

On Learning to Teach: Letter to a New TA

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Dear Students,

Welcome to your pedagogy course! Your course might be like mine: three credits, one night per week for fourteen weeks, with a focus on preparing new teachers to teach college composition the following semester. Perhaps yours is a pre-semester workshop or a series of afternoon in-services; you may find yourself studying teaching just before or even well after you have begun to teach writing.

Regardless, you might be tempted to treat this class like just another school event in a long, familiar line of school events. And yet it's not, not quite. The way you will learn in studying pedagogy—studying not just a new field, but one that is so personal, dynamic, and multifaceted—may differ significantly from how you learn in your other courses. Thus you may need new strategies in order to feel and be successful. The more you know about how students like you learn in a course like this, the better prepared you'll be to set goals and succeed at them. To that end, I want to share six learning strategies that can help you see how people like you learn to teach writing better. I hope that you can use these concepts to increase both your confidence and your success as a teaching learner and perhaps even pass some of them on to your own students.¹

Strategy 1: Access prior knowledge

Although pedagogy instructors often design our courses as introductions, we recognize that you bring a lot of relevant prior knowledge to the table—and you need to figure out how to access as much of it as possible. While you may have just a few weeks of formal pedagogical study, you have been a successful student of reading and writing, and you have been going to school and thinking about teaching and learning, for decades. Despite any dark hours in which you may suffer from impostor syndrome (that nagging feeling that if people really knew how unprepared you are, they'd cart you

off to the boondocks and find you a job scraping mud off moose hide), you have already been preparing to teach writing.

You are already a writing teacher. You know that most people best learn to write when they write something and receive feedback on it from a careful reader. Thus, every time you have given thoughtful feedback to another writer, you have been teaching. In this class, you will take steps to refine your strategies for classroom teaching, but you are not a blank slate. You're also already a writing/teaching theorist. Perhaps you have not yet studied composition theory or taken an education class. But every time you chose one course over another and every time you found one writing assignment more engaging than another, you were building a theory of learning and writing. You know a lot about how you best learn; you may also have considered how your friends learn. While you might not have named these theories, you practice them every week. You bring all this knowledge to your pedagogy course—whether it's on the tip of your tongue or lurking beneath the surface of your mind like the hidden bulk of an iceberg—and you should take some time to articulate what you know.

First, you will need to know about your knowledge for confidence. This class, more than your other classes, may present you with a range of completely unfamiliar material. Reminding yourself of your own expertise may prove crucial in order for you to combat imposter syndrome and stay motivated as you encounter surprises and challenges.

Second, you will need to know about that knowledge for community. The more you can remember that your classmates and colleagues are knowledgeable theorists, too, the more you will be able to benefit. (This class is not populated by clueless rookies!)

Third, you need to access your knowledge for consistency. You don't want to believe one thing as a learner and a writer but dogmatically teach your students something else, or to adopt a practice that contradicts your own principles. If you don't believe it's effective to craft an outline or write three-point theses or consult a peer as you write, for instance, but you profess that good writing pedagogy means that all your students must do so, you may be creating conflict for yourself as a teacher.

Finally, you need to know what you know for change, in order to adapt as you learn. Even if everything you know about writing is correct and functional, it may not all work in your future classrooms: in order to teach people who are not like ourselves, all of us need to learn some strategies that are different, even opposite, from ones that worked for us as learners. If you do not know what you assume, prioritize, or desire as a writer, learner, or teacher, you may find yourself caught by an unexpected behavior, like an iceberg swept along by subsurface currents.

As you begin this course of study, then, you should identify what you already know about teaching and writing, share it with others, and explore how prior knowledge complements and contradicts new learning.²

Strategy 2: Understand and adapt to conscious incompetence

Learning theorists outline an overlapping, recursive set of four stages encountered—and often re-encountered—by most students. In an early stage of what is called *unconscious incompetence*, learners of any subject (calculus, soccer, writing, bass guitar) do not know what they do not know. If you have ever watched informal groups of young children play soccer, you may have witnessed some blissful moments of unconscious incompetence: what they don't know about player deployment strategies or the offsides rule isn't worrying them at all.

In the next stage, *conscious incompetence*, learners become acutely aware that they do not know how to do something well. As your pedagogy class evolves, for instance, you may discover that you are uncertain how best to respond to a student essay or plan a week's worth of class activities about critical reading. In this stage, learners begin to recognize errors and make deliberate efforts to improve their performance. Yet they are often less happy and less confident, since nobody enjoys feeling incompetent.

Learners can cycle into a third stage, *conscious competence*, wherein they can perform tasks well but only when they concentrate carefully. These students are much improved, yet they may sometimes feel exhausted or disheartened by the effort involved. As a new writing teacher, you will provide helpful comments on students' essays, but to do so, you may need to reread your guidelines or even to go back to compare two B-minus documents to check for consistency. Eventually, learners can move into *unconscious competence* with some tasks or sets of tasks: they can perform well without having to devote excessive attention to the matter at hand. Teachers who are familiar with a subject and a writing task often review and comment without much second-guessing.

If this cycle holds true for all learners—including your own writing students—why should you pay special attention to it in a pedagogy class? Because several factors can magnify the effects of conscious incompetence for teaching learners like you. First, the feeling can surprise you because in the rest of your classes, the things you're incompetent at may be relatively few in comparison to all the knowledge you've accumulated. What's one new theorist or primary text compared to the dozens you already know? In comparison, the conscious incompetence you may encounter in a pedagogy class can stick out like a very sore thumb.

To complicate matters, in learning to teach, you are likely to inhabit all four stages at once, relative to different aspects of teaching. Just as you start to feel comfortable with commenting on student writing, for example, you'll read an article about multi-genre assignments that makes you realize you don't fully comprehend genres as a concept. Frequently, in learning teaching, as soon as you understand the issues at one level, your view refocuses so that you can see new challenges and unknowns at the next level. So instead of progressing steadily toward competence as the workshop or semester goes along, you are—like many experienced teachers—likely to encounter new incompetencies each week.

Finally, as you prepare to teach classes of unknown students, the stakes may feel pretty high. After all, if you're incompetent in interpreting the latest Swedish film, probably only you and your professor (or maybe a few trusted peers) will know. If you're incompetent at designing a peer review assignment, you may fail much more publicly. Since you can feel exposed at the front of a classroom, learning to teach can feel very personal, even if you tell yourself that it's just a job or just a class. Moreover, you may become worried about building your hoped-for career in this profession. These magnifying factors are inherent to being a new learner of a complicated, highly personal task—but that doesn't make the incompetence feel any better.

At some point, therefore, you may need some additional coping strategies as a teaching learner. You can remind yourself that the incompetence feeling is a normal learning stage and one that will diminish over time. You can take time to review all the knowledge and competencies you do have that can buoy you up. When you do make progress, you should take time to celebrate those gains while you prepare to learn still more. You might even decide to ask directly for reassurance or specific guidance from an experienced teacher, program director, or mentor. Not everyone will expect (or notice) that you feel especially concerned about a concept, student encounter, or skill. When you finally reveal your conscious incompetence anxieties (and now you have a technical term to use for them!), you may discover that you're doing better than you think or learn that there are some straightforward steps you could take to gain more clarity and competence.

The better you become at recognizing the signs that you are having a round of learning pains, understanding that they are inherent to the process of learning a new and intricate profession, and finding a strategy to alleviate them, the more you'll gain from the opportunities in this course.³

Strategy 3: Integrate multiple learning approaches

Just as becoming physically fit requires more than one kind of endeavor (cardiovascular conditioning, weight training, flexibility exercises), learning to teach also requires a kind of cross-training. When a pedagogy course feels like a whirlwind tour through multiple topics or exercises, it can be overwhelming.

Yet you can also see the “If It’s Tuesday This Must Be Belgium” aspect of a pedagogy course as a distinct contribution to your learning because of two key considerations. First, research shows that learning and practicing integrated, overlapping tasks in context—as jazz musicians, jet pilots, and basketball players do—provides better long-term learning than mastering all about X and then all about Y separately. In teaching, the tasks you perform are always interconnected, so it’s to your advantage to learn about assessing student writing, then work on designing an assignment, then think again (from a new, more informed perspective) about how to evaluate the student work from that assignment. Instead of mastering each one, you can gain an initial, more holistic understanding about how assigning and evaluating are linked in the practice of teaching.

Second, perhaps even more than other students, teaching-learners need to acquire knowledge through all three of the major modes of learning:

- *learning about*, or declarative knowledge that helps you understand key concepts;
- *learning how*, or procedural knowledge that helps you develop skills and abilities; and
- *learning through insight*, or reflective/metacognitive knowledge that helps you gain awareness of your own opportunities and motivations.

Table 1 helps show how each of these modes might play out in learning to be a teacher, a profession that requires you to know the *about* and the *how* of teaching, of writing, of individual student learning, and of classroom learning—and to reflect on your own writing and teaching metacognitively.

Table 1

Mode of learning	Field-specific knowledge	Example
Declarative knowledge about ...	Composition as a field and an institution	Design a syllabus to meet field-wide learning goals
	Writing, reading, researching, revising strategies	Explain concept of audience to students
	Effective practices for classroom learning	Design a session integrating experiential learning about genres
Procedural knowledge of . . .	Writing, reading, researching, revising strategies	Prioritize strengths and weaknesses in student drafts
	Effective pedagogical strategies for individual learning	Provide revision-directed comments on student drafts
	Effective pedagogical practices for classroom learning	Use follow-up questions to deepen students' analysis during class
Metacognitive knowledge of . . .	One's own writing practices	Draw on one's own struggles with revising to provide suggestions to students
	One's own learning preferences	Reflect on one's enjoyment of collaborative learning, knowing that it will fit some learners better than others
	One's own teaching practices	Analyze a successful teaching moment: what factors contributed?

Despite the divisions noted on the chart, these approaches to learning often occur simultaneously: for instance, most recent research emphasizes that declarative knowledge must be blended with procedural knowledge, in all fields. Students who know about chemistry or US history also need to be able to solve how-to problems in that field. Indeed, many learning specialists argue that students strongly benefit from this more integrated learning, even if an integrated, problem-focused approach means that less material will be covered in those courses or that learning won't be organized in tidy, predictable components.

Your pedagogy class will likewise help you blend some declarative knowledge about the subject matter with practice in some of the procedures that teachers need to know. A pedagogy course, like other introductory courses, can't cover everything. Yet again, the gaps in this class may feel different to you. When a US history class only touches on the War of 1812 so that there's more time to investigate the Civil War in depth, few students worry. When a pedagogy course skips over a topic, the loss can feel more dramatic because you may actually need to know—tomorrow!—more about assisting multilingual writers. It is difficult to trust that you will succeed without knowing that key information now. Since full coverage is impossible, metacognitive learning becomes crucial for teaching-learners. Metacognition supports your ability to transfer learning to a new situation and continue to learn there. In a pedagogy class in particular, nearly all of your practical experiences will need to be adapted to the next student, in the next semester, at the next school. Therefore, your metacognitive knowledge—the stories you tell yourself about teaching and being a teacher, how you accustom your neurons to solving teaching problems—will prepare you to continue learning the material your class doesn't cover.

When you encounter a new topic, task, or approach in your pedagogy class, you might shrug and think “Tuesday: Belgium.” But you can also map out the process by connecting this learning approach to the integrated practices of your future teaching by linking any new approach to one or more types of learning (declarative, procedural, metacognitive), or by telling yourself a new story about what and how you are learning.⁴

Strategy 4: Learn from multiple sources and experiences

Since one pedagogy course will not teach everything you need to know, you need to know how to learn about teaching from other sources. Certainly delving into the iceberg of your prior knowledge and looking for strategies that will transfer to new contexts can both help here.

If you have observed a mentor teacher recently, you have encountered another valuable source of pedagogical learning: your peers, both those in your cohort and those with more experience than you. You need to deliberately cultivate your ability to learn teaching explicitly from your peer teachers—by talking with them, reviewing their materials, observing as they teach, and asking critical questions. Few good teachers work as hermits, inventing their own assignment wheels and building their curricula with bricks shaped only by their own hands. Other teachers' approaches won't always be what you feel most comfortable with, and yet those methods may succeed with students as well as or better than your own. Of course, you will have to judge how to adapt others' ideas to fit your own major principles or goals. You should also try someone else's idea more than once before concluding that it doesn't work for you.

In addition, you have an opportunity now to engage in a special kind of implicit pedagogical learning. You're a practicing student, and every time a teacher makes a move—even now as you're reading this letter—you can reflect on that moment to increase your understanding of how teaching and learning work. You should use this metacognitive double vision to peer behind the curtains of your own learning scenes: Why do you think your teacher just made that move? How did other students react? If you're satisfied or frustrated as a learner, what factors have contributed to that experience? If you had been the teacher, what approach might you have taken to assist a student such as yourself?

Your goal is not to become the know-it-all who critiques all of her senior professors or sees his future students perfectly. Instead, your goal is to become a question-it-all, to use your dual position as a teacher and learner to better empathize with students and teachers who are navigating complex classroom currents. Any time when you find yourself in the position of a learner—you start a new Pilates class, switch to a different computer, add someone to your family—you can renew your double vision and become someone who sees teaching as teaching, who watches yourself and others learn rather than only letting it happen.

When you step outside your pedagogy class or workshop, try to look for ways to practice learning about teaching, directly by consulting with teaching peers to see what you can borrow from them, and indirectly by using your double vision to reflect on your own learning experiences.⁵

Strategy 5: Explore “managed uncertainty” and “failing forward”

It is neither true that good teaching cannot be studied nor that good teaching can be completely learned from books. Very good teachers prepare by

studying models and principles, and they continue to learn from their daily interactions with their students.

While it is just barely possible that a class session you design might go either 100% or 0% the way you plan it—you have your perfect rainbow class, or you encounter aliens who turn everyone into mushrooms—most teaching happens in the middle zone. From your own previous perspective, it may have seemed that decent classes without alien invaders usually proceeded in the 90–95% perfect zone. Yet many experienced teachers feel that we work in the 40–70% zone, delighted that some of a class session is going as we had hoped and then actively adapting in order to keep the rest of the class in an acceptable (and sometimes exciting) controlled spin so that learning can continue. One of my mentors once asked one of her nationally renowned colleagues about the best class he ever taught: he responded quietly and with only a little humorous exaggeration, “Well, I could tell you about a pretty good 10 minutes last spring. . . .”

During a pedagogy class, you will indeed learn some strategies to prepare you to handle many elements of teaching, and you will learn the reasons and principles behind such strategies. These principles will help you predict a fair amount of what will create a successful learning environment. You should try to predict what you can, just as sailors check the weather forecasts and tides: professionals don’t just wing it. But you will also need to practice a flexible mindset so you will be ready to adapt everything you learn to your own personal and educational style, to the learning goals of any class you teach, to the personality of any group of students overall, and to the vicissitudes of any particular day of teaching. In other school subjects, you may have been (and might still be) judged by your ability to draw correct conclusions and show that you’ve mastered a stable body of material. As a teaching learner, however, you should judge your increasing preparation more by how many variables you can identify in a dynamic situation and how many reasonable alternate paths you can imagine. Each time you mentally praise yourself for considering multiple possibilities rather than settling on a right answer, you build up your tolerance for productive uncertainty.

Since you will always learn and teach without being certain, you will always face failures as a pedagogy learner and as a teacher. Beyond your occasional bouts of conscious incompetence, you will—as I do—mess things up, or elements of your teaching will simply go awry on their own. Now, unless you hang out in a science lab or play a video game regularly, you may not have spent a lot of time failing and having that be a normal, accepted part of the way students learn and professionals perform. Yet teachers are like laboratory biologists and midnight gamers: we often fail because

we are fully engaged in a complex endeavor (a good thing!), not because we lack knowledge or commitment. Indeed, our potential for growth often depends on our willingness to take risks and fail. It's better, of course, if we don't fail utterly, which is one reason we work on managing uncertainty and predicting multiple opportunities. It's best if we fail forward—that is, if we see any particular failure not as a final judgment of our capabilities or worth, but as an opportunity to try something again, differently. Even when you are uncomfortable with or frustrated by failure, research shows that you can learn to modify your reaction to it, to identify not just what went wrong but how you yourself can change in response by exploring your assumptions, attitudes, approaches, preparations, and/or goals.

Much of your conscious incompetence will pass, eventually. Yet teaching is overall an uncertain enterprise, and you will be a better teaching learner when you manage your uncertainty by expecting, practicing, and even valuing it; by predicting what you can and adapting to the rest; and by using failures as opportunities for learning rather than signs that you should give up and turn back.⁶

Strategy 6: Extend your new teacher timeline

The very existence of English 101 gives many students and professors the illusion that second-semester students should know all they need to know about college writing. Anyone familiar with the field or the actual course knows this is patently impossible: writing is far too complex an endeavor to be mastered via one class. Interestingly, though, some pedagogical education programs can similarly foster the illusion that once their TAs finish one course, they magically know all they need to know about teaching. After all, we quickly put you in charge of your own classrooms and tell you you're going to be fine. That illusion can leave you caught in the middle: officially prepared, but truthfully still learning. As a TA interviewed recently put it, it can feel like he's letting people down: "It's kind of frustrating just not being perfect [yet]."

At some point, you do have to step into a classroom without knowing everything. On the other hand, when you step into the classroom for that first time, you may bring an excitement, an energy, and/or a freshness to the material that your students will find highly appealing, and those qualities will enhance the learning environment substantially. So when program leaders say that "you are ready to teach," they are not lying. They have hired capable readers and writers with strong teaching potential, and they are helping you gain additional declarative, procedural, and meta-

cognitive learning that is sufficient to make you a competent teacher for their program.

You will still also be a teaching learner: not just the way all good teachers are lifetime learners, but an intensive still-at-the-beginning teaching learner. Researchers estimate that new teachers can spend from three to five years moving from being “senior learners” to “colleagues in training” to “junior colleagues.” During these early years—years, not months—almost all of teachers’ best work is just consciously competent: they have to think hard about their actions in order to feel successful. Some days they create class sessions that match precisely what they learned as core principles in their pedagogy classes, and on other days they improvise with whatever is in their book bags. Moreover, every time they try something new, the challenge can send them right back to conscious incompetence.

While you may transition smoothly into teaching your first classes (and everyone hopes that you do!), if your experience is uneven or involves setbacks, then you are probably experiencing a normal teaching learning curve, not having a personal catastrophe or letting your program down. Not only are other experienced teachers not aiming for the 95% accuracy zone, but you get to be a new teacher—the kind who asks questions, relies on his peer colleagues, worries about her time management, and fails at some key goals—for longer than your first semester.

Given this multi-year path, you might look at your pedagogy course as providing at least two kinds of learning resources. First, there is immediate learning, which is about preparation rather than mastery. You will be able to gain some in-depth competence in a few core areas of declarative and procedural knowledge and consider how to apply it more widely. For instance, the questions you learn to ask as you design a writing task—questions about students, learning goals, genres, institutions, and assessments—will recur as you design class sessions, inquire about multilingual learners, or even consider your policy about late work.

Second, there is delayed learning. Your initial course of study will also help you become aware of other questions, concepts, or strategies that will be important to you in the long run as a teaching learner, even if you cannot fully explore them during your first semester or two. Looking forward, you can acknowledge and prioritize for yourself what there is to be learned. What new technologies or genres might you want to help student writers to explore? How might you eventually want to create better opportunities to engage students in community projects or explore alternate approaches to feedback and assessment? If you’re making a five-year learning plan, you can dream big: what do you want on your to-learn list?

The more you tell yourself the true story about being a teacher on the first steps of an extended learning journey, the more you can enjoy each of the successes of your learning and teaching right now. This approach can help you prioritize your pedagogy learning to focus on a few concepts to learn deeply now and identify several more for later consideration.

Moreover, recognizing the extended timeline of teaching learning enables all five of the other strategies I've listed here. When you don't have to be perfect by Friday, you can take time to investigate your own prior knowledge and integrate new knowledge into it so that the new ideas have a more stable foundation. You will have time to encounter conscious incompetence and to experiment with teaching strategies in an uncertain world. You can learn from your peers and your experiences as you piece together a dynamic, evolving understanding of how teaching works for you—rather than accepting a simple, pre-packaged view of it from a how-to manual. You will have time to learn to think like a teacher who can wield those tools and strategies across a wide variety of educational situations.⁷

Moving Forward as a Pedagogy Learner

You may not need the strategies I have outlined here. When learning is going smoothly—and keep in mind that you are an expert learner or you wouldn't have made it this far—students don't need new ways to think about how to learn. But having names for these learning concepts might still help you. If you start to feel off-balance or overwhelmed as a teaching learner, you might stop and consider what factors are at work. It will always be possible that you're experiencing normal school or life factors: too much work, not enough time. (It's also possible that the class might be a bad class or you might be an unsuccessful pedagogy learner: any of these six learning strategies can be pushed too far, perhaps leaving learners with too much uncertainty or feeling only incompetent. But in a roomful of people thinking hard about teaching and learning, complete breakdowns like those are rare and can often be resolved.) If your standard coping strategies as a student don't work, though, you may find it useful to remind yourself of some of the new ways of learning that are part of your pedagogy education.

Perhaps just as important, you may be able to help your own students when they struggle. Students at any level who have been accustomed to one kind of learning environment—perhaps one that focused on right answers or teacher directives more than your classes will, for instance—can stumble when they switch to new learning challenges. Your students might benefit from exploring their own prior knowledge or understanding that you don't expect perfection from them in just a few weeks. Or perhaps you will

want to explore deep, problem-solving learning approaches with them and explain why you're teaching that way.

I think that many experienced teachers would say we are still learning. Yet that's not quite the same as the excitement (and frustration and occasionally moments of dread) that comes with the first rounds of learning to teach, with realizing the full range of creative opportunities you will have as you begin to interact with students in a new learning environment. Whether you are taking up classroom teaching just for the time being or as a lifelong vocation, I hope you can also take this opportunity to expand your understanding of your own learning processes—so that you can continue learning and helping others learn with balance, humor, and grace in whatever explorations lie ahead of you.

—Shelley

NOTES

1. For arguments about how new teachers benefit from understanding general learning theories, see Parkay and Stanford (32–34); for more about how writing teachers benefit from questioning their assumptions about learning, see Stygall (40–41); for specific arguments about promoting “thinking like teachers” to new instructors, see Auten. Perkins argues more generally for all students to “play the hidden game” of understanding learning strategies (136–38).

2. For an introduction to the concepts of prior knowledge, negative transfer, and transfer generally, see Ambrose et al. (15–27) or Bransford et al. (235–38); for an overview of those concepts in composition studies, see Moore. For the idea of (pedagogy) students who have already developed “theories in use,” see Parker (413); for the idea of TAs as “senior learners,” see Sprague and Nyquist (295); for an analysis against viewing new English TAs as blank slates see Stenberg (63–66). For one exploration of ways that TAs sometimes teach against their own writing principles, see Dryer. The conversation about new (composition) TAs resisting (or critically inquiring about) pedagogical theories is extensive; Hesse and Welch represent two key voices here. For one take on the concept of teachers' icebergs, see Malderez and Bodóczy (14). For general arguments about having teachers use reflective strategies to uncover their assumptions, see Bamberg, Brookfield, Dryer, Ebest, Reid “Teaching,” and Winslow. Arguments about the benefits of collaborative learning overall go back to Bruffee.

3. For a quick summary of learners' competence stages, see Ambrose et al. (97–98) or Sprague and Nyquist (297–98). For one take on the pressure in graduate school to seem knowledgeable, see Recchio (255). For a definition of mastery in unstructured problems as ever-increasing attentiveness to more detailed challenges, see Bereiter and Scardamalia (esp. 79–82). For analysis of how the interpersonal and managerial dimensions of teaching can raise the stakes for new teachers, see Morgan (395, 399–400).

4. For a summary of research about the benefits of interleaved or back-and-forth study, see Brown Roediger, and McDaniel (46–66). A brief overview of declarative and procedural knowledge can be found in Ambrose et al. (18–20). To consider additional kinds of teacher knowledge (such as pedagogical content knowledge), see Shulman. For a summary of how metacognitive activity supports learning transfer, see Bransford et al. (67–68). The chart is adapted from Reid “What Is” (200). Discussions of problem-posing education go back notably to Freire; Bain provides one of many discussions of the recent “deep learning” research in his chapter “Messy Problems” (133–63). For analysis of the challenges of coverage in the composition pedagogy course, see Hardin (37–38) and Reid “Uncoverage.” For more on metacognition and reflective practice in pedagogy generally, see Schön as well as Hillocks (126–37); see Bamberg (151–52) or Broz (136–37) about new writing teachers specifically.

5. See Dobrin (23) on the institutional similarities between pedagogy education and first-year education. For explanations of how TAs should learn from equal or senior peers, see Martin and Paine or Weiser; for lists of questions that could help (new) teachers better notice their peers’ work in a (K–12) classroom, see Portner (50–55) or Boreen et al. (42–44, 61–67). For more on the benefits of reflecting on our autobiographies as learners, see Brookfield (49–51, 115). For an extended reflective example of student-to-teacher double vision (though with the assistance of mature hindsight), see Stenberg (77–91); for a description of a reflective teacher-narrative assignment, see VanderStaaay.

6. The practicum course vs. theory course debate regarding the “TA training course” in English Departments has a long history; for one recent summary, see Dobrin—and note that most of the essayists in his collection resist any easy binary. Among scholars explaining that (learning) teaching is unpredictable, see Dannels (18–19), Belanger and Gruber (114), and Stenberg (148–49). For arguments that new teachers should measure their progress against clear and evolving criteria grounded in scholarship, see Rose and Finders. For arguments that constructivist, adaptive teachers who locate responsibility for change in themselves are most open to improvement and thus success, see Hillocks (e.g., 134–35). For a review of the research on the benefits of tolerating difficulty and failure in learning, see Brown Roediger, and McDaniel (90–98); consider also Dweck’s work on fixed mindset vs. growth mindset learners (6–9).

7. For recent data on the pace of learning of composition TAs and arguments about the need to extend pedagogical education beyond the seminar, see Estrem and Reid (474–76) and Reid, Estrem, and Belchier (61–62). For more on the “pedagogy of the extracurriculum” (Hesse and Sandy 124), see also Bamberg, Ward and Perry, and Weiser. Senior learners (etc.) comes from Sprague and Nyquist (295); the quotation from the TA comes from Estrem and Reid (475). For more on why new TAs might work on just a few skills at a time to gain confidence in core competencies before tackling additional challenges, see Sprague and Nyquist (298).

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