Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines, Introduction

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Our Story

Our motivations for developing this special issue of *Across the Disciplines* began in 2011. At that point all of the editors were working at the Michigan State University (MSU) Writing Center, Trixie Smith as the director and the rest of us as graduate students. We began focusing on the issues of graduate writing support through our involvement with the graduate writing groups hosted through the MSU Writing Center, conducting research on the benefits of such groups. When the Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures department began an initiative to create research clusters that bring faculty, staff, and students together to engage in conducting professional academic research and developing professional publications, we decided that a research cluster focusing on graduate writing would be ideal. We participated in this Graduate Writing Research Cluster for the two years that we were all still at MSU, and this special issue is a product of that participation.

Working with many graduate student writers from across the disciplines at the MSU Writing Center, individually and in graduate writing groups, as well as being graduate students ourselves, we started questioning the existing systems of support for graduate students. We recognized that writing instruction and support—and research—often focus on undergraduate students, but graduate students need instruction and support, both formally and informally, and bring their own complex identities into liminal academic spaces, too. In *Writing in the Academic Disciplines*, David Russell (2002) discusses how writing instruction has historically been pushed to the margins, especially for graduate students who are often expected to be expert academic writers of a variety of specialized genres—such as academic articles, conference proposals and papers, and grant applications. Since disciplinary communities "have rarely integrated systematic writing instruction into their curricula to initiate the neophytes consciously into the written conventions of a particular field" (Russell, 2002, p. 17), graduate students seek out university resources, activities or other thirdspaces (Soja, 1996; Grego & Thompson, 2008) offered outside their departments, such as writing center consultations, writing groups, and writing workshops, and often develop their own "underground" support systems.

While we were certainly concerned with the systems of support that exist at MSU, we all became interested in exploring the multiple ways graduate writing is supported across the country and across the curriculum. This special issue, *Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines*, is designed to present just a few ways graduate writing is being researched and discussed both across and within disciplines. Before we present the specific content of the journal special edition, we will first give a brief overview of problems and concerns within graduate writing education, which provide support for why research in this area is so important.

Why Graduate Writing Support is Essential

There is an abundance of teaching and scholarship regarding writing at the undergraduate level. With first year writing, Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing in the Disciplines, and multi-tiered writing initiatives, it is easy to assume that graduate students will possess highly sophisticated writing abilities. After all, most students have taken writing classes—a first-year writing course at the very least—at some point within their undergraduate education. However, there is a clear disconnect between what graduate students are expected to know, according to faculty, and the writing abilities they possess as they begin their graduate work.

At the graduate level, writing is the dominant way in which knowledge is presented and assessed. This happens through coursework, comprehensive exams, theses and dissertations, conference presentations, and publications. Graduate students write frequently, though the actual requirements vary across departments and disciplines. However, as Margaret Salee, Ronald Hallett, and William Tierney (2011) state, "the expectation is that students already know how to write before they begin grad school. Instructors of graduate students may assume that students learned basic writing skills during their high school and undergraduate years" (p. 66). Given this assumption, it is no surprise that many graduate faculty express "exasperation about the quality of student writing" (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p. 28). Yet, as Mike Rose and Karen McClafferty (2001) also state, "We seem to do little to address the quality of writing in a systematic way at the very point where scholarly style and identity is being shaped" (p. 27); that is, at the graduate level.

Unfortunately, the "absence of direct writing instruction for graduate students reinforces misperceptions that writing competency amounts to a set of static skills learned once and for all" (Micciche & Carr, 2011, p. 494). These kinds of "misperceptions" are then transferred to students who seek to learn these static skills, believing that writing is a transparent "vehicle or a conduit for delivering one's findings" (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p. 29) and nothing more. Additionally, assumptions that writing is a static skill dismiss the nuances of academic writing as they vary by discipline and sub-discipline. We've all seen these beliefs in action while working with graduate students at the MSU Writing Center. Students are often surprised at some of the questions they are asked that basically boil down to: "why did you make this choice?" Their responses are frequently: "because that's the way we do it in *x* discipline." The invisibility of genre, voice, style, data presentation, active versus passive writing, structure, and epistemology in writing instruction often allow students to refrain from critically examining their presentation of information and recognizing that the way something is written is just as important as the content being written about (and that the two are often intertwined).

There are also important differences between writing at the undergraduate and at the graduate levels, which challenge the expectations that students should learn how to write before entering graduate school. One of the primary differences is the scale and complexity of the writing tasks being undertaken. As Desmond Allison, Linda Cooley, Jo Lewkowicz, and David Nunan (1998) explain:

> whereas most undergraduate writing is completed within weeks, possibly months, a graduate dissertation will take 3-5 years and is likely to be in the region of 80,000 words plus. The nature of such a task places particular demands on the graduate writer, namely the need to sustain an argument over an extended piece of discourse and the need to review and revise what may have been written months earlier. (p. 201-202)

In addition to the increased duration, complexity, and length of graduate writing, the genres, focuses, and purposes of writing are often different between undergraduate and graduate education. The

emphasis in writing instruction during undergraduate education tends to be more generally focused on developing basic understandings of writing in a discipline versus the more nuanced and complex understandings of disciplinary writing that graduate students are expected to develop. As an undergraduate, a student might learn to write like a "scientist" but in graduate school she will be expected to write like a "chemist."

Graduate education continues to professionalize graduate students into academic disciplines—becoming an academic—whereas undergraduate education tends to focus on becoming a professional outside of academe. Despite this purpose, some graduate students are not mentored into the professional writing norms of their disciplines nor do they engage in the process of writing for professional scholarship until they face their thesis or dissertation writing task (Cafferella & Barnett, 2000, p. 39).

While professionalization into a discipline has long been a goal of graduate education, the definition of "professionalization" is changing. There is a greater range in expectations and increased demands on scholarly productivity. Claire Aitchison (2009) argues this point by stating:

> The kinds of writing acumen needed for successful higher degree research go beyond subject and disciplinary knowledge to include an understanding of assessment and supervisory expectations, the development of particular scholarly identities, and a sophisticated awareness of how to project oneself within a variety of social, cultural and linguistic settings. (p. 906)

Anyone involved with the academic job market knows that the expectations placed on newly graduated Masters and PhD students are intense, particularly for those seeking tenure-track positions. With the numbers of graduating students far surpassing the number of jobs available each year (more so in some disciplines than in others), students clamor to produce publications while completing coursework, exams, and theses/dissertations. Having a scholarly identity before entering the job market feels essential and may be a great source of stress and anxiety.

Another important consideration that influences graduate writing education is the ever increasing number of international graduate students (Paltridge, 2002, p. 127). A telling question is presented by Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, and Nunan (1998): who should provide assistance for grad students whose first language isn't English? Typically advisors/supervisors have been responsible for working with graduate student writers, but this can be insufficient for several reasons:

> Not all graduate students have the language and other interpersonal skills to activate advice from their supervisors. In addition, not all supervisors have the knowledge and skills to identify exactly what it is that needs to be done in order to improve the comprehensibility of a given piece of writing. (Allison, Cooley, Lewkowicz, & Nunan, 1998, p. 199-200)

There is, then, a clear need for "systematic writing instruction" (Rose & McClafferty, 2001, p.28) at the graduate level.

Graduate students need "structured writing support in order to succeed" (Phillips, 2012, para. 1) rather than being expected to "learn how to write critically through repeated exposure and an osmosis-like process" (Micciche & Carr, 2011, p. 485). However, the needs of graduate student writers extend beyond the scope of being explicitly taught to write. Graduate education is fraught with identity struggles and self-doubt, much of which centers around the ability to write effectively to meet the expectations of faculty mentors and the field at large. Professionalization and support in

graduate writing education needs to include identity and emotional support. As Micciche and Carr (2011) write: "the pain so many of us experience [while graduate students] need not be private, shameful, or an indicator of unfitness for graduate school," and they go on to argue that "a curricular space devoted to critical writing represents one effective counter-narrative to such ideas while also serving intellectual and professional goals" (p. 479). Whether that curricular space is part of coursework or mentoring outside of classes, faculty need to help graduate students understand the demands facing them, and they need to demonstrate how such demands can be met successfully.

In addition to faculty who help graduate students navigate their way through the struggles of academic text production, peer support is also important. Damien Maher, Leonie Seaton, Cathi McMullen, Terry Fitzgerald, Emi Otsuji, and Alison Lee (2008) discuss their experiences working within writing groups. They claim that "when the writing became difficult and an end was difficult to imagine, sharing our frustrations and concerns gave us momentum that we perhaps would not have had if we were working in isolation" (p. 273). Encouraging graduate students to discard the image of the struggling lone scholar and to take up practices that provide support and commiseration regarding the emotional struggles of graduate work are just as important as direct writing instruction.

Graduate Writing Across the Disciplines

This special issue of *ATD* seeks to bring together discussions, strategies, programs, and courses that all address different ways of meeting the diverse writing needs of graduate students. When we set about to create this special issue, we hoped to extend the conversation begun by Russell and others (Bazerman, Casanave, Prior, Roozen) by requesting articles that address existing writing learning practices that graduate students engage in and those that propose new approaches to graduate writing instruction and support. Although we knew there was room for several conversations on graduate writing, we were surprised at the overwhelming response we received to our call—we received 62 proposals for this special issue. The enthusiasm of potential contributors renewed our own commitments to promoting scholarship about graduate writing, but it also showed us that there are already many scholars actively researching graduate writing education. The trouble, it seems, is that much of this work is carried out in disparate disciplines that do not always speak directly to each other, including but not limited to Rhetoric and Writing, Writing Centers, TESOL, Education, Communication, Speech Pathology, Linguistics, Second Language Acquisition, Writing Across the Curriculum, Writing in the Disciplines, Technical Communication, Professional Writing, and Curriculum and Instruction.

The selections in this issue represent topics we have encountered frequently as graduate writers and address many of the questions we put forward in our call. The first three articles emphasize a WAC approach to graduate writing. These pieces focus on dissertation writing, writing camps, and resources for L2 writers. They each consider graduate writing across multiple disciplines—literally exploring the experiences of graduate writers across disciplines.

We begin by addressing the genres most associated with graduate work: theses and dissertations. In "Dissertation Genre Change as a Result of Electronic Theses and Dissertation Programs," Kate Pantelides investigates the increasing prevalence of mandatory Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) policies, which have ushered in a rather dramatic change to the dissertation genre. Through genre analysis of 14 interdisciplinary, award-winning ETDs, Pantelides addresses how the discursive opportunities offered by ETDs shift the genre ecology within which dissertations develop. Within her discussion of ETD policies, Pantelides emphasizes how widespread electronic publishing of dissertations has become. Nearly all PhD students in the U.S. have to submit their work to ETDs,

which means that no matter the discipline, ETD policies and procedures must be followed. These policies have the potential to affect the presentation of dissertation data and information and drastically change the genre.

Continuing our focus on dissertation and high-stakes writing, our second article—"Camping in the Disciplines: Assessing the Effect of Writing Camps on Graduate Student Writers"—from Gretchen Busl, Kara Lee Donnelly, and Matthew Capdevielle addresses a research-based set of best practices for the design and implementation of writing camps to support advanced graduate student writers across the disciplines. By tracing the trends they see emerging in data collected from twelve graduate writing camps occurring over the span of three years, they suggest that writing camps that teach students strategies for managing their writing processes result in small but meaningful improvements in student attitudes and behaviors.

WAC considerations not only address common graduate genres, such as dissertations, they also consider concerns of and support for multiple student populations across all disciplines. For instance, an emphasis on support for the growing L2 populations in American graduate programs is featured by Jennifer Douglas in "Developing an English for Academic Purposes Course for L2 Graduate Students in the Sciences." She describes strategies for teaching an interdisciplinary, graduate-level scientific writing course for non-nnative English speakers. Teaching strategies emphasize the students' transitioning from the role of consumer to the role of producer of knowledge. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses like the one outlined by Douglas are important to graduate education both for and beyond the population of non-nnative speakers of English because they can address needs that are difficult to meet through campus-wide programming, such as writing centers staffed primarily by undergraduate writing tutors unfamiliar with writing at the graduate level.

In the second half of this special issue, we focus on a WID approach to graduate writing. Each of these articles discusses graduate instruction within specific disciplines and programs. We chose these articles because their approaches to WID programming are mindful of the local affordances and constraints of particular institutional settings. Instead of providing models for how all programs should implement a WID approach to graduate writing, our goal is to emphasize the importance in considering local conditions when developing graduate writing education.

In "Creating a Culture of Communication: A Graduate-Level STEM Communication Fellows Program at a Science and Engineering University," Steve Simpson, Rebecca Clemens, Drea Rae Killingsworth, Julie Dyke Ford, and Peter Hofner report on a graduate-llevel Communication Fellows Program developed in cooperation with three science and engineering disciplines along with their Center for Graduate Studies. Though situated within STEM fields, thus emphasizing a WID approach to graduate writing, the Communication Fellows Program also works across disciplines—essentially presenting a hybrid of WAC and WID approaches to writing instruction. The authors' focus on the specific environment of New Mexico Tech (where this research was conducted) and the voices of graduate student Fellows has led to a prime example of adapting programs to local conditions.

Our next article presents an important, additional consideration to graduate student work: that of teaching. Elliot Shapiro describes how being teachers of writing can help graduate students become better writers in "Towards an Integrated Graduate Student (Training Program)." He focuses on the two training courses for graduate writing TAs offered through Cornell's Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines: a course that prepares graduate students to teach first year writing courses and a course that prepares graduate students to teach writing within specific majors. These classes also include particular features of the training curricula that help graduate students learn to write as academic professionals through their practice of teaching discipline-based writing. Shapiro discusses "the idea that teaching can be research into how students learn—in this case, how graduate students

learn." Graduate students in this teaching program create a community of shared knowledge which helps them develop discipline-appropriate reflective writing practices as they learn how to be disciplinary teachers.

Our final article provides a narrow, local, disciplinary focus. In "Just Care: Learning From and With Graduate Students," Elizabeth Boquet, Meredith Kazer, Nancy Manister, Owen Lucas, Michael Shaw, Valerie Madaffari, and Cinthia Gannett trace their action research in a School of Nursing, Writing Center, and Core Writing Program. They collaborate on programs designed to support writers in their university's first doctoral program, a Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), and consider the overlapping concerns of these very different areas of inquiry: Nursing and Rhetoric/Composition. The authors' focus on the local plays a particularly important role in this article—they carefully consider the fact that Fairfield University is a Jesuit school with a very specific mission, in addition to making sure they meet the specific needs of their DNP students. Though the values that shape this program might be quite particular, the authors' careful discussion of those values demonstrates the kinds of considerations necessary to develop sustainable programs in local contexts.

Conclusion

Interestingly, many scholars—ourselves included—have claimed there is a lack of scholarship and programming that support graduate writing. Yet, this collection and the interest in it, indicates that there is actually quite a lot of work being done regarding graduate writing education and support. This is a growing area of scholarship, so why does there seem to be such a lack of widespread knowledge and awareness? Perhaps one of the problems lies in sharing the support programs that do exist in ways that are easy to access and learn from. Therefore, rather than claiming that this collection of articles provides new, previously unknown information, we claim that because this journal reaches audiences across disciplines, it is a place in which we can share some of the important work being done regarding graduate writing education and support. However, publications like this are only one way to increase awareness and access. Campus-wide initiatives that link writing programs in all their forms—WAC, WID, Writing Centers, FYW—could be productive local ways to address graduate writing education and support. Additionally, national and international initiatives are important to improving graduate education and support in writing. To this end, organizations such as the Consortium on Graduate Communication (CGC) "an independent community of educators who provide professional development in academic written and oral communication to (post-)graduate students before and during their master's and doctoral degrees" created in April 2014 can provide momentum for the movement and important resources for educators and students. The CGC creates "online and face-to-face opportunities to discuss and share resources, ideas, research, and program models for this vital segment of international higher education" ("Consortium on Graduate Communication," 2015, About the consortium, para. 1). As the articles showcased here demonstrate, attending to the local needs of individual universities while being mindful of research on and across similar programs throughout both the nation and the world can lead to successful initiatives in graduate writing pedagogy.

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