The Space Between: MA Students Enculturate to Graduate Reading and Writing

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Abstract: Written collaboratively by three master's-level students and a professor of composition, this article provides personal narratives of the enculturation experiences of students transitioning to graduate school. In the first section, Terri describes teaching a graduate composition seminar to incoming graduate students that incorporated activities related to enculturation. Jami explores how the emotional aspects of entering graduate school as a nontraditional student impacted her ability to write effectively in her classes. Kaylin discusses the enculturation challenges she encountered that ultimately led her to leave graduate school after the first semester. Finally, Scott discusses his transition from student to teacher and how he came to appreciate the in-between space he inhabited as a graduate student. The article concludes with some brief suggestions for how faculty might support students during this transitional period.

Keywords: Graduate Study, Enculturation, Transition, Teacher-Student Relationship

Rosemary Perez (2016) argues that "early professional socialization experiences play a powerful role in shaping one's expectations of and commitment to [a] field" (p. 764). Graduate school is widely considered to be the stage at which students emerge as scholars and teachers in their own right, and for this reason, enculturation to graduate school has emerged as a topic of some interest across many disciplines. Drawing on research into communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; more recently summarized by Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and activity systems (Russell, 1995), we define "enculturation" as the process by which individuals are inducted into the values and practices of a community, including the practices of reading, writing, and creating knowledge. In this article, we argue that talking about enculturation has the potential to benefit all graduate students. Reading and writing as a member of a discipline is different than the reading and writing most students are asked to do as undergraduates. While graduate students are given more freedom to make connections across courses and to pursue inter-

ests, the "rules" and strictures that guide how that work can be done successfully are also subtler. Because the theoretical conversation is often removed from the actual lived experience of graduate students, it seems only right to us that graduate student voices play a major role in the literature on graduate student enculturation. Yet with notable exceptions (e.g., Good & Warshauer, 2000; Micciche & Carr, 2011; Simpson, Clemens, Killingsworth, & Ford, 2015), publications on graduate student enculturation are all too often authored solely by faculty. This text, by contrast, is the work of three master's students and a faculty member, who came together in a composition studies pedagogy course:

- Terri is a professor of English, who has been teaching graduate composition classes for over a decade. Her Ph.D. is in Rhetoric and Professional Composition, and her research focuses on writing classroom pedagogy. During the writing of this article, Terri taught several additional graduate courses.
- Jami was a non-traditional graduate student. During the writing of this article, Jami completed coursework in literary studies and worked as a consultant and office manager for the Writing Center.
- Kaylin was a traditional graduate student in creative writing, who left the graduate program after her first semester. During the writing of this article, Kaylin worked as a communications manager and wrote in her spare time.
- Scott was a graduate student in Composition Studies. During the writing of this article, he wrote and defended his thesis on student responses to teacher evaluations and taught first-year composition at an area two-year college.

At our master's-granting public university, the MA in English offers concentrations in literature, creative writing, composition, and professional writing; most students take at least a few courses outside of their own concentration. The four of us met in Fall 2012 in Terri's introductory course in composition pedagogy; Jami and Kaylin were in their first semester of graduate school, while Scott had already completed a semester in the program. In some ways, the enculturation challenges we discuss in this article are exacerbated in the pedagogy course because, for many graduate students, this is their first introduction to Composition Studies as a discipline. Yet because the coursework is designed to be graduate-level, students are still expected to perform as emerging scholars/teachers. In other ways, however, Composition Studies—with its focus on the nature of teaching, learning, and writing—offers students the freedom to explicitly explore the difficult transitions they experience without losing credibility as an emerging scholar/teacher.

Perez (2016) argues that graduate students' socialization experiences are shaped by the ways in which students engage sensemaking and self-authorship in response

to the "surprises, disruptions, or discrepancies" that occur during the first-year of graduate school. We approach this article, then, as individuals with varying perspectives: for example, at the end of the Fall 2012 semester, Scott changed his graduate concentration from literature to composition, while Kaylin left graduate school altogether. What we all share is a strong interest in the ways students make the disciplinary transition to graduate study and the supports professors can give students as they make that transition. For this reason, we present this text in a multi-vocal format. We find precedent in our approach in the *Literacy in the Raw* project, a web-based collection of narratives by English Studies graduate students on their literacy practices (Carr, Rule, & Taylor, 2013). Like Carr et al., we believe "story can become a productive lens through which to explore graduate literacy practices," and we further believe telling our stories gives us some control over those stories. For this reason, we preserve our individual voices (albeit not in the "raw," unedited form captured in the narratives uploaded to the Digital Archive of Literacy Narratives) by letting a single person command each section. At the same time, we embrace the idea that knowledge is constructed through social interaction; in our several years working on this article, we came to better understand our own stories through long conversations on the issues we raise here. To give a sense of the ways our stories overlap and exist in dialogue with one another, we have included a type of marginal commentary in italics.

In the first section, Terri describes her efforts to design a graduate course that explicitly addressed enculturation. Jami explores the emotional dynamics she experienced as a non-traditional student navigating the transition from undergraduate to graduate study. Kaylin describes the stressors and frustrations that ultimately led her to withdraw from the program, leaving behind—at least for now—her goal of becoming an English professor. Finally, Scott discusses the positive and negative aspects of the unique situation graduate assistants find themselves in: not yet teachers but no longer only students.

Terri's Story, Part 1: Making Enculturation Explicit

Compared to my own experience teaching a stand-alone section of first-year composition during my first semester of graduate school, I tend to view the English graduate program at my current institution as a model of gentle enculturation. During their first semester, students enroll in a course designed to prepare them for the tasks of reading, writing, and presenting as an English Studies scholar. In addition, before teaching their own sections of first-year composition, graduate assistants (GAs) spend a year as consultants in the writing center and take three pedagogy courses: Writing Center Pedagogy, Composition Pedagogy, and a mentored teaching experience where they spend a whole semester co-teaching in the

classroom of an experienced tenure-track or tenured faculty member. And yet despite coursework intended to ease the transition to graduate school, the students in my program continue to experience the "baptism by fire" that has long marked the entrance to graduate school.

So for the Fall 2012 composition pedagogy class, I decided to devote some class time to the practices of reading and writing in composition studies. In doing this, I hoped to ease students' transition to graduate-level scholarship. Specifically, I tried to create a space that:

- recognized the tension between what Paul Prior (1991) refers to as immediate socialization (the practices, communication strategies, and skills needed to succeed as a student) and anticipatory socialization (those needed to succeed as a professional) and
- encouraged vulnerability (Micciche & Carr, 2011), risk-taking (Burger, 2012), and exploration (Reid, 2009).

I engaged these issues of enculturation in several ways. Each week during class discussion, I asked the students to consider some aspect of the form and structure of the essays we'd read. In feedback on students' weekly responses to the assigned reading, I tried to point out examples of how someone steeped in the literature of Composition Studies might perceive the claims made in the articles. I pulled excerpts from students' own successful writing to model sophisticated ways of integrating source material and building toward a claim. In addition to these small changes, I introduced a "quality of failure" (QoF) component, which I developed after reading Edward Burger's essay "Teaching to Fail" in *Inside Higher Ed* (2012); here is the description from my syllabus:

> **Scott's take:** I'm a little embarrassed to admit I was unfamiliar with the term "enculturation" before Terri invited us to discuss the possibilities of this collaborative project. Only because of these explicit conversations over enculturation did I develop a better understanding of the stressors I experienced through our program—albeit, three semesters later than I would have liked. Having a discussion with students about the goal of socialization may be very helpful.

> **Quality of failure (5% of semester grade):** The knowledge of every discipline is based on a process that includes regular failure, reflection on that failure, and then adjustments made accordingly. Unfortunately, the nature of our educational system often makes the risk of failure seem too high for students; as a result, students may not develop risk-taking habits in their education and, subsequently, their careers. For most of you, this class intro-

duces you to a new discipline, a situation ripe with opportunities to fail. I encourage you to make high-quality mistakes: try out a new idea or approach in a reading response, share a partially formed idea, change your mind. And when you do, I will reward you for that in the currency of the university: your grade.

The impetus behind my introduction of this concept was two-fold: First, like Burger, I was looking for ways to productively challenge students' assertions and first efforts without shutting them down. Second, the composition pedagogy course introduces students to a range of theories about the teaching of writing. In previous experiences with the course, I'd learned that those students who too quickly or too thoroughly embrace a single theory tend to have only a limited grasp of subsequent theories and other issues. In addition, previous students' fear of being criticized for contradicting themselves sometimes prevented them from exploring potentially productive claims.[1] So this explicit encouragement that students should be will-

ing to change their minds, or to "wallow in ambiguity" as the students and I came to call it over the course of the semester, was an important part of my effort to delay the solidification of their thinking on the issues in the course.

I was excited about the QoF component, but also nervous: Would students respond to this concept? How could I assess the quality of students' failure? Ultimately embracing the potential for failure myself, I decided to simply ask the students to evaluate themselves over the course of the semester in terms of their risk-taking and failure. Most of the students in the class responded positively to the quality of failure assignment, and several students described it as the most important element of the class in terms of building their confidence and/or opening pathways for them to create high-quality work. As this brief excerpt from Kaylin's QoF memo demonstrates, the QoF memo, written after the last class but before submission of the final paper,

Jami's take: The QoF portion of our grade was instrumental in providing the "buffer" I needed in order to breathe a little easier. While it may not have made up for a poor paper grade, it was more about changing the way I approached the work of graduate school than just 5% of Terri's course.

Scott's take: I agree with Jami that QoF did more as a gesture than it did in determining my grade. However, there was still a leap of faith that was required of me to take Terri up on the proposal. I didn't entirely trust that my failure would be rewarded. How does successfully failing really work? As I grew to understand it as an invitation to take risks, I thought better of it.

1   LaFrance and Corbett (this collection) also discuss how graduate students are "conditioned to avoid failure," thus "[missing] out on deeper learning opportunities."

provided a good opportunity for students to reflect on their experiences as learners and emerging teachers:

> Even as the semester comes to a close and I attempt to sum up my experience and defend it in my final papers, I wallow and I fail. I wallow in the fact that I still do not know exactly how I feel about all the pedagogies we studied. I feel drawn to some (expressive, feminist, process), but there is still so much I do not know about them because there is just so much theory to wade through in order for me to take a firm stand one way or the other. I fail in the fact that I have not mastered the language of the academy or the style in which to discuss these matters. I sometimes fail at grasping the material itself, which affects all of the above failure and wallowing.

Two students did not embrace the QoF component, primarily because they seemed to view the component as simply another assignment rather than as a philosophical way of approaching learning. For example, one creative writing student in the class wrote:

> 5% of one's grade is very little compared to the F we could get on a paper. The QoF element was a nice idea, but to me it was just something written on a syllabus. If I didn't take risks and produced more conventional work, my grade would be higher. It's hard to justify losing an assistantship over a creative risk.

In spite of these useful criticisms, I was pleased overall with the direction I'd begun taking with my graduate course; by the end of the semester, the overall quality of the students' written work had risen significantly, and the theory syntheses students wrote showed deeper engagement with the course concepts than I'd seen the previous time I'd taught the course. When the co-editors of this collection put out their call for articles on graduate student writing and reading, I was eager to contribute. I invited three people who'd had a range of positive and negative experiences during their Fall 2012 semesters to join me in writing the article. For me, this article was an opportunity to extend the conversations we'd had throughout the semester and in the students' QoF memos. Since we'd spent 15 weeks together explicitly exploring these issues, I believed I had a pretty good understanding of their experiences, but the stories they had to tell sometimes surprised me.

Jami's Story: Not a Fraud

Early in my first semester as a graduate student, I realized the workload and pacing of graduate school were going to require some serious adjustments—not just in

how I performed the work, but in how I processed life as a graduate student. As a non-traditional student who completed my undergraduate degree at age 36, doing well had always been important to me, so I worried about grades and establishing good working relationships with my professors. I soon realized I needed to worry about just surviving the enculturation process of graduate school. The problem was I did not know how to "just survive," and in retrospect, I realize I was not given many of the tools to do so. The only explicit advice I was given as I began graduate school came from a professor who told me, "At some point you have to accept a certain amount of mediocrity in your work. You have to come to an understanding with yourself that you won't be able to do everything, and find a way to live with that." While I know my professor's statement was meant to make me feel better, I had always expected to perform at my best, so to be told my best was impossible actually increased my feelings of inadequacy. Rather than feel empowered, this statement led me to feel I was bound to fail. If that was the case, what I really needed was for someone to tell me how to accept specific academic failures without feeling like a failure as a person.

The methods of reading and writing I had perfected as an undergraduate just did not work anymore. There was so much information to be absorbed in such a short time it was impossible to get everything compartmentalized, and I did not know how to fix the problem. I remember sitting in my apartment one evening after my daughter had gone to sleep, thinking, "I do not belong here. I feel like a fraud." It seemed that, as a graduate student, I was expected to just *know* how to process the information and work through the demands of the program.

These feelings were amplified as I struggled in week two with the first paper of the semester for my literature elective. I was assigned to write a simple one-page, no-margin essay about a novel I was already familiar with. I was excited to find what I thought was an interesting link in the text; but, not only did the professor not see the link, she recommended I take the essay in a completely different direction. The feedback I received was kind, but I felt my work

Terri's take: When I first heard this story from Jami, I thought it should be a success story: her professor found in just a single page of Jami's writing a topic worth pursuing. But as I listened to the emotion behind her experience, I was able to see it as she saw it: as a silencing and dismissal of her passion and ideas. How do we as teachers help students learn to identify the topics that will be of interest to the discipline without forcing them to abandon the issues and questions that draw them to the field in the first place?

Kaylin's take: While Jami received overly-controlling suggestions on what to write, what I needed were specifics on how to say what I had already written within the strictures of the discipline.

had been dismissed in favor of the professor's vision. I was asked to revise that paper and every paper after it for that class, each time with the professor suggesting for me to change the topic. For example, my paper on female workers in the early British postal system turned into a paper on the development of the pneumatic tube system. In fact, every time I would think I had what the professor was looking for, I was told I did not. As the semester progressed, I began to worry I did not have what it took to write as a graduate student, and maybe I had never had it to begin with.

The result was that I no longer felt safe to write. I am not sure what I thought would happen if I just started putting words to the page, but panic had taken hold and, eventually, the words would not come at all. I would sit at the computer and think, *no I need to plan more*. I would second guess every decision; even my ability to punctuate a sentence became an issue. All of my thoughts, ideas, and assignments started interfering with the daily activities necessary for life. I was unable to sleep, not only because of the amount of work, but because I was too overwhelmed to shut down. When I did finally sleep, I would wake up in a panic, sure I had forgotten to complete something for the next day. The emotions created by sleep deprivation and a near constant state of panic led to tears—a lot of tears. Micciche and Carr (2011) have identified this as a common response to the enculturation of graduate school:

> It's no secret that graduate students (much like faculty) regularly
> encounter academic writing as an emotionally fraught, privately
> experienced hardship. [In my own program], the participants—
> some of whom specialized in literature or critical theory; others
> in rhetoric and composition—cried regularly in or after class,
> so overwhelmed were we by all that we had to know in order to
> create writing that made a contribution, no matter how minor,
> or just made sense. (p. 479)

The emotional toll caused by that first failure turned out to be greater than I realized as it spilled over into my other classes. My emotional response to the enculturation of graduate school was the result of a lack of confidence and not knowing how to accept and recover from what I perceived to be failure. What I needed was transparency rather than the "baptism by fire" feeling Terri mentions in her narrative. In the first week of the semester, I cannot remember one member of the faculty, either in the program orientation or classes, discussing the potential emotional and physical consequences of the program. Looking back, I have often wondered how the semester might have been different had these matters been discussed from the beginning.

It was the eventual sharing of that knowledge that finally allowed me the breathing room I needed to survive. One evening after class, Terri issued a firm challenge: I was no longer allowed to undercut my claims by saying "I'm probably not making sense" or "maybe I'm wrong" during class discussion or in weekly writing. Terri

was attempting to help me see if I did not find some way to build my confidence, the professors would notice. Without that confidence, I had very little chance of earning their respect. This conversation was the turning point in that semester. Terri suggested I consider the phrase, "fake it until you make it." That phrase became my constant companion. I leaned on the "quality of failure" safety net Terri describes, and while that didn't mean I thought I could get away with writing garbage, I knew if an idea was not great, it would still be okay. The conversation also affected how I began reading for the class. I stopped worrying as much about being wrong and started rethinking the way I was approaching the reading. With the other mental clutter out of the way, I was able to focus on what was important—learning how to read pedagogical theory without letting my literature background get in the way. Instead of seeing the articles as a character list of theorists, I started seeing the ideas and putting them in practical context. Once I was able to see how each pedagogical theory might work in an actual classroom, it was easier to compartmentalize them. As a result, I gradually felt more comfortable expressing my views. Each week I looked forward to reading the feedback on my reflection papers, and eventually my confidence began to build, which was reflected in my ability to write for all my classes. I felt like a weight had been lifted.

> **Scott's take:** For me, a statement coming from an authority figure encouraging me to "fake it" would have been damaging to my performance and enculturation. A sense of pretending always lingers in academia, which most students resist and somewhat fear. I would not have valued my own work and efforts had I discovered my professors saw it as something built on the foundation of pretense. I would not have been able to take my work seriously had I thought that "faking it" was expected in the profession.

The first semester of graduate school was intellectually and emotionally difficult. Emotionally, there was no way to prepare for it without the transparency I can now see was needed. I went from thinking learning was neat and clean to knowing it can be unbelievably messy. My literary background didn't prepare me for reading the theory and pedagogies required in Terri's composition course. But, in the end, it was that course and Terri's willingness to say, "Fake it until you make it" that helped pull everything together and build the confidence I needed. It became a foundation on which to base new knowledge—what it means to learn, teach, and finally find the confidence to say I am not a fraud.

Kaylin's Story: Square Peg, Round Hole

Upon entering graduate school, I—like Jami—spent a semester struggling in ways I never expected in an academic environment. I began graduate school with the

intention of pursuing a career as a college English professor. By mid-semester, I was reevaluating that pursuit. By the end of the semester, my plans had changed completely.

As a child, I struggled to learn to read, if only for a brief period of time. My reading teacher and my parents worked together and separately to turn that struggle into what became a lifelong passion. They gave me strategies to help me learn, and soon I had excelled so far that I skipped several reading levels and transferred from the basic reading class to accelerated honors. When I learned to write a short time later, I realized it came naturally and easily to me. It allowed me to organize my thoughts, feelings, and ideas in a way that made sense and entertained whomever read my writing.

When I went to graduate school, I quickly learned what had always come naturally and easily had become extremely difficult. I began to procrastinate until the last possible minute (by my standards, anyway) because I couldn't begin to fathom what I was supposed to write. So I did what experience had taught me to do when faced with a problem I could not solve independently — I asked for help. I sought advice from a few of my professors based on the feedback I received on my work. However, what I took as instruction on genre rules actually turned out to be the idiosyncrasies of individual professors, which while helpful in its own way, did not help me succeed on the broader spectrum.

I found the priorities and focus of the work (and even of the students) were grossly different from the private four-year research university where I completed my undergraduate degree. Whereas my undergraduate university focused on my well-being and growth as a student, my graduate school—a public MA-granting university—seemed to focus solely on the quality of my work. It missed the concept that one was intricately linked to the other.

Not only did I have to make the leap to graduate-level work, I also had to find my way in an entirely different academic culture than I was accustomed. But where was that transition supposed to occur? Was it the instant I graduated with my bachelor's degree or sometime in the first semester of graduate school? Either way, I was left to make the transition largely on my own, using only past strategies and knowledge to guide me as I built a shaky bridge from one level to the next. Enculturation required (or seemed to require) a lot of trial and error and a sink-or-swim mentality. I can tell you—I did not make that transition.

I had been lucky enough to have educators at every level up to that point who saw a natural talent in me and pushed me to foster it and progress beyond any limitations they or I set. They impacted my life so much, they unknowingly helped determine the path of my higher education and career. I wanted to write, to become a professor, and to be for my future students what they had been for me. I thrived under such educators who took the time to train me in the rules of the discipline, so I could then find my own ways of bending and playing with them as

a writer. This is what I needed from the professors in my graduate program. This is what I asked of them, but it was not what I received.

As soon as I made progress in one class, I applied what I had learned to another course, and it was "wrong." What aid there was came in the form of feedback on papers, which ranged from helpful constructive criticism to vague statements that led me nowhere. In Terri's class, for example, I was not delving as deeply into the material as I should. I was not conversing with the text or its author(s) the way the assigned articles did with each other, and *that* is what I was supposed to be learning how to do. I was expected to have a certain level of knowledge and skill in academic writing. Yet, I was not being given the tools I needed to learn to read and write at the graduate or scholarly level. I was not being enculturated the way my previous educators taught me I should be. Navigating the waters of English Studies at the graduate level proved challenging and frustrating, that is, until Terri—like those before her—took the time to pass on a strategy or two.

In an effort to draw deeper analysis in and dialogue from my writing, for one assignment, Terri asked me to explicitly reference the reading material three times and flesh out those statements before I added in my thoughts. She took a few moments to mentor me as an individual, as a student, as a writer, and as a potential scholar. And it worked. I improved. I was able to move forward and apply that strategy and later mix it with my own style.

More common, though, were vague comments such as "This is too informal" or "Strive for a more academic tone," when I really needed to know exactly *where* I was being too informal and how I could make my tone more academic. The problem was not the quantity of comments but their specificity. Those ambiguous comments led me to realize something was "wrong" with my writing but only told me part of the problem. I wanted and needed more transparency. Had I been given that explicit information, my performance would have been better and my stress much lower.

The effect of knowing there was a problem and not knowing how to fix it started to take its toll; I felt I was spinning my wheels, unable to gain traction. I could not seem to get my professors to let me in on the secrets of the discipline or to enculturate me into the world of academia. Instead, my love and passion for reading, writing, and deep analysis were fading quickly. I dreaded the reading. I dreaded the writing. I found I took on these tasks with a combination of procrastination and panic—both new and unwelcome in my writing process. Suddenly, I felt I could not write. The pressure to be original, to bring something new, fresh, and different to the discussion was substantial. I also knew this pressure was not going to disappear if I pursued a career as a college professor. The words "Publish or Perish" were already ringing in my ears. In fact, this very fear came to life when I presented a paper in a department-wide literary seminar designed to help first-semester graduate students act as scholars. I was excited for this assignment and felt it

was my chance to turn a corner in my graduate studies.

I was placed on a panel with two classmates with similar topics. After the presentations, everyone else on the panel received five or six questions, but I was asked just one: "So what's the purpose of your paper?" I was mortified. I had a sense of my topic when I first received the assignment and began writing, but the idea never took shape on paper the way it had in my mind. Even as I presented, I failed to bring to life what I had envisioned. Yet as I sat on the panel and listened to my peers, I heard my idea eloquently and seamlessly coming to life in someone else's paper.

E. Shelley Reid (2009) argues that new graduate teaching assistants should be challenged with writing assignments that push them just hard enough to excel but not so hard they run way. This concept spoke directly to me. It was as if she had written, "Kaylin, were you frustrated? Were you lost? Did you feel like you were stuck in limbo between the undergraduate and graduate level, graduate assistant and scholar?" Why yes, Reid. I was, and I did.

> **Scott's take:** As it was a professor who asked Kaylin the question that mortified her, I think it is worth mentioning that sincere inquiries can have an equally powerful impact on students' growth. Most graduate students want to know if the work they are doing is authentic, valuable, and interesting. Without Terri's interest in my advocacy of students' perspectives in composition pedagogy, I might not have changed my concentration from literary studies until it was too late.
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> **Terri's take:** Reading Scott's comment, I'm struck that he does not call for praising students' work, but for finding what is authentic, valuable, and interesting in their work. That strikes me as much more difficult—and more important—than simply offering praise.

By this point in the semester, I had spent hours alone on my two-and-a-half-hour commute doing an immense amount of reflection and analysis of myself, of my goals, and of my life plan. I evaluated the work I was doing: I was getting by on work I was not proud of or satisfied with; I was certainly growing but not in the ways I had expected; I did not feel I was contributing much, if anything, of worth; and what had always been my passion, my joy, and my escape had become a prison sentence to endure. I observed my professors in and out of the classroom: I saw their lives—once believed to be ideal for their work, schedule, and ability to influence young lives and minds—and found it was not the life I wanted. That I was not being enculturated into this level of academia only exacerbated the fact that my values, goals, and life plan no longer coincided with that of a college professor but of something else I had yet to discover.

I felt like a square peg in a round hole, as if I would always be the one saying something shocking. For example, during one class, I voiced the opinion, "I don't

believe everyone needs or should go to college, let alone continue beyond under-grad. We need people in trades. It takes all kinds to make the world go round." And everyone looked at me with eyes that said, "Did she *really* just say that?" It was the first in a long line of similar moments, where I knew my ideas, beliefs, and experiences would never align with the world I was attempting to enter. More importantly, I did not desire for them to do so. Simply put—try as I might, I was never going to fit into the life I thought I wanted.

It was at this point I knew I had a tough decision to make. I needed to leave the graduate program, but it did not make sense. I was doing well in terms of grades and participation. I had a graduate assistantship that provided me with a scholarship in the Writing Center, even in the first semester. I was studying in the discipline of my dreams. And yet . . . I was extremely disheartened, dissatisfied, and dispassionate. Ultimately, the experience of a semester of graduate school and my decision to leave the program did not boil down to "This is too hard; I can't hack it." Not by a long stretch. There were many more nuanced factors involved. Least of all was I sincerely felt someone else—who loved academia, who was willing to sacrifice and give more, who thrived in this environment—deserved to take my place in the program rather than me coast through stressed, miserable, and far from enculturated. I did not belong there, and I knew it.

My mind and heart had been in a constant battle for months until finally, I concluded, "Enough is enough. This isn't what I want." My plans had changed, and that was okay. A vast sense of peace settled over me once I made my final decision and told my professors (most of whom expressed shock at the news). Although I remain immensely grateful for the opportunity, for my professors and peers, and for the lessons in writing and in life that I would not have otherwise learned, the decision to leave graduate school is one I have never once regretted making.

Scott's Story: A Wonderful Position of Learning and Transition

In Terri's class, I did not like the concepts within the text or the subtext of what I was reading. Still a student myself with no teaching experience whatsoever, the ideas of cognitive process theory, the politics in teaching, and guarding the Ivory Tower left me with a sense of culture shock. As I moved from undergraduate- and graduate-level courses in literature to conversations about various teaching theories, I felt more like a student peering in at the world of writing instruction than a future educator. I thought the world of Composition Studies wouldn't much like me as I knew I didn't much like it. Somehow, the unveiling of the professional world I was working towards made me better understand myself as a student than as a teacher, and I'm sure this perspective came through in my writing. Although understanding

my student self through the pedagogy material became a necessary first step to becoming a professional, it was a frustrating experience. In other words, before I could become a professional, I had to transition through hybrid roles of student and teacher. Prior (1991) says, "schools often manifest a tension between immediate and anticipatory socialization"; my socialization (or enculturation) came slowly. What I hope to convey here is that the act of socialization into the professional world of teaching through graduate school is a prime period within a student's development, and it should be acknowledged as a wonderful time to resist the material, take chances, and explore prior to becoming a part of the professional community. To celebrate such a period of learning is to accept and encourage the process in graduate-level writing.

As I failed to empathize with the theorists, I was (in my own way) challenging them for failing to empathize with me: the student. For example, The Connors and Lunsford (1993) essay "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Students' Papers" describes a scene where readers of 3,000 evaluated essays saw a "harder, sadder" (p. 210) image of graded writing than they ever imagined. The study gave me a glimpse at the larger picture of my profession, and it seemed rather morose. I couldn't understand how or why more composition scholars could not see the gloomy atmosphere I was seeing. On the side of the student, I was still beginning to engage with prominent minds within the profession.

Although part of me suspected I might be showing my ignorance or criticizing unfairly, I felt passionate about my harsh critique of the profession I was entering. My concern over my display of ignorance or stubborn attitude was at its peak when I had to write my term paper for Terri's class. It is one thing to express ideas during classroom discussions, but to include them in a thoughtful (and graded assignment) is quite another. Because of the Quality of Failure clause included in the syllabus for the class, I decided to test Terri's invitation by writing a paper criticizing the lack of scholarship that considered students' viewpoints, mainly in regards to grading and evaluations. In other words, I was still very much in the mind of the student, but I was beginning to see how I looked to a professional. During the class following our rough draft deadline, I distinctly remember Terri giving us a speech about how our papers should be written from our "perspectives as emerging teachers rather than as students." I sat back in my chair feeling defeated as if she had publicly called me out. However, she quickly amended her speech by saying, "Except for Scott." Then she described to the class how I was writing about the lack of concern writing pedagogy seemed to have in regard to students' perspectives. Still, she reminded me explicitly that I had to engage in the conversation through my paper from a scholarly position. At this moment, I should have felt like I was on the right track, that my rebellion had merit, and that I had just been invited into a professional conversation. Instead, I felt like a student who got lucky on a topic. Still, Terri was treating my idea as if it had come from an emerging teacher, which

made an impact on my socialization.

Regardless of my rebellious start, what I ultimately learned through the tough process of enculturation in Terri's class is that I did not have to relinquish my loyalty to students in order to become a part of the theoretical conversation. I learned I could maintain it, cultivate it, and merge it with the theories I had begun to engage. This synthesis of my ideas was the next step of my enculturation process. In order for me to take real academic and mental ownership of my position, be it in practice or in writing, I needed room to push against the text, and to some degree, against Terri's nudge to assimilate to the profession. Therefore, I believe allowing students the type of resistance I had to the material can be essential to enculturation and, in many cases, a significant part of immediate socialization that Prior discusses.

However, it took much more than Terri's reading list, writing lessons, class discussion, and the luxury of permission to explore through failure in order for me to continue my enculturation process. It took more hands-on experience. Outside Terri's class, I worked roughly 20 hours a week as a writing consultant. By working with students, I was able to begin enacting my student-centered philosophy (if it is even fair to call my resistance to enculturation a philosophy). I began to identify the problems with my (pseudo) scholarly thinking. For example, I was initially appalled by David Bartholomae's (1985) popular article "Inventing the University," which argues that college-level writing instructors should focus on academic writing as opposed to

> **Kaylin's take:** I think Scott's connection to Malvina Reynolds' song describes exactly how I felt during my time as a graduate student. I felt as if I was being forced into a box I didn't fit quite right in and I, consequently, felt myself begin to resist that push and fight it to some extent. I didn't want to "come out all the same" as everyone else in the program. I wanted to find my own way and my own niche. Ultimately, that led me to look outside academia to find it.

personal essays or expressive writing. As an admirer of Malvina Reynolds' (1962) song "Little Boxes," I believed Bartholomae's approach would turn the university into a "ticky tacky" factory where students are "put into boxes and come out all the same." However, as I put in hours in the Writing Center, I learned the necessity of teaching the academic genres advocated by Bartholomae. I also learned the importance of students practicing a level of composition beyond that of defining an individual's voice and identity through writing. By practicing what Terri was teaching me, I began my anticipatory socialization by beginning to think like a teacher—a necessary step regardless of my teaching values. Without this hands-on practice as a writing consultant outside her classroom, my one-dimensional perspective as a student may have persisted. Through this experience in the Writing Center, I began to empathize with professors' positions in composition just as I had held onto the empathy with students when I began Terri's class. Without this experience working

in the Writing Center, my writing would have suffered, as my perspective on teaching would have remained shortsighted.

Working in the Writing Center might have started me thinking like a teacher, but it didn't give me a seat in the social circle of teachers, which is what I really wanted. While working with students in the Writing Center, I felt I had to side with professors' comments written on those students' writing. As a result, my own emerging beliefs as an educator were being inadvertently challenged by the professors at my university. For example, I worked with a student in the Writing Center who had used the phrase "chicken cordon bleu" twelve times within the short span of 200 words. The paper was a personal narrative, and the student was proud of his comical tone and word choice. I was, too. However, by looking at the remarks made by his teacher in early pages of the essay, I knew the teacher would not read the student's work with the same enthusiasm with which the student had written it. Because I envisioned twelve bright red circles drawn around each "chicken cordon bleu," I did not maintain my position. Instead, I forwent my philosophy and urged the student to "correct" the overusage of the phrase. Therefore, the Writing Center position did limit my approach to classroom lessons and essay writing.

> **Jami's take:** I had a similar situation in the Writing Center. A student had spent several hours researching a topic only to receive comments declaring how much the professor "hated" her topic on her early draft. She had to start her research over from the beginning, and this left her unable to write. I feel both of these students had the potential to create something unique and daring. However, like Scott, I felt that as the consultant, I had to appropriate the student's intentions (to a degree) in order to meet the professor's expectations.
>
> **Terri's take:** What strikes me about this brief example from Jami is how it is a mirror of the experience she describes in her narrative of having the very ideas of her paper co-opted by the instructor.

What I hungered for, and what I needed to push me to consider the context and content of my emerging philosophy, was real academic socialization as a teacher among teachers. I needed the ability to make my own teaching decisions and even some mistakes. I believed I needed a good pair of strong and worn professorial shoes and a tweed jacket (which I literally bought) to walk in around campus. After all, if I was meant to enculturate, then I should probably dress appropriately.

Not surprisingly, my final push into the teaching community came when I was given the opportunity to teach through my department's mentored teaching program. If not for this program, I do not believe I would have ever truly dressed the part of the professor at the university. Although I initially feared I would stand awkwardly in the corner of the classroom simply staring at students as I assumed

another in-between role like that of the Writing Center consultant, the mentored teaching program acted as another necessary step in my enculturation. My responsibilities in the course gave me the opportunity to fully synthesize learning with practice. Moreover, my mentor was open to some of my teaching theories, which was confidence-building. I felt I had finally gained a foothold in the teacher's circle. I believe this stage allowed me to tackle classroom writing problems with the confidence and expertise my professors were looking for.

Although the positions between student and professional can feel artificial, I now believe graduate students should embrace the role. In programs like ours, where graduate students are offered opportunities for hands-on practice, students have an ideal place to begin a safe enculturation process, not unlike the invitation in Terri's Quality of Failure assignment. Furthermore, most of the undergraduate students I taught seemed to have an unspoken understanding that I was on the same side of the desk they were. The students seemed more at ease asking for my help and building rapport with me than with their professors. In other words, because I was not entirely enculturated to the practices of the "other side," I had a better relationship with students, which provided a more genuine approach to writing instruction—something I needed as I struggled to let go of being a student. Although my aim wasn't to improve my writing, I believe the context and content of my writing naturally improved as I experienced tensions within my microsociety, juxtaposition of authority as I experienced in the Writing Center, and my developing personal judgments (Prior, 1991). The position of the beginning graduate student, who is allowed the opportunity to practice their profession outside of the classroom, is an essential part of the enculturation process: a wonderful position of learning and transition. Without the opportunity to act like a teacher, I may still have been acting like a student, and my writing may have become stagnant as well.

Terri's Story, Part 2: Where Do I Go from Here?

Simultaneously unique and generalizable, the stories Jami, Kaylin, and Scott tell are, for me, the most important aspect of this article. Too frequently, we teachers speak *about* our students rather than listening *to* them. Several times as I submitted drafts of my section to my co-writers, they sent back notes saying, "No, what you describe when you talk about graduate students does not resonate with my experience." In responding to drafts of this article, however, reviewers were, perhaps not surprisingly, interested in hearing my response to the students' stories, particularly Kaylin's. So with the permission of my co-authors, I offer some additional thoughts.

In the end, most of the classroom strategies I so carefully planned and implemented did not register as important enculturation moments for my co-authors; some did not register at all. Instead, when talking about my class, Jami, Kaylin, and

Scott tended to focus on single "moments" between us that had a significant lasting impact on them. For example, all three students recalled as important my statement that they should be reading composition theories from their perspective as emerging teachers rather than as students. That was a significant moment for me as well, but not one I'd planned for the course. After reading a set of underdeveloped final project proposals, I was becoming frustrated with what I perceived to be students' too-glib responses to the articles we were reading. I spent the first half of the next class session listening closely to and mapping the students' discussion to pinpoint the source of my frustration, at which time I realized the majority of the class was reading and writing from the student perspective exclusively: For example, students responded to several articles on collaborative pedagogy with comments such as, "If a teacher asked me to work on a team project, I would hate it." During the ten-minute break following that discussion, I planned out a brief statement about learning to read with the mindset of a composition teacher and scholar. That brief statement stayed in my co-authors' minds far longer than many of the activities and assignments I spent hours, even days, crafting. Jami and Kaylin described in their narratives similar "moments" between us that had a significant impact on them; these interactions occurred outside of designated class time in one-on-one settings. None of these moments were ones I could have planned for at the beginning of the semester, but they reinforce my belief that what many graduate students need most is individualized, just-in-time mentoring that recognizes the enculturation processes students are engaged in.

But what about Kaylin? How does her story fit into my goal of helping students successfully enculturate to graduate school? As Kaylin describes, I intervened in her work during the semester when I found her writing was not at the level of most others in the class. Her academic writing improved over the course of the semester, but I knew much more work was necessary in order to bring her writing up to the level it would need to be for writing the thesis.

When Kaylin approached me to say she was not going to be staying in the program, I was impressed with her maturity and self-confidence, two traits I admit that I hadn't noticed during the semester. I've seen a lot of students limp through the graduate program or fade away slowly over time, but it's rare to see a student able to assess their work and their own emotional responses objectively enough to say, "This isn't working out." It was on the basis of that conversation—and her Quality of Failure memo, which was written in eloquent, engaging personal prose—that I decided to invite her to work on this article. My work with her in the nearly seven years since has shown me that those positive traits were there all along and my focus on scholarly reading and writing skills as the primary attributes of ability may have kept me from noticing the other strengths there: professionalism, organization, a direct writing style that communicates easily, and an ability to take constructive criticism unlike almost any student or scholar I've encountered. I agreed and still agree with Kaylin's decision to leave the program. Like her, I don't believe graduate

school is right for everyone, and I didn't see her decision to leave the program as a failure for her or me. I often tell students it is their responsibility to take control of their own education, and it is my responsibility to create an environment that facilitates student control. By that measure, Kaylin and I had a successful semester.

Through this project, I've learned so much about what James Scott refers to as the "hidden transcript" of my course, the discourse "that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by power holders" (as cited in Miller, 1998). In some cases, being granted access to the students' hidden transcripts has been surprising; in other ways, I've been gratified to learn more about how my students experienced the transition to graduate school and some of the most im-

> **Kaylin's take:** The idea of Quality of Failure opened my eyes to possibility—inside the classroom and out. I began applying to all aspects of my life the process of taking a risk and then assessing what works, what doesn't, and what can be improved. The long hours commuting gave me the time to assess myself, my risks, my efforts, my heart, and my life as a whole. I found that the risk I'd taken by going to graduate school was not working for me the way I'd hoped, while the risk of leaving offered me endless possibilities to find where I fit.

portant moments for them, and to recognize, albeit in hindsight, other opportunities when I might have engaged directly students' experiences of enculturation. Ultimately, I've come away from this project committed to continue creating a classroom space that helps students transition to graduate-level reading and writing, but I realize now what I failed to do in my first attempt was to speak candidly and openly with my students about enculturation and to give them ample opportunities for reflection and dialogue. I still believe many of the enculturation activities I introduced were useful, and I have continued refining them in subsequent graduate composition courses. The Quality of Failure (QoF) component, in particular, gave students some space to explore and challenge course material and disciplinary conventions, as Jami and Scott discussed briefly in their narratives. With guidance from my co-authors and feedback from others in the class, I made small adjustments to the QoF, including increasing its value in relation to the semester grade while at the same time embedding its reflective elements into multiple aspects of the course. I reintroduced the QoF into my next graduate composition course, where it was widely embraced by the students, most of whom were full-time high school teachers eager to try taking their classroom material in new directions. The QoF assignment and other planned activities have improved my classroom environment, but based on my experience working with Jami, Kaylin, and Scott, helping graduate students through enculturation is now as much about getting to know the individuals in my classroom and encouraging them to talk about what they're experiencing as it is about teaching them particular strategies of reading and writing.

Conclusion: Bringing Our Stories Together

As we conclude this chapter, we find our narratives do not lend themselves to a simple list of guidelines for the classroom. It is difficult to identify specific strategies that would accurately and adequately address the narratives we have presented here (and the 12 other stories from that composition pedagogy class in Fall 2012 not included but that lurk in the backs of our minds: What would our colleagues have added to this story of a semester of graduate reading and writing? How would their stories have changed what we have shared?). We hold firm in the belief asserted at the beginning of this chapter that it is the stories themselves—with their messy, context-specific details—that professors most need to hear as they consider their students' enculturation to graduate-level writing and reading.

Throughout our narratives, however, some common threads emerge. In their study of first-year master's students, Sato, Kozub, and Samalot-Rivera (2017) found that the "transition to graduate school created academic shock, social isolation, and adjustment to a new academic culture" (p. 632); the stories told here affirm that this transitional moment is a time of strong emotion—frustration, anger, resistance, loss of confidence, and fear. Terri went into the semester thinking that simply *showing* students the processes by which composition scholars read or write would reduce, perhaps even eliminate, many of these negative emotions. But Jami's, Kaylin's, and Scott's narratives raise the possibility that such strong emotions may be central to the enculturation process, and that enculturation may be as much about emotional transitions as it is about learning new practices. As Scott says, "Growth hurts. But for a graduate student to understand the purpose of that growth can make all the difference." Perhaps rather than seeking to mitigate students' emotional responses, professors would do more good by openly validating the emotional aspects of students' graduate experiences. Teachers might acknowledge that resistance and frustration are natural reactions of people struggling to find their place within a discourse community. In that way, the QoF assignment was valuable less for its own sake than for the space it created for instructor and students to engage in risky conversations—about not knowing, doubting oneself, resisting the discipline, or failing to enculturate.

Second, our stories attest to the fact that some of the most important enculturation moments happen outside of the formal classroom—in one-on-one conversations with students and in the spaces where a discipline does its work. For Jami and Kaylin, individualized mentoring from Terri carried greater impact than any planned activities or lectures. Professors would do well to remember that the lives, stresses, problems, and joys students bring to the classroom will impact how they experience the classroom. The classroom is just one of many spaces impacting the individual enculturation experience of each student. For students, the work of a particular course exists in dialogue with the work done in other classrooms; in

their teaching or other workplaces; and in their conversations with peers, families, and friends. In truth, each professor plays only one part in a student's enculturation experience, so perhaps the best help to offer is transparency about what happens in the classroom, why it happens, and how and why that might differ from what students are likely to encounter in other spaces within the discipline.

Enculturation beyond the classroom also occurs when graduate programs give students more opportunities to engage in the professional work of the discipline. The importance of professional experience to enculturation is echoed in the other articles in this section: for example, the former graduate students surveyed in Lannin and Townsend (this collection) noted that work as a teaching assistant helped them to be more aware of their own writing and thus able to improve on their own writing abilities, while Shapiro (this collection) explores how teaching writing helps graduate students become better writers themselves. In Scott's narrative above, he describes well how his experiences as a writing consultant and composition teacher enabled him to find his own place within the discipline. And Kaylin poignantly describes her own professional presentation to English Studies colleagues, a largely negative experience, but an important one nonetheless. That same presentation confirmed for Jami that—despite the challenges of juggling graduate school, jobs, and parenting—she was finding her place within English Studies. Without that opportunity early in their graduate school careers, Kaylin and Jami might have taken much longer to make decisions about their futures in the discipline.

Finally, we argue that learning and talking about enculturation can help graduate students as they transition to graduate-level reading and writing. For most students, the practices of academic disciplines are not intuitive; they do not come naturally, and a "sink or swim" mentality through the experience may not lead to successful enculturation. For example, as Kaylin shared above, without guidance, a graduate student may be unable to distinguish standards of the discipline from individual teacher preferences. Examining students in literary studies courses, Laura Wilder (2012) argues that the genre conventions of literary analysis are rarely taught at any level from high school through graduate school even though these conventions "appear to play a significant role in instructors' evaluations of student writing, evaluations that frequently determine students' prospects for continued work in a discipline" (p. 108). Similarly, Boquet et al. (2015) found graduate students were often expected to write in genres they had not been exposed to as undergraduates, and the students interviewed in Fry et al. (2019), reported "their undergraduate work had not prepared them for the rigors of graduate writing, and that the graduate program had not yet clarified the expectations of what constituted 'good' graduate writing" (p. 2841). In our conversations about this project, the four of us returned over and over to the idea of transparency. It is only through exploring the concept of enculturation for this project that the student co-authors were able to recognize in retrospect what they experienced and needed during that

Fall 2012 semester. All three believe having a clear understanding of enculturation earlier would have helped them through that difficult first year of graduate school. Ultimately, graduate programs and professors need not make graduate school *easier*; rather the goal should be to normalize the process of enculturation by making it *clearer*.

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