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Teaching Writing Teachers Writing: Difficulty, Exploration, and Critical Reflection

As they prepare to teach writing, new teachers should respond to writing assignments that we deliberately design to be difficult, exploratory, or critically reflective, so that they may better develop flexibility and engagement as learners, teachers, and theorists in the field of writing instruction.

It was, ironically, the very process of writing and then revising this essay which ultimately led me to my [essay's] conclusion about how writing should best be taught.
—Kori[1]

Most of us who teach writing teachers would be delighted to read a student comment like Kori's, suggesting as it does that writing and reflecting on what one writes are productive core activities for writing teachers. After all, one of the few widely-agreed-upon elements of writing teacher education is that writing teachers should be asked to write as part of their professional development. Ann Lieberman and Diane R. Wood note that "providing opportunities for teachers to write and share their writing in groups" is central to the National Writing Project, while "the opportunity to write . . ." is the first expectation listed in the CCCC position statement on the preparation of writing teachers. Our goals extend beyond the notion that writing teachers should demonstrate high competency in their field. Lil Brannon and Gordon Pradl

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have recommended teaching writing to help teachers build an identity "on the basis of who they are as writers" (28). More recently, Kathleen Yancey, Sally Barr Ebest, and Rosemary Winslow, among others, have argued that teaching writing teachers writing can extend their professional awareness and increase their pedagogical empathy.

While writing pedagogy instructors assign their students a range of writing tasks, often as central or repeated features of the course, we haven't yet addressed a crucial question: does it matter *what* new teachers write? If pedagogy students are being assigned writing in part to further develop their attitudes and practices related to teaching writing, is a researched report as productive as, say, a teaching journal or some other assignment? Should writing assignments all be tailored to the needs of individual pedagogy-education programs?[2] Alternately, might some kinds of writing assignments be especially congruent with the broad goals of writing pedagogy education? In the following pages, I explain why our answer to that last question should be *yes*. Writing assignments that are overtly, deliberately *difficult*, *exploratory*, and *critically reflective* should form the core of what we assign to teachers. Writing pedagogy classes need to provide writing experiences that allow students to experience productive, guided difficulty in writing—and thus to become true learners in the field. Working through these difficulties within a supportive environment will increase teachers' empathy with students; their felt sense that process-based, student-centered teaching is effective; and their understanding of how to connect composition theories with pedagogical practices. In addition, writing assignments need to emphasize exploration rather than conclusiveness at all stages of the writing process. And finally, metacognitive writing about these difficult, exploratory assignments should be critically reflective, addressing the difficulty and the exploratory nature of the writing, and linking writing to teaching practices.

Mine is itself an exploratory argument, aided though not conclusively reinforced by commentary from six cohorts of graduate composition pedagogy students at two universities. Currently, no longitudinal studies about the effectiveness of writing pedagogy education have been published; scholars in composition have seemed reluctant even to articulate general principles for this common task. We propose tentative solutions to specific problems such as student resistance to composition theory; we sometimes recommend extracurricular structures such as mentoring or co-teaching. Generally, though, we offer local success stories without arguing directly for field-wide adoption. In this article, however, I intend both to argue specifically for a writing-based peda-

gogy of difficulty, exploration, and reflection, and to ask more broadly whether writing pedagogy educators can usefully strive to agree not just on core goals for teacher preparation but on curricula that will move us toward those goals.

Prologue: Finding Common Ground

Why focus particularly on *writing* as a common element in the preparation of writing teachers? Why add more difficulty into a course that's difficult already, or emphasize exploration and reflection with students who may need a great deal of basic knowledge? These questions take us beyond considering what we want in a pedagogy course, into discussions of who we hope our new writing teachers will become. We could likely argue into the wee hours about what new writing teachers most need to *know*, and not make much progress toward common ground. Indeed, as we face increased pressure to cover a growing body of knowledge and practice, and have so much material now available to us, it is already difficult to resist pressures to drive our pedagogy courses far and wide across the field, to let go of a commitment to *coverage* and thus make more time for *discovery* (Reid 25; see also Stenberg 54). Discussing instead the affective gains we hope new writing teachers will make rather than the information or skills they should master may bring us more directly to productive collaboration—though it may be easiest to see our common values by imagining their absence. Consider, for instance, the teachers who might be created by the nightmare versions of writing teacher preparation programs that we hope to avoid: institutionalized boot camps where new teachers are quickly indoctrinated into a curriculum, with all decisions made for them, leaving as little space as possible to fail or to grow (the two are related); or conversely, laissez-faire programs lacking any guidance, which result in new teachers teaching on their own using a patchwork of pedagogies assembled from what they vaguely remember their own teachers doing. Such visions make us wince, though elements of such programs are often pressed upon us by institutions, or even requested by novice writing teachers themselves as they work through their own confidences and fears.

We should be able to agree that we need to educate teachers who are ready to help their own students think critically, adapt to changing rhetorical situations, and become confident, lifelong writers. We want to help grow good teachers (not course-delivery-bots or Freirian "bankers") who become invested in teaching and in the discipline of teaching writing, and who thus find the classroom a creative, energizing space. We want even the newest teachers to be able to draw upon their own expertise, to feel confident enough to innovate

(and to risk failure and survive it) as they meet their students. We hope that they will continue to adapt to new syllabi and new students and new technologies, that they will know how to inquire about answers when they encounter challenges and problems. We very much want, in short, to contribute to the development of writing teachers who are engaged, confident, flexible, creative, reflective practitioners of writing education.

Uncovering these affective goals at the foundations of my own pedagogy has concerned me somewhat: I worry about my being perceived, or the field being perceived, as "soft." Moreover, I am committed to enacting composition pedagogy as a discipline and a performance that can be studied, theorized, debated, assessed, researched, and deliberately revised. I have thus turned to writing assignment design as a primary strategy for rooting new teachers in the field and preparing them to work with the "content" of composition pedagogy. As a personal, creative, public, ethical act, *writing* can serve as an approximation of the *teaching* that most of my students will soon undertake. More practically, I know from experience and scholarship how to build a writing assignment that can balance "hard" and "soft" curricular goals; that can foster the kind of "writing to develop" that Shari Stenberg advocates for new teachers (55); and that will model the kind of student-centered, collaborative learning I hope new teachers will adopt. Through my own explorations and my students' responses, I have been discovering how difficult, exploratory, and reflective writing assignments can combine to foster the engagement, flexibility, and inquiry that are vital for new writing teachers, without leaving behind the discipline of composition pedagogy. While this approach raises some intense challenges for teachers and students, as I discuss below, using these particular criteria for writing assignments as one core tenet of the writing pedagogy curriculum makes sense because of the central goals we hold in common.

Why Be Difficult? Fostering Writing-Learners

Experienced writing teachers often find that our own engagement, flexibility, and curiosity grow outward from our roots in the field. Our students do not initially have that option: while students of chemistry or history begin to teach their first labs and classes only after years of studying in their disciplines, few novice writing teachers have the same experience. In exploring the possibility that difficult writing assignments are necessary for preparing writing teachers, I expand on Stephen Brookfield's argument that all teachers need to be not only practitioners but also conscious *learners* in the field. Teachers depend on the "conceptions of teaching derived from our own experiences as learners,"

according to Brookfield (49), and "the best teachers are probably those who have achieved their skill mastery, knowledge, and intellectual fluidity only after periods of struggle and anxiety" (62). Like Barr Ebest and Winslow, Brookfield values the empathy, engagement, and flexibility that "periods of struggle" can instill in a teacher.

New composition pedagogy students, however, may not have much past difficulty to draw upon. Students who become English majors are often "naturally" good writers. The composition pedagogy class may thus be students' first opportunity to experience writing as a difficult task, and then only if assignments are deliberately designed to challenge them *as writers*: posing for them serious difficulties, both cognitive and affective, in discovering and then communicating what they mean. Otherwise, they may not have access to the full learning experience that Chris Anson describes:

> [W]e teachers need to experience what our students experience . . . to feel the pressure of a deadline or that often *productive discomfort* of imagining our peers experiencing our words. . . . We need to remember the moments of difficulty, of being twisted up in a tangle of assertions . . . we need to remember as well the moments of satisfaction or triumph when we're surprised by our own words and their elegance or intelligence. (Anson 30–31, my emphasis)

Notably, Anson here recommends that teachers need to "experience what our students experience"—not only to "write what our students write" (see also Barr Ebest 60). A crucial step toward understanding one's writing students—toward being rooted in the field—comes in sharing an equivalent experience of difficulty, rather than only sharing equivalent topics or genres of writing.

Teachers who experience writing difficulty not only connect emotionally to their students, something they might do after writing *what* their students write, but they gain clarity about how students learn to write better. They also gain a felt sense about the discipline that is crucial to becoming engaged in the teaching process. Barr Ebest's point that "[b]ecause they succeeded in every academic context, graduate students are generally unaware of how they were taught" (43) implies an equally important corollary: they are generally unaware of *how they learned* to write, and thus perhaps how *anyone* might learn to write. If they have never felt the challenge of working in a "zone of proximal development," Lev Vygotsky's term for a learning situation in which the task is beyond the student's independent abilities but within the reach of a student who is being guided and supported in his or her efforts, they may not have been *taught* to write in the way we are preparing them to teach others. The

pedagogy class provides an important opportunity to be deliberately guided through difficulty in writing by an expert in the field. Elsewhere in graduate school, students are being asked to write primarily "to learn how to contribute to the field as scholars" and "to display knowledge" (Ray 146). When we privilege "the completed assignment . . . over its production, the written product over the writing process," we offer few opportunities for guidance in learning to write (Sullivan 286). However, when writing difficulty is foregrounded in the composition pedagogy class, graduate students can learn to write (better), and learn *how to learn to write*.

Current composition pedagogy is based on the premise that writing well is difficult; people who do not believe that premise themselves may only go through the motions as writing teachers. Consider, for instance, the idea of recursive drafting and revision, the foundation of nearly all current theories of writing instruction. It seems likely that writers who themselves draft and revise will be better teachers of this approach. A majority of Winslow's TAs, for example, reported that completing their revision-intensive writing portfolio strongly affected their teaching of "revising strategies, peer response groups, [and] conferencing" (324; see also Lieberman and Wood 15). Such revision work, though, may be merely an exercise, not actual engagement, unless the writer is truly experiencing a period of struggle or anxiety. As my pedagogy student Kelley explains about a revision experience that left her deeply frustrated, "This is a prime example of why I am not a complete draft writer. When I have to turn in drafts of things, it really messes me up." Writers who don't perceive that they *need* such help are unlikely to believe that the benefits of the drafting process are worth its messiness and disruption, even if they experiment with it in a class or workshop. Until writers encounter real problems, not just infelicities, they have no true need for either guidance or revision opportunities; they may offer both to their students, but they can maintain their own identity as nonrevisers and thus remain disengaged from what they're teaching. Moreover, pedagogy students need to be aware of the difficulties they face and the role of guided learning in meeting those challenges in order to fully engage with the field of composition pedagogy and put down roots from which to grow.

Difficulty in Practice: Closing the Gaps between Teachers and Learners

As they encounter and name difficulty in writing, pedagogy students can draw on their own experiences in order to engage with common theories and

practices of teaching writing and to develop their own questions about the field. TAs like Belle, for instance, may discover that their added experience as writing-learners brings them increased insight:

> I know that many of my students experience the same feelings I did every time I gave them a new essay prompt. . . . I generally am not frightened by any writing assignment, but this assignment was a needed reminder to me of how difficult/scary an assignment can be!

Such a lesson isn't restricted to new teachers. Near the end of her recent analysis of writing pedagogy education, Barr Ebest reflects on her own difficulty revising that book's manuscript and reveals that she now views her former graduate students with more sympathy. "I thought them stubborn [in not revising their writing]," she explains, "because I . . . had not realized [until revising this book] how difficult it might be to dig deep [and] open up" (Barr Ebest 211). Her own difficult writing experience breaks an unseen barrier between herself and her students, one that had existed despite her theoretical knowledge and many years of teaching. Through her experience she gains a broader empathy for others' resistance to change; she also gains a greater optimism about the ability of writers and writing teachers to change and improve.

Experiencing writing difficulty can also give writing teachers opportunities for increased inquiry into the whole concept of how learning and teaching might happen each day in a writing class. That is, as difficulty breaks down the writing process from a "flow" to a series of trials, queries, reader responses, and revisions, participating in the process can prepare students to see teacher intervention as a planned yet flexible set of assistive activities rather than as an intuitive, Hollywood-staged, "O Captain! My Captain!" ethos. Even pedagogy students like Luke, an MFA candidate with years of creative writing workshops behind him, can become more aware of the efficacy of writing teaching: "I [have now] remembered what it was like to be coached along with an essay. In fact, having never taken a composition course, I think this was the closest and longest attention I have received [about] an essay." Without this insight, teachers may consider "writing as a process" to be something *other* people need, as Alicia notes:

> I know that sometimes it is necessary to completely scrap the first idea or the second or third. (This always sounded easy when I told my students, but I don't think I have ever actually had to start over completely more than once [before this assignment].)

Highly proficient writers in graduate pedagogy courses may see process steps and composing strategies as crutches needed mostly by less skilled writers. They can be understandably reluctant to admit their own needs, as Faith explains:

> I did what I try to encourage students in the writing center to do. At first I felt a little silly writing out a thesis position and trying to identify three supporting paragraphs to . . . detail an action plan for my thesis, but once I started writing I was really glad I had outlined.

Any categorical distinction that teachers see between their writing processes and those of their students is likely to increase teachers' frustration with students' behavior and decrease their engagement. Like Barr Ebest, Naya re-sees her students' actions while reflecting on her own experience: "[W]hat I resisted most was revising the essays. It [was] then that I realized why my students dislike revising the essays and hand in the same drafts by just editing a few things here and there." Naya here gains not just empathy but a new view of her role as a teacher: at the resisting moment that threatens to set teacher against students, she may be better able to maintain her role as a reader and coach rather than becoming a frustrated taskmaster. Pedagogy students who find they *need* help, who *experience* what actually helps, and who then take time to name, reflect on, and connect those experiences to broader discussions of composition pedagogy will be better able to reevaluate personal and scholarly theories about writing and teaching writing.

Students' "resistance to theory"—and to any change in their beliefs about teaching—is often cited by writing pedagogy instructors as a key challenge. We must tread carefully between advocating change and reassuring students that their deeply felt beliefs and their "theories-in-use" (Parker 413) about writing, learning, and teaching will be respected. Barr Ebest explains that some of her students resisted working through a process-writing approach because, like Naya and Kelley, they felt the instructor was trying—from the outside—to change a fundamental element of their writing style. She cautions that students who feel pressured to change their approaches might ironically draw on their newfound empathy with their students and "avoid these teaching methods" altogether (Barr Ebest 101). Similar concerns are echoed in Nancy Welch's worries about the "conversion" of TAs and Sidney Dobrin's insights about the pedagogy class as an "initiation into composition studies" (21) or even a site of "powerful policing" (25).

Assigning difficult writing—and reflecting with pedagogy students on their learning experiences—can help us emphasize inquiry into rather than

mere acceptance of writing pedagogies. If the difficulties generated are real for (and named by) each student, then as we invite students to describe what they personally need, discuss those needs with each other, and seek solutions, they become more likely to build their eventual pedagogy on their own understanding of a range of learners' needs. In this way they have the opportunity to move not just from theory into practice, but also from their own practices toward their own theories, as Kori did in discovering "how writing should best be taught." Encountering difficulties as writers, with opportunities to discuss and respond to those difficulties, prepares pedagogy students to be flexible, engaged classroom teachers who can move between theory and practice, between learning and teaching, as they respond to the needs of their own students.

What's So Hard? Designing Difficulty in Pedagogy Instruction

Identifying what *difficulty* might mean at a conceptual level can help pedagogy instructors bring writing difficulty into our syllabi without significantly compromising other goals or overtaxing our students. In considering how to design writing assignments that are productively difficult, I am assisted by Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori's musings on difficulty. Salvatori sets out a rationale for helping student readers "identify, name, and reflect on their difficulties as pathways to understanding" in order to learn "how to trust their difficulties" (1). She notes that the textual passages that student readers identify as difficult are often "the ones [that] the critic approach[es] as rich interpretive cruces," as the beginning of further illumination (Salvatori 1). Writers might usefully articulate a parallel argument, recognizing how instances that require difficult negotiations among intent, audience, form, and language invite us into an important learning opportunity. (As an opposing case, consider the relative "ease"—and rhetorical enervation, and inquiry-resistance—of a five-paragraph essay.)

Salvatori draws on work by George Steiner to argue that reading difficulties are the result rather than the cause of cultural and personal alienation; she explains that the experience of difficulty signifies a gap already present and reveals an opportunity for reengagement (3). One might similarly note how writers who are alienated from their own writing processes (for instance) face additional barriers to learning. When the flow of writing stops, the difficult moment may reveal how a process-alienated writer has less awareness of where the problem might lie, or of what alternate steps might re-start the writing. To discuss the learning of writing as a process, writing teachers need to be able to recognize and remediate such alienations. While Steiner's categories of difficulty for textual interpreters (contingent, modal, tactical, and ontological

difficulties) do not directly correlate with the difficulties that text creators face, pedagogy instructors might still benefit from choosing some heuristic to "identify [and] name" writing difficulties.

For example, we might consider identifying the schematic, relational, and exploratory difficulties writers encounter. Schematic difficulties arise from writing in unfamiliar genres or through unfamiliar processes, as writers have to revise or create new schemas to guide their work: "I'm realizing that I am uncomfortable writing about what I think," notes Elaine, while Susan protests, "I HATE revising. I do it as little as possible." Relational difficulties arise as writers imagine and negotiate with readers, individually or through community discourses: Lisa states, "I feel like if I add too much about myself [as reader comments requested] then it's going to take away from . . . what I want to [say] as a writer"; Faith reflects, at the end of a revision process, that writing was less difficult once "it finally dawned on me that I wasn't [writing] for *College English*." Lastly, exploratory difficulties result from the writer's quest—or unexpected need—to learn more about a topic in order to complete the writing task. Thad describes the general difficulty that "arose from my constantly evolving . . . view of what I saw as important," and Wes pinpoints a particular moment of difficult learning:

> The most difficult aspect of writing [this essay] for me was my forced admission that pedagogical theory, in fact, did play a significant part in forming what now stands as my teaching philosophy. . . . Connecting these incandescent people [highly admired former teachers] with the often dry, detached voices of pedagogical theory made me squirm. . . . [But] suddenly I could explain to myself why the things that worked so well with me as a student worked so well.

Certainly categories such as these will overlap; pedagogy teachers and students may also need to create different categories to name additional challenges.

Thinking about writing difficulty in categories can help writing pedagogy instructors as we create or revise writing assignments. Consider, for example, a common assignment: the reading-response paper. Small alterations to the assignment could invoke schematic difficulty by requiring (or inviting) writers to meet an exact length requirement or a four-part structure, or by requiring writers to address a particular subtopic or take a narrow stand. "The most difficult part of this," writes Leanne about such an assignment, "was to . . . commit to just one position." We can increase relational difficulty by adding a publication or presentation step, or even by inviting writers to participate in

peer review and revision. Susan notes that a peer-review session for a minor assignment unsettled her:

> Writing [the first response] didn't feel hard to me. . . . What was difficult and challenging was the peer workshop and revision process. . . . I thought I had written a relatively well-organized and clear argument for my position, and [my peers'] comments suggested I wasn't quite as organized or systematic as I needed to be. The horror! I'm a writing tutor!

We can also add exploratory difficulty to short assignments, asking writers to deliberately reach for long-buried personal experiences or to wrestle with unanswerable questions. Responding to one such experience, Thad points out that "it was difficult to come up with a philosophy for an activity that I've never done before." Creating time for reflection and revision can also increase the opportunity for exploration: the more she thought about her essay, Kori writes, the more she realized she was caught in the irony of "struggl[ing] to quell my own perfectionist impulses in writing an essay *about my perfectionist impulses*."[3] By carefully choosing our approaches to generating writing difficulty, we can either add a crucial layer to some extant assignments or design new assignments whose main purpose is to engage students in difficult writing.

Our goal in designing assignments to favor writing difficulty, of course, is not to make the whole course more difficult, but to privilege the kind of difficulties that increase new teachers' experience of being writing-learners and thus strengthen their engagement with the teaching of writing. We know that other assignment-related difficulties will be present: cognitive challenges posed by content comprehension or advanced reading and research; time-management challenges facing new teachers; emotional challenges that may come from autobiographical writing or classroom-teaching events. We should also preserve space in our pedagogy classes for writing that doesn't foreground difficulty; for writing that emphasizes play, experimentation, or discovery; and for writing, difficult or not, that is not evaluated. Moreover, while we may not be increasing the number of assignments in a course, we are raising the bar in some of them; difficult writing need not replace other kinds of learning, but we should be aware that we may need to cover less ground with our students in order to fully engage them as writing-learners. Furthermore, we need to design our classes to ensure that writing teachers who are experiencing difficulty in learning to write find support and have the opportunity to experience success. Alicia speaks for many of our students, who are under great pressure to prove

themselves as advanced students and new professionals, in saying she is "not used to failure . . . in work or school or life." It is therefore important for us to help pedagogy students not just to name difficulty but to see how even "dead ends" or "failures" in their writing can *increase* their ability to teach writing well. Students who experience writing as difficult, but who can identify that difficulty as an opportunity for greater learning, and who then can come to see *writing-learning* as something that may be collaborative, productive, and satisfying, can build those same ideas into their writing class designs. That is, they can identify more strongly as writing teachers and connect more directly to the theories and practices of the field.

Inquiring Minds: Writing to Resist Closure

The concept of *exploration* deserves attention in the context of the pedagogy course separately from its role in creating writing difficulty, in part because new teachers who risk failure every day need special encouragement to be explorers, and in part because so much in formal pedagogy education mitigates against exploration. In order to help new teachers prepare to be continuing learners and flexible practitioners, we can design writing assignments to emphasize inquiry over conclusion-oriented writing. When we ask for exploratory thinking as a primary goal in formal, graded writing assignments, we help students see that inquiry, flexibility, and even uncertainty are fundamental goals for good teaching, not signs of incompetence. Exploration can be a deliberate strategy to encourage novice teachers to delay conclusions while they consider a broader range of options, and to clear space for teachers to participate in a disciplinary conversation rather than only receive its wisdom.

We may, however, find it difficult to create sufficient space for our students' exploration unless we deliberately build it into the core assignments. Consider, for instance, two common assignments: the research-based seminar paper and the teaching philosophy essay. Certainly both assignments are capable of generating inquiry and exploration: an initial argument or statement can change over the course of writing it, leading to new questions. We are well positioned to teach both these writing assignments as exploratory, hoping to evoke pedagogy students' curiosity, risk-taking, invention, and flexibility. Our students, however, are not always in a position to volunteer to take risks or reveal ignorance: they are in the process of joining a culture of experts while feeling themselves to be far from expertise. And unfortunately, given the constraints of the pedagogy course, we ourselves may press students for "right" answers: by

moving through all the material we have to cover too fast to allow for tentativity and exploration, or by positioning core assignments like seminar papers or philosophy statements as “final” measurements, summative documents that by definition require certainty.

Pedagogy instructors who hope that their students will develop exploratory habits and take time for learner-reflection may have to substantially amend a formal seminar-paper assignment. For example, we can require a multistep process, part of which must be explicitly personal or exploratory (VanderStaay); we can ask students to begin writing before they feel they know enough to draw confident conclusions, and can allow sufficient time for reconsideration and revision; we can revisit our evaluative criteria, as Richard Marback does, to emphasize that students will be “evaluated [not] in terms of what position they come to [but] rather by how ‘thick’ their accounts” of their thinking are (99). In these and other ways, we can help students stand against the pressure to conclude, and convince them that we will credit their uncertainties at least as much as their arguments.[4] We also need to attend to the ways in which teaching philosophy statements or other teacher narratives can push students away from exploration. Certainly new teachers face significant risks in admitting that they are not sure what—or why—they want to teach. As several pedagogy scholars have pointed out in recent years, the culture of teaching-related narratives remains conclusive rather than exploratory. Stenberg writes:

> [T]eacher narratives often promote . . . a neat and linear story told by a unified narrator. Any moments of messiness are to be cleaned up and polished by the story’s end. . . . These narratives ultimately lead to closure, presenting the teacher as the victor. (71)[5]

Feeling such a pressure to be more certain, even for an exploratory assignment, Faith explains, “One of the most disorienting aspects . . . was trying to write an essay based solely on my opinion/experience without any research or theoretical knowledge, and then trying to mitigate my uncertainties in the voice of the paper.” Indeed, faced with a heap of uncertainties while writing a standard “statement of teaching philosophy,” any worried student might “mitigate” them all in search of a solid statement, giving an answer that ties up loose ends neatly on the page—even if she did not yet feel so certain.

On the other hand, with enough time and encouragement, writers like Luke can begin by “asking myself a big question,” and then “[go] through a process of answering it little by little.” Similarly, with enough time to reflect,

Gabrielle was able to see progress:

> I'm excited and encouraged to see my teacher-self emerging on the page. What a relief! I wasn't always sure she was in there.

Marina, too, gained a new vision of her professional and personal trajectory:

> I initially began [by saying] . . . that I couldn't help feeling that teaching is the career I keep trying to avoid, without success . . . except now I'm also seeing the ways it entrapped me long ago, and I just never realized it. . . . I feel like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* who discovers she had the means to get back to Kansas, in the form of the red shoes, all along.[6]

To promote inquiry over (false) certainty, assignments that ask new teachers about their plans or beliefs need to be explicitly described as exploratory, evaluated based on questions rather than only on answers, and drafted over time so that the students can move past (or more deeply into) their first impressions. In this way, they can begin to learn through their writing experience about "[t]olerating the ambiguities of practice, living with the certainty of unpredictability, and learning provisional reasoning," all of which Brookfield notes are important for teachers (221).

By assigning exploratory writing, pedagogy instructors also help teachers gain confidence as professionals in the field. Joy S. Ritchie and David Wilson explain how a formal exploratory assignment can strengthen a new teacher's confidence more than, say, an informal journal assignment. In the latter, a writer might still feel that his or her explorations are cloistered in a protected space, while in a formal assignment, writers are expected to place their own questions and hypotheses directly into a larger conversation. Integrating personal and formal narratives, Ritchie and Wilson argue, can help new teachers "[resist] dominant narratives [and bring] together theory and practice" (75). As Helen explains, in her first draft of such an essay, "[t]he answer seem[ed] to be right there. But upon exploration, discerning a real answer . . . made me develop my own theory that embraced both sides separately and significantly." While an initial sense of rootedness may anchor an exploratory move, the reverse is also true: writing teachers who write to explore can further engage with and become more rooted in the discipline.

Moreover, when we "acknowledge and encourage ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity" (Ray 157), we reinforce our students' sense that, like difficulty, uncertainty and exploration are common and beneficial conditions for learning and teaching. Pedagogy students who learn to tolerate and even seek out

ambiguities—as writers and as teachers—can become more tolerant of their own and their students' uncertainties and failures. They can also learn to look past the facade of certainty in pedagogical theory and teacher-narratives in order to hear the questioning going on in the background: framing "theory" as informed exploration may make it seem less alien and thus more adaptable to students' and teachers' own uses. In addition, writing in an exploratory mode helps prepare them to cope with and even draw insight from their own uncertainties as teachers and to see the teaching of writing as an ongoing inquiry. While exploration can take many forms in a pedagogy class, designing formal, graded writing assignments to be purposefully exploratory reinforces new teachers' sense of flexibility as a primary goal rather than merely a passing stage along the way to surety.

Moving to "Meta": Writing to Name, Question, and Connect

If we are to productively increase writing difficulty and exploration, we need also to design assignments to help students participate in critical reflection. "[L]earning moments—moments of perplexity, disorientation, even chaos—" writes Stenberg, "can lead, *upon reflection and inquiry*, to new pedagogical possibilities" (66, my emphasis). Unless we directly ask for reflection related to writing difficulty, we risk creating only disorienting confusion, not the "productive discomfort" to which Anson refers. Brookfield argues further that teachers benefit from *critical* reflection in which we examine systemic power inequities and question assumptions about our processes (8). Reflective writing thus both supports the learning we aim for in difficult or exploratory assignments and helps teachers develop perspectives that will increase their success in the classroom.

While some reflection-in-action (Schön) will likely occur in writing assignments that are difficult or exploratory, students may not move "naturally" to specific critiques of writing, learning, or teaching processes. Likewise, students may be reflecting on their immediate experiences, but not fully tapping into a learner-into-teacher perspective. As both Barr Ebest and Ruth Ray note, the writing pedagogy class may be the only upper-level class in which students produce any reflective writing. To prepare teachers who can critically reflect on their practice as teachers, it makes sense to help students hone their strategies on a practice with which they are more familiar—writing—and then point out ways to transfer those techniques to their pedagogical practices. As with drafting-and-revising and with writing in an exploratory mode, reflecting critically may initially seem too messy or risky. Kelly Belanger and Sibylle Gruber

remind us that for new teachers, "the functional overwhelm[s] the critical" in coping with daily challenges (130), leaving no time or energy for reflection. Beyond the safe spaces of the pedagogy course, then, reflection may disappear if it does not become a familiar and valued practice. We certainly want new teachers *not* to have to think about every little thing they are doing; an increase in "unconscious competence" is one sign of the progression from novice toward proficient practitioner (Sprague and Nyquist 296–98). However, critical reflection—setting aside time to deliberately investigate successes, disjunctures, and inequities—helps writers and teachers to adapt and succeed.

Attending to Brookfield's four stances for critical reflection—viewing ourselves through our autobiographical experiences, through our students' eyes, through our colleagues' eyes, and through the lens of pedagogical theory (29–30)—can help us weave reflection into our pedagogy assignments. For instance, pedagogy students writing a literacy narrative could be asked explicitly to question their assumptions about learning to read and write (or to question the institutional structures that enable or prevent such literacies). After students' drafts go through peer review, students could be asked to write reflectively both about the comments they received from their peers and about the experience of being a student writing and revising an assignment; such reflections could also be linked to ideas from published articles on revision.

In addition, we need to include reflective assignments that directly focus students' attention on their achievements and their challenges as writing-learners, and on how they might translate that knowledge to their classrooms. The comments from pedagogy students featured in this article were often written in response to typical metacognitive questions ("What was hardest about writing this essay?"), and sometimes in response to questions I asked specifically to focus their attention on writing-learning and pedagogy-learning: "What helped you overcome challenges you faced? How would you modify this assignment if you were giving it to undergraduate writers?" When they are encouraged to notice the assignment prompt and the writing process as pedagogical artifacts, students can use reflection on writing to move into reflection on teaching. Of course, such a turn doesn't happen automatically: both Wendy's serious comment ("I could not seem to connect with this assignment, no matter how much I struggled with it") and Marc's more dramatic one ("There were moments of fury when [I] could be seen through the window of [my] office with the latest draft of [my essay] and an open Zippo") articulate but do not reflect further on the frustration they faced. When students reach

beyond an initial response, the reflective writing produces a richer learning moment, as in Gabrielle's reflection:

> I struggled so much with this essay, having really never written anything like it before. . . . By [writing] an essay assignment that made us uncomfortable, we stretch[ed] and grew as writers.

With some added distance, students can also see how they respond to the cultural pressures faced by many writers, as Elaine discovers:

> As I read over this essay now, I notice how much its writer sounds like a combative academic, wedded to inscrutable ideas, demanding of accuracy and clarity. Is that writer really me?

And in the best moments, the reflections can move from the personal to the pedagogical, analyzing the assumptions that go into assigning writing and drafting responses, as in Alicia's comment:

> I learned that we all see assignments/prompts a little differently—even when they seem straightforward and clear! I will always try to discuss the prompt thoroughly; and I will be more understanding if some [student] interprets it a little differently.

More importantly, without being required to complete critical reflection assignments, pedagogy students might never make these connections, as Leanne points out:

> [In writing this essay] I had to practice what I preach, and that's often the hardest [thing] to do. Even right before writing this [reflective assignment] this hadn't dawned on me.

If we intend for students to become more astute at noticing how their own writing experiences, and particularly their own encounters with difficult and exploratory writing, help prepare them to be better teachers, we need to directly ask them for such reflection; we may also need to model, discuss, and praise reflective responses that draw the complex connections we hope for.

Finally, in addition to asking pedagogy students to reflect on their experiences as writers, we can ask them to attend specifically to how they are *learning to write*, and thus how to compose their own theories of writing pedagogy. Brookfield suggests several questions for reflecting on classroom-based learning, such as

> What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming and helpful? What action . . . did you find most puzzling or confusing? (115)[7]

Such questions can help writers translate individual experiences into pedagogical theory; sharing answers in class can help reveal complications and instabilities in writing pedagogy more broadly. Some learners may be glad to have an error fixed outright for them or a clear directive given; others may feel hampered by directives and helped by a more probing question or heuristic. Reflecting on these experiences may increase teachers' willingness to shift approaches to meet the needs of new students or contexts.

In other words, critically reflective assignments can ask students not just to *connect* theories or readings to what their experiences have been as writers, or—another step—to note how pedagogical theories help name their experiences, but also to *use* their experiences to create their own theories and thus to challenge theories about which they've read or heard. While experts in a field can engage others' perspectives through a kind of automatic reflection-in-action, novices need more explicit support in practicing this kind of inquiry and adaptation. Through directed reflection, students can see if and how a theory resonates with their actual experiences as writing-learners, and then learn how to translate that understanding into better practices or greater confidence. Critical reflective writing about difficult and exploratory writing assignments can help new teachers link personal constructs about writing with external theories. Teachers who become practiced at making this kind of move in one area—how writers perform and learn—can expand their reflective practice into other areas. They can increase their awareness of their current theories and practices as writing teachers, their sense of participating in a conversation about such concepts, and their ability to see, desire, and create new approaches to teaching writing. Writing assignments that create difficulty, encourage exploration, and provide opportunity for directed practice in critical reflection thus reinforce one another in preparing teachers to participate fully and flexibly in the discipline of writing education.

No Safe Ground, or The Difficulties of Difficulty

There is nothing safe about approaching a writing pedagogy course as a place for difficulty, exploration, and critical reflection. Barr Ebest's research project began, as many of our revisions of this course do, as a response to resistances she perceived from her students. As she points out, adding or emphasizing dif-

ficulty in writing assignments may, at least initially, increase these resistances. "In practically every case, writing was the catalyst for resistance," she writes. "Paradoxically," she continues, "it was also the cure" (Barr Ebest 5). But the cure may be slow in coming: several of her students were still actively resisting her cures as her classes ended. We hope that these students will "see the light" weeks or months later, but they may be more like one of my former students: when asked what pedagogy class concepts she used during her first semester teaching composition, she replied simply, "None." (Either the concepts were ones she already knew, she explained, or they weren't ideas she thought would ever be useful for her.) Difficult writing, like any other pedagogy, provides only opportunities, not guarantees. In addition, students who have enjoyed success as writers may be intensely distressed to find it made difficult for them. Gita's vivid description of writers' experiences with difficulty may not be limited to the undergraduates she imagines:

> For me, writing is like trying out a new recipe. Not one out of a book, but one that I am trying to experiment with on the spur of the moment. . . . But for the majority of students whom I will be teaching, writing [could] be like getting a tooth pulled out in the dark by a two-year-old. Agonizingly painful, and something that they will never want to try again.

"I GIVE UP!!" writes Kelley, finding herself in that dark, painful place. She and pedagogy students like her may, with time and support, also find their way out—"I feel sort of lucky to have bombed it so badly now because it cleared the way for me to completely ditch that old idea and explore this new one," she writes later—but if they don't, we risk convincing them that they "never want to try again."

Emphasizing exploration can likewise increase students' anxiety. Lu Ellen Huntley explains how her decision not to grade a midterm assignment but to ask her graduate students for more exploration and revision "translated to some students as a message of failure; for others, it was an insult; and for a few, just too much to ask" (293). As one of her students protested, "My main problem [with this class] is the process is never ending. . . . We're always in process" (Huntley 295; see also Ray 107–8). And critical reflection brings its own disorientations and risks. Some of my students have expressed frustration that they seem to spend more time *reflecting on* than *acquiring* new pedagogies; others have reported that they lost confidence about teaching writing after I "helped" them see additional complications. Finally, I have found it difficult to compensate for new challenges by decreasing others, and so I risk having students remem-

ber only the extended exertion, not the learning. Despite these challenges, we have a responsibility and a need to keep exploring toward more satisfactory answers. We know the frustration we can feel at being "salespeople" trying to push new strategies into students' repertoires, and—more worrisome—we know the risks and resistances we face when composition pedagogy students cannot find a way to "buy into" the work of teaching writing. Moreover, despite their resistances, we know our pedagogy students want to learn and succeed, and we want to honor that desire.

If, as current scholarship suggests, the composition pedagogy class is likely to be fraught anyway, then perhaps the best way out is *through* the fraught ground, together. It may likewise be time to bring the difficulties of this course into the foreground of our teaching and our professional conversations and trust that exploration, reflection, and collaborative support will help us learn to cope. If a double realization like Kori's—first, that one's own practices in writing can reveal how one should teach writing, and second, that one must discover the first realization by oneself—is an outcome we would value highly, then we need to let go of the orderly processionals of knowledge coverage and to tolerate or even create disorder and difficulty in order to stimulate need, inquiry, exploration, and critical reflection. We may need to risk giving our students exactly what they say they do not want, to *tell* them that that's what we're doing (and why), and to try to learn—and help them learn—to live with and even thrive in these new conditions.

Conexploraclusions

Writing this article has certainly been difficult for me. Between starting to plan it and finishing the first sprawling draft, I switched universities and discovered a pedagogy student population with different needs and expectations; in accounting for these and other new contexts, I had to push my research and my writing much further than I had envisioned.[8] Writing and revising these pages has also made me aware of ways in which I am not yet practicing what I am preaching: for instance, I still give too many assignments and so leave not enough time for exploration and critical reflection. Meanwhile, reading widely in the pedagogy of pedagogy has made me aware of teaching practices that I hadn't considered before, some of which seem very difficult to me. As I feel my own mixed admiration of and resistance to Brookfield's critical incident questionnaires or Barr Ebest's extensive teacher-research assignments ("*I* can't do that! That won't work *here*!"), I wonder again about whether it behooves us to try to articulate any common principles for writing pedagogy education.

In other words, my writing experiences support my argument that writing difficulty can bring some people to productive learning as writing teachers—even as the same experiences undermine my intention to argue that difficulty, exploration, and reflection in writing should be adopted in core assignments by *all* writing pedagogy instructors.

But I come back to the idea that the (writing) pedagogy class is an important case, deserving of new and considered attention because of what we teach and what we want from that teaching. "If pedagogy is a collaborative activity that has to be remade every time a group of learners comes together," Stenberg explains,

> then the very notion that teachers can be *trained* unravels. . . . [We should instead] teach new teachers *to participate in* a learning-centered discipline. (xviii, second emphasis mine)

When we bring pedagogy students into full engagement with the field as writing-learners, as writing-explorers, and as critical reflectors on their writing and learning, we help them discover for themselves what the discipline of writing education really involves, and help them practice being in a state of "ongoing learning, study, and development." Paradoxically, by focusing on their roles as learners and explorers, we move closer to treating them as professionals: as Steven L. VanderStaay notes, we treat them as people who are (or will soon be) "not so much told how to do their job as appointed to decide for themselves how to do it" (96). By highlighting the need for inquiry and flexibility, and positioning everyone as a learner—including ourselves as we remake our own pedagogies—we position everyone as a teacher.

Finally, if we are brave enough to argue that there are better and worse ways to teach writing, generally, then we need to be equally courageous in exploring and recommending better pedagogies for educating writing teachers. Composition pedagogy may indeed need to be "remade" for every class, but it should not be remade from scratch, without reference to common goals and practices. Even as I have been creeping along hoping to dodge or hedge this conclusion, I've found myself wondering: how can we face our pedagogy students' questions about what they should all do in their disparate classes, if—despite our necessary reverence for local contexts—we don't face each other about what we should all do in ours? So I'll conclude here: it is time to go beyond syllabus collections and descriptive accounts, beyond classification of trends that are already occurring (see Latterell or Smagorinsky and Whiting, for example[9]), beyond recommendations to one another about books to assign or topics

to address. We need to begin to discuss—and then to assess—what the core tenets and pedagogies of a writing pedagogy education class should be. Writing difficulty, linked with exploratory and critically reflective writing assignments, may not in the end be among the core principles we decide to embrace: maybe we can equally (or more thoroughly) develop students' engagement and inquiry through particular strategies for reading in the field, say, or through a fine balance of mentored practice and reflective experimentation. Yet reasoning through this three-part option here has given me—like Kori—new clarity and a stronger sense of my purposes. Perhaps, then, it will be enough at the start to ask that every pedagogy teacher write his or her own difficult, exploratory, critically reflective explanation of his or her writing-teacher-education pedagogy. I look forward to reading and responding to those explorations, knowing that at least then we will be engaged in the problem, facing our own resistances in order to learn from one another more directly about how to teach the next generations of writing teachers.

Notes

1. Student comments come from class assignments given in six graduate composition pedagogy course sections that I taught at two universities; students are identified by pseudonyms (first names only). They gave informed consent for their words to be quoted. Some of the student comments are repeated from my 2004 article; that article also contains more thorough descriptions of writing assignments I have used.

2. Belanger and Gruble, and Stancliff and Goggin, have argued that writing pedagogy education is fundamentally local.

3. "Difficulty" is, to be sure, a moving target. Models of learning proposed by educators from William Perry to Carol Gilligan to Malcolm S. Knowles remind us that at any moment, some of our students may be feeling competent while others are experiencing the intellectual and emotional responses associated with difficult learning experiences.

4. Ray suggests that some difficulty in creating exploratory assignments may be due to our own fears: "If I'm not training traditional research scholars, does that mean that I'm not doing my job?" (153).

5. See also research by Dressman and by Anson and Dannels.

6. It's true that students could "fake" some of their exploratory writing, representing an uncertainty they do not feel—or, less pejoratively, they could be approximating an unfamiliar discourse as they begin to write in it. I don't mind taking this risk, because students have so few other opportunities to practice an exploratory discourse.

7. For reflective heuristics that focus on *teaching*, see Ciriello, Valli, and Taylor. They draw on Schawb's commonplaces (students, teacher, content, context), Berlak and Berlak's pedagogical dilemmas (control, curriculum, and society), and van Manen's levels of reflection (technical or "how to," interpretive or "what does this mean," and critical or "what ought to be" questions) to aid in questioning pedagogical assumptions (107–10).

8. I'm grateful to Heidi Estrem, Laura Micciche, and the *CCC* reviewers, in addition to my usual cadre of draft readers, for their insightful comments and support.

9. See Tremmel for a critique of projects that categorize rather than prioritize approaches to educating (writing) teachers.

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