New Perspectives: TA Preparation for Critical Literacy in First-Year Composition

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Abstract
A new teaching assistant in our department recently showed me an outline for a proposed research paper from one of her first-year composition students: "I thought he was going to investigate racial profiling in the aftermath of Sept. 11th," the dismayed instructor said to me. "But this disturbs me. He is going to argue in favor of it. I am struggling with what to do. Do I let him write this paper?"

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New Perspectives: TA Preparation for Critical Literacy in First-Year Composition

Barb Blakely Duffelmeyer

In teaching writing, we are not simply offering training in a useful technical skill that is meant as a simple complement to the more important studies of other areas. We are teaching a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it.

—James Berlin

[...]critical exchange requires denying the full sufficiency of individual experiences, explanations, and beliefs[...]. Yet we must do so without counting them wholly insufficient, either. Of course, one could dismiss critical exchange as an end. But if formal education cannot cite change as its reason for being, I do not know what its justification might be.

—Douglas Hesse

A new teaching assistant in our department recently showed me an outline for a proposed research paper from one of her first-year composition students: “I thought he was going to investigate racial profiling in the aftermath of Sept. 11th,” the dismayed instructor said to me. “But this disturbs me. He is going to argue in favor of it. I am struggling with what to do. Do I let him write this paper?”

Undoubtedly many readers can recall with uncomfortable clarity similar incidents from their own teaching experience. I once received a paper from a first-year student in which she recounted beatings she had received as a child from her stepfather. Rather than using the narrative as

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an occasion to re-think and re-position herself in relation to this experience—to use it as a starting place from which to find some agency, in other words—she concluded, to my dismay, that the beatings were “not too bad,” that she had “deserved them,” and had “learned from them.” Berlin writes of his “majority of male students[...]who “assured [him] that race and gender inequalities no longer exist in the United States and simply do not merit further discussion” (Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures 102). These students all seem to remain stuck within what is, for them, a familiar position from which to understand their worlds. Further, as the TA’s student seemed intent on doing, these students all seem to have come to an “answer,” an unsettling finality in their thinking.

Such occasions of mismatched expectations, or even of apparent resistance between what we may call our critical pedagogy and the work our students sometimes produce in response to (or perhaps in spite of) it are acknowledged in the lore of experienced instructors and in composition scholarship (e.g., Berlin, Hurlbert and Blitz, Lee). However, these occasions are especially dismaying and discouraging for TAs, who themselves are working through what is often an unexpectedly challenging first teaching experience. TAs may readily come to the conclusion that their students simply “can’t get it”—they can’t or don’t want to think critically—or they may just as readily question their own efficacy as instructors, or what their school’s first-year composition (FY Comp) program is asking of them and of their students (Farris, Marback).

Our field provides some valuable ways to think about and approach this problem, and our teaching in general. Referring to Bartholomae’s well-known essay, in which students’ adjustments to the demands of the university are described, Hesse pointedly states that the “challenge is to get graduate students to recognize that Bartholomae is talking not just about 19-year-olds but also about them” (227). Specifically, both groups—new TAs and new FY Comp students—are grappling with ambiguity, multiplicity, and open-endedness, albeit at different levels and in slightly different contexts. FY Comp students are working to achieve an unfamiliar complexity and inflection in their reading, thinking, and writing about difficult social and personal issues; new TAs are working to feel comfortable and successful in their unfamiliar teaching endeavor. Many members of both groups would prefer an authority to “just tell them what to do” and show them a straight and narrow path to success; both would like a more obvious order to what can often feel like a chaotic experience. Our responsibility, however, is to encourage the realization, in both FY Comp students and new TAs, that critical thinking and critical pedagogy are
processes, not finished products or performances, and they are processes with which one is never finished: there are always new viewpoints to examine, alternative positions and strategies to consider and reconsider in light of new evidence or experiences. Lee emphasizes the developmental nature of the processes both students and instructors engage in when she says that “[...]we need to frame critical pedagogy as a developmental process that continues throughout one’s teaching (and learning) career” (89).

Preparing and mentoring teaching assistants in the teaching of first-year composition requires an intensely purposeful and efficient melding and distillation of information, information that is contextualized within the specific curriculum in FY Comp at their particular institution, as well as in relation to insights and applications gleaned from the theory, research, and practice of post-secondary composition pedagogy. Unfortunately, this instruction is often delivered to teaching assistants in a manner that often unavoidably follows the business model of “just-in-time”: although they usually have had some orientation in the summer before their first semester of teaching, these least-credentialed, least-experienced members of university teaching faculty are often already progressing through their maiden semester as instructors of their own classes of FY Comp while also taking a pro-seminar designed both to prepare them for, and support them in, their teaching. However, among new TAs’ reactions to teaching FY Comp, Farris notes that, “[f]or many graduate students, teaching may be the first thing in their academic careers that has not gone really well from the beginning” (101). Irmscher concurs, adding that “teaching assistants[...]are often shocked by the first papers they get” (28). Bridges probably sums the phenomenon up best, noting that “new teachers are new teachers” (viii)!

Therefore, I believe that new TAs’ queries and early classroom experiences, coupled with the challenges and exigencies of the pro-seminar instructional context, provide a valuable occasion to re-balance the emphasis in such a pro-seminar between teaching and learning. Specifically, knowledge from adult development theory can augment TA preparation in what to teach, how to teach it, how to sequence it, and how to respond to it with a concomitant consideration of learning—of the FY Comp experience from the perspective of the first-year student. The parallels between the literatures of adult development and of the promotion of critical literacy in FY Comp (social-epistemic rhetoric) are striking, to say the least, and this paper will explore these parallels while making a case for the value of synthesizing, for TAs, insights from the two
bodies of knowledge to assist them in understanding the FY Comp experience from their first-year students' perspectives, a perspective it is often difficult for these novice instructors to appreciate. I will also present several concrete strategies for addressing the overlapping goals of assisting FY Comp students in developing a critical literacy, and assisting new TAs in developing transformative pedagogies and becoming more effective because of the perspectives they share with their students, not despite them.

**Meaning Perspectives**

The FY Comp course in reading, thinking, and writing is important because it is "precisely a place that introduces students to the critical reflective discourse that provides the medium for the undergraduate experience" (Bazerman 256). Bizzell agrees, stating that these first-year students are beginning to grapple with the "one important constant in the struggles of all college writers: the intellectual demands of liberal education" (Bizzell, "William Perry" 452). It is precisely this struggle and these demands that adult development theorists say are essential to more sophisticated and useful levels of thinking, and clearly they comprise what Berlin calls our "work of creating a critically literate citizenry" ("Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies" 32, emphasis added). Clifford is also startlingly direct in his statement about our obligations as teachers of post-secondary composition: "critical literacy is[...] an ethical necessity, a professional imperative" (261).

However, Greene asserts, in language reminiscent of Bartholomae's in "Inventing the University," that it is unrealistic to expect FY Comp students to value and demonstrate the critical literacy goals we have for them without acknowledging and accommodating the assumptions, habits of thinking, and developmental realities and opportunities they bring with them into the classroom. We can begin to outline what classroom expectations and engagements are useful in accomplishing educational goals in FY Comp, in part, by recognizing that students are embarking on a transformative journey, the broadly basic elements and junctures of which are documented and understandable. Such recognition will also allow us to more ably assist TAs in making sense of their classroom experiences, and in generating more productive experiences as new composition instructors; I have found this to be an important component in the process of preparing TAs to experience their teaching as successful.

Inviting students to engage with ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and open-endedness, and giving them strategies for doing so productively
is challenging, but valuing such engagement appears repeatedly in adult
development literature, and is striking in its connections to composition
pedagogical theory. Adult development theorists Pascarella and Terenzini
say, for instance, that college students tend to grow “away from a personal
perspective [of][...narrowness, exclusiveness, simplicity, and intoler-
ance and toward a perspective [emphasizing] greater[...broadness, inclus-
iveness, complexity, and tolerance” (559-560). Charles Bazerman makes
a similar point about the undergraduate years: “The undergraduate years
are a time of moving from prior assumptions into a broader and more
reflective view of life and a growing commitment to particular ways of
being and acting in the world, integrating greater learning and liter-
acy[...]” (256).

I believe that adult development theorists can provide a significant
amount of useful insight into new FY Comp students’ assumptions, habits
of thinking, and developmental opportunities, even while acknowledging
that composition as a field has been hesitant (with good reason, arguably)
to wholeheartedly embrace adult development scholarship. Much of its
foundational work in the 1970s was heavily stage-based and smacked
uncomfortably of reifying the educational experiences of upper-class,
heterosexual, white males to be applied prescriptively to every individual
in the classroom. For example, bringing the work of adult development
theorists to bear on our work in composition theory and pedagogy was
problematic because William Perry’s early work was not seen as inclusive
(e.g. of women; people of color; older students; lesbian, gay, or
bisexual people). However, since the 1970s, the work of, for instance,
Perry and of Kohlberg has been revisited, revised, and refined (e.g.,
Kitchener and King). Even more potentially useful to us as pedagogical
theorists in composition, adult development theorists have come forward
with different lenses (other than the monolithic, white male, stage-based
model) through which to view the phenomenon of the first-year student
encountering critical pedagogy.

Remembering that “[n]o single definitive theory describes the develop-
mental pathways of all students” (Baxter Magolda 2, emphasis added),
transformation learning theory is striking in its overlap with the tenets of
social-epistemic rhetoric and is, therefore, extremely useful in preparing
TAs for their FY Comp classes. Over a twenty-two year period, Mezirow
and several other adult development theorists (e.g., Belenkey, Brookfield,
Kegan) developed and studied the concept of transformative learning as
a learning theory for adults. Transformative learning theory pinpoints
“perspective transformation” as the fundamental process occurring when
adults change their assumptions and habits of thinking and acquire more complex epistemologies. In addition to Thomas Kuhn and Paulo Freire, Mezirow credits as influencing transformation theory the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and the work of Habermas, in particular. Specifically, Mezirow’s theory focuses on the use of discourse in uncovering and examining beliefs as an important element in what he calls “self-formation” (xii-xiii). This development, says Mezirow, “involves a qualitative evolution toward a self-authoring mind—a capacity to judge expectations and claims—but also toward the capacity for us to distance ourselves from our transformed frame of reference so that we are open to learning from other meaning perspectives as well” (xv).

The Challenge of Transformative Learning and Critical Literacy
Recalling Bazerman’s emphasis on the connection between FY Comp and students’ transformation in both their ways of seeing the world and their literacy practices, if the general goal is to help students come to value ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and open-endedness without succumbing to relativism, what does that mean and what sort of challenge does it present both for first-year students and for the new TAs teaching them? Referring to the FY Comp course, Lazere neatly delineates the skills and characteristics of the critically literate person as being able to unify and make connections in one’s own experience and academic studies[...]to engage in mature moral reasoning[...]to be attuned to skepticism, irony, relativity of viewpoint (without lapsing into indiscriminating relativism), ambiguity, and multiplicity of meaning[...]; to form sociopolitical opinions based on open-minded and autonomous reasoning rather than on prejudice and authoritarianism, on reciprocity[...rather than on egocentrism or ethnocentrism. (Lazere 56)

These may seem like lofty goals, especially to our new TAs, but a useful starting point is the intersection between social-epistemic rhetoric and transformation theory—students’ personal epistemologies (Kitchener and King; Schommer)—which amount to belief systems, or meaning perspectives (Mezirow 2). Individuals’ meaning perspectives profoundly affect their beliefs about how knowledge is constructed and integrated and their sense of agency in acquiring new knowledge and affecting their worlds. Kitchener and King’s data show that “[...]these perspectives are identifiable,[...]they are age related, and[...]they change in a predictable fashion over time. Further[...]these perspectives act as frames of refer-
ence through which students interpret learning experiences” (162). King’s caution is thus especially pertinent to new TAs: “Teachers who attempt to teach [...] without attending to students’ underlying epistemic assumptions will probably be very frustrated, and their students will probably be dissatisfied as well” (qtd. in Kitchener and King 169). I find that, just as importantly, new TAs need to be aware of their own assumptions about what it means to teach and learn critical thinking, reading, and writing lest they fall into the pedagogical default position of believing that one need only assign first-year students to read essays which present diverse and challenging perspectives, and stimulating, worldview-altering discussion and writing (i.e., “perspective transformation”) will automatically follow. The TAs’ role presumably becomes, in this scenario, a matter of choosing the right set of readings, exposing FY Comp students to new perspectives, and then simply marking grammatical and punctuation errors in the finished papers!

The reality is that first-year students often show a characteristic reaction of simplifying or selectively incorporating new information so that it fits into their pre-existing, comfortable meaning-perspectives (as in the three examples at the beginning of this paper); it is vitally important for new TAs to realize why this is happening, and to have some strategies for helping their students to gradually work past this natural point. For instance, Kitchener and King have found that most entering first-year university students believe that there is a Truth-with-a-capital-T and it is known and immutable in most areas of inquiry; however, they also believe that in the perennially complex and knotty social issues—which, not incidentally, tend to be those the popular FY Comp textbooks take up—Truth is apparently somehow unknown because there is not enough evidence. Presumably, when the evidence is available, we will be able to agree on Truth in those areas, but until that time, we can rely only on personal understandings and feelings: “Beliefs can only be justified on the basis of what feels right at the moment” (Kitchener and King 163). There is also the characteristic approach of students who believe that Truth is known relative to an issue (say, whether gay people should be allowed to marry) and some people are just not grasping or accepting it. If only all people would interpret the information in the correct way, they would also arrive at the proper understanding: Truth-with-a-capital-T. With this understanding of the first-year student’s meaning perspective, it is less surprising and frustrating for TAs to see that some of their students do not easily distinguish fact from opinion, do not always understand and maturely evaluate the use of evidence to support a
viewpoint, and do not automatically value multiple perspectives on a single issue, because rather than leading them to the one comfortable Truth, they seem to be leading them in different and even contradictory directions (Kitchener and King 169).

New TAs benefit from knowing that this is not only a common but an expected juncture for many first-year students, and it is precisely engagement in this process that makes transformational learning possible. Indeed, adult development theorist Deirdre A. Kramer identifies three recurrent themes in the work of those who study late-adolescent and adult development, and she presents them as a series of unfolding realizations on the part of the learner: 1) acknowledgment that there are “mutually incompatible systems of knowledge [there is not always a Truth-with-a-capital-T] and that one’s conceptual tools influence the knowledge one has about those systems”; 2) that one must deal somehow with this increased awareness of contradiction without lapsing permanently into relativism; and finally, 3) that one is able to develop a critical framework that “allow[s] for a comparison, evaluation, or synthesis of apparently contradictory alternatives” (qtd. in King and Kitchener 39-40).

**Toward Critical Literacy in FY Comp**

So how can these insights be applied productively in both of the classrooms where new TAs reside? Covino suggests that FY Comp instructors should take these insights into account in several overarching ways, including their deliberate choice of readings, sequence and types of assignments, and the use of student texts and collaboration. These provide opportunities for modeling and practicing critical distance on issues, and thus creating a space in which students come to recognize the inherent constructedness of their own points of view, even while they acknowledge that others’ perspectives are similarly constructed and no less meaningful. Berlin calls upon us to make our students’ experiences a topic of investigation and to problematize those experiences, thereby inviting students to think about the unquestioned beliefs they bring with them to college (“Poststructuralism and Cultural Studies” 31). By asking students to explore the intersection between their individual perspectives and others’ similarly constructed viewpoints in the making of meaning in culturally structured ways, students progress toward more flexible and reflective approaches to knowledge and certainty—the transformative learning in which Mezirow and Bazerman believe. The ongoing teaching and learning processes that Lee characterizes as developmental can be instantiated in several more specific ways in both FY Comp and TA pro-
An early exercise we have asked TAs in the pro-seminar to complete is an informal interview with a FY Comp student who is not in their own section of the course. TAs visit and discuss with the student, one-on-one, what the student's previous, formative literacy and schooling experiences have been, what he/she believes constitutes "good writing" and a "good English teacher," and what expectations he/she has of the class and the instructor. We also sometimes ask the TAs to re-interview their student after the first graded paper has been returned. This exercise is valuable because it helps TAs to see the students as people rooted in a specific and individual set of experiences, and it makes visible alternative assumptions about reading and writing—assumptions which may differ radically from those which seem self-evident and natural to our English-major, "hyper-literate" TAs. After the first paper is returned, new TAs are often surprised to discover that students are frustrated with what they consider an inexplicable absence of a formulaic approach to writing an A paper: "Why can't Instructor X just tell me what he wants and what he wants me to do so I can get an A?" Sharing the insights gleaned from their interviews with their classmates in the pro-seminar offers an opportunity for other instructors and the class professors to both reassure TAs that their students are not unmotivated or unintelligent and, that with various interventions as the semester progresses, the meaning-perspective of these FY students will become more permeable—more admitting of ambiguity, multiple perspectives, and open-endedness. At this early point, we also ask new TAs to read Marcia B. Baxter Magolda's book *Teaching to Promote Intellectual and Personal Maturity: Incorporating Students' Worldviews and Identities into the Learning Process*, and to attempt to apply insights from that text to what they are experiencing in their classrooms.

One such intervention generally must occur in FY Comp students' characteristic inclination to simplify new information, maintain familiar viewpoints, and take and defend a stand on each issue that does not admit new or contradictory information. Carl Rogers' essay "Communication: Its Blocking and Its Facilitation" is often anthologized in FY Comp textbooks. Another strategy useful in the TA pro-seminar is to have TAs ask their students to read this essay and to walk their students through a section-by-section summary of it. Its main points are ideally suited for the reading, writing, and thinking work students will be engaged in as the semester progresses: Rogers eloquently and persuasively details the value of "listening with understanding," of being able to "achieve
[another’s] frame of reference,” of “understanding with a person, not about him,” and most importantly, points out that such listening is often avoided because we “run the risk of being changed” when we really listen to someone else (420-421).

Clearly, Rogers is describing a form of transformative learning and one means to approach it. After FY Comp students are familiar with Rogers’ main points in the essay, they are asked to apply the concepts he describes in the essay to an actual, current discussion of a contentious issue. For instance, I recently did this with a CNN transcript (transcripts are readily available on CNN’s website) of a discussion about whether same-sex couples should be allowed to adopt children. By reading through the various participants’ contributions to the heated discussion, my FY Comp students were able to identify specific points which one speaker or another was not “really listening” to or understanding, thus impeding communication. This activity is non-threatening to FY Comp students in that they are being asked to analyze the discussion from a distance, as it were, not to try to find Truth and not to take and defend a position on it themselves. Depending on TAs’ needs, a further step can be taken by bringing the transcript and my students’ responses to it, using the lens of Rogers, into the pro-seminar classroom, allowing the TAs to examine how this activity presented FY Comp students with an opportunity to see how meaning perspectives and discourse are intertwined and how, in some cases, alternative viewpoints may each have valid points.

Asking students to “explore multiple perspectives without necessarily having to come to any closure or proclaim a final decision, without having to ‘take a stand’” (Covino in Ward 136), is an approach which generally runs counter to that which many novice instructors of FY Comp think is the preferred curriculum of the course. However, rather than asking students to practice discourse that leads to a “final decision” (136), and which then inevitably and obdurately defends the stance and seeks out only that evidence that strictly supports it, Covino says FY students need to be encouraged to “keep an issue alive” (137), thus acknowledging and engaging its ambiguity and open-endedness, potentially permitting them to transform their perspectives in light of the new and multiple alternatives. To help students see the value of this and to give TAs a way to engage their students with multiple viewpoints in class, removing the pressure of agreeing or disagreeing with one answer, one Truth, I have adapted a strategy found originally in an early edition of Ramage and Bean’s Writing Arguments. FY Comp students are asked to consider various authorities’ views on events and issues, to think about the variety
of perspectives represented on one issue, and to examine conflicting views and determine how the different parties arrived at them. Although the original strategy as described in Ramege and Bean’s 1992 text describes this approach as using only two, opposing viewpoints (30-32), I have expanded its scope, making it more congruent with the tenets of transformation theory, by allowing for the possibility of more than just pro- and con- viewpoints. To emphasize this as an analytical activity, removed from the urge to “decide who’s right” or to choose and then defend a position, I have created the “Alternative Positions” matrix which uses Ramege and Bean’s original categories of facts and interpretations of facts, metaphors and analogies, definitions of key terms, and underlying worldviews through which each author presents his/her position. Working individually or in groups to fill in the cells in the table, FY Comp students gain experience in reading not to filter for what they already agree with or understand (an identifiable developmental characteristic of many FY students, as Schommer and Kitchener and King have described), but rather to determine the range of the conversation and to discover first hand that intelligent, well-meaning people can honestly disagree for very valid reasons on these issues. Truth begins to become contingent and contextual; it no longer must have a capital T.

Clearly, in addition to appropriate challenges as described above, we also need to provide appropriate supports for FY students. Again, novice FY Comp instructors are uniquely positioned to benefit from understanding this. Instructors can avoid adding to FY Comp students’ natural anxiety, frustration, and defensiveness in the face of the new intellectual demands composition theorists describe as accompanying FY Comp. One way they can do this is by providing tacit and overt forms of reassurance and as much structure as possible in the context of the open-ended nature of the issues students are immersed in reading, writing, and thinking about. King and Kitchener urge, for instance, the value of providing detailed expectations on assignment sheets. TAs can also reduce FY students’ anxiety and frustration of wanting one true answer to some of these issues by openly acknowledging to students that “decisions are harder when there are no right or wrong answers,” thus “legitim[izing] students’ struggle to adjudicate between competing interpretations and perspectives” (250; 253).

**Challenges, Supports, and the Struggle**

These, then, are the sorts of challenging and supporting moves that accomplish the transformative shifts in thinking that adult development
theorists and those in rhetoric and composition call critical literacy. The broad-ranging reading—and writing and talking about that reading—that our students engage in in FY Comp will increase their exposure to, and understanding of, diverse viewpoints. Becoming aware of the complexity of current issues and less intent on arriving at a final solution in their thinking encourages a willingness to tolerate and even to appreciate ambiguity, multiplicity, and open-endedness. For our new TAs, their proseminder should offer both the opportunity for them to design their own assignments and activities that accomplish these transformative goals through alternate routes, as well as to examine and critique sample assignments and activities for the degree to which each would offer appropriate challenges and supports for the social-epistemic rhetorical and transformative goals described by Berlin, Clifford, Covino, Kitchener and King, Lazerz, and Mezirow.

But perhaps the most crucial piece of classroom advice for fostering critical literacy is the caveat that unless we urge students toward this level of thinking, reading, and writing, the development won’t occur. An adult development perspective coupled with our own field’s knowledge of social-epistemic rhetoric is extraordinarily helpful in encouraging critical literacy in our FY Comp students and helpful to new TAs in understanding their students’ experiences and perspectives. As Hays puts it, in a quotation I give to new TAs in our English department every fall, we need to remember that our students are not simply recalcitrant or stupid when they write in ways that seem to us puerile and simplistic. They really are struggling to achieve a new perspective on reality, and we need to support them as they engage in it, both assuring them that they will learn to jump those hurdles, encouraging them to continue to try, and challenging them by progressively setting those hurdles higher. (142, emphasis added.)

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