits an emotional conflation of the open forum and Lucy’s assault, a reaction similar to my own. As readers remember, Nancy had voiced concern over her students’ resistance to political texts and her authority earlier that term in the TAP seminar. She had also been instrumental in setting up the open forum: hoping to help resolve the resentment many GTAs were feeling over the way department officials handled Lucy’s case, she had e-mailed Sarah Allegheny requesting that the department explain their decision making process and give GTAs more clarity on policy. Although Nancy’s comments below indicate her positive intentions for sending the email and requesting the forum, they also make clear that she too was dissatisfied with the way the department handled the meeting with judiciaries.

I am going to take the opportunity with this response to respond to everything that has been said, ever: It was all bullshit, all of it. Actually, I
would like to respond to quite a few topics concerning our little open-forum on Thursday. [. . .]

When I returned to the dungeon\(^1\) after class, I realized that many of my fellow TAs were irate about the proceedings, gesticulating madly, cursing. Some very legitimate concerns were raised and as I went outside for a smoke, I realized that I had become irate as well. I thought it might pass, as many moods I acquire in the dungeon do, but I’m still upset and I’d like to discuss the details of that emotion. What upset me the most about the way the forum was managed was the manner in which [Lucy] was held up as an example. I could visualize the panel stamping her forehead, “WARNING: THIS IS NOT THE WAY TO HANDLE THESE SITUATIONS.” I feel that it was both unfair and a bit bizarre that [Lucy] should be in any way blamed for the situation and, in essence, be victimized yet again by a system that could not shake the rust from its gears long enough to protect her. Am I being too harsh? I’m not sure I know anymore.

Also, I was upset by the insinuation that in requesting such a forum, I bypassed the expected avenues of discussion, when in actuality, my delivery of that dreaded e-mail was meant to simplify the fulfillment of a need common to all of the first-year English TAs I spoke with. By

---

\(^1\) GTAs referred to their office as “the dungeon”—a large room with ten-plus desks, one phone, and two computers shared by roughly thirty GTAs, this office was housed on the ground floor of the building, while the English Department and offices for experienced and tenure track faculty were housed on the third floor.
saying that we should have met individually with the proper authorities, is it not suggested that requesting an open-forum is a big no-no and that it should not be done again? What kind of message is that? I, for one, am intimidated by it.

Issues that were avoided [during the open forum] included the message that was sent when a failing student was moved to another classroom, presumably with the opportunity to pass the class. As the situation had not reached judicial proportions at that point, the issue [could not be addressed by the judicial representative] during the forum. I am concerned about the precedent [the reassignment of Jeff to another section] sets, but I am afraid to raise my voice as an individual, much less as a representative of fellow dungeon dwellers. Perhaps I don’t know the true details of the matter? Do any of us?

I felt that [MA in Literature “Wendy”] raised some interesting points during the discussion, and points that provided the most tense and confrontational moments of the proceedings. I know that I would have been very intimidated by the face-to-face hostility that ensued, but [Wendy] stuck to her guns. It was eventually admitted that in some departments or colleges, I’m not sure which, notification of a student’s disruptive past is given to the student’s academic advisor, and that advisor has the authority to decide whether to pass that information on to
instructors or not. I would suppose that this is not the case in this department or in the College of Arts and Sciences, but again, I’m not sure.

To summarize, I still feel bothered by what has regretfully become known as “The [Lucy] Problem.” I believe that the general sentiment still lingering in the dungeon is one of distaste and apathy for the system. I would like for that sentiment to be replaced with definitive answers for the bitches [i.e. the GTAs], but we lack decisive action. My concern rests in the foggy area around that lack of action. Do we just share a love for bitching, are we afraid of taking action, or are we lazy? I suspect that I would qualify as all three.

On a final note, I would like to thank [Will] for the pep talk included in [his weekly response paper]. It’s nice to know that fellow TAs have my back. Go TA power! (Reflective Response 10/12/00)

Like Rob, Nancy expresses resentment over “the manner in which [Lucy] was held up as an example.” Read closely, Nancy’s comments suggest that by publicly reproving Lucy’s actions, the department was blaming the victim: “I feel that it was both unfair and a bit bizarre that [Lucy] should be in any way blamed for the situation and, in essence, be victimized yet again by a system that could not shake the rust from its gears long enough to protect her.” Again, it seems that the proximity of the open-forum to Lucy’s alleged assault led some GTAs to align, if not conflate the two events. Nancy’s “rust” comment is even more palpable—for me as a reader, it suggests that Nancy believed department officials were not willing to stand up for Lucy even though her situation merited defense
While it is important to underscore that almost all GTAs who wrote about Lucy in their responses conceded that Lucy had acted at least somewhat imprudently, GTAs were willing to exonerate Lucy because of her lack of experience. Comments like Nancy’s imply that department officials should have done so as well. These comments also imply Nancy’s hostility toward her vulnerability and lack of classroom and institutional agency, a source of disaffection that, Laura Micciche reminds WPAs, permeates the working lives of many writing teachers (447).

My own response to Lucy’s situation was similar to Nancy’s. When I heard about Jeff’s alleged assault, I looked at Lucy’s previous decision to evict Jeff from her classroom as evidence of her ability to read accurately the behavior of a potentially volatile student. As I reasoned, her judgment may have saved her students from witnessing Jeff’s disruptive-turn-abusive behavior in the classroom. While such conjecture may appear unfair to Jeff, because many GTAs had personal relationships with Lucy and empathized with her frustration over her lack of institutional authority, we became defensive of her and our own authority (GTA Reflective Response 10/12/00; Research Journal October 2000).

Other common complaints that Nancy’s response represents include being intimidated by the insinuation “that requesting an open-forum [was] a big no-no,” that the forum “avoided” the precedent set “when a failing students was moved to another classroom,” and that the judicial process itself was vague and elusive. As Nancy states, even after the judicial forum was complete she was “not sure” about the particular sanctioning methods available for disruptive students. I also find interesting Nancy’s
references to the unity coalescing among GTAs: as she asserts in her final comments, “It’s nice to know that fellow TAs have my back. Go TA power!” Such sentiments elicit an “us against them” mentality, pitting the unauthorized graduate teaching assistant community against departmental, administrative, and institutional authorities.

As responses like Will’s, Rob’s, and Nancy’s indicate, the solidarity that forms among GTAs is strong. In the program I studied, GTAs’ lack of institutional capital fortified their unity—and, one might argue—their growing scrutiny of political approaches to writing instruction. I take up this argument in the final section of this chapter.

Section Three: Institutional Political Location and Its Affects on GTAs’ Perceptions about Political Approaches to Writing Instruction

Joann: If I were to teach this book in my high school classroom I would not have a job. I tried to institute an assignment where students had to research alternative perspectives to social issues. Students complained to their parents, parents to the board, and a witch-hunt began. It wasn’t worth it to my family—it was terrifying. From a self-motivated, practical point of view, I backed off.

Rebecca: Why does this have to be our responsibility? Don’t misunderstand me, I agree that everything we teach is political and we
should teach this, but it is very overwhelming to get them to learn how to think and write. [ . . . ] This is a big responsibility to place on one person, whether we are willing to admit that or not. I agree that politics cannot be completely taken out of the class. [ . . . ] Yet, should we all be expected to jump at the chance to do this? And, do we have to do it in such a large and heavy dose? I say no.

**Amy:** I don’t have the talent to teach these kinds of essays. I don’t have the background in politics or knowledge of history. Writing deserves to be the focus because I feel ignorant and incompetent. I don’t think it’s fair to students to approach a feminist essay when I don’t have a background in feminism.

*Voices from the TAP seminar*

As these passages suggest, as the term wore on and GTAs became increasingly aware of the complexity of their job descriptions and their vulnerable institutional locations, many vocalized their concerns about political approaches to writing instruction, which they sometimes conflated with political pedagogies. Of course, the TAP seminar *had* offered GTAs alternatives to political pedagogy—most explicitly, the expressivist pedagogy offered in Donald Murray’s *Craft of Revision*. But because of the force and weight political pedagogy appeared to occupy in the seminar, not only through *Doing Public Writing*’s political-reflexive approach to writing instruction, but through the pages
of a number of articles in Cross-Talk, many GTAs appear to have harbored the perception that they were obliged to embrace a political pedagogy. As I do in my Introduction, let me remind readers of the distinction I make between political approaches to writing instruction—which involve the use of politically provocative texts—and political pedagogies—which obligate teachers to name—and thereby work to transform—the discriminatory hierarchies at work in our culture. While Doing Public Writing necessitated a political approach because it anthologized political provocative texts that GTAs used in their classrooms, in no way did the textbook, the TAP seminar, or WPAs oblige GTAs to adopt a political pedagogy. Nonetheless, because some GTAs saw political approaches and political pedagogies as synonymous and because many of the essays they read from Cross-Talk advocated the use of political pedagogies, GTAs felt pressure to adopt the mantle of transformative intellectual. Perhaps because of this misperception, some GTAs continually expressed their anxieties about teaching writing using political texts. An important outlet for these concerns became the informal writing GTAs performed in connection to the seminar readings. Consistent with my ethnographic methodology, I include long passages and in some cases whole manuscripts which, in essence, allow research participants to speak for themselves.

Some of GTAs’ most spirited Reflective Responses were in reply to Maxine Hairston’s “Diversity, Ideology, and Teaching Writing.” As featured in Villanueva’s Cross-Talk and my Literature Review, Hairston’s essay argues that by infusing first-year

\[20\] This was particularly true of essays like Victor Villanueva’s “Considerations for American Feireistas” and James Berlin’s “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” which both argue (albeit to different degrees) for the merits of adopting political pedagogies.
composition with political issues, teachers rob students of instruction in the writing process, replacing the safe classroom space fashioned by early process pedagogues with a fearful atmosphere bent toward indoctrination. While essays by Villanueva and Berlin support the use of political pedagogies, Hairston’s contribution to *Cross-Talk* is the only piece to explicitly argue against them. As she writes, when inexperienced graduate students “try to teach an introductory composition course by concentrating on issues rather than on craft and critical thinking, large numbers of their students end up feeling confused, angry—and cheated” (185). While not all GTAs agreed with this and other sentiments Hairston expressed, some voiced their concerns about using politics in the composition classroom; these conversations spread out over two seminar sessions.

After day one of the discussion, Ph.D. student in poetry Don Buikema voiced a different concern: in essence, he wanted Eliza Marks to offer up a more spirited defense of the use of politics in the writing classroom. As the following email attests, he feared that Lucy’s conflict with Jeff had caused many GTAs to dismiss political approaches and mistrust the advice offered up in TAP seminar.

Date: Thu, 19 Oct 2000 13:36:19 -0400

From: [Don Buikema]

Subject: Re: -- No Subject --

To: [Eliza Marks]

Dr. [Marks],

I'm writing to express some dismay—though I haven't any constructive suggestions about how to address the source of my
disappointment. I'm frustrated with our [TAP] class. I feel that: a) many TAs are close-mindedly rejecting the idea that politics have an essential place in freshman writing classes (or anywhere in a college curriculum); and b), since your view is clearly opposed to theirs, they are resisting and rejecting the class entirely. Are we going to see a more forceful and clear presentation of why politics belong in both freshman writing classes and in the curriculum? I realize that your position here is rhetorically problematic—given your status as an authority. May I type up a brief (and courteous) reaction to today's conversation and distribute it to TA's? My concern is that a number of issues and distinctions are being confused, and that other emotions provoked by other situations ([Lucy’s] predicament, in particular) are fueling a mistrust of the university and by extension the class. Maybe we can chat about this sometime.

[Don]

What is so revealing about Don’s argument and what helps me support at least one of the central claims of this study is that Don recognized that “a number of issues and distinction” about the uses of political approaches to writing instruction were being confused by GTAs, and “that other emotions provoked by other situations ([Lucy’s] predicament, in particular) [were] fueling a mistrust of the university and by extension the [TAP seminar].” In essence, Don puts his finger on what my observations were leading me to conclude: that GTAs were conflating their negative perceptions and
animosity about their marginalized institutional political locations with their negative perceptions and anxieties over their uses of a political approach to writing instruction. And, that this conflation was leading to animosity and disaffection in the TAP seminar.

Because much of my analysis in this chapter showcases negative responses GTAs had toward political approaches to writing instruction, Don’s voice is a welcome alternative, particularly from my perspective as an advocate of political approaches to the teaching of writing. I suspect that Eliza Marks was equally relieved to have an ally in Don, and she agreed to his request. What he wrote is what GTAs came to call his “manifesto.” I reprint it in its entirety.

Don’s Manifesto

[10/20/00]

Dear Fellow [TAP] Students,

I really am sorry for burdening you with yet another item to read. I’m writing because I was surprised and a little scared by what seemed a general consensus in class on Thursday that politics should not be part of a freshman writing course. As I have a particular stake in opposing this viewpoint, I wanted to present as coherent and non-theoretical an argument as I could for why I think reflexivity and essays like those in [Doing Public Writing] should be considered crucial parts of a freshman writing curriculum. I hope that you’ll take the time to read this, in spite of
your many other assignments and concerns, and that you excuse me if my
tone occasionally lapses into the emotional.

I want to begin by arguing against two premises:

I. The _sole_ purpose of education is to provide students with the
skills and information they need to get jobs and live more or less
happy and productive lives.

II. The only way to avoid imposing our own moral views on
students is to adopt a neutral, apolitical positioning in the
classroom.

The best response I could give to (I.) would involve quoting a letter I came
across this summer written by a high school principal and addressed to the
teachers he supervised. Unfortunately, since I can’t locate my copy of the
damn thing, I’ll have to do my best to paraphrase. The principal (I believe
he worked in a New Jersey public school) was a Jew who had endured the
holocaust in Germany and emigrated to the US some years after W.W.II.
His letter asked his teachers to bear in mind the fact that the guards who
had abused him were all high school graduates, that the nurses and doctors
who had supervised executions and experiments had held both
undergraduate and advanced degrees, and the population who, at least
through inaction, had condoned his treatment had included millions of
technically well-educated individuals. His point was simply that schools
have a considerable interest in producing, not merely technically proficient
human beings, but humane human beings resistant to the kind of propaganda that initiated and supported the concentration camps in Germany.

In case concerns about a repeated holocaust seem exaggerated and misplaced at this time and in this place, I want to offer two closer-to-home illustrations of the dangers of viewing technical proficiency as the sole aim of schools and universities. First example: while the Germans were carrying out their program in Europe, the American and Canadian governments were relocating thousands of citizens and legal immigrants of Japanese descent and confining them in internment camps in New Mexico, Saskatchewan, and elsewhere. Needless to say, both the inventors and executors of this policy included any number of highly educated people—to say nothing of the populations of both countries who in large part succumbed to the propaganda released by their governments. (I should foreground a bias. My mother spent a period of her childhood in one of the Canadian internment camps, as did my grandparents and most of my aunts and uncles on her side of the family. While the camps were by no means comparable to those in Germany, they did inflict enormous physical, emotional and material damage on the people who were affected. My grandparents, for example, lost their house, their car, and most material possessions—including scrolls, calligraphy brushes, and a sword that had been in the family for centuries; my younger aunts and uncles still
suffer the effects of having been without access to milk during their early childhoods.)

My last example is perhaps less dramatic, but considerably more contemporary: it is still illegal in the state of Alabama to marry interracially. Though, from what I understand, the law is no longer regularly enforced, that it remains on the books indicates that no majority of the highly educated legislators serving the State of Alabama at one time have ever had the moral sense and personal courage to pass a bill revoking the law.

Of course, my point in presenting these examples is not to establish that teaching reflexivity will abolish injustice, prejudice and discrimination from civilized countries, or that adopting Qualley\textsuperscript{21} and Co.’s curriculum will transform the deep south into the Big-Rock Candy Mountain. But I do think it is reasonable to believe that if greater segments of the population are capable of thinking reflexively—seeing things from the viewpoints of Jew and Slavs, Japanese, African Americans, Gays, and so on—it will be both: i) harder for a relatively small number of rhetorically skilled individuals to create the circumstance in which large-scale atrocities can take place, and ii) easier for human

\textsuperscript{21} As readers remember from earlier in the chapter, Marks introduced GTAs to Donna Qualley’s \textit{Turns of Thought: Teaching Composition as Reflective Inquiry} early in the term, which served as a theoretical model for the kind of pedagogy \textit{Doing Public Writing} worked to enact.
principles to nibble away at smaller scale injustices. So much, I hope, for premise (I).

The second idea I want to oppose is the notion that the only way to avoid imposing our own moral views on students is to adopt a neutral, apolitical position in the classroom (i.e. (II) above). As far as I can tell, the argument from this premise runs something like this:

A) Because of our unique position of authority in the classroom, teaching reflexivity, feminism, anti-racism, anti-homophobia, and so on constitutes imposing our views on our students—an act that violates our students’ right to freely choose their own moral principles.

B) On the other hand, if we teach poems, short-stories, essays, etc. which do not have an overt political content, we can stay politically neutral and refrain from infringing our students’ right to freely choose their own moral codes.

I want to address the second of these concerns first, simply because my argument against it is shorter than my argument against (A). As I see it, the problem with (B) is that, in practice, there simply is no neutral, apolitical position to adopt—no matter what we do in the classroom, our actions have moral and political implications. Consider: if we decide not to teach the kind of curriculum advocated by Qualley and Co., we are not
taking a neutral position, rather, we are taking a political stance opposing Dr. [Marks], Qualley, [the authors of essays in Doing Public Writing] and so on. In fact we would be holding the political position that I’ve labeled (I) above. I’ve already argued against (I) so I’ll move on. My point is simply that (B) is mistaken.\footnote{As some of you have no doubt noticed I’m playing it a little loose here. While it’s true that, technically, I have illustrated a problem with (II), there is a fallback position which my argument against (II) leaves open, i.e., despite our taking a political stance by rejecting Qualley and Co.’s curriculum, because our students won’t recognize that we’re taking a political stance, they can’t be affected by our views. Thus, by taking a stance opposed to Qualley’s we’re still protecting our students’ right to choose freely. I will address this fall back position in my response to (1) below.}

I now want to turn to (A) above. Because the claim is a negative universal, to prove it wrong I need only demonstrate that adopting Qualley and Co.’s curriculum does not infringe on our students’ right to freely choose their own moral codes. In order to accomplish this, I need to briefly discuss the conditions necessary from making a free choice, before going on to show how the kind of course Qualley and Co. advocate meets those conditions.

First of all, we need to recognize that the ability to make a free choice of any kind is dependent on the fulfillment of two necessary (and fairly obvious) conditions: i) the person making the choice must be faced with more than one option, and ii) the person making a choice must be free from external sources of compulsion. Let me elaborate on these conditions a little further. First, though the idea that a person must have more than one option available at the time of choosing seems fairly
obvious, I worry that its implications might be less so. For example, one implication is that not only do at least two courses of action have to be available to the chooser, but the chooser has to be aware that he/she has those several options available. This means that in order for our students to freely choose their own moral code, they must be aware of at least one possible moral code which they could legitimately adopt. Second, the same first condition also implies that a student can enjoy varying degrees of freedom, for example, a student who is aware of five out of a possible five options available to him/her has more freedom than one aware of only three of those possible options. Thus, by increasing our students’ awareness of various possible options, we increase the degree of freedom they experience in making choices. Third, being free of compulsion requires that a student be in a position to evaluate the options open to him/her without interference from outside sources. This in turn requires that a student have available: first, a reliable set of criteria for selecting among options; second, the ability to apply those criteria to his/her options; and third, sufficient reliable information about his/her various options to enable him/her to apply those criteria effectively. Applying this analysis of the conditions for free choice to the problem of enabling students’ free choice of ethical positions yields the following set of necessary conditions:
a) Students must be aware of as many ethical perspectives as possible.

b) Students must acquire the critical thinking and reading skills to recognize attempts at manipulation and misinformation.

c) Students must acquire the critical thinking, writing and research skills to discover and evaluate their own sources of information.

d) Students must acquire the critical thinking, writing and logic skills to determine the relative value of evidence and arguments for and against the various moral codes they want to consider.

From stage left enter Qualley and Co.’s curriculum. By teaching reflective and reflexive thinking, and by presenting essays representing a wide range of moral perspectives, we assist students in making free choices by meeting condition (a) above. Essentially, we provide students with options—perspectives on moral and political issues of which they might otherwise remain unaware. Of course, in one sense, our students are already aware that they have several moral positions available to them; they know they can become feminists and that they can decide not to be racists, sexist, homophobic, etc. However, in another and I think more important sense, they do not realize that these options are available to them. As many of our recent experiences (not to mention [Lucy’s]
position) bear out, being a feminist is widely viewed as equivalent to being a raving lunatic. It seems in fact (as many of our students’ reactions to [essays within Doing Public Writing,] gay rights week [at Ridge], and so on, demonstrate), any strong commitment to social justice is viewed as symptomatic of being not-normal—a little touched in the noggin. Thus, from many of our students’ perspectives, their only options are: either to be normal or to be crazy. In other words, many of our students are aware of only one legitimate option. It is because of this, as I understand Qualley and Co., that our job is to not leave students without options (as we would if we failed to adopt something like their curriculum). Our job is to make the “crazy” options legitimate—to allow our students to temporarily inhabit a number of different viewpoints in order to demonstrate that these viewpoints represent options which deserve the same consideration as “being normal.”

Of course, all this being reflexivity won’t help our students make free moral choices if we neglect the critical reading, writing, and thinking skills required by conditions (b)-(d). Hence, we cannot eliminate these more traditional elements of a freshman writing curriculum. But consider: the most important skill for a critical thinker, reader, and writer to possess is reflexivity—the ability to examine texts from a perspective not normally his/her own. Reflexivity is what enables a critical reader to temporarily put aside her prejudices and views when analyzing both her own and others’
writing. (Think of how often you’ve wished our students could do this). Reflexivity is also necessary for evaluating evidence, conducting research, and so on. Thus teaching reflexivity not only assists in meeting condition (a) above, but it also contributes in an essential way to meeting (b)-(d) above.

So, since teaching Qualley and Co.’s curriculum meets conditions (a)-(d), (A) can’t be right. And I’ve already shown that (B) can’t be right, therefore (II), which depends on (A) and (B), can’t be right. Is this clear? Let me sum up . . .

First of all, I’ve tried to show that there are good reasons for not banishing political and moral issues from schools and universities. Doing so can only make it easier for large and small scale injustices to take place. In addition, I’ve tried to explain why adopting a more traditional curriculum represents both a political statement and an obstacle to our students’ abilities to make free moral choices. If we adopt such a curriculum we adopt the position that politics and morals do not belong in schools and, as a result, we impart our students’ abilities to freely choose moral codes of their own. Finally, I’ve tried to show that adopting a curriculum like Qualley and Co.’s does not impair our students’ ability to make free moral choices—in fact, it increases the degree of freedom they experience in doing so. So what are you all objecting to?
At this point I’m exhausted and I expect you all are as well. I hope that I’ve presented a relatively clear argument. I greatly appreciate your having taken the time to consider my position. Pitcher(s?) on me next [time we’re out] for the inconvenience?

To my mind, Don’s manifesto surfaces several important points. His references to the Jewish holocaust, Japanese internment camps, and Alabama segregation laws help to demonstrate the importance of infusing politics in education. As Don’s manifesto suggests, because traditional/under-politicized education typically works to suppress critical consciousness—not cultivate it—educators have a responsibility to nurture reflectivity in students, and thereby aid in preparing ethical and engaged civic actors. Reminiscent of both ancient isocratic and contemporary critical conceptions of education, Don’s manifesto illustrates the importance of preparing citizens to navigate their various political locations, whether institutional, cultural, or social. What’s more, Don seems to be arguing not only for the examination of political texts in writing classrooms in order to prepare students to become critical citizens, he is arguing for an explicitly political pedagogy.

Consistent with Aronowitz and Giroux, Don’s statement indicates he believes that it educators’ duty to make transparent the range of moral choices available to students. This line of argument is no doubt a retort to Hairston’s claim that political approaches “change freshmen composition into a political platform for the teacher” (“Diversity”183) and, as a result, infringe on student’s free will. Hairston’s is a frequent criticism, one that even advocates of political approaches sometimes put forward. Noted in my
Introduction, Donald Lazere suggests this perspective in “Teaching the Political Conflicts: A Rhetorical Schema.” While “[m]y own political leanings are toward democratic socialism,” Lazere writes,

I am firmly opposed [. . .] to instructors imposing socialist (or feminist, or Third-World, or gay) ideology on students as the one true faith—just as I am opposed to the present, generally unquestioned (and even unconscious) imposition of capitalist, white-male, heterosexual ideology that pervades American education and every other aspect of our culture. (195)

But unlike Hairston, Lazere believes that it should be the primary aim of writing instructors “to broaden the ideological scope of students’ critical thinking, reading and writing capacities so as to empower them to make their own autonomous judgments on opposing ideological positions” (195). Echoing Lazere’s sentiments, Don’s manifesto argues that it is only when students recognize a range of political choices that they can imagine alternative discourse—or at very least—recognize alternative discourse as something more than the ranting of “a raving lunatic.” As Don suggests, it is through practicing the habit of reflexivity—the habit of mind modeled in the pages of Doing Public Writing—that students begin to reexamine their own knowledge, beliefs, and values, as well as those held by others. Such a habit allows students to become active participants in their public and private spheres, enables them to act as informed citizens in the political arena. Without the critical consciousness this habit of mind inspires, Don and other advocates of political approaches argue, students recognize fewer choices
available to them, and hence experience a limited form of consciousness and, by
extension, political liberty (Shor xi).

While I too embrace political pedagogies and political approaches to writing
instruction, my teaching experience and cultural observations also support Don’s
warnings: that is, I have seen many of my students suggest that cultural and educational
activists are “a little touched in the noggin.” As Don suggests, it is their belief that they
have limited power in their lives to affect change that makes them see advocates of
political approaches—at best—as tilting at windmills. It is perhaps in part because of this
widespread perception that some GTAs feel threatened by a preparation seminar, a
syllabus, and a textbook that compelled them to use politically provocative texts as an
apparatus to stimulate critical consciousness in their students, even while that seminar,
syllabus, and textbook provided alternatives to political pedagogy. Indeed, as several
GTAs voiced in their responses to Don’s manifesto, multiple factors contributed to their
anxieties about political approaches. Joann Jones’ Reflective Response below helps to
illustrate how even experienced teachers can find surfacing pedagogical issues in their
classroom threatening.

Joann’s Response

Joann Jones raised the dangers associated with infusing politics into education in
her response to Hairston’s essay—in many ways, her words serve as a rejoinder to Don’s
manifesto. With over twenty years of teaching experience in secondary English education
classrooms, Joann emphasized the personal risks she had incurred when bringing overtly political subject matter into her high school classrooms, risks that she ultimately concluded were too much for her to bear. While she is speaking about her experiences as a high school teacher, I detect subtle but significant correlations between her own experience and of other GTAs.

[Joann Jones]
[10/24/00]
Response Paper #6

The argument over whether political agendas belong in the composition classroom, which started a week ago, ignited strong discussion outside the [TAP] classroom as well as inside it. I tend to agree with [Amy] and [Jon] that it really shouldn’t be in the classroom. Part of my reaction is based on personal experience in public secondary education since I have seen and been subjected to a board of education and citizens who thought I was too lenient in encouraging discussion while teaching social problems. I was allowing the inner city ethnically diverse [. . .] immigrants to give a counter point of view to the WASP rural Midwest-American argument. Mentioning any idea or argument that might threaten the community’s status quo leaves a teacher vulnerable to requested resignation. From the board’s point of view, a teacher is a font of objective information, not a subjective leader of counter-argument. My maternal role as provider for three children stepped in, and I altered the
course to place the arguments on paper instead of in discussion. I wasn’t prepared to fight this battle and risk my security. (Ok, [Don], I know you’re gnashing your teeth.)

However, after class last week, [Carole] and I continued talking about political agendas and subject matter inspired agendas. We found the need to define what a political agenda entails and its extremes in subject and presentation. My light bulb switched on, and I found my agendas were less obvious and related to the board-accepted textbook I am using. For example, in *Beowulf*, we discuss paganism and Christianity in the text. I make a point to say, “It’s information and you may accept or reject it as you see fit,” but present paganism in a positive light, not as a satanic cult. Here my political agenda is to make the differences in religion a non-threatening issue to the religiously oriented in my classroom. At least they can reflect on two differing viewpoints. I, the role model teacher, didn’t say they must, or should, accept any one view. (This may appear as nitpicking, but it satisfies the powers above me). As a second example, when I cover the *Canterbury Tales*, I provide historical context to consider the Wife of Bath as a successful woman in a male dominated society instead of a slut. After all, she has had five husbands. Isn’t this a kind of feminist agenda?

Outside the textbook content, though, I have an agenda when some of the girls come to me for advice or support on personal issues. The local
society purports that a woman must have a man to have value. No boyfriend, no status, no worth. I end up [being] the person offering the unspeakable viewpoint, “So what? I grade and respect you for your own work, not his. You’ll still do great things without him.” I know this response springs from watching too many girls not survive a divorce or a death of a spouse because they lacked self-preservation skills. I do have an agenda on this issue; I want girls to have a strong self-image and independence.

I discovered I have an agenda. It’s just a matter of how far I verbalize and model my agenda. This can be particularly dangerous in a small, inbred community, which expects teachers solely to impart information and not espouse a view. Seems paradoxical to me for the legislature to continue to give teachers more moral/social issues to cover (like sex education), when the community really believes those issues are parental concerns outside a teacher’s realm. The dangerous results of a teacher speaking an opinion are non-renewed contract or dismissal for a visible social agenda.

This brings me to [Don’s] six-page letter. (Thank you, [Don]!) I’m not sure you can teach “standing up to defend a viewpoint” to a majority; it’s even hard to get them to register to vote. Most of my students, and I include myself in this group, have as an underlying motivation of selfish preservation. If events warranted, I’d protect and
defend my family [over] other groups. Yes, I see that it’s first one group and then another, but living in that present moment, how does one determine what will happen next? For me, my children have to survive first. I do think secondary schools are beginning to become better forums on issues; for example, we now teach *Schindler’s List* as well as *The Diary of Anne Frank* and talk about the California internment camps. But presenting certain issues from multiple viewpoints, especially GLTB or gender, is still a swamp of sucking quicksand for teachers. I see a common public view that teachers should be impartial voices of objective information—almost encyclopedic in voice—and that schools should reflect the status quo. Let the individual make his/her choice outside the school environment. And [Don] is correct in that sometimes a student doesn’t recognize he/she has a choice, especially a choice of NO. If a student does say no, he/she sometimes neglects to reflect on the consequences of his/her choice. The responsibilities and consequences of saying NO can be excruciating to bear.

Where am I now? Still uncomfortable, but that seems to be more normal state of mind in [the TAP seminar]. However, I do recognize at least a portion of my subtle agendas and the force of my instinct to protect my family. It was certainly easier to protest the Vietnam War on my college campus when I was single and twenty than it would be today to risk my family.
As my introductory comments to her reflection also suggest, one of Joann’s primary claims is that enacting political approaches can be a fearful, even “terrifying” experience: as Joann asserts, this is particularly true when one’s local community holds strong, mono-dimensional views about politics. As Joann claims, when a community purports the teacher to be a “font of objective” knowledge—Freire’s “‘banking’ concept” personified (58)—the risks are even greater. Like conservative political personalities, many Americans believe that for educators to suggest that “America is a racist, sexist, imperialist, militaristic” culture is a biased position (Will 72). Thus, it is understandable that Joann “backed off” for fear of losing her job, a position she held without tenure and the academic freedom that often accompanies it.

For me, this is the most provocative of Joann’s insights. Her vulnerability enacting a political approach as a high school teacher parallels GTAs’ vulnerabilities enacting one in a university setting. Although GTAs at Ridge had the support of writing program administrators in using political texts to stimulate critical thinking in students and their writing, both GTAs and high school teachers like Joann work from marginal institutional locations. While the fear Joann had about losing her job was a different kind of fear from than the GTAs in my study articulated, my research suggests that college instructors who lack institutional clout are prone to anxieties about enacting political approaches that institutionally sanctioned instructors are not. Many of the GTAs in my study, I suspect, would argue that their vulnerability was embodied in the example of Lucy, a teacher who they perceived was left abandoned when she needed the university the most.
While Joann makes important points about the fear institutionally marginalized teachers face when surfacing politics in the classroom, one might read her examination of “whether political agendas belong in the composition classroom” as missing an important element. That is, readers have to wonder whether Joann thought that the point of using politically provocative texts was to further a political agenda, rather than to discuss these texts as writing, as rhetoric, as public argument and private experience, as ideas rendered through writing. I don’t want to put too fine a point on this argument, because Joann’s text does not explicitly indicate this suspicion. But it is reasonable to wonder whether Joann perceived Doing Public Writing’s primary purpose as furthering a political agenda rather than examining writing and fostering a habit of mind that would produce good writing.

A similar argument might be made in reference to GTA Rebecca Shields-Reid’s response as well. Given that Rebecca speaks from the subject position of a woman of color and publicly identifies as a feminist, her critique of political approaches draws my attention. While it is clear that she sees politics as vital to education, she worried about her ability to lead political discussions given her lack of teaching experience. She also wondered whether the stress inflicted by surfacing the political was pedagogically productive.
Rebecca’s Response

[Rebecca Shields-Reid]

Response Writing

October 24, 2000

(Cross-Talk)

Although I feel compelled to comment on the last responses of my fellow peers, [. . . ] I do not believe that their topics are at the forefront of many, if not all, of our minds right now. [. . . ] The discussion that needs to take place is that of whether or not politics or controversial topics should be taught and/or challenged in a freshmen composition class?

It amazes me that [Don] was so animate about this topic that he spent an evening writing what we have sincerely titled “his manifesto.” It certainly made for an interesting read, and I appreciated and like many of his arguments, but I did not get the idea that we were at a “consensus” to stop teaching the issues we are teaching. Yes, I feel that there are a few who may be totally opposed to leaving us with the responsibility to open the eyes of the freshmen students, to realize that society has made them what they are and to inform them that they have the power to change that. Yet, I would argue that many of us just feel a bit overwhelmed with everything we are given to accomplish in this class, and that we feel it is a rather large pill to swallow for them (and possibly us). Maybe the answer is to break up some of the heavy material we are asking our students to
read, analyze, and write about, with things a little simpler and easier to swallow.

I will admit, on Thursday, my biggest fear came to life. One of my male, white students asked to speak with me outside of class. He informed me that he and another one of my male students had been talking, and they felt a little uncomfortable about the class. They felt that the entire textbook was constantly blaming the white male for all the wrongs in the world, and they felt that it was an attack on them. Immediately, I was shocked. I was quick to turn the situation or fault on myself, wondering if I had done this. If I was the one who was placing this blame. I know that I have tried all quarter to continually provide discourse and counter discourse to explore different perspectives of the assigned essays, but did I not do a good enough job? I asked the student why he did not bring up this issue in class, in front of everyone else, and he claimed that he did not do it because he was not sure if others felt this way. Plus, he did not want the students to feel as if he was blaming me, the teacher. He excused me from my guilt by stating that he understood that I was given this book to teach, and therefore it was not my fault. So, I was left with the question of how to make him feel welcomed in the class again.

This is a big responsibility to place on one person, whether we are willing to admit that or not. I agree that politics cannot be completely taken out of the class. I agree that things would be so much easier and
probably better if the lesson of opening our students’ eyes were the curriculum across the campus. I agree that someone(s) need to help these students see a world out there they have no idea exists. I am willing to take on that fight, for very personal reasons. Yet, should we all be expected to jump at the chance to do this? And, do we have to do it in such a large and heavy dose? I say no.

Many of us, if not all of us, are doing this for the first time. Not only teaching, but challenging others to question and evaluate their beliefs, cultures, and mannerisms. I would argue that many of us are learning along the way, with our students. Yes, this can be a positive process, for it keeps us “on our toes” and it may force us to continually reevaluate what we are teaching, why, and how, but this is some serious stuff to be teaching without being very comfortable with it. Plus, we are doing it in a class that is unsuspecting to the students. For me, I was asked to challenge my beliefs and societies’ norms in special history classes, religion, and some literature. Although I am thrilled at the prospect of “shaking things up” in the minds of our students, I think we should warn them or something. Some students truly need help with their writing. They need someone to show them the ropes of accessing a prompt, brainstorming, organizing, and somehow formulating some pattern of their thought on paper. I witness this is my own class. Yet these students are drowning in all of the other things they are being asked to look at, along with their
writing. No, I am not saying we should not teach these issues in our class, but I do think that everyone should be moderately prepared for what they are getting themselves into, and that we, as teachers, should be ready as well. I do not think all of us are, at least not completely.

Three things strike me about Rebecca’s response: the ways it articulates GTAs’ marginal institutional political location, the ways it surfaces GTAs insecurities about how to enact political approaches effectively, and, like Joann’s response, the ways it suggests that Rebecca may have misconstrued Doing Public Writing’s central mission.

Rebecca’s claim “that many of us just feel a bit overwhelmed with everything we are given to accomplish in this class” speaks to all three of these points. It is not that Rebecca is opposed to bringing politics into the writing classroom; it is simply that her lack of experience—which predicates her marginal institutional location—makes enacting a political approach overwhelming. Her statements suggest that GTA preparation initiatives pay too little attention to a major responsibility she faces: the responsibility “to open the eyes of the freshmen students, to [help them] realize that society has made them what they are [. . . ] to help [them] see a world out there they have no idea exists.” Although she recognizes the significance of this task—and “is willing to take it on for very personal reasons”—it “a big responsibility to place on one person, whether we are willing to admit it or not.” In essence, she feels overwhelmed by embracing the mantle of the transformative intellectual, by accepting the responsibility of “formulating a conscious political position” that recognizes and resists “the inequities in our society” (Berlin “The” 11); in other words, she does not distinguish between the use
of political approaches to writing instruction and the enactment of a political pedagogy. Here we see the force and weight of the discourse of Rhetoric and Composition crashing down on Rebecca: she perceives that adopting the role of transformative intellectual and enacting political pedagogy are her duties, not her choice. In this way, like Joann, she misconstrues *Doing Public Writing*, does not see that enacting a political pedagogy—or not—is a choice. In some ways, her sentiments can be read as a plea: please acknowledge that leading discussion about politically provocative issues is complicated, that cultivating critical consciousness is a difficult task, especially for a first-time teacher.

Indeed, several GTAs expressed feeling under-prepared to enact a political approach to writing instruction, much less a political pedagogy. MA in Poetry Amy Sutpen voiced this concern even more vehemently; unlike Rebecca, however, Amy argues that political issues are not an appropriate focus for the composition classroom.

*Amy’s Rebuttal*

If it is fair to categorize Don’s manifesto as a spirited defense of political approaches, readers will recognize in Amy’s writing an equally energetic rebuttal. Amy voices common perceptions about the teaching of writing and common criticism of political approaches. Because Amy added hand-written comments to her document before turning it in to Eliza Marks, I include those comments in footnotes to her piece.
Reading Response to Maxine Hairston’s
“Diversity, Ideology, and the Teaching of Writing”

I have a feeling I respond to Hairston’s essay with the unpopular vote of complete agreement. There are many things I would like to say about this essay. I do not presently have the time to address them in the sort of organized, meticulous essay I would like to write. It would probably be very long and I do hope to sit down and write it—perhaps as a supplement to my final paper where I evaluate my teaching experience. Right now I am too bogged down grading papers and getting my own work together.

Please forgive me then if my points aren’t made in the best of order or aren’t as articulate as one might hope. I’m just writing free-style here so bear with me—I will attempt to address as many of Hairston’s valid points as I can.

[At the top of her response, Amy penned the following:] “[Eliza]—I hope I do not offend. I think you are a wonderful teacher and these issues are important. I’m just throwing out my feelings so far. I’m not at a point I can’t be swayed.”

Amy crossed out the word “complete” during class discussion of Hairston’s piece.
Writing courses, especially required freshman courses, should not be for or about anything other than writing itself, and how one uses it to learn and think and communicate. 25 I firmly believe, based both on my experiences as a student and my experiences as a teacher thus far, that freshmen need a writing course that is actually devoted first and foremost to advancing their writing. That means first evaluating their current level, identifying the most fundamental problems (which are usually in the areas of grammar and sentence construction,) and reteaching (which assumes that all of this was actually taught to them before) basic rules of grammar and syntax. Students should also be taught about style. These should be incorporated into the classroom or on-hand for reference in a book on style. Students should frequently be given sample essays on the same prompt which reflect poor, average, and excellent style so they can better see what constitutes good writing style.

Why do I feel it is so important these issues be addressed throughout the duration of the course? When I received my first batch of essays I was shocked at how poorly so many of my students wrote. Really shocked. They seemed completely oblivious to some of the most basic rules of grammar and stylistics. I did not know how I could even hope to begin to sufficiently address their writing deficiencies in order to bring about actual improvement—the syllabus that had been created for us had

25 Amy places Hairston’s words in italics throughout her reflection.
no time devoted to grammar lessons. It focused more on reading and responding to the readings. I sat down at home with *A Writer’s Reference*, the writing guidebook our students had bought, and began flipping through the pages. It seemed like almost every page addressed something I felt my students needed to be re-taught.

I spent far too much time on their second drafts of the first papers—every place I had written “unclear phrasing” or “work on better wording” or “this is grammatically incorrect,” they seemed not to have known how to say it better—nor did they know what was wrong with how they had said it to begin with. So I ended up basically rewriting every seriously flawed sentence for them, in hopes that they would see why my working was clearer and would know next time what I was looking for. Wrong. Drafts for the second paper were even worse. But in addition to all of the same grammar and sentence construction errors, the organization of information this time was atrocious. Their second paper was the first essay that required them to address multiple issues within an essay they had read and to incorporate quotes or examples from the text. I ended up sitting down with each essay prompt and making a page-long, excruciatingly detailed outline for each essay and having each student write down the outline word for word as I dictated it to them in conference, so that basically all they had to do was translate my paragraph by paragraph outline into a paper. But I have a feeling the organization of
their third essays will be just as flawed because there is some basic
organizational skill that they haven’t yet grasped.

My question is, if they don’t learn these things here, where are they
going to learn them? By trial and error, meaning they suffer through
scores of low paper grades from other teachers, slightly improving each
year as a result of reading more and more essays? Is this really fair?
Where else but in a writing course should devotion to the basics of writing
be given priority? I’m not sure I understand the argument that all
departments should be responsible for helping their students learn to write
better. I agree that biology professors, for example, can make occasional
suggestions, but because their classes are designed to be specific
knowledge of biological processes and terminology—I don’t think it
should be the biology professor’s job to get bogged down in correcting the
grammatical mishaps and stylistic failings of a student’s writing. That
isn’t fair to the instructor or the student.

The few times I have voiced concerns about the extent of the
mistakes my students make in writing, about their lack of skill or comfort
with the basic process of writing a paper, about the overwhelming feeling
that I need to bridge the gap in their knowledge of how they have been
writing and how they should be writing to play catch-up so that their
writing will be acceptable in their other classes, I have come away feeling
(perhaps mistakenly—I didn’t disallow that possibility) that writing is
viewed as secondary to critical thinking as an outcome for Freshman Composition at [Ridge] University. This troubles me immensely. I feel more is called for than simply “taking a half hour here and there to review grammar and style.” I’m not sure I can yet articulate what is called for, but something more. Something more consistently concerned with the teaching of writing.26

You might say to me that the enormous amount of writing assignments and many detailed sequences and prompts for paper assignments prove that writing is not at all viewed as secondary. Those paper prompts ask for thorough analysis of a text, they ask for specific examples, they demand coherent organization. . . But my experience so far has been that these writing prompts, intelligent and complex as they are, in order to be answered sufficiently require a level of writing to which my students have not yet advanced. They have not been asked to think so critically before, nor about such issues—the novelty is in itself a struggle. That, coupled with grammatical rules and stylistics they have not yet mastered, makes for a real mess of a paper. We have talked so much about thinking through writing, and because they are not yet sure of the writing process, and because they are even less sure about how to articulate their ideas well, their writing, rather than being a means through

26 [Amy’s hand-written note:] [Eliza], I heard your response loud and clear in class, so please don’t get fired up about this!
which to think better, winds up confusing them more. They don’t know the rules so they definitely don’t know how to use them to their advantage. What I am trying to say is that these writing prompts demand a level of thinking that is not commensurate with their level of writing, and which they therefore do not enact through writing. In my experience.

Whence comes my frustration? Part of it is the idea, which Hairston addresses and rejects, that Freshman Composition is the place for a political agenda. Yes, critical thinking is important. Yes, exposure to multiple perspectives is important. As is exposure to the many “other” voices which have traditionally been silenced and marginalized in society. But in a writing course I feel it is first our duty to address the basics of writing, for all of the reasons I have already mentioned. A writing course that does not hold as its main priority the improvement of writing cheats the students. And I think that they feel cheated.

So am I saying that students should not be exposed to all of the political issues we have been raising in [the first-year course]? No. My question is, from where did we get the idea that it is the responsibility of Freshman Composition teachers to initiate in students this transformative thinking? I agree with Hairston when she says, As writing teachers we should stay within our area of professional expertise: helping students to learn to write in order to learn, to explore, to communicate, to gain control over their lives. She goes further to validate this point: When
classes focus on complex issues such as racial discrimination, economic injustices, and inequities of class and gender, they should be taught by qualified faculty who have the depth of information and historical competence that such critical social issues warrant. For example, [...] I completely forgot that California, Arizona, Texas, and parts of Colorado, all used to be parts of Mexico.\(^{27}\) It just didn’t occur to me. I did learn that once but it was buried so deep I wouldn’t have come up with it on my own. Again, someone had to remind me. It embarrasses me to admit to these things but I do so because I think I can’t be the only TA in TA history to be ignorant of certain important issues. But while being reminded of the fact that we had taken all of this land away from the Mexicans helped me to understand [the] essay better, it did not provide me with the depth of historical knowledge I feel someone teaching this essay should have had; I did not shed the sort of insights someone more historically informed could have and my own shortcomings in history mangled my first reading for myself—thankfully not for the students. But I felt bad that I couldn’t answer questions [students had about historical events related to this essay].

Similarly, there is a lot I didn’t know about the Vietnam War that I would like to know before discussing certain essays with my students. I

\(^{27}\) One of the authors featured in Doing Public Writing relies on this historical fact as a basis for his argument, yet does not reference it directly.
am trying to find out as much as possible, but I have never, for example, even known why we lost, or why we got involved in the first place. (Yes, I’m embarrassed, and yes, I’ve only had my head buried in books of poetry and fiction for the last ten years, and I’m trying to remedy that, but I want to be honest here.) I didn’t know until a week ago what the war was fought over. Such issues, I think, are better left to professionals who have background in such fields. Political Science instructors, for example.

But I know what you’re saying: leaving the exploration of such topics to political science instructors or African studies instructors or Feminists studies instructors guarantees that a large number of students will never be exposed to the traditionally marginalized groups and to the history of injustices that have been enacted upon them in society—and if they never learn to consider those perspectives then they will never accept them as valid and they will never oppose the perpetuation of discrimination when active opposition is our only hope for change, for eradicating discrimination and social injustice. I agree that fostering reflexivity, tolerance, and action are all important. But I feel that good, capable writing is also necessary and important in a student’s college and professional career. My suggestion? Why not different classes devoted to both?

I know I have harped on this before, but my experience as a student in Freshman Composition was vastly different from that of my
own students. We were confronted with all of the political issues that have come up so far, and many more. But our encounters occurred in classes called Liberal Learning classes, one of which we took every semester along with our other courses. In these classes, all of our notions of self and all of our traditionally held beliefs were thrown under the microscope. And we were confronted with as many opposing beliefs as possible, all in the name of understanding and open-mindedness. I credit that Liberal Learning curriculum with many of the choices I made about what I believe, and with a significant engendering of open-mindedness that I’m not sure I would have embraced left to my own devices—at least not as quickly nor as consciously. (Keep in mind I was raised Southern Baptist and my father, though he stopped preaching when I was about 10, remains an ordained minister. It was acceptable in my family, growing up, to use the terms nigger and fag. To this day I’m not sure how love thy neighbor fits into scheme).

In any case, Liberal Learning was invaluable. We took it for four years and we could not help but think reflexively, we could not help but be changed for the better. [. . . ] The amount of learning was incredible. The way that doors were opened in our minds, in our capacity to shift perspectives, was invaluable. I cannot praise those classes enough.

But Liberal Learning was something separate from Freshman Composition. And while certain poems or short stories contained at times
political elements, the focus of our classes was our writing, and the improvement thereof. We wrote a research paper. (My students would be absolutely clueless if I asked them to do this.) We studied citation and bibliography. And while we were not as focused on grammar because it was an advanced class, writing was still the first priority.

Based on the unskilled writing I continue to see, I would call for three quarters of Freshman Writing for first year students. The class would address the kinds of writing issues I have already discussed. Students would write research papers—one in each class. There would be marked improvement between a first quarter and end-of-third quarter essay. In this class students would not as often “need to be assigned essays to read so they will have something to write about—they bring [many of] their subjects with them” (Hairston 667). Or perhaps the first two quarters could be focused more, but not completely, on experience-based writing, and the third quarter could focus entirely on text-response writing. There is certainly room in my proposal for suggestion. But it hinges on three quarters of student writing as the focus.

In addition to a course focused on writing, I think my own experience supports my call for the institution of a Liberal Learning-like curriculum in the university. But here comes into play one of my areas of confusion in this “political” debate as it were. The school I attended was a small, private Liberal Arts college where their admitted agenda was to
educate students in the rhetoric of liberal thinking and to create open-minded, liberal and compassionate civil servants. As a private school they were within their rights to espouse such a political agenda, and parents and students know up front that this was part of the education of a Queens College student. But I am curious whether a public university can openly embrace this sort of learning and teaching the way a private school does. Because in essence I am teaching the importance of liberal thinking. (I realize some of you may take issue with the idea of reflexivity as “liberal” when you feel it is the only acceptable way of thinking and should not be characterized in extremes—however, it has traditionally been called liberal thinking, liberal learning, Liberal Arts and I refer to it as such for the sake of my reader’s understanding.) I have said I am somewhat enacting a liberal learning curriculum—but is this political stance anywhere stated as part of this public university’s mission? Since we require students to take Freshman Comp., and we engage our students in these political discussions, are we not in some way attempting to turn them into (traditionally) liberal thinkers? Again, while I do not underestimate the importance thereof, I wonder if a public university is allowed in the same way as a private university. I simply am curious if this political stance in the Composition classroom is an unspoken and somewhat unacknowledged (outside of the English Dept.) trend, or whether the university as a public institution, as a whole acknowledges
this political agenda as part of their aim. Should they be required to do so? Has such an aim traditionally been a private aim and therefore only appropriate to private schools? I’m not on one side when it comes to these questions—I actually don’t know the answers and would like to.

Clearly though I am not calling for the effacement of political and perspective awareness from required student learning. I am simply calling for separate issues to be addressed more thoroughly in separate classes—the issues of writing and politics. I feel that a class that tries to do both, and which relies on politically untrained instructors, at best only skims the surface of issues that deserve in-depth analysis, and relegates the fundamental skills for good writing to a secondary position. I realize that at present such a class is an attempt to teach both political awareness and writing because both are seen as crucial to student development, and to do away with one entirely is only to the detriment of our students. But I do not think that one class can do justice to both areas of learning, and currently I feel students’ writing may suffer for it. Therein lies my frustration.

Like Joann’s and Rebecca’s responses, Amy’s rebuttal provides many provocative insights. Perhaps primarily, her words indicate her frustrations about enacting a political approach to writing instruction, frustrations that speak directly to GTAs’ marginalized institutional political location.
As her statement suggests, Amy’s frustrations appear to be rooted in her perception that politics displaces writing instruction in the hierarchy of outcomes in Ridge’s First-Year Composition Program. As she writes, despite concerns she had voiced in the TAP seminar about her students’ lack of writing skills, she often left feeling “that writing is viewed as secondary to critical thinking as an outcome for Freshman Composition at [Ridge] University.” This is unfortunate not only because her students could use more concrete writing instruction, Amy argues, but also because she lacks the knowledge to effectively teach critical thinking via a political approach. As she emphasized in the TAP seminar,

I don’t have the talent to teach these kinds of essays. I don’t have the background in politics or knowledge of history. Writing deserves to be the focus because I feel ignorant and incompetent. I don’t think it’s fair to students to approach a feminist essay when I don’t have a background in feminism.28

Echoing some of Hairston’s sentiments, Amy argues that through an emphasis on the political, “writing classes cheat students. And I think that they feel cheated.” Also like Hairston, she asserts that her lack of experience makes her a poor candidate to teach using a political approach. But even though Hairston and Amy agree on these points, the similarity in their arguments ends there. To be sure, Amy’s advocacy of a “back-to-basics” approach, while pervasive throughout American culture, resolutely distorts

---

28 Marks would later note that she found irony in this statement, as the following year Amy developed and taught themed courses on animal rights and vegetarianism.
Hairston’s thesis. That is, Hairston is arguing for a low-risk, process-based pedagogy, not the current-traditional approach Amy advocates.

Clearly, Amy’s lack of familiarity with fundamental aspects of composition theory surfaces repeatedly in her response. In addition to her lack of knowledge of process theories, the “shock” Amy expresses at the poor state of her students’ writing underscores her lack of familiarity with what John Trimbur calls “the discourse of crisis.” As Trimbur notes, shock about the writing abilities of students has peaked and valleyed throughout the history of writing instruction in the United States, yet this shock is more often a response to economic uncertainty than any negligible decline in literacy (“Literacy” 279-80). Experts in the field have long accepted this point, as well as the fact that students’ writing skills can momentarily weaken as they work to examine challenging subject matter. Unfortunately, however, short-term preparation initiatives do not give novices like Amy the time necessary to acquire such knowledge.

Interestingly, even authorities like Hairston aren’t immune to what many scholars would argue are misperceptions about the connections among the teaching of writing, rhetoric, and political discourse. Responding directly to Hairston’s essay, John Trimbur makes this point exactly. As he explains, political approaches to writing instruction are not about politics for politics’ sake, but about helping students generate arguments that will affect agency in their lives. As noted in my introduction, Trimbur argues that composition classrooms that use politics as a framework for teaching writing are not devoted to racism and sexism *per se* but rather to how arguments—forensic and deliberative—are framed to adjudicate problematical
situations of social and cultural discrimination. Far from being outside the competence of writing teachers or novice teachers in training, the course is resolutely rhetorical in its design because it asks students to consider [. . .] how people argue public issues of central importance to our society.

(“Response” 248)

That is, what is missed by many critics of political approaches to writing instruction (and political pedagogy, for that matter) is that at its core is rhetoric. Fundamentally, writing courses should ask students and teachers to engage in public discourse, “to look at how the language we use constitutes the world we live in, the differences that separate us, and what we praise and blame in our hopes for a better future” (Trimbur “Response”248). Marks echoes Trimbur’s sentiments in her description of the pedagogical approach articulated in Doing Public Writing:

The readings in [Doing Public Writing] were chosen by the co-editors not merely because the contributors write about political issues, but because they are essays that examine crucial public matters through a variety of perspectives, academic field perspectives as well as those of race, class, gender, personal and systemic and they examine these crucial public matters THROUGH writing. [. . .] The apparatus for the text focuses writing and rhetorical issues in relationship to the content the writers are working with.29

---

29 From a personal email correspondence with Marks, shared with permission.
Trimbur’s and Marks’ point is well taken: indeed, instruction in writing viewed through the rhetorical tradition mandates an attention to politics, to public discourse, to helping students articulate and defend what they know, believe, and value. What my data from the TAP seminar suggests, however, is that Amy and other GTAs had not yet internalized the academic tradition they are asked to work within, and were sometimes conflating political approaches to writing instruction with political pedagogy.

It seems both ironic and unfortunate that Amy’s insecurities about her teaching prompted her to reject political approaches in favor of current-traditional writing instruction. Ironic because even though Amy clearly wished to do right by her students, she ended up doing a range of things educators warn against: enacting a “‘banking’ concept of education” (Freire 58); adopting a red-ink pedagogy that debilitates students (Shaughnessy 4); teaching in ways that not only impede students’ progress as writers, but waste the precious time of faculty (Bean 63-66). Although Marks and Allegheny had emphasized these points in pre-semester orientation, and Marks had reemphasized them repeatedly during the TAP seminar, Amy and others had not yet had enough time to synthesize and internalize them. Unfortunately, one can only sense, the result was that Amy’s back-to-basics approach undermined her professional competency, and further complicated her already vulnerable classroom authority.

As I close this chapter, let me emphasize that I make these distinctions not to disparage writing teachers like Amy—who work diligently to come to terms with an unfamiliar discipline—or to disparage WPAs—who work diligently to introduce new teachers to a variety of pedagogies and rhetorical contexts. Quite the contrary, I make
these distinctions to underscore the ways in which Rhetoric and Composition’s marginal status in the academy directly affects the students and teachers who inhabit writing classrooms. Even when GTAs engage in well-designed preparation initiatives, even when they earn well-deserved spaces in graduate programs, even when they earnestly try to do right by their students, they are too often under-acquainted with the disciplinary knowledge that allows specialists in the discipline to teach writing effectively. When readers couple this reality with the cultural biases against politics and a lack of understanding of rhetoric and writing instruction’s origins and aims, it should be no surprise that GTAs have a hard time implementing political approaches to the teaching of writing, nor that they conflated political approaches with political pedagogy. In fact, these points seem obvious.

Chapter Conclusion: Summary and Implications

As I have argued throughout this chapter, many of the GTAs enrolled in the preparation seminar I studied expressed anxieties over their students’ reactions to politically provocative texts and recognized the ways their marginal institutional political locations inhibited them from implementing political approaches to writing instruction as effectively as possible. Thus, my research indicates that GTAs’ vulnerable institutional political location negatively affected their ability to implement political approaches to writing instruction. While I should reemphasize that not all GTAs expressed dissatisfaction with using political approaches to writing instruction, it is clear that their students’ resistance toward politically provocative texts influenced some GTAs’ negative
perceptions about their work. This, along with Lucy’s conflict with Jeff, helped to ignite—although by no means entirely fuel—the disaffection GTAs experienced in the program I studied.

What also appears clear to me as I reflect on the data showcased in this chapter is that GTAs’ perceptions about political approaches to the teaching of writing were often inaccurate. Some do not entirely understand the role they should play in their classrooms. Some perceived that they had no choice but to embrace the mantle of transformative intellectual, had no choice but to adopt a political pedagogy. As readers will see more clearly in the next chapter, such misperceptions led to tension in the TAP seminar, as well as to a heated debate between Eliza Marks and Amy Sutpen over the value of political approaches to the teaching of writing. This debate led me to speculate on how political traditions associated with the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition studies and writing teachers’ marginalized institutional political locations affect the preparation initiatives WPAs construct, as well as the professional subjectivities they inhabit.
CHAPTER FOUR: Pedagogy, Location, and Split Subjectivity in Writing Program Administration

As I explore in Chapter Three, my research indicates that while GTAs in my study responded to political approaches to the teaching of writing in a variety of complex and divergent ways, their vulnerable institutional political locations led many to express anxieties about—and in some cases resistance toward—surfacing political issues in their classrooms. Although a series of unpredictable and volatile incidents appear to have influenced their criticisms, my data suggests that GTAs’ lack of institutional authority, teaching experience, and familiarity with disciplinary and political discourse also influenced their negative perceptions, and had ramifications for WPAs who helped prepare them. In this chapter, I emphasize WPAs’ responses to political approaches and institutional political location, drawing on the scholarship of writing program administration, transcripts from the teaching assistant preparation seminar I studied, and personal interviews with writing program administrators at Ridge University to reexamine key events in the TAP seminar through the lens of WPAs’ subjectivities. Like the graduate students who participated in my study, WPAs respond to political approaches and their institutional political locations in complex and divergent ways.

Section One of this chapter explores how scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition in general and on writing program administration in particular constructs conceptions of politics, political approaches to writing instruction, and institutional political location. I begin by examining the ways in which the discipline characterizes the
institutional political location of WPAs, exploring how it emphasizes the alienated subject positions and inequitable working conditions many administrators face, and how it calls WPAs to be institutional activists for both themselves and the writing instructors with whom they work. I also examine how tropes of emancipation associated with institutional activism and political approaches to writing instruction manifest themselves in the scholarship of writing program administration. Following Donna Strickland, I suggest the ways in which these tropes obscure the managerial function of administrative work and, consequently, project WPAs’ *split subjectivity*: a professional habitués that purports them to be both emancipatory agents of change and agents of the sometimes-exploitive institutions in which they work.

In Section Two, I turn to personal statements and seminar and interview transcripts to illustrate how split subjectivity plays itself out in the lives of the writing program administrators who participated in my study. It is in this section of the chapter that I focus specifically on the perspectives of the writing program administrators who participated in my study, highlighting how they perceived their institutional political locations and how they negotiated GTAs’ resistance to political approaches to writing instruction. Finally, I close the chapter by arguing that the discipline would benefit from continuing to study how political approaches to the teaching of writing and the politics of institutional location conflict and intersect within writing programs, teacher preparation initiatives, and composition classrooms.
Section One: Institutional Politics, Emancipatory Tropes, and the Split Subjectivity of Writing Program Administrators

As Chapter One makes clear, notions of politics in Rhetoric and Composition studies, academia, and mainstream culture have ambiguous manifestations. Even given these complex and sometimes-contradictory understandings of politics, however, it is clear that much scholarship in the discipline embraces and celebrates the political. Stephen Parks, for example, argues that the discipline owes its very genesis to the rise of political activism in the academy and culture, proposing that “the development of composition studies” should be read through “its relationship to movements for social and economic justice,” including civil rights, anti-war, and women’s rights political movements (5). In a similar vein, Andrea Greenbaum asserts that “[t]hose of us who are trained in rhetoric and composition have been taught to view the teaching of writing as a political act” and, consequently, that the notion of “emancipation has become the trope of choice for writing instruction” (83; 84).

But even in spite of the field’s embrace of the political, it also recognizes that the rise of writing instruction in the modern university corresponds with political currents that are anything but emancipatory. While Tom Fox argues that “one of composition’s achievements in the last decade has been the critique of the ways that the institution uses literacy instruction and assessment to reinscribe cultural hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and class” (92), he also recognizes that “[w]e are a discipline that began as a remedial enterprise designed to repair the poor languages of students” (91). Indeed, as I explore my the Literature Review, academic gate keeping (Crowley 252-254),
disciplinary and cultural elitism (Berlin *Rhetorics* 88-93), and racial (Villanueva *Bootstraps* 65-90) and sexual oppression (Susan Miller *Textual* 121-141) have helped support the growth of Rhetoric and Composition and affect both its students and teachers. It is in this paradox—that is, that Rhetoric and Composition studies is sustained by both emancipation and oppression—that a fundamental tension in the discipline emerges.

Indeed, a wide range of scholarship suggests the ways this tension manifests in the field. Contributing to the burgeoning discourse on working conditions in academe, Eileen E. Schell and Patricia Lambert Stock’s *Moving a Mountain: Transforming the Role of Contingent Faculty in Composition Studies and Higher Education* illustrates how labor exploitation of non-tenure track faculty permeates most composition programs and other core courses in the undergraduate curriculum. Historiographers in the discipline surface this reality as well: as Robert Connors attests in “Rhetoric in the Modern University: The Creation of an Underclass,” writing instructors are “increasingly marginalized, overworked, and ill-paid” (“Rhetoric” 55). Whether working as a “part-timer” or a “teaching assistant”—two oft-used titles that indicate neither the scope or responsibilities of these positions—a significant number of writing instructors suffer from the lack of institutional capital, financial support, and/or professional experience that most faculty teaching beyond the core curriculum garner.

Writing program administrators have made related arguments about the inequitable status of their working conditions as well. In “On Coming to Voice,” Mara Holt discusses the ways in which being hired as an assistant professor in Rhetoric and Composition presupposed her to inequitable amounts of service even before she took on
an administrative role in her department, and characterizes the work of administration as “full of long hours day after day, doing multiple and apparently ceaseless tasks” (27).

Continuing the conversation in relation to contingent labor in “The Way We Work Now,” Holt and co-author Leon Anderson concede that while “[t]he most obvious degradation of academic employment is the rise of part-time academic instructors” (134), even those workers on the tenure track find that “the demands of academic life are proliferating” (133). Holt and Anderson attribute the deterioration of academic working conditions to three forces associated with the rise of corporatism in academe: increased expectations in labor due to the integration of technology, decreased levels of worker autonomy, and amplified degrees of competitive individualism in faculty members of all ranks (134).

“As long as adjuncts exist as a significant disadvantaged workforce,” the authors reason, “the position of tenure-line faculty members will also be precarious” (135). Taken as a whole, Holt and Anderson’s piece makes the case that tenure-track faculty and administrators should follow the lead of the AAUP by uniting to reform labor practices in higher education (140-41).

To respond to the conditions of overwork outlined by Schell and Lambert, Connors, Holt and Anderson, and others, academic organizations have passed resolutions that describe the standards for adequate working conditions for instructors and administrators working in writing programs. Synthesizing arguments made throughout the scholarship of the discipline, resolutions ratified by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) and Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) call academic workers to reshape labor practices in the academy collectively.
Concentrating on the inequitable working conditions that many WPAs face, the CWPA’s “Portland Resolution” highlights guidelines for writing program administrative positions in an effort to help WPAs gain recognition for and relief from over-demanding working conditions. Referencing a similar resolution published by CCCC, the CWPA’s “Portland Resolution” argues:

Many WPAs at colleges and universities, and department or division chairs at community colleges, find themselves in untenable job situations, being asked to complete unrealistic expectations with little tangible recognition or remuneration, and with few resources. The CCCC statement points out the exploitation of writing teachers at all levels, including program administrators: “The teaching, research, and service contributions of tenure-line composition faculty are often misunderstood or undervalued.” (para. 2)

As statements like these attest, labor exploitation occurs for writing faculty on all levels, “part-time” to tenure track. From my standpoint, such resolutions are reminiscent of the political activism Parks and others recognize as the raison d’être of Rhetoric and Composition: through them, professional organizations seek to unite instructors and administrators in institutional reform, a move that echoes political pedagogues’ efforts to unite writing teachers—and their students—in cultural activist struggle.

But even given the field’s penchant toward cultural and institutional activism, some critics argue Rhetoric and Composition has not yet done enough to address the ways members of the profession participate and support exploitive working conditions
for writing faculty. As Donna Strickland suggests in “The Managerial Unconscious of Composition Studies,” what is missing from our scholarly discourse is an open acknowledgement of the labor exploitation sustained within writing programs and by WPAs. Such an acknowledgement is lacking, Strickland asserts, because members of the discipline have too long privileged their emancipatory identities as teachers over their managerial identities as administrators, have too long let go under-examined what I am referring to as their split subjectivity. While privileging emancipatory possibilities of WPA work is certainly every administrator’s prerogative, in as much as this privileging has left unexamined the exploitive potential of WPA work, it works to weaken their ethos. As Strickland asserts,

It is the case [ . . . ] that composition professionals who have sought to tell the story of composition have for the most part avoided framing the story as a tale of the rise of management. As a result, the administrative function, if it appears at all in scholarship, tends to be presented simply as fact rather than as a particular material condition with a history and with material consequences. The stories composition professionals tell about the field, along with the unwritten narratives that serve as warrants for composition theory, can thus be read symptomatically as narratives of the managerial unconscious, narratives that leave unsaid the material struggles that speak them. (47-48)

In her criticism, Strickland points specifically to the work of two scholars integral to my study—namely, James Berlin and Bruce Horner. As I illustrate in both my Introduction
and Literature Review, Berlin and Horner align their scholarship within both emancipatory political and cultural-materialist critical traditions. Nonetheless, as Strickland notes, neither scholar—nor many others writing within similar political or materialists traditions—addresses the managerial realities associated with the work of writing program administration.

Analyzing scholarship that emphasizes the theory and practice of writing program administration, Strickland’s claims continue to hold weight. In order to illustrate, I examine the discourse of writing program administration below, identifying persistent tropes that emphasize the emancipatory possibilities of administrative work, yet obscure its exploitive potentials. As I explore later in the chapter, by suppressing the negative realities of WPA work—by leaving those realities unnamed—WPAs increase the disaffection Laura Micciche identifies in their work, not shrink it. As I argue here, the scholarship of administration can be read as symptomatic of administrators’ split subjectivity, a professional habitués that has the potential to alienate already marginalized writing teachers and program administrators and create obstacles in teaching assistant preparation.

In order to recognize the proliferation of tropes of emancipation, I return now to scholarship examined in Chapter One, particularly essays contained in Betty P. Pytlík and Sarah Liggett’s *Preparing College Teachers of Writing*. Throughout the volume, administrators describe the ways they help foster relationships of *mentorship* and *collaboration* with the faculty they prepare and supervise, and work to be progressive *agents of change* in their institutional settings. While these terms accurately illustrate the
ways in which writing program administrators continue the emancipatory traditions ingrained and celebrated in the field, they often also act to conceal the darker side of administrative work.

Certainly, the term *mentor* functions in this way, serving to highlight the emancipatory nature of WPA work. Although some scholars—namely Rebecca J. Rickly and Susanmarie Harrington—recognize the ways in which mentoring can support an old boys’ network or master/apprentice model of administration (110), the term *mentor* is more commonly employed in the scholarship of administration to suggest the emancipatory effects mentoring initiatives have for GTAs and other non-tenure track faculty. As Sally Barr Ebest argues in “Mentoring: Past, Present, and Future,” mentoring initiatives offer inexperienced faculty the “guidance, support, and protection” integral to effective teaching (219), and thus empower instructors who in eras past had little to no pedagogical preparation or professional council. Emancipatory conceptions of the term *mentor* appear in five essays in the Pytlik and Liggett collection, including Irwin Weiser’s “When Teaching Assistants Teach Teaching Assistants,” Katherine Gottschalk’s “Preparing Graduate Students across the Curriculum to Teach Writing,” Anderson, Deluca, and Rosenberger’s “The Three-Part Program for Preparing TAs to Lead Professional Communication courses at Miami University (Ohio),” Wanda Martin and Charles Paine’s “Mentors, Models, and Agents of Change,” as well as in Sally Barr Ebest’s piece.

While mentoring no doubt makes a significant, positive difference in the lives of new and experienced faculty—and I believe writing program administrators should laud
their attempts at improving the preparation and working conditions of the faculty in their programs—the emancipatory dimensions of the term mentor obscure the economic gains made by the university through some mentor initiatives. Of course, not all mentoring initiatives are inherently exploitive: ones described by Weiser and Gottschalk, for example, are careful to compensate those providing mentor services. But as Barr Ebest’s historical review of mentoring initiatives suggests, not all mentoring relationships are mutually beneficial. On the one hand, such initiatives can perpetuate gender-biased relationships where mentors “use female protégés to do their ‘dirty work,’ such as grading or researching, which may retard the protégé’s progress toward degree” (218, quoting Benokraitis and Feagin). On the other, mentors themselves can be the targets of exploitation, which may be the case for adjuncts or teaching assistants who serve as mentors, yet whose institutions do not compensate them appropriately for their work. This is a significant problem for WPAs as well: although their institutions may compensate them for some mentoring through merit or service, WPAs typically mentor a much larger percentage of students and faculty than non-administrative full-timers, yet their institutions rarely compensate them commensurately. As such, the emancipatory trope associated with mentoring and used widely in WPA scholarship conceals the financial exploitation of already under-compensated and/or overworked academic workers. In these ways, the mentor trope supports WPAs’ split subjectivity: while scholars often use it to emphasize the emancipatory nature of WPA work, it likewise conceals the exploitive potential of administrative practice.
The term *collaboration* similarly incorporates emancipatory tropes often associated with political approaches to writing instruction, while concealing less-than-flattering institutional realities associated with writing program administration. Scholarship that incorporates theories of collaborative administration typically demonstrates the ways WPAs undermine discriminatory hierarchies traditionally associated with academic culture, reflects feminist political objectives, and reinforces the emancipatory potential of work in the field. Essays like Rickly and Harrington’s cited above, as well as Marcia Dickson’s “Directing Without Power: Adventures in Constructing a Model of Feminist Writing Programs Administration,” Barbara L. Cambridge and Ben W. McClelland’s “From Icon to Partner: Repositioning the Writing Program Administrator,” Christine Hult’s “Politics Redux: The Organization of Writing Programs,” Suelynn Duffey et al.’s “Conflict, Collaboration, and Authority: Graduate Students and Writing Program Administration,” and Jeanne Gunner’s “Decentering the WPA” all employ emancipatory language in celebration of collaborative administrative styles. Gunner’s essay is particularly noteworthy, as it justifies the use of “decentered” administrative practice through the field’s allegiance to collaborative pedagogy and political consciousness. As Gunner writers:

> We cannot in good faith endorse collaboration as a pedagogy and then walk away from it as an administrative model. [. . . T]he strongest defense of a decentered WPA is a political [defense]: it is a democratic model. It places ownership in the hands of *all* faculty, giving them the
means to influence the direction of the program they form. ("Decentering"
14-15, emphasis in the original)

In as much as collaborative administration helps to give marginalized faculty voice in the
decision making of program practice, I would agree with Gunner’s assertion:
collaborative administrative practice does have emancipatory institutional potential.

Nonetheless, as Laura Bartlett argues in “Feminization and Composition’s
Managerial Subject,” feminist principles of collaborative administration can also work to
undermine emancipatory potential. While feminist collaborative principles of
administration “may seem oppositional to corporate conditions in higher education,”
Bartlett writes, they paradoxically simultaneously support the “‘new managerialism’”
important in maintaining exploitive hiring practices in the academy (Bartlett 274, quoting
Kenway and Langmead 66). Bartlett explains:

Despite the genuine desire of most WPAs to command the power of their
position in the service of social justice, the material conditions of the
WPA position generally work against feminist goals. The core duties of
the position—training contingent writing instructors, developing a
standardized composition curriculum, and independently hiring and firing
teachers according to the university’s staffing needs—constitute labor
practices that construct composition instruction outside the boundaries of
traditionally valued and supported academic work. (275)

I would also add that these core duties appear to contradict the emancipatory zeitgeist
associated with contemporary Rhetoric and Composition and political approaches to
writing instruction. Although Bartlett argues that espousing collaborative and feminist values may make WPA work appear more palatable, such emancipatory tropes mask the exploitive hiring practices and less-than-stellar working conditions indicative of many writing programs. As such, the trope of collaboration reinforces the contradictory poles of administrative subjectivity.

Although used with less frequency than nouns like mentor and collaboration, the term change agent obscures administrators’ managerial function in similar ways. Susan McLeod’s “The Foreigner: WAC Directors as Agents of Change” is an interesting case in point. Shunning metaphoric mediums such as conqueror, diplomat, volunteer, or missionary—metaphors she associates with authoritarian styles of administration—McLeod prefers the semantic vehicle agent of change.

WAC directors are change agents largely by virtue of their difference, their other-ness; they are not part of the local department power structure, they have no stake in disciplinary arguments, they do not represent any identifiable constituency and therefore are not seen as a threat. [. . . ]

Their unfamiliarity with and respect for the local culture combined with a willingness to listen and learn from that culture makes them appealing visitors, makes their knowledge about teaching writing not something to be imposed but something to be discussed, perhaps broadened through dialogue with disciplinary experts. (112)

I would not disagree with McLeod: WPAs administering writing across the curriculum (WAC) programs do occupy institutional spaces outside the traditional bounds of
departmental authority, and are in a unique position to serve as agents of change because of their other-ness. What McLeod leaves unacknowledged, however, are the ways WAC administrators also participate in departmental and institutional power structures, whether in the abstract by virtue of their tenure-track affiliation with English Departments (this is often the case), or more concretely through the ways they support the preparation and management of non-tenure track faculty (as was the case at Ridge University). WAC directors who participate in the preparation of non-tenure track faculty wield authority, particularly because their knowledge as pedagogical experts and positions as university administrators compel faculty to follow their teaching models and curricula. While it is reasonable to suggest that WAC directors work more often with tenure-track peers than do directors of composition, like other writing program administrators, they occupy managerial institutional positions, positions that distinguish them in relation to non-tenure track faculty.

Similar to McLeod’s piece, Martin and Paine’s “Mentors, Models, and Agents of Change: Veteran TAs Preparing Teachers of Writing” elides the managerial realities of writing program administration. As their title suggests, their essay argues that preparation initiatives using veteran TAs work to establish teaching assistants as part of a collaborative-administrative power structure, allowing teaching assistants to reshape preparation to better serve the needs and desire of inexperienced teachers. Thus, Martin and Paine characterize veteran TAs as positive agents of change. But while the authors are careful to note that their “university is fortunate to have so many capable people willing to work hard for minimal compensation” (225), they do not follow this admission
with an examination of labor exploitation in writing programs. Rather, as the following passage illustrates, they gloss over the less-than-democratic realities behind the preparation initiatives they describe.

By encouraging our veteran TAs to innovate, we give up some control, but we open up possibilities. Led by their peers during August Orientation, TAs feel they can legitimately question or add to the philosophy and practices of the writing program. New teachers witness veteran teachers in disagreement and think about their own practices.

Of course, there’s the old problem—that tension: Innovate too little and become stale and ineffective; innovate too much and present a disunited front and inconsistent philosophy. So, of course, we are active (not overactive) managers who weigh in with what we feel and with what we know from research that constitutes sound teaching. We sometimes put the brakes on change. But by putting our TAs in charge of innovation, we manage stability in a dynamic environment. (231-32)

While I take their characterizations as sincere expressions of sound administrative practice, Martin and Paine’s failure to complicate their symbolic language weakens their argument. While words and phrases like “innovate,” and “open up,” suggest the ways in which their program treks forward in Rhetoric and Composition’s emancipatory tradition, such phrasing also suggests a ruse: GTAs in their program do not simply “legitimately question or add to the philosophy and practice of the writing program,” but rather “feel” as if they do. In other words, GTAs work as agents of change only in as much as
administrators are comfortable, as the “put the brakes on” reference makes clear. GTAs feel as if they have a voice in governance, but in truth, WPAs tether teaching assistants’ agency and power. The limited scope of the collaborative governance Martin and Paine enact elides the reality that mentors are not only under-compensated (if at all) for their work in orientations\textsuperscript{30} or other preparation initiatives, but are under-sanctioned in their agency to affect change. Choosing to highlight the emancipatory potential of collaborative administration, the authors gloss over its exploitive tendencies, and reinforce the split subjectivity inherent in WPA work.

In response to just this kind of emancipatory glossing, critics have recently begun to expose the less than positive side of administrative subjectivity. Unfortunately, however, these critics also deal with only one side of the administrative split, subordinating the emancipatory possibilities in administration in favor of demonstrating administrators’ oppressive potential. Both James Sledd and Marc Bousquet, for example, wage devastating criticism at WPAs past and present. In “Disciplinarity and Exploitation: Compositionists as Good Professionals,” and “On Buying In and Selling Out: A Note for Bosses Old and New,” Sledd wages a verbal assault on Rhetoric and Composition, or more to the point, on those within its ranks who have achieved power but have done little to undermine the labor exploitation of many composition teachers. Characterizing scholars and administrators in the field as self-serving corporate climbers, Sledd suggests that contrary to the spirit of emancipation associated with the discipline, most tenure-line

\textsuperscript{30} I should note that like GTAs, many new tenure-track faculty (including WPAs) are also required to attend similar kinds of orientation initiatives, and are often not compensated for the time and labor expended in them. Indeed, as Holt and Anderson claim, labor exploitation in academe happens across levels.
composition professionals have been co-opted by the prestige of power. These compositionists are self-deluding: they are “the good professionals who accept the system uncritically, push hard for their own status and privilege, yet genuinely believe that they are liberators, empowerers, transformative intellectuals. They pave hell” (“On” 146). Emphasizing the managerial subjectivity of WPAs, Sledd’s metaphor of choice is the “boss compositionist,” a term he wields artfully and with force.

To [criticisms waged] over the past decade and more, the boss compositionists have replied that they have been falsely accused of selling out. The accusation is in fact quite different—but more disturbing because it questions foundations. The boss compositionists haven’t sold out. They’ve bought in, bought in to the rotten system of academic exploitation as good professionals do. Good professionals have to play by the system’s rules. [. . . ] In an essentially unchanged system, then, the boss compositionists on Pomocompo, composition’s postmodern farm, have risen to be foremen, superior to the migrant workers but far below the members of the farm’s corporate board. This is the unplanned achievement of their revolution (“Disciplinarity” para. 23-24).

For Sledd, Rhetoric and Composition’s turn toward theory and pursuit of full-fledged “professional” identity has led to a forgetting of its primary purpose—that is, to teach students “general-purpose prose” (“Disciplinarity” para. 32). In its fast pursuit of theory, “composition studies have gone everywhere and nowhere,” Sledd tells us. As he questions, “What possible unity could hold together women's studies, men's studies,
queer studies, Asian studies, Black studies, Chicano studies, cultural studies, language studies, and unlimited studies in the literatures of the world's most popular language from the fifth century to the twenty-first?” (“Disciplinarity” para. 31-32). All in all, Sledd’s language works to enforce an exploitive managerial subjectivity for WPAs and other compositionists who have argued to professionalize the discipline’s status. As such, his words suggest that many in the field are hypocrites, hiding behind the mantle of liberatory social theories and emancipatory political approaches and pedagogies while insidiously maintaining labor exploitation.

Marc Bousquet’s startling 2002 essay “Composition as Management Science: Toward a University without a WPA” also reveals the dark side of administrative subjectivity, surfaced and debunking the emancipatory hero-figure featured in much of WPA scholarship. In essence, his argument is that like lower management in corporate atmospheres, WPAs have little agency to affect positive institutional change; in as much as they embrace the logic of managerialism and its pragmatic materialism, Bousquet tells us, WPAs support oppressive power structures. Like Sledd, Bousquet argues against the evils of managerial subjectivity. But unlike Sledd, Bousquet asserts that compositionists too easily reject—not embrace—critical theory. As he writes, there are “current trends in the discourse [of Rhetoric and Composition] away from critical theory and toward institutionally focused pragmatism, toward acceptance of market logic, and toward increasing collaboration with a vocational and technical model of education” (495-96). While both writers name the evils of managerialism and draw connections between it and
administrative work, they seem to be at odds over what prompts the managerial subjectivity they name.

What I am getting at here is that both Sledd and Bousquet are pointing fingers at WPAs, uncovering the ways they participate in exploitive managerial and institutional practices. But what is interesting—and what helps to support my understanding of split subjectivity—is that Sledd and Bousquet are deriving their criticism of administration from opposite ends of the theoretical spectrum. Sledd argues that through its pursuit to professionalize, administrators and other leaders in Rhetoric and Composition studies have uncritically embraced critical theory, hoping to gain the academic acumen and caché associated with it. Bousquet, quite to the contrary, argues that administrators have too often rejected critical theory in an effort to gain institutional standing in academic cultures that embrace market logic and managerial administrative styles. One blames emancipatory theories and pedagogies for the problem, the other laments the rejection of these theories and pedagogies. When examined in tandem, their arguments illustrate how the two halves of administrative subjectivity—disciplinary-activism and manager-disciplinarians—are embedded within the scholarship of administration, but have yet to be concretely identified.

Certainly both Sledd and Bousquet make important points, ones that should not be dismissed simply because they are at odds. From my perspective, Sledd’s work is important because it helps to surface the hypocritical nature of a discipline that embraces critical-political stances yet supports the exploitation of academic workers, Bousquet’s because it helps to illustrate how the scholarship of administration uncritically accepts
managerial logic. From my perspective, however, Bousquet’s argument is seriously out of touch with the emancipatory currents in the field. What is disturbing is that he does not surface how James Berlin, Susan Miller, Sharon Crowley, and others reveal how hegemony inscribes itself in the profession, instead deriving his criticism of all administrators from the few who embrace what he considers to be co-opted administrative rhetorics. My point here is not that Bousquet’s claims lack creditability—indeed, his conceptualization of “The Heroic WPA” influences my understanding of split subjectivity (“Composition” 494). I do take issue with the way Bousquet systematically ignores the activist history of Rhetoric and Composition, however, as well as its major scholars’ contributions to materialist discourse and institutional critique. As a literature specialist, Bousquet’s omissions maintain traditional hierarchies in English studies, hierarchies that elevate the “critically-oriented” literature specialist (Bousquet “Tenured” para. 6) above the managerially-bound WPA (Bousquet “Composition” 518). By not placing his arguments within the ideological conversations offered by Rhetoric and Composition’s political forerunners, Bousquet’s rhetoric is antagonistically “Literary.”

Interestingly enough, one of the first pieces of scholarship to surface the managerial subjectivity of administration uses the “agent” trope examined above. Jeanne Gunner’s 1998 “Among the Composition People: The WPA as English Department Agent” convincingly argues that even administrators with the strongest of emancipatory commitments can find themselves in the grip of hegemony. While Gunner’s institutional power-force lies not in the managed university, as Bousquet places it, but rather in the

---

31 In fairness, Bousquet does cite Berlin, but only in context to his scholarship in cultural studies pedagogy.
anti-composition-current-traditional-Literature-wing of the English Department, her larger point is in keeping with his arguments: because of the ways institutions hold WPAs accountable for the faculty working in their programs, WPA power can be used to reproduce and support repressive power structures. As Gunner argues,

If we consider the WPA as the liaison figure between the English department and a subfield whose increasing theoretical sophistication can threaten the dominant culture of literary studies—a threat embodied in, for instance, the case for social institutional change that such scholars as Berlin and others have issued—then the WPA position, in its typical organization context, can be used as one means to sustain the disciplinary and administrative status quo[. . . . ] Properly controlled, the WPA can help the English department withstand[/resist/reject] the continual evolution of theoretical frameworks of composition theory (and, more broadly, critical theory at large), especially theoretical critiques that attack essentialisms and embrace liberatory goals, containing and so rendering them less threatening to the structure base. (154)

Although Gunner’s essay resists the institution of English studies, not the so-called “managed university” (see Bousquet, Scott, and Parascondola’s collection), her point is the same: administrators, like other institutional workers, can be agents that reproduce hegemony.

Like Gunner, my purpose in examining the less flattering side of administrative work is not to demonize WPAs or discredit their contributions to the field. Rather, it is
my aim to show the ways that many administrators’ professional subjectivities are often at odds with their scholarly activist allegiance. As I show in the following section, by not acknowledging the managerial realities of our work, WPAs deny a real aspect of their function, and—as a result—can alienate the GTAs they work to prepare. This contributes to the frustration GTAs already experience because of their marginalized institutional locations, and thus supports the disaffection Laura Micciche associates with WPA work/teaching assistant preparation.

Indeed, as Micciche argues, disappointment is a reality in writing program administration because many WPAs “may be the only compositionists (or theorists, or multiculturalists, or feminists) in our departments, [and often] find ourselves working in [programs] where not all voices count equally” (446). Given the marginalized political location of GTAs, WPAs with activist allegiances may be especially susceptible to disaffection—after all, the realities of their work continually force them to switch into and out of activists and managerial roles. As my analysis above suggests, WPA scholarship represses the disappointing managerial realities of our work in order to honor its emancipatory potential. But as Donna Strickland’s theory of the managerial unconscious suggests, the suppression of negative aspects of our work can lead to a kind of professional neurosis, an unhealthy emotional state that hides eerie phantoms in order to project a positive outward appearance.

In an effort to both acknowledge the disappointment associated with administrative work and reveal the ways WPA responses to institutional and pedagogical politics can be read as symptomatic of the split subjectivity represented in the scholarship
of administration, Section Two of this chapter examines WPAs’ responses to pivotal moments in the TAP seminar. To do so, I draw on personal statements, electronic correspondence, and interview and seminar transcripts in which Eliza Marks and Sarah Allegheny reflect on their work with GTAs in general, and in response to Lucy Piece and Amy Sutpen in particular. What my data suggest is that teaching assistant preparation is particularly fertile ground for the alternate suppression and emergence of WPAs’ activist and managerial subjectivities.

**Section Two: Local Contexts of Split Subjectivity**

As I explore in the previous chapter, two pivotal moments in my research occurred in relation to GTAs Lucy Pierce and Amy Sutpen. As I will argue in this section, like the scholarship of administration, WPAs’ responses to Lucy and Amy’s situations illustrate split subjectivity. Indeed, like much scholarship on writing program administration, one can read Marks’ and Allegheny’s responses as indicative of the ways their positions construct them as both disciplinary-activists and manager-disciplinarians.

Undoubtedly, the most unsettling and perhaps disappointing experience that occurred for GTAs and WPAs alike was Lucy Pierce’s conflict with first-year student Jeff Hogan. As readers remember, Jeff was the undergraduate who openly resisted Lucy’s authority to use political subject matter in her classroom, inappropriately disrupted his fellow classmates while consistently arriving to class late, and allegedly assaulted Lucy after she had taken steps to remove him from her class. As seminar transcripts from Chapter Three indicate, Lucy shared her frustrations about Jeff in the
teaching assistant preparation seminar on a number of occasions, and many GTAs were angered by the way writing program administrators and university judiciaries resolved the matter. In sum, some GTAs felt Jeff’s lack of performance and bad behavior should have resulted in his failing the course. In the end, however, Jeff landed in another section, and eventually passed the course.

As WPAs’ responses to Lucy’s conflict below suggest, rather than aligning administrators’ motives with the emancipatory potentials often associated with the discipline, some GTAs felt betrayed by WPAs. That is, instead of feeling as if WPAs’ allegiances were with them, some GTAs felt WPAs’ allegiances were with the institution, and this caused tensions in the TAP seminar and the composition program. Indeed, Sarah Allegheny was highly aware of GTAs’ feelings of resentment about Lucy’s situation. As she explained:

**Sarah:** TAs felt as if [Lucy] had been betrayed. That was a real lesson for me, and a disillusioning moment in my professional life. Having been a TA, I should have known this I guess, but I was so bewildered by the way [Lucy] had handled the situation, I just focused on resolving it reasonably. I don’t blame [Lucy] for how she handled it—she was a typical first-quarter TA, she was insecure, she felt alone, and she told absolutely everybody what had happened. She needed the support of everybody, but because [her situation] created hostility, it became a matter of concern.

(Personal interview June 2003)
As one of the GTAs who Lucy shared her story with, I empathized—and to some degree shared—her and other GTAs’ resentment. As a graduate student writing program administrator, however, I also understood why Allegheny felt obligated to follow institutional protocol. Again, Allegheny explains:

**Sarah:** I have this tendency, as everybody knows, to be very traditional. When it comes to the [decisions to be made in] the program, I rely on the history of the program. The whole thing is, I need to be persuaded that what we are doing is not right. At the time [Lucy’s] situation erupted, I still thought in terms of the way things were done. I still do now. I was the only Rhetoric and Composition person here when we started the program, so I knew the traditions and procedures we had in place, and needed to be persuaded to do things differently. Because the policy [on handling disruptive students] seemed clear, I felt I should follow it.

(Allegheny/Marks collaborative personal interview June 2003)

To be sure, running a writing program is a large and complicated endeavor, one that calls for principled and consistent action and knowledge of history, tradition, and policy. What’s more, the professional stakes for administrators are high—those who deviate from institutional protocol or are perceived as ineffective or incompetent risk marginalizing their already tenuous institutional positioning.

Still, it is important to note that during her time as Director of Composition, Sarah Allegheny did not feel marginalized and therefore did not work with the understanding that she was. In fact, quite to the contrary, she appreciated the power her position granted
her within the department. After she left her position, however, she came to recognize that she occupied a marginalized institutional location even as she wielded power and respect (Personal email correspondence, November 2005). Indeed, even though her position as Director of Composition made her an important figure in her department, she had also run the writing program for many years solo, had earned tenure while handling this extraordinary administrative load, and had entered the profession at a time when Rhetoric and Composition specialists garnered little scholarly respect. Allegheny’s remarks indicate how her institutional location as both marginalized and powerful.

**Sarah:** I became the composition director actually by default, of course, because I was the only compositionist. And I came in under a department chair who was totally into literature and whose antagonism against composition came through in an essay he wrote in *ADE Journal*. What there was about [Frank, our chair,] though, was that because he had disdain for—or at very best ambivalence toward—composition, he allowed me to do with it whatever I wanted. And I had opportunities to make the program better and to educate teachers in the larger community. And he really, really respected me, in spite of his disdain for composition. So I did the job eleven years as WAC director and nine years as director of composition. But there were some people who thought I was [Frank’s] flunky, who thought our friendship meant that I was letting him dictate the program, and who thought that he was taking advantage of me by making me make all of the decisions and handle all the work on my own. But
what some didn’t understand was that the strength that I had was a result of his allowing me to do whatever it was I wanted to do. [. . . ] In fact, I was the one setting the standards, not [Frank]. I was the one who was the nine-to-five person who came in on the weekends. This was me. This was who I was. [. . . ] I took on this workload because it was part of who I was as a professional. As a comp director, I think that the thing that underpinned everything I did was the question of professional ethics. I had no room for [unprofessional behavior]. In fact, one of my flaws was that I couldn’t believe that people didn’t follow policy. (Personal interview June 2003)

Such comments illustrate both the isolation and power that WPAs inhabit and project, another function of their split-subjectivity. It is true that Sarah wielded authority in the department and that she did not see her work as “flunky” work—indeed, she saw it as essential to the maintenance of the department, and her chair respected her and her work. At the same time, it is also true that her chair had little respect for the discipline of composition, and that others had little respect for her scholarship or her administrative work. “Certainly, most [of us] know,” Sarah claimed, “that most of our colleagues believe our scholarship isn’t equal to creative work or literary analysis.” Nonetheless, Sarah believed that administrators “have to work out a way to get done what needs to be done, and one way may be to make the best of a situation by working around it” (Personal email correspondence, November 2005).
The way administrators worked around Lucy’s situation, however, left GTAs wondering if their best interests had been served. I suspect that part of many GTAs’ outrage stemmed from the fact that the TAP seminar—via readings in composition theory and work with *Doing Public Writing*—continually highlighted the emancipatory political tradition of Rhetoric and Composition studies, yet when it came to negotiating Lucy’s marginalized location, WPAs—from GTAs’ perspective—sided with the institution. Here, then, is the split subjectivity manifest. What GTAs may not have recognized, however, was that WPAs were working from marginalized institutional locations too—locations they held because of their status as compositionists, the under-defined nature of their work, and the elusive lines of authority in the programs—and that these locations led them to resolve Lucy’s situation in the way that they did.

Indeed, I suspect that Allegheny’s and Marks’ precarious institutional locations affected the way they negotiated Lucy’s situation in many ways. Another factor that complicated the situation’s resolution was that WPAs’ administrative authority and job descriptions were not transparently defined. Because both were sharing administrative responsibilities in preparing GTAs—Allegheny their immediate departmental supervisor, but Marks their instructor of record and therefore GTAs’ most visible and consistent authority figure—problems arose. Both administrators speak to this fact in an interview I conducted with them collaboratively.

**Eliza:** There were lots of problems that arose because TAs didn’t know who to turn to. If the two of us were in disagreement with how to handle something, which happened more than once, that put the TAs in an
interesting spot. Ultimately at one point [Sarah] and I had to have a talk and [Sarah] had to remind me that I didn’t run the program—she was right. I don’t direct the program. This was all fallout from the [Lucy] situation. Because there was this continued fallout from that for us and for the TAs.

**Sarah:** And of course the other tension was that [Eliza] did not know what was required of her in terms of the composition program and the WAC program. There was nothing written down about what anyone should do. [ . . . ] So here [Eliza] is every once in a while making decisions that really were not hers to make. This is what I think we really had more arguments over than anything else.

**Eliza:** Because I am being told they are mine to make by my boss in [Undergraduate College]. My boss is saying that I am the one to make the administrative decisions as far as general education courses are concerned. Curricular control lies inside of English, administrative control actually lies outside of English. Which is a really problematic setup.

**Sarah:** For instance, we had an argument over letting the student back into [Lucy’s] class. I said that I needed to find another place for him, but [Eliza] didn’t think that he deserved another place, that because his behavior was so egregious he should not have another place. Because of the way the situation was handled, I believed he needed another shot, and
after we discussed it, that’s how it was handled. (Allegheny/Marks collaborative personal interview June 2003)

Because of their differences in administrative style—Allegheny encouraging GTAs to follow the traditions and procedures already in place, Marks encouraging GTAs to cultivate their professional intuition and honor their personal instincts—GTAs received mixed messages, which fueled their resentment toward administrators and the institution.

From my perspective, it is clear that the ambiguous lines of authority in the program’s administrative structure exacerbated WPAs’ split subjectivity. On the one hand, by encouraging GTAs to cultivate and trust their professional and personal instincts, Marks was illustrating her allegiance to emancipatory pedagogy, to feminist and collaborative models of shared classroom authority; on the other, Allegheny was asking GTAs to follow the policy she put into place as the primary architect of the First-Year Composition program. And—for better or for worse—the institutional policies administrators abided by resulted in GTAs’ transferring their resentment about Lucy’s situation into a resentment toward the composition program in general and its curriculum for first time teachers in particular.

Indeed, as referenced in Chapter Three, GTA Don Buikema’s email to Marks suggests just this. Alluding to the levels of resistance Amy Sutpen and others displayed in the seminar, Don confessed: “My concern is that [. . . ] emotions provoked by [Lucy’s] predicament are fueling a mistrust of the university and by extension the class”—that is, the TAP seminar that was led by Eliza Mark and that professed a political approach to writing instruction. When viewed through the lens of Marks’ scholarly identity—an
identity that valued emancipatory, activist allegiances—it is easy to see why conversations surrounding political approaches in the TAP seminar became volatile. From my perspective and Don’s, GTAs were transferring their resentment about Lucy’s situation onto the political approach to writing instruction Marks and Allegheny had developed and approved for the Program.

Perhaps predictably so, tensions peaked on the day TAP seminar members read Maxine Hairston’s “Diversity, Ideology, and the Teaching of Writing.” As examined in Chapter Three, this essay argues against the use of political approaches to the teaching of writing. Spurred on by the Reflective Responses of GTAs, Eliza Marks delivered an important aside: her remarks were meant as a response to GTAs’ commonly held suspicion that using a political approach meant ignoring the writing process. Sitting on top of the desk at the head of the classroom, Marks said that it was never her intention to give the impression that GTAs should not focus on the writing process in their classrooms.

**WPA Eliza:** Last week’s discussion [of Hairston’s piece] has been a teacherly learning moment for me. Because it has been my idea, my assumption that you have been focusing on teaching writing all along, and if you haven’t been doing that, it has been a mistake on my part for assuming.

It is one of those places where I have been so buried in my assumption that I may not have been as clear or forceful or as supportive
of you as I needed to be, because there would have never been any question in my mind that that is what is going on.

After reaffirming her pedagogical commitment to the writing process, Marks and other members of the TAP seminar returned to their discussion of the Hairston piece.

When I review this portion of the seminar transcript, it is clear to me that Marks was working diligently to afford GTAs the space to voice their perspectives on political approaches to writing instruction. She stayed out of the discussion for a good portion of class time, I suspect to encourage GTAs’ candid criticism. When the discussion began to heat up, however, Marks was no longer able to remain quiet. As the following transcript attests, Marks could not let go unchallenged some of the latent assumptions buried in advocacies of more traditional pedagogical approaches.

**GTA Amy:** Part of my problem is that I feel that we should have a separate class which focuses on politics and ideology, and one which focuses on grammar and writing issues.

**GTA Don:** I don’t understand how we are supposed to separate what is fundamental writing from what is political. I don’t understand how we can teach a class that is just writing, and not political, and save all these other things for another class.

**WPA Eliza:** Where does your inability to understand that lie?

**Don:** I don’t understand then what we are going to teach in a writing class. How are we going to teach something that is not political? What it is that we are going to teach that wouldn’t be political?
Amy: You want me to answer, or keep quiet?

Eliza: Go ahead.

Amy: I wasn’t saying. . . I . . . In my experience, I had the whole political curriculum, and then I had the responding to literature class which was also freshmen comp.

Eliza: But literature is as political as anything else!

Amy: Right, right, right, right!

Eliza: And by-god, I can’t hold back anymore. I can’t! I can’t! So is grammar and basic fundamentals and mechanics.

Amy: That’s, that’s not my point. My point is that we slowed down a lot more, we returned to writing, we spent days. . .

Eliza: That is up to you to do. That’s why I sat on the desk this morning and said, “Boy, have I made a mistake.” Because my assumption is that’s what the heck you were doing. This is my fault. I’ve missed the boat. I thought you guys were hearing me, and you haven’t, and boy did I learn. I need to adjust. Because that’s what I expect you to be doing. Because nothing about my approach to the teaching of writing or [Doing Public Writing] stops that or wants it stopped.

Amy: So we can spend days on that grammar guide booklet?

Eliza: Yes, you can do that.

Amy: Because that’s what I’m saying we did [at my undergraduate institution].
**Eliza:** But one of the things you’re not going to get away with easily, [Amy], without discussion, without debate, without further reading, without all sorts of talk and dialogue is whether that really is where the focus of the teaching of writing ought to lie.

Now we can discuss, we can argue, we can debate, we can fight, but if you come back [to a grammatical or literary approach], if you stay there, the choice is yours, but what is important to me is that you have that centered in thoughtful, theoretical position. You know? I mean, you might want to ask yourself why is it that [you] feel that [a more traditional approach is the best], but practically 30,000 scholars in Rhetoric would disagree with [you]. You know? You also need to raise that question. That is why it is so important to take a look at these flashpoints, and center yourself, because if you are going to center yourself [in a grammatical or literary approach], I want you to do it wisely, really wisely, fully aware of what the implications are, of what the theoretical conversation is.  

**Amy:** I mean, I could be wrong. Convince me. I’m just voicing what my initial reactions are.  

**Eliza:** Yeah, I just voiced a little of mine.  

**Amy** [Barely audible]: Yeah, well I didn’t mean to make you scream.  

This was an explosive moment in the TAP seminar, and I suspect that I was not the only person to leave class that day rattled. What I think this section of the transcript shows
quite clearly is one administrator’s split subjectivity. That is, it works to show a moment in which Eliza Marks’ professional activist sentiments and her institutional managerial function collide.

As I see it—like many members of the discipline, like me—Marks sees her teaching and pedagogy as embodied activism, a consciously political act sanctioned by her disciplinary community. In light of scholarship in the discipline, one could read Marks’ inability to remain quiet—“I can’t hold back anymore. I can’t! I can’t!”—as emerging from the commonly held disciplinary assumption that literary-canonical writing pedagogies have the potential to reify dominant (and often discriminatory) power relations. Indeed, Marks’ objection that “literature is as political as anything” reflects the sentiments of James Berlin and others who trace how the academy has historically suppressed the teaching of writing in favor of the teaching of literature, leaving students educationally and politically disenfranchised. Not only does the suppression of writing instruction keep the middle and working classes under-acquainted with literacy strategies (strategies that the privileged classes gain in their home cultures), it reifies the classism, sexism, and ethnocentrism often supported through traditional Western “Great Books” curricula. As such, Marks’ activist subjectivity compels her to speak out strongly against literary-canonical pedagogies and for pedagogies focusing more exclusively on writing and rhetorical instruction.

I should note that Amy, too, seems to be calling for a composition course more focused on writing instruction. But what Amy recognizes as legitimate writing pedagogy is very different than what Marks recognizes. Like many people new to the discipline,
Amy equates writing instruction with grammatical instruction—or, at very least, believes that grammatical instruction should be a central activity in the writing classroom. As transcripts in Chapter Three suggest, one of Amy’s major criticisms of her program’s political approach is that it takes classroom time away from grammatical instruction, which she believes is integral to responsible teaching. Because Amy is concerned about her students’ writing abilities, she wishes to devote more time on the “grammar guide booklet.”

On the contrary, however, Marks aligns herself with the predominant disciplinary assertion that current-traditional grammatical instruction has negligible potential to help students’ growth as writers. As Constance Weaver asserts in *Teaching Grammar in Context*, countless studies “indicate that there is little pragmatic justification for systematically teaching a descriptive or explanatory grammar of the language” (23). In fact, Weaver cites multiple research reports that indicate that the teaching of grammar has the potential to frustrate students and in some cases even reverse conventional language use (21). Because of these findings, Marks and others agree that the teaching of grammar supports class hegemony, preoccupying students with ineffectual drills and rote memorization, rather than giving them a space to contemplate the politics and emancipatory power of language. As Berlin argues, because traditional instructional practices suppress the politics of culture, working and middle-class students remain under-prepared to navigate “[p]olitical discourse [and] the language of social arrangements” (*Rhetorics* 7). Said another way, because grammar instruction hides the politics of culture, it contributes to class hegemony and lack of political agency. Thus,
once again, Marks’ activist sentiments compel her to defend political approaches to writing instruction passionately.

Of course, this is not to say that grammatical and stylistic competency was not a goal at Ridge, or that helping students to achieve said competencies is outside of the purview of Rhetoric and Composition studies. Instead, it is to point out that because experienced educators at Ridge did not agree that students’ grammatical and stylistic competencies were inadequate—some even deemed them exceptional—political approaches to writing instruction were appropriate first-year composition. In fact, the fact that Ridge did not offer “remedial” writing courses was testament to its student body’s overall writing proficiencies. If Ridge were an open admissions school, Amy’s argument might have held more weight, but because Ridge students had facility with stylistic discourse conventions, emphasizing grammar seemed counterproductive. Again, Berlin argues, because the basis of writing courses should be rhetorical—in all the political dimensions that word evokes—it would be unethical not to expose students to “the ideological forces and codes that shape their subjectivities” (*Rhetorics* 182).

Because rhetoric at its core demands the examination of the political, Marks could not allow Amy’s assumptions to go unchallenged.

But the power of Marks’ institutional position complicates her vehement retort. From my perspective, the Eliza/Amy interchange suggests the ways in which administrators have the potential to be perceived not simply as disciplinary-activists, but also as manager-disciplinarians. Certainly, the strong tone Marks uses emanates from her authority as an expert in her discipline, not simply because she is an authority figure by
virtue of her administrative post. What’s more, the style she uses to engage Amy rises
directly out of the sophistic rhetorical tradition. Still, because administrators gain
authority through their institutional positioning, GTAs under their direction can construe
their theoretical and pedagogical positionings as managerial, oppressive, or both. The last
line of the interchange illustrates this most persuasively: when Amy replies that she
“didn’t mean to make you scream,” she is suggesting that Marks is coming down too
hard, using her authority too vehemently, squelching the alternative discourse that Amy is
grappling to voice. While the fact that Amy felt enough agency to criticize the use of
political approaches and capture the last word in the interchange (albeit in barely audible
tones) is testament to the student-centered atmosphere Marks had cultivated in the TAP
seminar, Amy’s final words in the interchange indicate that she may have felt castigated
inappropriately. My larger point is this: even though Marks’ theoretical and pedagogical
allegiances position her squarely within the progressive activist tradition, the passion she
uses to defend that tradition, coupled with her institutional authority, constructs her as
manager-disciplinarian, someone who uses the power of her position to dictate pedagogy,
squelch dissent, and maintain her institutional and scholarly authority. As such, the
Eliza/Amy interchange serves as a powerful example of split subjectivity. In it, we see
appearances of the disciplinary-activist and the manager-disciplinarian in tandem.

Indeed, even in spite of her activist scholarly identity, Marks is clearly in a
position of authority in the interchange: the power of her position makes her vehemence

32 Defined as “a professional teacher of political excellence” in Theresa Enos’ Encyclopedia of Rhetoric
and Composition, sophistic rhetoric carries both positive and negative connotations. Sophists were
respected for their ability to impart wisdom, but also suspect because of their penchant for political
progressivism (681).
unsetting. The point seems all too obvious, and reinforces Bartlett’s characterization of writing program administration as outside of the bounds of traditional academic work (275). When GTAs have yet to accept or internalize the scholarly history and pedagogical emphases that support contemporary practices in the teaching of writing, curricula that emphasize politics can feel oppressive. Certainly for GTAs like Amy, political approaches often felt like unnecessary, uncomfortable, and underproductive classroom exercises, and thus became—for her and others—an additional force of marginalization for an already marginalized group of academic workers. In essence, perceived through the framework of split subjectivity, political approaches to writing instruction felt less emancipatory than oppressive, perpetuating a cycle of disaffection for another generation of marginalized and managed writing instructors.

Undoubtedly, I need to emphasize that the kind of “management” involved in preparation programs like the one I studied at Ridge is an important part of GTAs’ scholarly training, and most WPAs rightly argue that preparation initiatives support the intellectual (not managerial) aspects of their work. Sustaining this argument, resolutions passed by the Modern Language Association, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, and the Council of Writing Program Administrators assert that in as much as faculty preparation is a form of inquiry that advances knowledge, it is indeed intellectual work. But as the CWPA’s “Evaluating the Intellectual Work of Writing Administration” warns,

faculty and staff development depends primarily on one factor: the degree to which those being administered value and respect the writing
administrator. Staff development cannot be accomplished by fiat. Instructors cannot simply be ordered and coerced, no matter how subordinate their position within the university. (para. 34)

Certainly, the GTAs in my study valued and respected WPAs despite their frustrations with the political approaches and their vulnerable institutional political location. Given that the teaching of writing occupies a less than celebrated space in academe and culture, and that many things political are construed as suspect, however, the ways that WPAs maintain respect is tricky business, particularly in light of their split subjectivity. In order to ward off frustrations that materialize in the face of the politics of pedagogy and location, WPAs need to cultivate strategies in TAP that both acknowledge and work to counteract the tensions between the emancipatory and exploitive potentials of their work.

Of course, there is no easy way to remedy the activist-managerial split in writing program administration, and my data does not provide a prescription. What it does illustrate is Bruce Horner’s understanding of the inexplicable connectedness of pedagogy and material conditions, Margaret Himley’s appreciation for the volatility that can erupt when political moments surface in the classroom, James Berlin’s recognitions of the marginalized institutional location of writing instructors, and Laura Micciche’s and Donna Strickland’s respective surfacing of the disappointment and the managerial functions associated with the work of writing program administration. What I hope my study contributes to their political discourses is the reality of WPAs’ split subjectivity,
and the necessity of proactively surfacing the pedagogical and institutional realities that influence attitudes about writing instruction.

It is because of GTAs’ willingness to voice their concerns, WPAs’ willingness to engage in self-scrutiny, and the discipline’s willingness to take the concerns I raise seriously that I began this project. As I hope to illustrate through the reflective essay that serves as my final chapter, the discipline would serve itself well to continue to articulate the connections among political approaches, institutional political location, and the discipline’s work to improve graduate teaching assistant preparation.

Indeed, while some recognize the very raison d’être of Rhetoric and Composition as cultivating critical consciousness that inspires political activism, the institutional political locations of those in the field are anything but emancipatory. Perhaps it is safe to say that another reason writing program administrators are attracted to political approaches to writing instruction is that writing teachers’ marginalization is so clearly visible in WPAs’ day-to-day working lives. In as much as writing program administrators see the ways this marginalization affects learning in writing programs and life for writing instructors, many of us feel compelled to critique institutions, to work to increase the political locations of writing instructors. I now realize that this reality is part of my own fascination with political approaches to writing instruction and part of my commitment to improving preparation initiatives for new teachers. In the next chapter, I attempt to synthesize what I have learned about teaching assistant preparation through this study, suggesting ways that WPAs can continue to reinforce the emancipatory activist potential
of their discipline even as they recognize—and work to undercut—the exploitive functions of their work.
CONCLUSION: Proactivity and the Possibility of Critical Administration

**GTA Rebecca:** Many of us, if not all of us, are doing this for the first time. I am not saying we should not teach these issues in our class, but I do think that everyone should be moderately prepared for what they are getting themselves into, and that we, as teachers, should be ready as well. I do not think all of us are, at least not completely.

_GTA on political approaches and institutional political location_

The sentiments Rebecca describes are ones common for many new teachers of writing: her words indicate the vulnerability and frustration that arise when people perform a complicated job for the first time. Of course, no amount of theoretical or practical preparation completely primes graduate students to move into their roles as teachers, for as emancipatory educators and process pedagogues have taught us, much of the learning is in the doing. The persistent challenge of teaching assistant preparation, then, is to prepare GTAs for the challenges we can anticipate. As Rebecca’s sentiments and the pages of this dissertation suggest, GTAs feel particularly vulnerable—and perhaps particularly under-prepared—in negotiating political approaches to composition given the politics of institutional location. Through my research, I have come to recognize the importance of naming the particular challenges GTAs face when adopting political approaches to the teaching of writing. This conclusion serves both to summarize
the answers to my research questions, and to offer WPAs strategies to prepare new GTAs to use political approaches to writing instruction.

**How Do GTAs Respond to Political Approaches to Writing Instruction and the Politics of Institutional Location?**

What is clear to scholars immersed in the discipline is that political approaches to composition are designed to elicit resistant responses from students, designed to help students become reflexive about their own worldviews and those held by others, designed to stimulate critical consciousness and social critique, designed to prepare the next generation to shape democracy. What Rebecca’s words indicate and my research reinforces, however, is that some new GTAs not only do not anticipate their students’ resistant reactions to discussing political issues, some new GTAs do not anticipate having to address political issues in a writing course. It appears that many new teachers are not aware that the teaching of writing rises out of a political-rhetorical academic tradition. Some may not entirely grasp or even agree with the notion that human expression derives from personal and socio-cultural contexts, that all writing is politically situated. Perhaps what is most clear as I reflect on this study, however, is that GTAs perceive certain pressures about the roles they should play while using political approaches to writing instruction, and their perceptions are sometimes inaccurate.

One perception some GTAs had was that political approaches obligated them to play the role of transformative intellectual. As James Berlin describes, such a writing instructor is “responsible for formulating a conscious political position[, responsible for]
recognizing and resisting the inequities in our society, the economic, social, and political injustices inscribed in class, race, ethnic and gender relations—relations that privilege the few and discriminate against the many” (Berlin “The Teacher” 11). Certainly, this is a tall order. Introduced to a range of scholarship in the TAP seminar purporting the significance of transformative intellectuals to the teaching of writing, GTAs like Rebecca felt a great deal of pressure to “open the eyes of freshmen students” (GTA Reflective Response 10/24/00). While she and others were “willing to take on that fight, for very personal reasons,” they also indicated that doing so was very overwhelming—“a big responsibility to place on one person, whether we are willing to admit that or not” (Seminar transcript 10/12/00). While WPAs introduced GTAs to a wide array of pedagogical approaches and encouraged them to pick and choose among them according to their comfort levels and tastes, my data suggest that given the scholarship GTAs were discussing in the TAP seminar, many felt pressure to assume the role of transformative intellectual, and this pressure caused them anxiety.

A second perception some GTAs had was that they needed to have specific content knowledge of the issues raised in their classrooms in order to implement political approaches to writing instruction effectively. In essence, these teachers had internalized Freire’s “‘banking’ concept of education” (58). Indeed, instead of working with students as “co-investigators” of political issues raised by classroom texts (Freire 97), some GTAs conceived of their roles as purveyors of knowledge. As Amy’s remarks made clear, she was more inclined to use what scholars in the field would recognize as a current-traditional approach to writing instruction because she enjoyed a significant degree of
confidence in her knowledge of grammatical, stylistic, and structural conventions. By focusing on “writing”—not politics—Amy argued, she would help students overcome significant challenges and sidestep her own inadequate knowledge of political issues. As she commented, “Writing deserves to be the focus because I feel ignorant and incompetent. I don’t think it’s fair to students to approach a feminist essay when I don’t have a background in feminism” (Seminar transcript 10/24/00). What comments like these and others suggest is that several GTAs were confused about the goal of bringing political texts into the writing classroom. Some saw writing and politics as distinct entities to be handled in isolation. In essence, they did not understand how to appropriately use political issues in the framework of a writing course. The goal was not to study politics per se, as John Trimbur points out (“Response” 248), but to grapple with how ideas that are important in public and privatized spheres are constituted in language, in writing, through rhetoric. Overwhelmed and confused by their obligations as teachers, several GTAs in my study reported significant anxiety about their work.

GTAs’ perceptions about their roles and political approaches were not the only issues that caused them anxiety, however. Their vulnerable institutional locations did as well. As this study illustrates, many GTAs expressed uneasiness about their authority in general and in relation to political approaches in particular. Both Nancy and Lucy expressed anxiety about their lack of authority in their classrooms, reporting incidents in which students refused to discuss political issues—or objected to the appropriateness of such discussions outright. Given Nancy and Lucy’s inexperience, when some students chimed “We don’t want to talk about this,” and others, “Why do we have to read this
shit? What’s the point of doing this?” (TAP Fieldnotes 9/28/00), both felt vulnerable. Although WPAs helped GTAs cope with inappropriate challenges to their authority by suggesting ways of dealing with such behaviors, student resistance caused GTAs tensions in their work.

Tensions surrounding GTAs’ authority were most palpable in reference to Lucy Pierce, whose conflict with a first-year student led to bitter feelings among GTAs and—in some cases—even fears about their work. Responding at least in part to Lucy’s conflict, Rob complained that students “keep pushing us and we have to keep bending over” (TAP Fieldnotes 9/28/00). Similarly, Nancy expressed her anger by arguing that Lucy was victimized twice over: once by the student who allegedly assaulted her, and then again by a “system that could not shake the rust from its gears long enough to protect her” (Reflective Response 10/12/00). Offering up her opinions during the week Lucy’s conflict enveloped the TAP seminar, veteran high school teacher Joann expressed her doubts about the value of political approaches to writing instruction, warning that her experiences surfacing politics in her secondary English classrooms were “terrifying” given her local community’s conservative values (Seminar transcript 10/24/00). As these examples attest, teachers in my study faced a number of challenges negotiating political approaches to writing instruction and their vulnerable institutional political locations. They responded by expressing their anxiety, anger, and fear.
How Do WPAs Respond to Political Approaches to Writing Instruction and the Politics of Institutional Location?

WPAs face challenges in relation to political approaches to writing instruction and the politics of location as well. Certainly the scholarship of administration suggests that WPA work is filled with “long hours day after day, doing multiple and apparently ceaseless tasks” (Holt 27). The administrators who participated in my study spoke directly to this challenge and a range of others that WPAs face. As Sarah Allegheny’s experiences attest, not only is it common for colleagues within departments to show “disdain for—or at very best ambivalence toward—composition,” colleagues sometimes perceive WPAs as flunkies (Personal interview June 2003) or even sell outs (Sledd “Disciplinarity” para. 23-24). Because they take on huge responsibilities that others will not do, many WPAs face both condescension and overwork.

What’s more, institutions often require WPAs to take on tasks without adequately defining their responsibilities. Even though the Council of Writing Program Administrator’s “Portland Resolution” states explicitly that “Each institution is responsible for providing clear job descriptions or role statements for its WPAs” (para. 3), many WPAs—including those who participated in my study—do not have clearly defined job descriptions. At Ridge, this led to disagreements among WPAs and confusion for GTAs. As Eliza Marks made clear, “There were lots of problems that arose [for Sarah and me] because TAs didn’t know who to turn to. If the two of us were in disagreement with how to handle something, which happened more than once, that put the TAs in an interesting spot” (Allegheny/ Marks collaborative person interview June...
While both administrators expressed that they were energized by the collaborative nature of their work and by their strong professional relationships with each other, because their job descriptions were amorphous and under-defined, tensions and problems surfaced.

Perhaps at least in part because of the marginalized institutional locations writing program administrators and writing teachers face, WPA scholarship often celebrates academic activism and argues for institutional reform. Such scholarship reflects the emancipatory political tradition associated with the teaching of rhetoric from ancient eras to the present, and is in keeping with contemporary movements within Rhetoric and Composition studies that support education for critical citizenship. But even though many administrators embrace the emancipatory possibilities of their scholarly, pedagogical, and administrative identities, WPA work also exhibits less flattering characteristics. Indeed, critics compare the work of administrators to the work of lower-level managers, arguing that WPAs have little agency to affect positive institutional change and, consequently, often help to reinscribe the marginalization of already exploited academic workers (Bousquet “Composition” 495-496). Certainly, the email Don wrote to Eliza Marks suggests the conflicting allegiances scholar-administrators can emanate. As Don suggested, it appeared that many GTAs were rejecting political approaches because of the volatile events surrounding Lucy’s “predicament.” He wanted to see a “more forceful and clear presentation of why politics belong in both freshman writing classes and in the curriculum” because, as he wrote, he worried “that a number of issues and distinctions [were] being confused, and that other emotions provoked by [. . . Lucy’ predicament
were] fueling a mistrust of the university and by extension the class” (E-mail correspondence 10/19/00). While Marks’ co-authored textbook and many of the scholarly articles GTAs examined in the TAP seminar reflected the field’s allegiances to emancipatory cultural and institutional activism, because of events surrounding Lucy’s conflict, it appears that some GTAs began to mistrust the guidance offered to them, seeing WPAs less as emancipatory agents of change than as agents of their institutions.

It appears that because of the conflict between many WPAs’ scholarly political allegiances and their managerial institutional functions, administrators can project a split subjectivity, a professional habitués that has the capacity to confound teaching assistants and—as a result—undermine WPAs’ emotional wellbeing. As Marks and Allegheny attested respectively, Lucy’s situation caused much “fallout” in the TAP seminar, was a “disillusioning moment” in the professional lives of these WPAs (Personal interviews June 2003). While the WPAs in my study supported political approaches to writing instruction, because they projected a conflicting subjectivity, they faced obstacles in the TAP seminar. Said another way: WPAs’ vulnerable institutional locations made supporting political approaches all the more precarious.

**How Does Institutional Political Location Affect Perceptions of Political Approaches to Writing Instruction?**

In sum, this study makes clear that GTAs’ vulnerable institutional political locations complicated their ability to use political approaches to writing instruction and negatively affected perceptions about their work in the program. It also argues that even
though WPAs remain committed to political approaches, because their work exemplifies both emancipatory activist and exploitive institutional potentials, WPAs experience challenges in adopting political approaches to writing instruction in composition programs that use inexperienced teaching assistants. While my data illustrate these answers quite clearly, other questions remain. As someone who began this study a graduate student and ends it a WPA in charge of GTA preparation, how do I see institutional location affecting political approaches to writing instruction? Where do I stand in relation to the use of political approaches in programs that staff first-year composition with inexperienced graduate teaching assistants? What did I learn from this study?

*Where I Stand: On Becoming Proactive in Teaching Assistant Preparation*

I remain committed to helping GTAs overcome the challenges associated with political approaches to writing instruction and institutional political location because I believe in the transformative power of these approaches for both students and teachers. What this study has shown me most vividly is the value of facilitating political dialogue in the classroom, of asking tough questions, of grappling with complex and sometimes conflicting responses. When I reflect on the GTAs who participated in this study, on the challenges they faced and the anxieties and disaffection they battled, what strikes me most is the growth they experienced because they were given a space to come to terms with the various political dimensions of Rhetoric and Composition studies and their work as writing teachers. As Allegheny explained about her colleague Marks, “one of the
things that is an outcome of [the teaching assistant preparation seminar] à la [Eliza] is that she made it possible for graduate students to think critically about their own situations” (Personal interview June 2003). While I was not able to follow teachers into their classrooms in the course of this study, given the disaffection they experienced, it surprised me to recognize how much these new teachers were shaped by the seminar, to recognize the degree to which preparation initiatives at Ridge guided them to reconsider their prior knowledge of the teaching of writing.

Indeed, teaching assistant preparation at Ridge did allow GTAs to rethink their own situations. My best proof lies in the two GTAs who appeared to be the most disaffected by their work in the program: Amy and Lucy. Even though Amy criticized her ability to implement political approaches effectively, she would go on to develop a writing course focused on animal rights issues and vegetarianism, a course in which she used these issues to teach not politics but writing. Even given Lucy’s conflict with Jeff, her subsequent deliberations about leaving the program, and her recognition of her vulnerable institutional political location, she would go on to soar in her classroom, winning a student-sponsored teaching award the following semester while teaching using a political approach. In essence, what I learned after the data collection stage of my study was complete was that GTAs’ first impressions don’t always last. GTAs find ways to manage, to cope, to overcome—at least in part—the disaffection they face.

Still, I recognize significant challenges for new GTAs working in programs that support political approaches to writing instruction, as well as significant challenges for the WPAs who work so hard to prepare them. Indeed, while the TAP seminar at Ridge
was expertly designed, intellectually rigorous, and pedagogically sound, and while it gave GTAs space to grapple with the affective dimensions of their work, it did not foreground the confluence of pedagogy and location. What I offer here is my attempt at facing the challenges of pedagogy and location proactively.

To do so in my current position as a WPA, I have tried to transform preparation initiatives into a graduate-specific form of political pedagogy, a pedagogy I have used—with admittedly limited success—to enable GTAs to work within the political-rhetorical tradition they inherit. In my TAP-specific brand of political pedagogy, I give graduate students an overview of the connections among rhetoric and politics the semester before they begin teaching in a two-hour weekly practicum on writing instruction. I start with Martha Nussbaum’s chapter “Citizens of the World” from *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, which links ancient Greek and Roman traditions to contemporary movements in emancipatory education. Nussbaum’s piece works well at my current institution, a place that honors both classical and aesthetic traditions much more so than political-rhetorical ones. By beginning the semester with a conversation on how politics and rhetoric are interconnected—and always have been—I try to establish the legitimacy of political approaches from day one.

I also try to emphasize the range of pedagogical frameworks available to GTAs as they work within the political-rhetorical tradition. To do so I have used Gary Tate, Amy Rupiper, and Kurt Schick’s *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*. I’m not entirely satisfied with the function of the text in the practicum, however, because GTAs have argued that they have a hard time imagining the theories expressed in this volume in
practice in their future classrooms. This argument points to one of the faults in the preparation initiatives we have in place at my current institution. While we have the luxury of beginning preparation a full semester before GTAs start teaching, because it is difficult for those with no teaching experience to make connections among theory and practice when they haven’t had any practice, some of what we read feels at best disembodied, at worst impractical. Although GTAs have reported in faculty support meetings that they recognize the connections among theory and practice once they have entered the classrooms, they still experience frustration in our system because discussions of theory do not happen in tandem with their first teaching experiences.

In order to emphasize the theoretical alongside the practical, like Marks and Allegheny, I have relied on John Bean’s Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom. I find Bean’s guide invaluable for the ways it condenses fundamental pedagogical techniques that support process-based instruction, concepts that scholars in the field take for granted, but that new teachers are often unaware. Chapters that discuss “Dealing with Issues of Grammar and Correctness,” “Coaching Thinking Through the Use of Small Groups,” and “Encouraging Engagement and Inquiry in Research Papers” give new teachers an overview of productive ways of discussing the writing process with students during class time, while “Coaching the Writing Process and Handling the Paper Load,” and “Writing Comments on Students’ Paper” help new teachers productively manage their own time outside of the classroom. Bean’s chapter on “How Writing Is Related to Critical Thinking” is perhaps the most relevant to issues that rise in political approaches to the
teaching of writing, as it introduces new teachers to the notions of cognitive dissonance, dialogic learning, and inquiry-based, problem-solving models of teaching and learning. Framed in practical terms and in relation to concrete classroom practices, Bean’s chapters work well when paired with theory-heavy excerpts from Victor Villanueva’s *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and James Moffett’s *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*.

Moving in and out of theory and practice has helped me head off at least some of the misconceptions I detected in the TAP seminar at Ridge. Nonetheless, my time in bi-monthly faculty support meetings also proves that no matter how proactively fashioned, teaching assistant preparation initiatives do not provide new teachers with enough time to come to terms with the givens of the discipline. During these meetings, which are part support group, part grade-norming session, I consistently see GTAs falling into the same traps: too much red ink on their students’ papers, not enough dialogic inquiry in their classrooms. In the future, I hope to emphasize the dangers of these traps more emphatically. We’ll see where that gets us.

One success I see in our program has been our ability to help GTAs stave off fears about dealing with political texts. We have done so by allowing GTAs to develop a course theme and choose reading selections based on their own interests in salient contemporary political issues. Again, this is something we are able to do because we begin preparation initiatives seven months prior to GTAs’ first teaching experiences. What this allows GTAs to do is fashion a political approach that allows them to teach their interests and strengths. Of course, the down side is that this means more work for
me: I spend my summers combing over syllabus drafts, making suggestions and fashioning much deserved praise for their course designs. I have to admit that I am tempted to search out a textbook that might make my workload over the summer lighter.

In order to prepare GTAs for the rocky institutional terrain they will inhabit, I foreground both the emancipatory and exploitive dimensions of work in the field. Because we don’t have the time cover works as extensive as Sharon Crowley’s *Composition in the University*, Susan Miller’s *Textual Carnivals*, or Stephen Park’s *Class Politics*, I use Andrea Greenbaum’s *Emancipatory Movements* and Tom Fox’s “Working Against the State: Composition’s Intellectual Work for Change” to serve the same end. These rhetorics of emancipation help reinforce the marginalized institutional locations of writing teachers and the ways in which Rhetoric and Composition studies aligns itself with political and institutional activism. Examining James Sledd and Marc Bousquet’s rhetorics of administrative critique in conjunction with these texts gives GTAs a framework to address the exploitive functions of their work and challenge the tropes associated with mine. While some might reason such readings could work to alienate GTAs—to make them jaded about their work and institutional location unnecessarily—I believe the risk associated with concealing GTAs’ vulnerable institutional locations are greater than the risks of exposing them. Addressing their vulnerabilities explicitly in TAP allows new teachers to come to terms with their institutional status collectively rather in isolation, in discussion with their peers and administrators rather than in hushed voices in department corridors.
I also ask GTAs to examine the relationship between writing instruction and literacy instruction at our own institution—a place that honors traditional literary and aesthetic exploration much more so than the political exploration of language. Reading the text of our institution alongside the “Introduction” of Berlin’s *Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures*, GTAs begin to see how our local customs support a potentially discriminatory hierarchy, one which places inexperienced teachers almost exclusively in charge of undergraduate writing instruction, one which rewards GTAs with strong teaching evaluations by removing them from writing courses and placing them in literature courses. While this discussion only partially surfaces the reality of GTAs’ marginalized institutional location, it opens a dialogue about potentially disaffecting hierarchies in English studies. In essence, whenever I can, I try to historicize and examine the relationship among politics and rhetoric and pedagogy and location in order to proactively surface—and perhaps begin to counteract—the disaffection that accompanies the use of political approaches to writing instruction and the marginalized institutional locations of writing instructors.

*What Did I Learn?*

What my experiences as a researcher and WPA have taught me is that each institution faces unique challenges to the preparation of graduate teaching assistants. Because at Ridge the majority of preparation took place in the TAP seminar—while GTAs were already teaching—Marks and Allegheny faced the challenge of having to prepare GTAs with very limited contact prior to their first experiences in the classroom.
While I currently have the luxury of an entire semester with GTAs before they enter their classrooms, I face the challenge of not being in regular contact with them throughout their first semester teaching. Clearly, institutional exigencies greatly influence the challenges WPAs face. Nevertheless, I believe that readers can take from my study of Ridge University some generalizable knowledge.

First, I have learned that while they differ in kind and degree, both GTAs and WPAs suffer from vulnerabilities associated with their institutional political locations. Certainly, GTAs occupy marginalized institutional spaces, ones that have the potential to cause disaffection in and about their work. As both administrators who participated in my study suggest, however, disaffection is also common given the demanding, isolating, and nebulous nature of WPA work: the resistance and sometimes resentment GTAs (and others) express toward writing instruction and writing program administration make it a challenging, complex, and sometimes disappointing line of work. Still, while GTAs and WPAs both experience vulnerability, because WPAs have sanctioned institutional authority and are obligated to abide by the dictates of their institutions, GTAs can wind up feeling abandoned—at least in part—by the administrators charged with their mentoring, advocacy, and well-being.

Second, I have learned that similar to undergraduates and the instructors who teach them, GTAs and WPAs sometimes have competing objectives about the aims of first-year composition. In the case of the TAP seminar I studied, competing objectives (and unforeseeable volatile events) led some GTAs to resist political approaches to writing instruction. Like the GTAs Doug Hesse describes in “Teachers as Students,
Reflecting Resistance,” the GTAs in my study were caught off guard by the theories and pedagogies they were asked to consider implementing and required to examine—as their voices make clear throughout my study, many GTAs expect first-year composition to be a very different course. Given well-documented and widespread misperceptions about politics, rhetoric, and writing instruction, this should be of little surprise. What is important to remember, of course, and what research in the discipline tells us, is that resistance is an important step in intellectual growth, that it should be embraced, not shunned. “A writer is always situated, always constrained,” Joseph Harris and Jay Rosen tell us in Composition and Resistance, “But she can work not only within but against the limits of a discourse to find a position she can claim as her own. And that is what we want our students to do” (58). This is also what we want GTAs to do. If conversations about the challenges of teaching writing using a political approach could be examined explicitly either before or in tandem with their first teaching experiences, I suspect at least some GTAs would feel better prepared to carry out their roles in the classroom.

Third, while I cannot support this assertion with concrete empirical data, I believe that split subjectivity helps to perpetuate negative connotations traditionally associated with the teaching of writing and the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition, and consequently, helps to perpetuate writing teachers’ marginalized institutional political locations. Unquestionably, GTAs’ strong reactions concerning the ways WPAs handled Lucy’s conflict indicate that they were surprised and angry not to be granted the classroom authority and institutional autonomy enjoyed by other faculty in the
department. While I make no claims about the overall perceptions GTAs in my study had (or have) about the teaching of writing, one can only intuit that GTAs who end their experiences as writing teachers with negative attitudes about their work—and who go on to take positions in English departments—pass on those negative perceptions to others. The point is not to make sure that everyone has a nice time teaching writing—although certainly that’s a reasonable goal to pursue; the point is to examine and explain the complexities of pedagogy and location in order to help new teachers negotiate their marginal status.

In her important work *Textual Carnivals: The Politics of Composition*, Susan Miller made clear almost fifteen years ago that workers in the field help to perpetuate the low status of composition through the narratives they exchange and the identities they purport. In a dramatically different vein, my research suggests that members of the field perpetuate the discipline’s low status by suppressing disaffective elements of their work, by emphasizing emancipatory narratives and squelching managerial ones. WPAs and other members of the discipline are entitled to celebrate the emancipatory and empowering scholarly and pedagogical traditions of which we are a part. Unfortunately, however, this story of our discipline is not the entire story. Explicitly acknowledging the exploitive and disaffecting potential of our work will help GTAs anticipate—and perhaps overcome—challenges they face. While GTAs gain facility as they gain experience, and while I do not want to exaggerate levels of disaffection in the GTAs who participated in my study, some GTAs never get past the initial disappointments experienced as writing teachers. These are the same faculty who eventually populate English departments and
who may continue, in turn, to perpetuate biased attitudes against the teaching of writing. If the disaffective dimensions of their work are surfaced proactively in TAP in ways that will help GTAs cope, however, these future faculty will have a better chance of remembering Rhetoric and Composition’s potential to cultivate their students’ and their own agency. When the affective dimensions of their work are not proactively surfaced in preparation initiatives, however, some GTAs leave writing classrooms feeling more exploited than empowered. And they pass the word.

Finally, while I have learned to question my faith in the emancipatory potential of the discipline, I remain eager to work toward a theory and practice of critical administration—a theory and practice that will allow administrators to work within corrupt systems as we make positive steps toward institutional change. As I explore previously, James Sledd and Marc Bousquet offer up compelling criticisms of writing program administration, criticisms that remain unsettling to me as I settle into my first position as a writing program administrator. Even though these critics suggest that WPAs have bought into a system of academic exploitation by accepting administrative posts, others argue that administrators are in a unique position within their institutions to effect positive change. James Porter, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles take such a stance in their Braddock Award-winning essay “Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change.” “Though institutions are certainly powerful,” the authors note, “they are not monoliths; they are rhetorically constructed human designs (whose power is reinforced by buildings, laws, traditions, and knowledge making practices) and so are changeable” (611). Similarly, Richard Miller purports in As
If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education that “to think of agency only as the ability to alter massive cultural structures [. . .] is to effectively remove agency from the realm of human action” (211). That is, WPAs—and other academic workers—do have the power to affect agency. My experiences as a graduate student, a researcher, and a writing program administrator support this claim. Far from co-opted cogs in the mechanisms of the corporate university, WPAs have the rhetorical, pedagogical, and institutional agency to effect progressive social change. It has been writing program administrators on the campuses on which I’ve worked who have most openly voiced their concerns about the marginalized status of writing teachers in the academy. These are the WPAs who successfully reshape local instructional practice to benefit students, faculty, and the larger community, the WPAs who take professional risks to defend GTA autonomy, the WPAs who openly challenge academe’s propensity to overwork writing teachers and administrators. These are the scholars and activists who work toward progressive social and institutional reform, the political pedagogues and critical administrators who “situate their activities within the contexts of the larger profession as well as the contexts of economic and political concerns” (Berlin Rhetoric 180). While not all WPAs embrace the emancipatory activism celebrated in their field in the same ways or to the same degrees, and while not all of their gestures are equally successful, they collectively illustrate that even while participating in disaffective institutional hierarchies, they are trekking forward in the discipline’s emancipatory political tradition.
Because it is their charge to prepare new teachers of writing, I believe WPAs have more potential to influence the next generation of academics than most faculty in English studies—they are in the best position to shape the next generation’s attitudes about the teaching of writing and the discipline of Rhetoric and Composition. While it is a painful reality of our work that uncompromising critics translate administrative negotiation into simple cooption, progressive agency is within our power to achieve. Although some equate all forms of administration with a dance with the devil—and of course there is an undeniably romantic appeal to such an equation and dismissal—most people engaged in emancipatory education understand that active negotiation is at the heart of all political struggle.

Indeed, as I reflect on Rebecca’s epigraph that introduces this chapter, on the struggles it surfaces—struggles that speak to the challenges associated with political approaches and institutional political location—I also recognize the potential WPAs have to influence the next generation of scholars. While Rebecca’s words speak to her frustrations as a first time teacher, they do not represent her attitude for all time. Although she began her MA career at Ridge University interested in studying Milton and frustrated with her ability to implement a political approach to writing instruction, she would go on to switch her degree concentration to Rhetoric and Composition, to work as a graduate student writing program administrator, and to devote her Ph.D. dissertation to critical race and education studies. Through her efforts to understand and transcend her disaffection—efforts Eliza Marks and Sarah Allegheny helped her achieve—Rebecca
was able to get past her frustration, to embrace political approaches, to become a confident teacher of writing. She carries on the emancipatory tradition.
WORKS CITED


Berlin, James A. “Composition and Cultural Studies.” Hurlbert and Blitz 47-55.


Also in Villanueva *Cross-Talk* 679-700.


Bousquet, Marc. “Composition as Management Science: Toward a University Without a WPA.” *JAC* 22.3 (Summer 2002): 493-526. Also in Bousquet, Scott and Parascondola 11-35.


Cambridge, Barbara L., and Ben W. McClelland. “From Icon to Partner: Reposition the Writing Program Administrator.” Janangelo and Hansen. 151-159.


---. Experience and Education. NY: Touchstone, 1997.


---. “Variety, the Key to Training Programs for Faculty and Teaching Assistants.” *ADE Bulletin* 57 (1978): 44-6.


Flanigan, Michael C. “Variety, the Key to Training Programs for Faculty and Teaching Assistants.” *ADE Bulletin* 57 (1978): 44-6.


George, Diana, and John Trimbur. “Cultural Studies and Composition.” Tate, Rupiper, and Schick 71-91.


Gottschalk, Katherine K. “Preparing Graduate Students across the Curriculum to Teach Writing.” Pytlik and Liggett. 135-46.


Hansen, Kristine. “Face to Face with Part-Timers; Ethics and the Professionalization of Writing Faculties.” Janangelo and Hansen 23-45.


Jukuri, Stephen Davenport, and W. J. Williamson. “How to Be a Wishy-Washy Graduate Student WPA, or Undefined but Overdetermined: The Positioning of Graduate Student WPAs.” Diana George *Kitchen* 105-19


“Politics.” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language.*


Porter, James E., Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeffrey T. Grabill, and Libby Miles.


---. “How Graduate Students Were Prepared to Teach Writing—1850-1970.” Pytlik and Liggett. 3-16.

---. “Teaching the Teaching of Composition: Evolving Theories.” *The Writing Instructor.*


---. “Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis.” Bullock and Trimbur. 277-296.


Weiser, Irwin. “When Teaching Assistants Teach Teaching Assistants to Teach: A Historical View of a Teacher Preparation Program.” Pytlik and Liggett 40-49.


APPENDIX A: Ridge University First-Year Outcomes Statement

Rhetorical Knowledge

*By the end of first-year composition, students should:*

- Identify and understand rhetorical purposes, audiences, and situations and the relationships among these
- Understand how to draw on genre conventions to address purposes, audiences, and situations

Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing

*By the end of first-year composition, students should:*

- Develop their own ideas in relation to the ideas of others through writing and reading
- Evaluate, analyze, and synthesize primary and secondary texts through writing and reading
- Critique their own and others’ ideas
- Integrate their own with others’ ideas
Processes

*By the end of first-year composition, students should:*

- Understand writing as a recursive process that permits writers to use a variety of strategies during writing stages and processes
- Understand the collaborative and social aspects of writing processes
- Develop an awareness of the role of computer-mediated communication

Knowledge of Conventions

*By the end of first-year composition, students should*

- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control conventions of structure, syntax, grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling

Adapted from the WPA Outcomes Statement, 2000
APPENDIX B: English [500]: Problems in Teaching College English

Fall 2000

Tuesday and Thursday 10:10-12:00

[Ivy Hall 110]

Instructor: Dr. [Eliza Marks]

Course Description:

This course is designed to give teachers guidance in learning how to teach composition based on current models of composition theory and practice, and to introduce teachers to some of the practical and theoretical issues involved in the teaching of composition.

Course Objectives:

Following the completion of this course you should:

- Have an introductory understanding of writing-to-learn practice and theory
- Have and introductory understanding of collaborative learning practice and theory
- Have an introductory understanding of composition theory and practice
- Have learned ways in which to link course assignments and grading to Freshman English outcome goals
- Have begun to locate your centers of strengths and weaknesses as teachers
**Required Texts:**

[Doe, J. and Marks, E. *Doing Public Writing*]

Murray, D. *The Craft of Revision*

Qualley, D. *Turns of Thought*

Villaneuva, V. *Cross Talk*

**Attendance:**

Regular attendance is EXPECTED AND VITAL. This course is a very important course in your professional training and your professional career. Your attendance and participation are of the utmost importance.

**Official University “No Class” Days:**

Veteran’s Day: Friday, November 10

Reading Day: Wednesday, November 15

**Last Day of Classes:**

Tuesday November 14

**Dates Of Which You Should Be Aware:**

Parents’ Weekend September 22-24

Rosh Hashanah Friday September 29

Yom Kipper Saturday October 8
Homecoming Weekend  October 20-22
Thanksgiving  November 23 (while this falls post end-of-term, it looms large on the horizon)

**Assignments:**

- One complete writing sequence as also assigned to your [English 101] students
- Response papers—once weekly you will write a one to two page response to the assigned readings (due on Tuesdays). These are informal in nature and meant to be somewhat analytical and synthetic; additionally, however, they are to become a dialogue among you and your group members. (It is your responsibility to bring enough copies of your response paper for your group members and one for me.)
- A two page statement of your teaching philosophy
- A three-five page reflective essay on your experience of teaching composition

Additionally you must complete and have approved by me the last half of your [English 101] syllabus (based on *DPW*) by the beginning of the 5th week of classes.
Grading:

All of these assignments must be completed on time at a high level of quality and engagement in order to receive an A for the course. Each assignment is worth 25% of your grade:

- Response papers 25%
- Writing Sequence 25%
- Philosophy Statement 25%
- Reflective Essay 25%

Major Assignment Due Dates:

I will assign reading weekly

- Writing Sequences and assignment will match those for your students
- Tuesday September 12th Second half of [English 101] syllabus (already approved)
- Tuesday October 17th Two page statement of teaching philosophy
- Tuesday November 7th Three-five page reflective essay on your experiences teaching composition