

2009

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TALES OF TEACHING:
EXPLORING THE DIALECTICAL TENSIONS OF THE GTA EXPERIENCE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jennifer M. Hennings

August 2009

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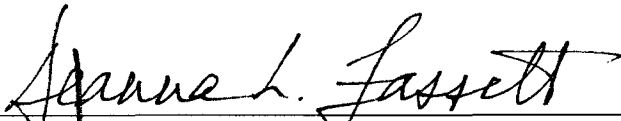
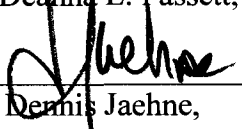
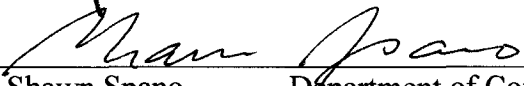
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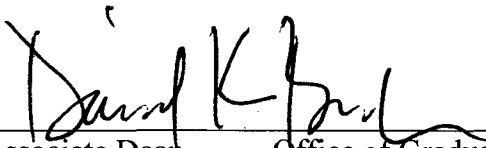
TALES OF TEACHING:
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by
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ABSTRACT

TALES OF TEACHING: EXPLORING THE DIALECTICAL TENSIONS OF THE GTA EXPERIENCE

By Jennifer M. Hennings

In universities across the United States, an increasing number of departments are turning to graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to teach introductory courses. As GTAs assume a larger percentage of university teaching responsibilities, it becomes even more important to understand the tensions and challenges that GTAs face. The majority of research on GTAs focuses on the perceptions of students and GTA supervisors, and few researchers have talked directly to GTAs. This research fills that gap by studying the GTA experience from the GTA perspective.

Using relational dialectics theory, this study identifies three key tensions that emerge from GTAs' narratives of role conflict and identity management: distance-closeness, perfection-reality, and structure-freedom. Further, it analyzes the strategies GTAs use to manage and negotiate these tensions. After discussing the implications that these tensions have for GTAs and supervisors, the study offers suggestions for coping with tensions constructively. Finally, since these tensions can influence GTAs' future careers as educators, this study concludes by considering the broader implications of these tensions for students and teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my advisor, Dr. Deanna Fassett: Saying thank you feels inadequate. You convinced me that writing this thesis was possible, and you have supported me every step of the way. Not only that, you have modeled what it means to live and teach with compassion. You have inspired me to consider the implications of my choices: as a teacher, as a writer, and as a human being. Most of all, you have cultivated a community of thoughtful and engaged teachers, and you have welcomed me into its folds. For this, I will always be in your debt.

To my committee members, Dr. Dennis Jaehne and Dr. Shawn Spano: Thank you for challenging me, encouraging me, and asking tough questions. You have helped me make this document stronger, clearer, and more meaningful, and I am thankful for your support.

To my fellow GTAs: Thank you for your friendship, your laughter, your candor, your creativity, and your wisdom. This writing is my humble gift to you.

To Dana, GTA alumna and friend: Thank you for calming my panic and answering all of my questions along the way.

To Diana, my thesis writing buddy and dear friend: Lunch by lunch, line by line, we made it through. Thank you for caring about my growth as much as you do about your own. I could not have done this without you.

To my family and to Doug: You are everything. Thank you for loving me.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Scenes from the life of a Graduate Teaching Associate (GTA)

Today's GTA staff meeting begins like any other. Our group of 13 first-year and second-year GTAs gathers around the department's too-small conference table. As we wait for our supervisor to arrive, we chat about our classes, our students, our families, and our lives. Karyn asks Tess how her literature review is going, while Sue and I commiserate about the take-home midterm that kept us up all weekend. Ella wants to know if we heard about what happened to one of Collin's students in class last week.

After we start the meeting with a casual check-in, our supervisor changes her tone of voice and switches to a more serious topic. Apparently, certain faculty members have complained to the department chair about our behavior in and around our GTA offices. The 13 of us share two large offices at one end of our building. Affectionately known as the TA bullpens, these offices share a hallway with other faculty offices. These offices are the locus of our lives as GTAs. Officially, they serve as our faculty workspaces, where we hold office hours, meet with students, develop lesson plans, and share stories about the joys and struggles of being new teachers. Yet, unofficially, these rooms also feel like student lounges. We gossip about our graduate seminars and moan about our workloads. We try to do our own homework, usually without much success, since animated conversations often fill the rooms. Occasionally, the stresses of school and life become too much to bear, and we fill these rooms with our tears. In short, we live our lives in these offices, often at full volume. And apparently that is sometimes too much for our hallmates.

While our supervisor declines to get specific about the nature of the faculty complaints, she asks us to think about the types of conversations we're having in our offices, often with the doors wide open. "Who is speaking?" she asks. "And who can hear you?"

We sit silently for a moment, some of us shifting awkwardly in our seats. Then Collin says, "I feel like we just got schooled."

The double meaning of Collin's statement strikes me. In the traditional sense of the word, we are being *schooled* as GTAs, in that we are learning what it means to teach at the college level. While we all know how to be students (indeed, it's primarily our success as students that led to our selection as GTAs), we still have a lot to learn about being teachers. After a mere 50 hours of training, we jumped into teaching our own independent sections of our department's introductory course. Each week, we confront new dilemmas: how to grade fairly, how to design effective lesson plans, how to engage reluctant students in discussion, how to deal with plagiarism. Since many of us want to teach at community colleges and universities after we graduate, our time as GTAs is the schooling we need to become successful professors in the future.

Collin's remark also speaks to a different type of schooling, one that leaves a bad aftertaste. In this moment, hearing that other faculty members have complained about our apparently disruptive behavior, we feel chastised, scolded, reprimanded. Far from feeling like teachers in this moment, we feel like naughty schoolchildren facing our teacher's wagging finger. These feelings follow us back to our offices, where we stare across the hall at the line of closed doors, and wonder aloud which faculty members

“turned us in.” Over the next few weeks, we’re careful to shut our office doors (sometimes too loudly), and we take turns shushing each other in mocking tones. We are confused and indignant; we want to know who complained, and what they said about us. “Why didn’t they just tell us in person to be quiet?” we ask each other.

For me, this story epitomizes many of the tensions inherent in our roles as GTAs. Since we are teachers and students at the same time, we often feel ourselves tugged in conflicting directions. As teachers, we are expected, rightfully, to behave as appropriate representatives of the university. We attend faculty meetings and course assessment meetings. We conduct our own courses and evaluate student work. In this role, we need to establish positive working relationships with our colleagues (including those on our hallway) by making sure that we contribute to a comfortable working environment. We must pay attention to how we dress in the classroom and to the language we use with our students. Yet as students, we also want to blow off steam, joke with our friends, gossip about our professors, and laugh out loud. We juggle the tasks of grading students’ papers with writing our own. We debate the wisdom of “outing” ourselves as graduate students to our own students, uncertain whether this will improve our rapport with them or undermine our credibility. We chafe at the idea of being silenced in our offices, which feel like the one space where we can “be ourselves” (i.e., be students).

One conspicuous symbol of our transition from teacher to student is how we choose to dress. Depending on whether or not we are teaching on a given day, our outfits change considerably. Some TAs who teach in the morning and have graduate seminars at night will change clothes in between; their “student” clothing is generally less formal and

more revealing. For me, the sartorial struggle surfaces during election season. I studiously avoid discussing my political preferences in my classroom. One day, I repeatedly encourage my students to vote, yet make it clear that I don't want to sway them to vote a particular way. Yet the next day, I show up on campus in a bold political t-shirt weighed down by political buttons. When a GTA friend raises her eyebrows at my outfit, I respond, "Hey, I'm a student today, not a teacher."

The paradox of my comment doesn't hit me until later. Can I really separate these two identities? Even if I'm not actively promoting my political beliefs in my classroom, I wonder what would have happened if I'd bumped into some of my students on my way to my own graduate seminar that day. What effect would my "student outfit" have had on them? I find myself wishing that I could have "teacher days" and "student days," so I could wear one costume and one identity at a time. Yet it's clear to me at this point that I can never really be one or the other. As long as I am a GTA, I will be always be both at the same time.

As GTAs, we occupy a liminal space between the role of teacher and the role of student. As teachers, we are often the sole instructors of record for our department's introductory courses, meaning that we design lesson plans, manage classroom activities, and grade all exams and papers. And as graduate students, our roles reverse, and we find ourselves doing the same types of assignments that we ask our students to do. We can't choose one role or the other; instead, we are constantly negotiating the space between the two. Baxter and Montgomery's concept of relational dialectics can help us make sense of this continual negotiation. In their book *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*, Baxter and

Montgomery (1996) explain that our relationships are “organized around the dynamic interplay of opposing tendencies as they are enacted in interaction” (p. 6). In the case of GTAs, these opposing tendencies (or tensions) often stem from the conflicting responsibilities, desires, and expectations that we experience as a result of our dual identities as teachers and students.

Several teaching guides for GTAs (e.g., Curzan & Damour, 2006; Hendrix, 2000) highlight the complexities of this dual role, and research by Feezel and Myers (1997) confirms that this role conflict is a key communication concern for GTAs. These role tensions can play out in our relationships with our GTA peers, our faculty colleagues, and our students, not to mention our friends, partners, and children. From my own experience, I know that these tensions surface in GTAs’ verbal communication (e.g., how GTAs choose to talk with their students about their own identities as graduate students) as well as their nonverbal communication (e.g., decisions about what to wear in the classroom). Yet instead of seeing these tensions as something we should resolve or eliminate, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) encourage us to embrace these oppositional tensions as a natural part of dynamic relationships. They suggest that a healthy relationship is one in which participants “manage to satisfy both oppositional demands, that is, relational well-being is marked by the capacity to achieve ‘both/and’ status” (p. 6).

Ultimately, the goal of my research is to explore the ways that GTAs negotiate the tensions that emerge from their teacher and student identities. In doing this, I will go beyond simply identifying tensions inherent in the GTA role. As Baxter and

Montgomery (1996) point out, the value of dialectical research comes not from generating an exhaustive list of tensions, but from “contribut[ing] to the understanding of the processes by which couples create, realize, and *deal with* dialectical tensions” (p. 44; emphasis mine). In this study, I will identify the tensions that emerge from GTAs’ narratives of role conflict and identity management, and will discuss the strategies GTAs use to manage and negotiate the “both/and”-ness of their roles. I will explore the implications that these tensions have for GTAs and their supervisors, and will offer specific suggestions about how GTA training programs can help GTAs navigate their tensions in a constructive and meaningful way. Since these tensions also have the potential to influence GTAs’ future careers as educators, I will end by considering the broader implications of these tensions for students and teachers.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In universities across the United States, an increasing number of departments are turning to graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to teach or support introductory courses (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Gray, 1990). Some GTAs teach dependent sections of a course taught by another professor, while other GTAs are responsible for teaching their own independent sections of an introductory course. Often, universities transfer teaching responsibility to GTAs to give full-time faculty more time to conduct research and teach graduate-level courses (Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998). While specific data about universities' use of GTAs are somewhat outdated, the economic downturn of the past few years suggests that GTA numbers are not likely to decrease any time soon: a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Coplin, 2006) cites the use of TAs as a way for colleges and universities to cut costs. As GTAs assume a larger percentage of university teaching responsibilities, it becomes even more important to understand the tensions and challenges that GTAs face.

In this review, I will first explain how relational dialectics theory provides a useful framework for exploring the oppositional tensions that characterize GTAs' identities. Next, I will examine current GTA research through the lens of three themes: GTA training and supervision, GTA socialization, and the study of GTAs in their classrooms. I will then conclude by explaining how my dialectical study of GTAs expands and nuances our understanding of GTA identity, and fills a significant gap in GTA research.

Relational Dialectics Theory

Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) concept of relational dialectics offers an appropriate frame for this research because of its focus on oppositional tensions in relationships. In their book *Relating: Dialogues and Dialectics*, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain that "the ongoing interplay between oppositional features is what enables a relationship to exist as a dynamic social entity" (p. 6). Baxter (2004) notes three key patterns of dialectical tensions that have emerged from her research: integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-non-expression. She explains that these (and other) tensions keep us in a constant state of flux; we do not resolve these tensions, but rather we continue to negotiate and struggle with them in our various relationships. For example, GTAs may vacillate between expression and non-expression when it comes to deciding how much of their graduate student identity to share with their own students. While some GTAs choose to talk openly with their students about their own struggles and successes in graduate school as a way of connecting with students and establishing empathic relationships ("I know midterms are stressful; I'm suffering through them, too!"), others may conceal their student identities for fear of losing authority in the eyes of their students.

Communication scholars have explored dialectical tensions in a variety of contexts: rural Indian health care (Basu & Dutta, 2007), lesbian relationships (Suter & Daas, 2007), stepfamilies (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006), and many others. One of the most relevant studies for this research is Prentice and Kramer's (2006) study of dialectical tensions in a college classroom. They point out that researchers frequently use

dialectics to study dyadic relationships, and their goal in their study is to expand the application of relational dialectics theory by using it to study a group. In this case, the group is the students and professor of a university seminar course. Through participant observation and interviews, they identify three key dialectical tensions that characterize students' interactions in the course: "(a) their desire to participate and their desire to remain silent during class discussions, (b) their desire for both predictable and novel classroom activities, and (c) managing their personal time and their class time" (p. 339). They discuss various strategies that students use to manage these tensions, and then argue that these tensions can broaden our understanding of the myriad factors that influence student behavior in a classroom.

One of the key implications of Prentice and Kramer's work is that teachers' behavior is only one of many factors that influence student behavior in a classroom. They point out that while most instructional communication research focuses on the effects of teacher attitudes and behavior on student behavior (p. 356), their research reveals that students also base their own class participation on the reactions or behaviors of other students. Thus, while a teacher may be dutifully employing immediacy behaviors to engage her students, a student's decision to opt out of classroom participation may be related to negative feedback from another student (and not to the teacher's behavior at all). According to Prentice and Kramer, "teaching issues are not often simple isolated problems that can be 'fixed' exclusively by teacher behaviors" (p. 358). Instead, students' classroom behavior reflects a complex web of tensions that stem from relationships with fellow students, the instructor, and the outside world.

Understanding how students manage these tensions can help teachers plan courses and classroom activities that respond to students' ever-changing needs and desires.

As Prentice and Kramer (2006) point out, very few communication scholars have explored the classroom setting dialectically. Furthermore, no communication scholars appear to have examined GTAs' experiences from a dialectical perspective. Having seen the utility of this theory in understanding the complexities of a college classroom, I see relational dialectics as a useful lens through which to examine the GTA experience. This is a new direction for relational dialectics theory. Instead of focusing on a dyad or a single group, I will use the theory to examine the tensions that emerge from a complex web of relationships that center on a single person: the GTA. To understand this further, picture the GTA as the knot at the center of a web. The other groups of people in the web include students, peers, supervisors, professors, family, friends, and others. As GTAs, our relationships with these different groups of people involve conflicting desires, needs, and responsibilities. Relational dialectics theory seems like a fruitful way to identify and understand this "knot of contradictions" (Cornforth, 1968; cited in Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 16) that GTAs negotiate both inside and outside their classrooms. Specifically, as GTAs share stories about these webs of relationships, they surface tensions that characterize the GTA experience.

In terms of figuring out how GTAs negotiate the tensions that emerge from their narratives, I will turn to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) categorization of eight strategies that people often use to negotiate dialectical tensions. These strategies include two less functional strategies, *denial* and *disorientation*, which involve either rejecting

one pole of a tension or resigning oneself to the belief that the tension is inescapable and inherently negative. Baxter and Montgomery also highlight six more functional strategies. *Spiraling inversion* occurs when a person moves back and forth between the two poles of a tension over time, whereas *segmentation* means moving back and forth between the two poles depending on which pole seems more appropriate in a given situation. *Balance* involves compromising between the poles and fulfilling each one only partly, while *integration* involves fulfilling each pole fully. (The authors acknowledge that integration is rare.) *Recalibration* means reframing the tension so that it is no longer perceived as a tension, and *reaffirmation* means embracing the tension and viewing it positively (the opposite of disorientation). Taken together, these strategies offer a useful framework for exploring the strategies that GTAs use to manage dialectical tensions.

Training and Supervising GTAs

Over the past thirty years, scholars researching GTAs have developed a significant body of research around issues of GTA training and supervision. A survey of communication and noncommunication departments by Buerkel-Rothfuss and Gray (1990) offers a comprehensive, though dated, picture of GTA training and supervision programs nationwide. While a majority of speech communication programs provide some degree of GTA training and supervision, nearly half of noncommunication departments choose not to train their GTAs. A later study (Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998) examined the training received by TAs across six different colleges at a single university. Their results indicated that only slightly more than half of the TAs had attended either a university or departmental TA training session. Universities may

choose not to invest in GTA training because of a lack of funding or a general belief that such training is not necessary (Shannon et al., 1998). Although the relevance of these studies is somewhat limited due to their age, my own anecdotal experience talking to GTAs at different universities suggests that GTA training has not increased or expanded dramatically since these studies were conducted in the 1990s. Also, the budget cuts that universities face as a result of the current economic recession suggest that funding for GTA training is unlikely to increase.

Given that GTAs are an integral part of introductory course instruction in many university departments, it is important to understand the effectiveness of different types of GTA training programs. As Shannon et al. (1998) stress, few researchers have actually examined the effects of GTA training on GTAs' teaching effectiveness. Their exploratory study suggests that training that emphasizes pedagogical practices (instead of just talking about university policies and procedures) leads to increased teaching effectiveness among GTAs. Numerous communication studies researchers have also reflected on the effectiveness of GTA training programs at their own universities. Staton-Spicer and Nyquist (1989) describe the training and supervision of speech communication GTAs at the University of Washington, a school whose GTA training program has since been used as a model by many other communication studies departments (e.g., San José State University, Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, Bowling Green State University, and Minnesota State University-Mankato). DeBoer (1979) and Andrews (1983) offer similar insights into the training and supervision of speech communication GTAs at Pennsylvania State University and Indiana University,

respectively. A comparison of these essays reveals general agreement among supervisors about certain elements needed for GTA training and supervision. These elements include: a clear definition of the GTA role, observation and critique of teaching, discussions about grading, thorough explanation of the subject matter, and interaction with new and experienced GTAs.

Sprague and Nyquist (1989) expand on these articles by providing a conceptual framework for understanding GTAs' supervision and development. They begin by describing three roles that a GTA supervisor must fill: manager, instructional role model, and mentor. They offer practical advice to supervisors about how to function effectively in each of these three roles. As a manager, a GTA supervisor should be accessible and give frequent feedback. As an instructional role model, a supervisor should introduce GTAs to different styles of teaching and help them recognize and negotiate "the complexity and tensions of teaching" (p. 42). And as a mentor, a supervisor should encourage and support GTAs as they emerge as new scholars and academic thinkers.

After introducing the different roles of supervisors, Sprague and Nyquist then argue that GTAs progress through three stages of development. Using models of teacher and counselor development, they propose that GTAs begin as *senior learners*, i.e., students whose academic success has led to their selection as GTAs. While senior learners are familiar with the role of "expert student" (p. 44), they often have trouble transitioning into the unfamiliar role of teacher. The authors advise GTA supervisors to be most directive with GTAs in this stage, and to make sure that they create an environment in which GTAs feel comfortable asking both large and small questions. As

GTAs become more familiar with their teaching responsibilities, they graduate to the stage of *colleague-in-training*. Here, Sprague and Nyquist suggest that GTAs become more confident in experimenting with different teaching methods, and that supervisors should help GTAs develop skills to implement and evaluate these various teaching strategies. When GTAs progress to the stage of *junior colleague*, supervisors should support GTAs as they develop their own teaching styles, and should show them how to develop collegial relationships with other faculty members.

While Sprague and Nyquist's work is grounded in many years of shared experience as GTA supervisors, the voices of GTAs are troublingly absent from their work. They make casual reference to the experience of certain GTAs, but do not integrate the ideas of GTAs when defining GTAs' stages of development. Instead, the authors speak *for* GTAs, e.g., "For most TAs, this [transition from student to teacher] is a troubling and confusing transition" (p. 44). This research will benefit greatly from the inclusion of GTAs' perspectives on their own training and professional development. While GTA supervisors can offer useful summaries and reflections based on their years of experience, only direct conversations with GTAs can lead to a complete understanding of why certain training methods are effective or ineffective. The dialectical perspective that I use in my research can strengthen our understanding of GTA training by offering specific examples of how GTAs themselves articulate the tensions that they experience during training. For example, only GTAs can describe the awkwardness and anxiety that comes from presenting a sample lesson to their peers for the first time ("microteaching"). This particular training practice, affectionately dubbed "micro-torture" by a few of my

fellow GTAs, is only one of many experiences that may make GTAs' transitions from student to teacher "troubling and confusing," to use Sprague and Nyquist's words. (Some GTAs may indeed agree with Sprague and Nyquist's description of their experiences; others may see training practices like microteaching as liberating and empowering.) Thus, while existing articles about GTA training offer a useful foundation for understanding GTA professional development, it is time to deepen our understanding by talking directly to GTAs about their experiences.

Williams and Roach (1992) take a step in this direction when they examine GTA training from the GTA perspective. They point out the lack of GTA perspective in research on GTA training (p. 184), and they aim to fill this gap by surveying GTAs about what they perceive to be the most important aspects of their training programs. Their research questions focus on two elements of GTA training: how GTAs should be guided in their transition to graduate school, and how GTAs should be instructed about classroom management. Using extant literature on GTA training and supervision, they developed a 34-item questionnaire and an open-ended question, all of which focused on identifying the elements of training that GTAs consider to be the most important.

They find that GTAs' training concerns center around three major categories: teaching, GTA socialization, and departmental obligations (p. 187). GTAs express less concern about issues related to graduate studies than for issues related to teaching. The authors argue that this is because GTAs are likely to be more comfortable with their roles as students than with their roles as teachers, which corresponds with Sprague and Nyquist's (1989) claims. On the topic of classroom management, GTAs express greatest

concern about grading, course assignments and descriptions, developing lectures, and handling academic integrity violations. Surprisingly (and sadly), issues like working with disabled students and addressing racial and ethnic diversity rank toward the bottom of GTAs' concerns. The authors suggest that this may be due to the fact that GTAs are well aware of the evaluative tasks that they will need to perform immediately, but perhaps less aware of the need to address complex and subtle issues of diversity in the classroom.

Williams and Roach's work is important because it introduces the GTA perspective into the larger conversation on GTA training. It provides needed support from GTAs for claims made by GTA supervisors like Sprague and Nyquist. But while this quantitative study offers a useful starting point for identifying GTAs' concerns, it does not fully address the complexities of the actual GTA experience. GTAs' responses are tallied and averaged, giving us a broad picture of GTAs' concerns. Yet we are still missing the rich descriptions and specific narratives that will help us understand *how* GTAs navigate these concerns and tensions. For example, perhaps GTAs are indeed concerned about issues of disability and diversity in their classrooms, but a closed-ended survey does not give them room to talk about the tensions they experience between their desire to address immediate issues like grading and lesson planning and their desire to understand broader pedagogical issues like classroom diversity. My research aims to expand and enrich our understanding of GTA training and supervision by using qualitative research to introduce this crucial element of GTA voice into GTA research.

Socializing GTAs

As soon as GTAs apply for their teaching positions, they begin the process of socialization into their roles as graduate students and teachers. Research on GTA socialization aims to define and understand GTAs' communication concerns during this process. Staton and Darling (1989), key scholars in GTA socialization research, borrow a definition of socialization from Merton, Reader, and Kendall (1957): "the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitudes, the interests, skills and knowledge—in short the culture—current in groups to which they are, or seek to become, a member" (Merton, Reader, & Kendall, 1957; cited in Staton & Darling, 1989). Staton and Darling argue that, for GTAs, socialization occurs through GTAs' communication with peers and supervisors. They suggest that GTAs must socialize themselves in two ways. In their *role socialization*, GTAs learn to perform the duties of their dual roles as graduate student and teacher. In their *cultural socialization*, GTAs learn the more subtle (and often unspoken) cultural rules about how to function as members of their specific department or university faculty.

Although Staton and Darling present these two types of socialization as distinct and separate, my experience as a GTA suggests that the two forms of socialization are closely intertwined. For example, considering my anecdote from the introduction, my cultural socialization involves learning (through experience and through direct instruction) what topics of conversation level and volume level are considered appropriate in the hallways of my building. Yet the influence of this knowledge does not pertain solely to my understanding of how to be a faculty member in my department.

Instead, this knowledge also influences the decisions I make about what volume to use and what topics of conversation to bring up inside the classrooms of my department, both when I am a teacher and when I am a student (i.e., my role socialization). One advantage of dialectical research is that it has the potential to illuminate similar tensions that GTAs may experience between role socialization and cultural socialization.

After introducing their two forms of GTA socialization, Staton and Darling (1989) state that GTAs use four key communication strategies to socialize themselves into their roles and cultures. These strategies include: asking questions to obtain information, developing a social support system, adjusting to rules and procedures, and generating new ideas about teaching and research. They suggest that GTAs use both passive and active communication to obtain information. For example, GTAs can learn about their roles passively from listening to conversations of other GTAs or observing other GTAs or professors. They can also choose more active information-seeking techniques, which involve asking direct questions of either other GTAs or professors. Not surprisingly, these scholars suggest that GTAs are more likely to turn to experienced peers with risky or difficult questions, and will approach professors or supervisors with more straightforward or low-risk questions. From my own experience, this finding speaks our desire as GTAs to save face in front of our supervisors. If I want advice after a lesson plan goes awry, for example, I am much more likely to talk with my peers or with more experienced GTAs before approaching my supervisor about it, for fear that she will see me as an inadequate teacher.

In terms of developing a support system, Staton and Darling say that new GTAs tend to socialize themselves by cultivating relationships with other GTAs, and that these relationships with peers are a crucial source of support and encouragement for all GTAs. For the third strategy, adapting to rules and procedures, GTAs use communication to uncover the various rules and policies of their departments. Specifically, GTAs ask frequently for advice and feedback so that they can figure out how to regulate their behavior to meet departmental standards. Finally, GTAs often engage in brainstorming sessions with other GTAs to develop new ideas about teaching or research. These collaborative sessions help GTAs broaden their understanding of effective teaching and also help them develop as graduate students and scholars.

Staton and Darling (1989) conclude by discussing how GTA supervisors could use this understanding of GTA socialization to improve GTA training. They highlight the importance of creating social opportunities for GTAs so that GTAs can form and nurture social relationships with each other. They also encourage supervisors to provide time for GTAs to meet to discuss teaching and research, so that they can further develop as teachers and scholars.

Myers (1994, 1998) builds on Staton and Darling's (1989) work in his research on GTAs as organizational newcomers. Myers examines the degree to which GTAs find certain socialization activities helpful (1994), and also looks at the importance of peer and mentor relationships to GTA socialization (1998). He offers empirical support for Staton and Darling's claim that peer and faculty relationships are key to GTAs' socialization (Myers, 1998). He also finds support for the claim that daily interactions

with other GTAs (especially new GTAs), as well as the department office staff, are some of the socialization activities that GTAs find most important (Myers, 1994).

While Myers' work provides a quantitative complement to Staton and Darling's (1989) qualitative research, the silence of GTAs in his and others' socialization research remains a problem. Staton and Darling (1989) cite a few qualitative studies based on their prior case-study work with GTAs (e.g., Darling, 1998; cited on p. 18), but they do not directly cite GTA voices to support their claims about GTA socialization. While their research, like Sprague and Nyquist's (1989), obviously benefits from their personal experiences working with GTAs, I believe it is crucial that we include voices of GTAs in this conversation if we want to fully understand how GTAs conceptualize and communicate in their roles. Also, GTA socialization research tends to focus on how GTAs communicate *outside* of their classrooms. To fully understand the GTA experience, however, it is also important to consider how GTAs' socialization is influenced by their communication *inside* their classrooms. As I enter into dialogue with GTAs, I hope to expand our understanding of how GTAs socialize themselves into their various roles by considering their communication both inside and outside the classroom.

Studying GTAs in their Classrooms

The majority of extant research that addresses GTA classroom communication does so from an undergraduate student perspective. A host of variable-analytic GTA research isolates a single variable of GTAs' verbal or nonverbal communication and tests the correlation between this variable and students' perceptions of GTAs. Quantitative studies on GTA attire (Morris, Gorham, Cohen, & Huffman, 1996; Roach, 1997) seek to

identify the impact of GTA dress on students' perceptions of GTA competence, although the conflicting results of these studies make it difficult to draw broad conclusions.

(Morris et al. contend that previous research about the effects of professional attire on perception may not be universally applicable to GTAs, while Roach claims that professional attire worn by GTAs leads to fewer student misbehaviors.) Yook and Albert (1999) examine a different variable when they test the effects of intercultural sensitivity training on students' perceptions of international GTAs (ITAs). They conclude that sensitivity training can increase sympathy and decrease anger toward ITAs.

Despite their varying conclusions, these researchers appear to share a common assumption that studying GTA classroom communication from the students' perspective is more important than understanding the GTA perspective. While studying students' perceptions of GTAs does contribute to our knowledge of GTAs, we also need research that will explore these interactions from the GTA perspective. Choosing an outfit to wear to class, for example, has many other implications beyond the number of student misbehaviors that it may trigger. As GTAs, our decisions about clothing reflect our negotiation of our conflicting teacher and student identities. What may appear to observers (in this case, students) to be a simple fashion decision may instead be an outward manifestation of an internal tension between complex thoughts and feelings. Thus, while surveying students will help us understand the effects of certain GTA communication choices (e.g., attire), only direct conversations with GTAs will help us fully understand the ongoing, irresolvable tensions that influence their communication choices.

The use of quantitative research methods also reveals the lack of contextual knowledge available in classroom communication research about GTAs. Roach (1997) uses surveys and asks students to recall past encounters with GTAs. Morris et al. (1996) base their conclusions on controlled classroom experiments in which they dictate the different types of attire worn by GTAs. Yook and Albert (1999) remove ITAs from the classroom altogether and make claims based on students' simulated interactions with videotaped ITAs in a laboratory setting. In each case, the researchers distance themselves from actual GTA classrooms and choose instead to rely on students' memories, to manipulate the GTA classroom, or to de-contextualize GTAs' teaching by moving it into a laboratory. These methods imply that GTA communication can be examined by distancing or detaching the communication from its actual classroom setting.

This assumption, while a valid assumption of the post-positivist paradigm, limits our understanding of how GTA communication occurs *in context*. In their delineation of relational dialectics theory, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) emphasize the importance of studying communication in its "historical, environmental, cultural, relational, and individual chronotopes, or contexts" (p. 44). While studying GTA communication in a lab or through the lens of student memories may provide a starting point for understanding its effects on students, I hope my interviews with GTAs can take us to the next level of understanding by offering GTAs the chance to articulate the thoughts and feelings behind their verbal and nonverbal communication choices. Having insights into GTAs' thoughts and feelings will help us understand and analyze the emotional and

intellectual context from which their communication emerges. Moreover, this work can help us nuance the prescriptive elements of GTA research. Since one of the aims of many GTA studies, including my own, is to offer useful, practical advice to GTAs and GTA supervisors, it is important that scholars root their advice in an understanding of how GTAs' intentions, thoughts, and feelings shape their communication choices. Instead of simply concluding that GTAs should dress up in order to keep their students in line, we need to acknowledge and discuss the complex dialectical tensions involving identity and role conflict that influence GTAs' communication.

My efforts to put GTA communication in context draws some inspiration from Fitch and Morgan's (2003) analysis of how students construct the ITA identity through primarily negative narratives about their experiences in ITAs' classrooms. While this study remains grounded in the student perspective, it demonstrates how interviews and narrative analysis can broaden and contextualize our understanding of GTA communication, since students describe specific encounters with GTAs in detail. My study, which focuses on GTAs' personal narratives, serves as a complement to student-focused studies.

This shift toward the GTA perspective does emerge in more recent scholarship, though more work remains to be done. Roach (2003) surveys pre-service GTAs about their levels of anxiety and asks them to identify potential coping strategies that they might use to address their anxieties as they begin teaching. This article is useful in that it provides an initial assessment of GTA's communication concerns, yet Roach's work yields only hypothetical conclusions. He reports how GTAs *think* they may cope with

their anxieties, but not how they actually do respond when, for example, they find themselves faced with a challenging situation in the classroom. This study highlights the need for further investigation into GTAs' actual classroom experience, i.e., research that takes us beyond GTAs' pre-service concerns and shows us how these concerns play out in GTAs' teaching.

Hendrix, Hebbani, and Johnson (2007) provide the most complex example of research that explores GTA communication from the GTA perspective. Their study explores the experiences of GTAs of color (GTACs) in predominantly White universities and identifies similarities and differences between the experiences and communication strategies of GTACs and their White GTA peers. They use a survey and a follow-up interview to glean insights into the experiences of 8 White GTAs and 16 GTACs at an urban, commuter university. When comparing the comments that GTACs and White GTAs make about their experiences, the researchers note several similarities, including: a desire for peer contact during both training and teaching, a need for mentoring and constructive criticism from faculty who value teaching, and a belief that a GTA's demographics (age, sex, gender, race, etc.) affects her or his experiences and communication in the classroom.

Two differences emerge when comparing GTACs and White GTAs. First, GTACs feel more of a need to prove their own credibility in the classroom by citing their academic credentials, adopting an authoritative tone, changing their speech patterns (e.g., to reduce the sound of an accent), and dressing more formally than GTAs (or, for international TAs, dressing in a Western style). Second, GTACs express a greater

awareness of their own racial identities in the classroom and a greater feeling of responsibility to educate their students about racial issues, whereas most White GTAs do not even identify race as a factor that influences their teaching. These differences lead the authors to recommend changes to GTA training such as: discussions of Whiteness and privilege, discussions of what it means to be a White teacher or a teacher of color, and increased mentoring and support for GTAs that acknowledges issues unique to their experience.

Hendrix et al.'s study is one of the first to introduce the narratives of GTAs into the conversation about GTA communication. In doing so, the authors provide much-needed insight into how GTAs conceive of their role and how they perceive their own communication. When compared to the many studies that conceptualize the GTA identity from a student perspective, this research adds another crucial dimension to our understanding of GTA identity by addressing the GTA perspective. In their conclusion, Hendrix et al. call for more research that will provide "a more inclusive and realistic view of life in academe" (p. 75). My research into GTA communication responds to this summons by continuing the exploration of the "road less traveled" in GTA research.

Re-envisioning GTA Identity

One of the most important ways that my research diverges from extant GTA research is in its assumptions about the nature of identity. The post-positivist research on GTAs that I discussed earlier breaks down the GTA identity into a set of dependent and independent variables that can be isolated, tested, and analyzed. While these studies offer useful insights into different aspects of the GTA role, their subdivision of GTAs into

categories like “attire” or “ethnicity” reveals an assumption that a GTA’s identity is a static entity that can be broken down into discrete, unchanging parts. Yet my own experiences as a GTA have convinced me that our identities are not so static or easily divisible. As Collier and Thomas (1988) explain in their discussion of cultural identity, “identity is a fluid process residing in discourse rather than a discrete dependent or independent variable” (p. 116). Fassett and Warren (2005) agree that this traditional approach to instructional communication research is an “under-theorized understanding of identity as an amalgam of individual and group traits” (p. 242). In other words, who I am as a GTA is not an objective, static set of variables. Instead, who I am evolves and changes through my conversations and interactions with other people. To more fully understand GTAs’ identities, we would do well to look beyond individual variables and examine GTAs holistically as the fluid, dynamic, multilayered beings that they are.

Identities are fluid because they evolve from our communication with others (see, e.g., Baxter, 2004; Collier & Thomas, 1988; Fassett & Warren, 2007). As Baxter (2004) explains in her recent review of dialectical theory, “a relating self is not a preformed, autonomous identity; instead, self becomes in and through interaction with the partner” (p. 187). Thus, my identity as a GTA is not some fixed set of personality traits; who I am emerges through my interactions with different communication partners (peers, supervisors, other faculty members, my students, etc.). As Collier and Thomas (1988) explain, these interactions can both confirm and challenge who I am, and my identity can change, shift, or solidify in response to each of my social encounters (p. 112). Fassett and Warren (2007) agree that our identities are “not assigned at birth but rather made

possible, accomplished, through communication” (p. 40). Identity, according to Fassett and Warren (2007), is something we perform through our interactions with others.

Yet just as we shape our identities through our interactions with others, we also reshape our identities as we share stories about our lives. While GTAs initially form their identities through communication with students, peers, and others, the stories they share with me *about* these experiences are another opportunity for them to shape their identities. For example, as I talk with GTAs about their experiences, they choose to highlight certain aspects of their experience instead of others. In making these communicative choices, GTAs position certain aspects of their identity as more salient or meaningful than others. These choices then influence how I understand and make sense of who these GTAs are. Our conversations are also a chance for GTAs to reflect on how their experiences have changed and challenged them. This reflection may, in turn, affect how GTAs respond to similar experiences in the future. GTAs’ communication about past encounters may thus shape who they choose to be in the future.

This research asks GTAs to reflect specifically on situations where they may experience tension. Like our identities, these tensions are not easily categorized. Baxter (2004) explains that while dialectical tensions are easily mistaken for “‘binary opposites’” (p. 189), they are more appropriately described as a “knot of contradictions” (Cornforth, 1968; cited in Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 56). For example, my decision to communicate aspects of my “student identity” to my own students is not a simple on-off binary (i.e., either I do or I don’t). Instead, over time, I make a series of possibly conflicting decisions about what aspects of my student identity to share, at what

time, and with whom. For example, I might choose to conceal my identity as a graduate student from my own students out of concern that they will not otherwise respect my authority as an instructor. Yet I might later choose to reveal my student identity to an individual student during my office hours as a means of establishing rapport. These decisions could create tension for me if that student later “outs” me to other students in the class. The exploration of these tensions has the potential to serve the GTA community in a variety of ways. On the practical side, I hope that my research will offer useful suggestions to GTAs and their supervisors. Yet I also hope to serve the broader theoretical purpose of nuancing our understanding of GTAs’ identities.

Research Questions

As shown in this review, the post-positivist perspective has dominated the majority of research about GTAs. This dominance has left gaps in our understanding of how GTAs communicate, and, thus, gaps in our understanding of how GTAs construct and negotiate their identities. Despite Staton-Spicer’s (1982) now-dated summons for more interpretive research within instructional communication, remarkably few researchers have answered this call within the realm of GTA research. Scholars generally choose to pursue post-positivist variable-analytic studies of GTAs, which is unfortunate because it limits our understanding of GTAs as communicators. While quantitative studies make it clear *what effect* certain GTA behaviors have on students, they obscure the thoughts, feelings, and intentions that underlie GTAs’ communication. In other words, when we rely solely on quantitative studies to understand GTAs, we limit our understanding of the GTA experience.

Given the prominence of GTAs in universities across the country, it is unfortunate that such little attention is paid to the intricacies of GTA communication and identity. Staton and Darling (1989) point out that being a GTA is a transitional role: no one makes a career out of being a GTA. Perhaps scholars are less inclined to talk to GTAs directly because of their transitory status, or because GTAs sit at the bottom of the “faculty food chain.” Yet I believe that GTAs, as instructors who often proceed on to full-time roles as professors at universities or community colleges, warrant our attention and understanding as communicators.

My research is a response to both Staton-Spicer (1982) and Hendrix et al. (2007), and will frame the GTA experience from an interpretive perspective. The goal of my research is to go beyond explaining and predicting the effects of GTA communication on students’ perceptions. Instead, I use dialectical theory to illuminate the complex web of communicative tensions that characterize GTAs’ identities. The following questions guide my inquiry:

RQ1: How do GTAs articulate challenges and concerns about their roles as GTAs?

RQ2: What tensions emerge from GTAs’ narratives of role conflict and identity management?

While there are many useful methods that I could use to answer these questions, I am using individual interviews for this study because interviews are a useful way to illuminate the thoughts and feelings that underlie GTAs’ experiences. My goal for this research is to provide foundational insight into the GTA experience that will serve as a

springboard for future research using other qualitative methods (e.g., participant observation).

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

As discussed earlier, I am troubled by the lack of GTA voice in GTA research. GTAs have been surveyed, paraphrased, quantified, and analyzed, but rarely heard. Even the few qualitative studies on GTA communication focus either on interviews with students of GTAs (Fitch & Morgan, 2003) or on the reflections of GTA supervisors (Andrews, 1983; DeBoer, 1979; Staton-Spicer & Nyquist, 1989), with Hendrix et al.'s (2007) work as a promising exception. My research builds on their work by incorporating the wisdom of GTA voices into the study of GTA communication. In this chapter, I will discuss the reasoning behind my decision to conduct interviews, and will then discuss my sampling and interview procedures in greater detail.

Using Interviews

Interviews are an ideal method for gaining a deeper understanding of how GTAs articulate the challenges and tensions of their roles. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), interviews are “particularly well suited to *understand the social actor’s experience and perspective*” (p. 173; authors’ emphasis). Since my aim is to integrate GTA voices into research as a means of better understanding the GTA perspective, interviewing is a natural choice for this study. Scholars like Kvale (2007) and Lindlof and Taylor (2002) highlight the flexibility and openness of the interview format as a way of surfacing a variety of themes and relevant stories. Given that my goal is to explore the variety of tensions that surround the GTA experience, this flexibility is an asset to my work.

While some scholars (e.g., Kvale, 2007) advocate the focus group interview as a way of inviting productive, spontaneous exchange among respondents, I chose to use individual interviews for this study. This was primarily a logistical decision: I interviewed GTAs from different departments and universities, and it was not feasible to gather these GTAs together in focus groups. However, for this study, I see other advantages to the individual interview format. I wanted to give GTAs a chance to speak in depth about their experiences, and I wanted to make sure that each GTA's story is heard in detail. While group discussions can generate ideas that might not occur in individual conversations, they can sometimes lead to an unbalanced exchange in which certain speakers and opinions dominate (see, e.g., Hirokawa and Pace, 1983). In contrast, individual interviews allow more time for each GTA's voice to emerge, and I had more time to ask follow-up questions to gain a fuller understanding of each GTA's experience.

While individual interviewing allows for depth and breadth of exploration, some scholars criticize interview studies for having too few subjects from which to draw useful, general conclusions. Yet the goal of this study is not to draw general conclusions that apply to every GTA. Instead, as Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain, richly-developed qualitative studies offer readers the chance to determine "when and how the claims 'transfer' to their own situations" (p. 240; quoting from Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By delving deeply into the experience of 10 GTAs, I illuminate tensions that I hope will resonate with different GTAs in different ways.

Personal Interest and Reflexivity

I have entered this topic aware of my own positionality as a GTA. Being a GTA has been the defining element of my career as a graduate student, and it has shaped me intellectually, emotionally, and even physically for the past 2 years. Before my department's GTA training, I felt confident about my teaching abilities, since I had gained several years of teaching experience at my job outside of graduate school. Yet in the days leading up to my microteaching session, I started feeling anxious and ill each time I thought about my sample lesson. The night before I was scheduled to teach, I stared at my lesson plan and sobbed. I was convinced that I would not make it through my lesson the next day without crying or throwing up. To my surprise, though, I survived (and even enjoyed) microteaching, and I left our GTA training feeling hopeful about the semester. Yet when I was confronted with the pressures of taking a full-time graduate course load, teaching my own class, and working 20 hours a week at a second job, I found myself paralyzed by anxiety, stress, and self-doubt. What I thought would be an invigorating challenge turned out to be an emotional roller coaster that left me routinely nauseated. I thought about quitting my GTA job and dropping out of graduate school, but a small, stubborn part of me was determined to make things work.

I decided to research GTAs for a class project to see if research on GTAs could help me make sense of why I was struggling so much. I was frustrated to discover that this body of research largely silences GTAs, and that it instead describes our experiences through numbers, or through the eyes of students or supervisors. Out of that class project grew my master's thesis. I care about bringing GTA voices to this research because, in

part, I feel it is my own voice that has been silenced in past research. I have also turned to this topic to make sense of my own GTA identity. Fassett and Warren (2007) explain: “Writing is a process of meaning making, not just for the reader, but also for the writer” (p. 105). As I have worked to explore and illuminate the tensions inherent in other GTAs’ experiences, I have also reached a deeper awareness and understanding of the tensions that shape my own experiences.

My GTA identity has been both an asset and a challenge in conducting this research. As my colleagues and mentors have pointed out, my own experiences as a GTA affect the questions I ask of other GTAs and the interpretations I offer of their responses. Kvale (2007) suggests that this personal involvement in a research topic can be an advantage. When discussing the sequence that a researcher should follow when preparing for interviews, Kvale emphasizes that a researcher must first clarify her/his research purpose, and then make sure s/he has pre-knowledge of her/his subject (p. 37). In this case, my own experiences as a GTA have helped me accomplish both of these steps. Furthermore, Kvale explains that “the personal perspectives of interviewees and interviewer can provide a distinctive and sensitive understanding of the everyday life world” (p. 87). My own membership in the GTA community has granted me insight into issues and tensions that GTAs face, which in turn helped me shape my interview protocol. Moreover, since Kvale emphasizes the importance of making interviews feel like natural conversations (p. 56), I relied on my own experience to establish positive rapport and a comfortable interview setting with my interviewees.

At the same time, my biggest challenge as a researcher has been maintaining a rigorous reflexivity about my own personal experience. While I am eager to understand my own experiences more deeply, I do not want to use this research as an opportunity to merely confirm or validate my own experience. Nor do I want to dwell solely on issues that hold meaning in my own experience. Fontana and Frey (2007) emphasize that “[r]esearchers should not privilege any ways of looking at the world [...] but should instead continue to question, question, question” (p. 697). I have done my best to adopt this philosophy by staying open to ideas and opinions about the GTA experience that, in some cases, are radically different from my own. For example, I was surprised to learn that most of the GTAs I interviewed identify more strongly as students than as teachers, since I have generally identified more strongly as a teacher. In this case, being reflexive means that I need to notice and explore this discrepancy, instead of simply dismissing GTAs’ experiences when they do not correlate with my own. As Fassett and Warren (2007) explain, “As a writer, I must be present in the document in order to identify *from where* I, as a critic, speak” (p. 98; authors’ emphasis). Unlike the goal of post-positivist research, which strives to distance researchers from their subjects as much as possible, my goal in this work is not to erase myself from my research. Instead, my aim is to be aware of how my own experiences and personal narratives influence my interpretations of others’ narratives, and to be candid about this influence with myself, my interviewees, and with my readers.

When discussing autoethnography, Fassett and Warren (2007) explain that it is a “mode of writing that privileges reflexivity—it demands that one slow down the

everyday doings of a moment [...] to see the machinery at play within the mundane landscapes of our lives” (p. 103). While I have not focused on autoethnography as the primary method of my research, I have made a concerted effort to think critically and reflexively about my own experiences throughout the interviewing process. For example, when GTAs shared stories that surprised or confused me, I responded by asking follow-up questions to clarify details and to make sure that I was summarizing their reflections accurately. Also, I often chose to share brief examples from my own experiences with my interviewees, which gave us a chance to explore our similarities and differences together. In exploring the conflicts between my own experiences and the experiences of my interviewees, I drew upon Fontana and Frey’s (2007) description of polyphonic interviewing, in which “multiple perspectives of the various respondents are reported, and differences and problems encountered are discussed, rather than glossed over” (p. 709). I see this philosophy as well suited to a study rooted in the dialectical perspective. Just as dialectical theory calls on researchers to discuss the negotiation of irresolvable tensions in relationships, so too does polyphonic interviewing call on researchers to discuss the (potentially irresolvable) tensions that emerge from the interviews themselves. Rather than seeking perfect consensus between myself and my interviewees, or between one interview and the next, I have instead engaged in a conscious analysis of the imperfections that characterize both dialectical theory and the art of interviewing.

My dialogues with interviewees have also served as a form of member validation because they have helped me make sure that I am not simply interpreting the data through the lens of my own experience. Member validation is essential because it strengthens

interview research while also sharing power between interviewer and interviewee. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain that member checks (i.e., confirming one's interpretations with one's interview subjects) are useful because they allow researchers to hear directly from their interviewees about how accurately they feel the researcher has interpreted their experiences. Not only does this member check heighten the validity of a researcher's claims, but it also empowers interviewees by making them more active agents in the interpretation of their experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 244). As a researcher, I do not want to "speak for" my interviewees in any sort of manipulative or misrepresentative way. Instead, as Fontana and Frey (2007) explain, I wish to take the feminist approach of using interviewing for "ameliorative purposes" (p. 720). In this case, my goal is to use GTA voices to nuance our scholarly discussion of GTA role and GTA identity. Since these voices have been under-represented in research about GTAs, I am committed to representing the voices of my peers and colleagues as accurately and sensitively as possible.

Participants

For this study, I interviewed 10 GTAs who were simultaneously pursuing master's degrees and fulfilling teaching roles in their department. I chose this number of GTAs based on the work of Kvale (2007), who cites 15 (± 10) as a standard number for interview sampling, due generally to researchers' time constraints as well as the law of diminishing returns (p. 44). Using convenience sampling, I was able to meet GTAs from two different large, public universities on the West Coast. These GTAs were from three different departments: English, Foreign Language, and Communication Studies. The

GTAs consisted of 7 females and 3 males, and they ranged in age from 23 to 50. Their ethnicities were: 7 White/Caucasian (4 self-reported; 3 White-appearing), 1 Italian/White, 1 Jewish, and 1 Indian. While many of these GTAs shared similar ethnic backgrounds, their life experiences varied in several ways. For six of the GTAs, their GTA position was their only current employment, while four others were also working a second job. Four of the GTAs were married, and both married and unmarried GTAs talked about the impact of their work on their personal relationships. Two participants were international students. In terms of prior teaching experience, two of the GTAs had taught their own classes before becoming GTAs, while 3 others had worked as teaching assistants during their undergraduate careers. Of the remaining GTAs, 3 had teaching experience from other settings (e.g., coaching speech and debate or giving music lessons), and 2 had not taught before. As GTAs, all 10 participants were the sole instructors of record for their assigned courses, meaning that they were the only instructors with whom students interacted for their courses (as opposed to other teaching assistants, who may lead discussion sections or lab sections of a larger course taught by a full-time faculty member).

Interview Procedure and Protocol

I conducted these interviews between February 4, 2009 and March 4, 2009. Each interview lasted between 60 and 75 minutes, and was audio recorded and transcribed. I obtained IRB approval for all interviews (see Appendix A). At the start of each interview, I obtained informed consent from each GTA (see Appendix B), and also asked each GTA to choose a pseudonym. The design of my interview protocol (see Appendix

C) is based on my three research questions. As recommended by Kvale (2007), I grouped my interview questions in a way that indicates which interview questions are associated with each research question. In this way, I was able to make sure that I addressed each of my research questions adequately.

Data Analysis

I looked to previous dialectical research by Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) and Prentice and Kramer (2006) to guide my analysis. First, I read all of the transcripts several times so that I was familiar with the entire collection of interviews. My second step was an “inductive process in which a given datum [was] compared to prior data for its similarity or difference” (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 35). As I read each transcript, I made note of stories, issues, or concepts that stood out as salient, and used these examples to create categories. If a new example was similar to existing examples, I added it to an existing category. If it was different, I created a new category. Then, like Prentice and Kramer (2006), I reviewed these categories to see what specific tensions emerged from GTAs’ narratives. Finally, I grouped these specific examples into broader themes that captured the overall tensions of the group. Instead of using a deductive approach to analysis, in which I might have drawn categories for analysis from existing research, I chose to follow this inductive approach because it honors GTAs’ voices as sources of meaningful and relevant knowledge. By not pre-imposing categories on my analysis, I made room for GTAs’ narratives to surface issues and tensions that may not have emerged from current research on GTAs or dialectical tensions.

In the chapters that follow, I will discuss GTAs' responses to the interview questions as well as the implications of their responses. GTAs' narratives form the centerpiece of my analysis. I will begin by identifying the dialectical tensions that emerge from these narratives. Then I will explore the impact of these tensions on GTAs' identities, and will focus in particular on the different ways that GTAs negotiate these tensions in their everyday lives. Ultimately, by giving close consideration to GTAs' narratives, I hope to further illuminate the GTA experience and deepen our understanding of the challenges that GTAs face.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons I started this research was to try to make sense of my own stress and frustration as a GTA. Since I entered graduate school with prior teaching experience, I expected to move smoothly and confidently into my role as a GTA. Instead, I have often felt anxious and self-doubting, even in my fourth semester as a GTA. This project has not only brought me new insights and knowledge, but it has also given me comfort, reassurance, and joy. During my interviews with other GTAs, I found myself nodding, laughing, and wincing as they reflected and echoed my own frustrations and anxieties in their stories. These GTAs have reminded me that I am not alone, and that being a new teacher is challenging for everyone, especially for those of us who are also tackling the challenge of graduate school.

These interviews were even more illuminating than I expected. GTAs shared amusing and poignant stories about their teaching, their graduate work, their personal lives, and the intersections of these areas. While there are many interesting tensions that emerged from these GTAs' narratives, I will focus here on the three tensions that stand out as most salient, both within individual GTA narratives and across the group of narratives as a whole. These tensions also address my first two research questions: RQ1: How do GTAs articulate challenges and concerns about their roles as GTAs? and RQ2: What tensions emerge from GTAs' narratives of role conflict and identity management? The three tensions are: a) the desire for both distance and closeness with students, b) the desire to be both a perfect teacher and a perfect student, and c) the desire for both structure and freedom within the GTA role. In this chapter, I will define each tension,

discuss its apparent causes, and then examine the strategies that GTAs use to negotiate these tensions.

The Distance-Closeness Dialectic: Cracking the Whip and Being their Friend

The distance-closeness dialectic emerges from GTAs' conflicting desires to be both authority figures and confidantes in the classroom. At least half of the GTAs I spoke with said they need to establish an authoritative, credible presence in the classroom. For some, this means earning students' respect and getting students to take them seriously as instructors, while for others, it means holding students to high standards and creating an academically rigorous classroom environment. In either case, establishing authority in the classroom as a GTA requires a degree of distance from students: as one GTA explains, it is difficult to be an authority in the classroom if your students see you merely as one of them.

Yet while GTAs are concerned with authority and respect, nearly every one of them also talks about connecting with students on a personal level and making a difference in students' lives beyond the boundaries of the course. This connection takes many forms: inviting students to explore emotionally and intellectually challenging topics in class assignments, inspiring and mentoring first-generation college students, or offering emotional support to students who are dealing with difficult issues in their personal lives. This type of connection requires a level of intimacy and closeness that comes into direct conflict with GTAs' desire to maintain distance and authority. Thus, the tension between distance and closeness becomes one of the major issues that GTAs negotiate in their relationships with students. In this section, I will first explore the roots

of these two conflicting desires, and will then address the specific strategies that GTAs use to navigate the space between distance and closeness.

Desiring Distance from Students

GTAs' desire for distance in the classroom most often manifests as a quest to establish authority. Three factors fuel this quest: age, self-doubt, and academic rigor. These three factors often overlap and intersect, and lead to different types of distancing and authority-seeking behaviors among GTAs.

Age

Not surprisingly, younger GTAs often distance themselves from students and seek authority in the classroom because of their age. As Edna, a 23-year-old GTA, explains:

I was not prepared for the fact that [students are] going to look at me and say, "Hmm, she seems young and naive." So, I had to come up with a little bit more of a persona in the classroom to gain authority. And there weren't really any significant problems, but I was just—in the beginning I felt very sort of self-conscious of the fact that, you know, some of my students are 20, and I'm only three years older.

Rebecca, a 25-year-old GTA, shares Edna's concern about her age influencing her students' perceptions:

I still get nervous about my age or not being perceived as credible because I look—I mean, I *am* young. . . .I heard I looked younger than I actually am, too, on top of it. I was really worried about being or looking too young, and my students not respecting my authority. I think that's a common concern with GTAs.

While both Edna and Rebecca told me that they have not had any major problems with their students as a result of their age, their fears still influence the teaching personas they adopt in their classrooms.

Because of her concerns, Rebecca has chosen not to “out” herself as a GTA to her students, and says that this is an issue she continues to struggle with in her fourth semester as a GTA. She jokes about “cracking the whip” with her students as a means of establishing control, although she also acknowledges that this authoritative mindset can be “problematic.” Edna situates herself as an authority in the classroom by demonstrating her expertise in the subject matter: “I just sort of started opening my brain and showing that I have all of this knowledge. It doesn’t matter how old you are. It’s just the fact that I still have things that I can teach you.”

Self-doubt

Regardless of their age, many of the GTAs I spoke with identified self-doubt as a second factor that influences their desire for authoritative distance in the classroom. As new teachers, GTAs often lack the confidence to trust their instincts in the classroom. Most of the GTAs I interviewed had little or no experience teaching their own courses before becoming GTAs. While several were teaching assistants during their undergraduate years (e.g., grading papers for a professor’s course and perhaps teaching one lesson during the semester), only two (Beth and Mickie) had taught their own courses before becoming GTAs. As a result, some of them strive to establish authority in the classroom as a means of masking their own self-doubt and proving their competence. Joe, a second-year GTA teaching English, explains, “Standing at the front of the classroom for the first time independently is a challenge. You need to present yourself as the authority, [as though] you know what you’re talking about, and there is the constant threat of self-doubt.” For Joe, being an authority in the classroom means “try[ing] to put

myself in the best possible position to succeed, you know, identify what is to be done, kind of do it, and exclude the fears.” Hannah, a first-year GTA, finds reassurance in looking at more experienced GTAs who appear more confident:

You doubt yourself constantly [in your first year of teaching], and then you look to the GTAs who are one year older than you in the program. They are so calm. They know what they’re talking about. They look so confident. And you think, “A year from now, I’m going to look like that. Is that going to happen?”

Indeed, many of the second-year GTAs I met spoke about their self-doubt primarily in the past tense, as a feeling they had experienced most acutely in their first year of teaching. Although second-year GTAs still describe themselves as new to teaching, self-doubt is even more of a consideration among first-year GTAs.

Academic Rigor

The third distancing factor, academic rigor, is a goal that both first-year and second-year GTAs share. GTAs who talked about academic rigor generally describe this rigor as having high expectations for their students. Hannah, who has a teenage daughter, compares her teaching with her parenting, and talks about having high expectations for both her daughter and her students:

HANNAH: As a mom, I’m not super caring and a “do everything for your kids” kind of mom. I’m kind of a mom that pushes a little bit. I expect my kids to take responsibilities and do things. . . . So I’m that kind of mom to my students, too. . . . I expect a lot from my students, like I don’t email them to remind them about assignments. If they are late, they are late. . . . So for me, I think that works as a teacher, and it’s similar to what I am as a mom.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any ways in which the way you parent your daughter is different than how you are with your students?

HANNAH: Yeah. I don’t worry that my daughter won’t like me, but I worry that my students might not like me, so I try to be more likeable to my students. As to my work, I try telling jokes every now and then, although I do that at home, too,

but more so probably in the classroom. . . . I don't lower my expectations but I want [students] to like me. I don't know, are those even contradictory? If you have high expectations, why wouldn't your students like you? I don't know.

Here, Hannah articulates the distance-closeness dialectic clearly: She worries that her high expectations may make her students dislike her, so she tries to reconnect with them through humor. This contradiction poses an interesting question for future research: do high expectations communicate a sense of distance from students? I imagine there is a way to frame high expectations as a way of developing closeness with students, i.e., I have high expectations of my students because I care about them and I want to do well.

While not all of the GTAs talked about academic rigor, those who did generally positioned it as a force that contradicts compassion or likeability, just like Hannah does. Rebecca's distance-closeness dialectic emerges as she talks about the tension she feels between being compassionate with her students and holding them accountable:

I feel like I struggle with tensions as a teacher: I want to be compassionate—and that's the one that wins—but then I also try the opposite. You have to hold them accountable. But for me, being compassionate is the more important, if I had to pick one. I think I'm attentive to detail, and again I struggle in terms of accountability. I feel like I am the teacher that wants everything labeled on the outline, and I want their theses to be structured and linear, and I feel like I have struggled with that because I know that it can be too formulaic, or making them not think for themselves. But on the other hand, I know that this is a class that doesn't have remediation, and that for some students it's a privilege to be able to say or do whatever you want, and for students that don't know how to, that's kind of debilitating.

Here, Rebecca's desire to hold her students accountable emerges as a type of instructional compassion. While she labels her strict attention to detail as an attribute that distances her from her students and makes her seem less compassionate, she actually expresses

another type of compassion by holding her students to high academic standards and promoting skills that will help them succeed in college.

Thomas echoes this sentiment when he compares his first semester of teaching to his third. He tells me that in his first semester, he was “very much focused on what my students thought of me, and was I a cool teacher?” Then, in his second semester, he “started to learn to say no,” which led him to expect more of his students:

I have a student from my first semester of teaching who comes in to just sit in my class now. . . . he has become a friend, and so he came to see, and he just can’t believe it’s the same class. Everything is—I wouldn’t say it’s rigid, but I expect more of my students, I ask more, I really think they learn more, they seem to comprehend better, and I have changed.

For both Thomas and Rebecca, raising their expectations for their students is a means of both establishing authority *and* being compassionate, albeit compassionate in a more academic sense (e.g., compassion through the teaching of useful lessons like writing and analytical skills). Yet many GTAs also desire a different type of compassion with their students, a compassion that involves closer, more personal relationships with students. This is the type of compassion that often conflicts with the quest for authority and distance in the classroom, and I will discuss it in more detail in the following section.

Desiring Closeness with Students

All of the GTAs I met talked about two key elements of closeness with students: wanting to make a difference in their students’ lives, and wanting their students to like them. These two desires are key to understanding the distance-closeness dialectic.

Making a Difference

For GTAs, making a difference involves more than just teaching course material.

Angelica sums up this desire when she says:

So, for me in my role as a teacher, it's not just teaching the subject, but somehow touching their lives, somehow making an impact. Hopefully, maybe having them realize that they have a hidden passion. . . . I really take it as like I'm their teacher but I'm also kind of their friend. Not a friend as in like, "Oh, you're my best friend," but I'm friendly with them, and I want to be their support. So, I feel like I'm the support system for them. I'm their encourager. I'm the person that will believe in them and there to help them. Like, I always tell them that I'm here to give you assistance when needed.

Other GTAs share Angelica's desire to support their students, especially in relationship to students' life issues outside of the classroom. When I asked GTAs about the most rewarding part of their GTA experience, nearly every one of them talked about the relationships they have developed with their students. Edna shares a poignant story about supporting a student whose mother was dying of breast cancer. For Edna, the most touching part of her experience is that the student she supported kept in touch with her after the course ended. She says, "I was very touched when she emailed me and let me know when her mother had passed. . . . It's like, 'Oh, you really do make an impact on other people's lives.'" This closeness with students often transcends the course material, and provides an emotional satisfaction that can motivate GTAs to continue teaching.

While the desire to support students is not unique to GTAs (i.e., many full-time faculty members probably share similar goals), GTAs' student identities make them particularly able to connect with and relate to students on a personal level. As Alois tells me:

I talk to my students about how I understand their experience because I'm still having it a little bit. I really want to be able to help them negotiate their identity as students because I haven't let go of my being a student completely yet.

For Alois and others, the desire to make a difference with students comes from their own experiences of struggling to succeed in college. Alois continues his story:

I'm a first-generation college student, and I dropped out when I was 18 because I was still freaked out. . . . I let [my students] know that, you know, I'm here to help you succeed, and any professor who doesn't do that is not a professor. I say that to my students. I say, "Hey, are you having trouble in other classes? Talk to me, maybe I can help you out." I don't see myself as just a professor of the one course that I teach, especially since we're teaching a GE [general education] course to freshmen. I see my role as bigger than that. It's overwhelming, it's heavy, it gets to me at times, but it's the only honorable way to do what we're doing.

Alois sees his GTA role as an opportunity to give his students the support he would have liked to have as an undergraduate. He tells me that what he values most about being a GTA is "the interpersonal role that a lot of professors try to avoid." For Thomas, filling this type of interpersonal role means that he is happy to be the person his students turn to with questions or concerns about family, money, commuting, or sexual health. This notion of GTAs being closer to their students is a theme that came up in several other interviews. And while this desire to get more involved in students' lives seems to stem from GTAs' desire to make a difference, it also appears to be related to their desire for student approval.

Seeking Approval

Student approval was a common topic of conversation in my interviews with first-year GTAs. This makes sense, given the high levels of self-doubt that GTAs say they feel when they are newest to teaching. As discussed earlier, Hannah worries that her

students won't like her because she has high expectations of them, and she tries to make herself likable by using humor. Beth, a first-semester GTA, says that she tries to connect with her students by "act[ing] like I am one of them or something. . . . I'm probably a little bit more laid back, a little less professional-seeming from other [instructors]." Unlike younger GTAs, who worry about maintaining distance to establish credibility, Beth is the oldest GTA I interviewed, and she has prior teaching experience at the high school level. Thus, despite being new to the GTA role, Beth reports feeling more comfortable in the classroom, and seems less concerned about distancing herself or displaying authority than other participants.

Seeking approval has benefits as well as drawbacks. Mickie, a first-year GTA, solicits frequent feedback from her students, and explains that she really wants to know what they like and don't like in the classroom so that she can improve as a teacher. In this case, Mickie's desire for student approval seems productive: she wants to use their feedback to become a stronger, more effective instructor. In other cases, though, the quest for connection and student approval can become problematic. When describing his first semester as a GTA, Thomas says he was overly malleable and didn't say no to his students. He attributes his lenience to his lack of confidence in his own teaching instincts, and explains that this caused problems in his class. He encourages other GTAs to "say no" and to not second-guess themselves in front of students, "because they read that on you like no tomorrow."

While GTAs' desire for students' approval does not disappear immediately, it does seem to dissipate over time. Frances, a second-year GTA, says that her primary

concern at the outset was making sure students “laughed at my jokes.” Now that she has more teaching experience, she finds that her satisfaction comes from engaging students in the course material. She explains:

The first semester, I was just happy when they laughed at my jokes, and then now I am happy when they really, really take something away [from the class]. And when somebody becomes a communication studies major, that is a huge reward, because they enjoy the information that you are trying to convey. And that’s like the same thing as when they join the speech team. They enjoy the information you were trying to convey.

Similarly, when I ask Thomas about the best part of teaching, he says he no longer focuses on being the “cool teacher.” Instead, he chooses the moment

. . . when you assigned some ridiculously complicated thing about postmodernism and you spend the entirety of the class period, an hour, trying to explain [it]. . . [and then] you have a student come up to you and say, “Hey, I want you to know that I get what you’re talking about, and I think it’s really cool.”

Frances’ and Thomas’ stories illuminate an interesting secondary tension: the tension between a more superficial sense of connection through approval-seeking, and a deeper connection that comes through engaging students in the course material. It would be interesting to look more closely at how GTAs navigate this tension, and how GTAs’ experiences of this particular tension change over time. Perhaps by shifting their focus away from superficial approval-seeking, GTAs can make way for deeper, more meaningful connections with their students.

Strategies for Navigating the Tension between Distance and Closeness

Having examined both aspects of the distance-closeness tension in detail, I realize that most of the GTAs I interviewed feel a natural closeness with their students. Despite the fact that many GTAs express a desire to be an authority in the classroom, their desire

to connect with students in meaningful ways generally “wins out” (as Rebecca puts it). Closeness seems to be the default position for GTAs in this dialectic: while many GTAs talked about struggling to set limits with students, no one mentioned any difficulties in connecting with students or building relationships. Thus, the challenge that most GTAs face in negotiating this tension is figuring out how to put boundaries on their closeness.

While each GTA ultimately navigates this tension in her or his own way, several GTAs’ strategies stand out in their narratives. For Joe, a GTA in his mid-twenties, the key to negotiating closeness and distance is portraying himself as strict at the beginning of the semester, and then lightening up later on. He says:

I’m playing a role as an instructor, honestly. And. . . because I’m a young person, I try to present a very hard-lined bull right out of the gates, because it’s important to me that these students know that I’m their instructor and not their friend. This isn’t playtime. We are not having a conversation on a personal level. This is the classroom. . . . When it’s appropriate, I’m understanding and forgiving, certainly, and as the semester goes on I think the kids realize that I’m a lot sweeter than I make out to be.

While Joe’s idea of treating the classroom as a professional space instead of a personal space might initially sound uncaring, it actually stems from his tendency to care too much:

It’s difficult not to become attached to these men and women that you’re interacting with. However, at times, the investment is too big and the connection is too strong. And it can impede your ability to teach because you’re so invested in this person’s well-being all of a sudden that you cross the boundary.

Thus, by performing the role of “hard-lined bull” at the outset, Joe is able to get enough distance from his students, and they can then interact throughout the semester in a constructive way.

Joe's movement between strictness and caring over time reflects Baxter and Montgomery's (2006) idea of spiraling inversion. While GTAs may or may not resonate with Joe's "hard-lined" philosophy, I think it is important for us to consider this idea of professional distance to some degree. It is admirable to want to make a difference in our students' lives, and there is nothing wrong with offering emotional support in addition to academic instruction. Yet when taken to an extreme, the quest for closeness and the desire to make a difference can lead us into the trap of taking care of our students at the expense of taking care of ourselves. Joe's insight invites GTAs to reflect on how we might maintain enough emotional distance and perspective so that we can fulfill our roles as instructors *and* maintain a healthy balance in our own lives.

For Rebecca, who struggles to balance compassion with high standards for her students, navigating this tension means being rigorous without being rigid. Even though it is hard for her to enforce her standards, she realizes that it is important not to sacrifice them completely, since that would be a "disservice" to her students. Instead, she says she tries to "keep [her standards] in mind, but also not be a total stickler for every little thing." Beth takes a similar approach: she is committed to correcting students' grammar in her language class, but she explains that "I try to not be *too* correcting. I think that can be intimidating. . . [if you] correct everything at once. You can choose [to focus on] a certain point or certain pronunciation point without making them afraid to open their mouths ever again." Here, Beth and Rebecca demonstrate Baxter and Montgomery's (2006) strategy of balance by fulfilling certain desires for academic rigor and relaxing or compromising in other areas. Again, while each GTA will draw her or his own line

between rigorous and rigid, this strategy offers us the chance to consider what standards matter most to us. Some GTAs may find it helpful to negotiate the distance-closeness tension by being strict in certain areas and more compassionate or lenient in others.

The Perfection-Reality Dialectic: “I’m Always Late, and I’m Hungry”

As discussed earlier, the tension that GTAs feel between distance and closeness can stem from a desire to be what Angelica describes as a “transformative” teacher. We don’t just want to be adequate teachers; we want to be *excellent* teachers. Several GTAs talked about wanting to be the teacher that every student remembers: the teacher who is prepared and flexible, rigorous and compassionate, an expert and a confidante. This teaching ideal would be hard enough to achieve if we were full-time teachers. Yet instead we juggle our desire to succeed as teachers with our desire to succeed as graduate students. And if one theme stands out above all others in these interviews, it is the idea that there is *not enough time*: time to plan lessons, time to study, time to grade, time to read and write, time to be with family and friends. We struggle to meet our high expectations for ourselves as teachers and students while also balancing our needs for sleep, socializing, humanity, and mental health. Herein lay the roots of the second tension, which I will name the perfection-reality dialectic. We get frustrated that we can’t invest ourselves fully in the role of either student or teacher, and that we have to make sacrifices to get it all done. In this section, I will explore the roots of our desires for perfection, and will then give examples of the numerous strategies that GTAs use to negotiate this tension between personal and professional priorities.

Being the Perfect Student

As mentioned in chapter two, GTAs are often selected for their roles because of their outstanding performance as students (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). Many GTAs see this academic success as a central part of their identities, and are determined to maintain the same level of achievement as students even when they take on the burden of teaching. When I asked GTAs to describe themselves as students, many were quick to categorize themselves as perfectionists and workaholics. Hannah tells me:

I take my student life really seriously. I study six days a week, all the time if possible, and one day a week I just rest and do my cross stitch or whatever I do. I always do the readings. I write and rewrite and rewrite my papers. I'm obsessed with being a perfect student and doing things perfectly. And after one semester of teaching, as a teacher I've kind of laid back a little bit. Last semester, I wanted to be a perfect teacher, too, but since I've done it once, I thought, "OK, they [her students] survived, they did well." So I don't obsess about that as much. Besides, I'm not graded in my teaching.

In addition to getting good grades, which was a common theme across interviews, several GTAs also mentioned the joy of being nominated for academic honor societies or receiving praise from professors. According to Joe, what keeps him going as a student is "receiving papers back with high marks, and a professor effectively gushing, 'This is it. You hit the mark. This is well crafted, an exciting piece of work, congratulations.' [That is] always satisfying. It never gets old." Because GTAs value this type of praise and encouragement, they continue to strive for excellence in their scholarly work, despite the new strains teaching adds to their schedules.

While this perfectionism did not surprise me, one thing that did surprise me about this tension was the fact that many GTAs define themselves more as students than as teachers. Since GTAs often talk about how their teaching work can dominate and

overwhelm their student work, I expected that GTAs would see themselves more as teachers than as students. This is how I have felt for the majority of my time as a GTA. Yet what I discovered is that many GTAs identify themselves more strongly as students. Edna explains, “I still see myself as a student just because it takes up most of my time and that’s what I’m supposed to be here for.” Angelica agrees:

I see myself as a teacher and identify myself as that. That is part of my identity. But maybe. . . I identify myself as a student more because I’ve been a student for longer, obviously a lot longer. It takes up more of my time. I’m teaching, but I’m not right where I need to be yet. Not where I want to be, as far as my characteristics as a teacher. . . . [Teaching is] all a bit new. So, maybe that’s why I don’t identify myself as much with it, but. . . when people ask me what I do, I always talk about both of them together, student and teacher. It comes up in all of my conversations. I don’t leave the teaching part out.

Angelica’s narrative reveals the interplay between her two identities of teacher and student. She identifies more with her role as a student because it feels more familiar and defined, whereas her teaching identity is new and in process. Yet she still describes herself as both teacher and student, which is also true for all of the other GTAs I met. Even those who identified more with the role of student clarified that both roles are equally important to them, and that they want to do well in both.

GTAs’ definition of their identities can also shift over time. Thomas explains that for his first three semesters of graduate school, he felt “like I was here to teach and that on the side I go to grad school.” For Thomas, his stronger identification as a teacher relates to the fact that many of his graduate seminars have not felt particularly challenging. Now, in his final semester, he finds himself taking a course with his program’s “most rigorous professor, who truly pushes you to go where you don’t feel safe going and [has you] producing more and better things than you ever have before.”

Since the professor calls upon him to demonstrate his abilities as a student, Thomas now identifies more strongly with the student aspect of his identity.

Other GTAs experience an opposite shift over the course of their GTA careers.

Rebecca, who plans to teach after she graduates, notices that the role of teacher becomes more salient for her as her graduation date nears:

As the endpoint of my formal education is getting really close, like months away, I'm sort of starting to think more of how my life will be as a teacher, so yes, I guess I feel again it's something that I can start to see changing. Right now, I'm so focused on, like, my thesis and stuff, I'm still like, "I'm a student," but yet, I'm kind of afraid of not being a student anymore. . . and I think my way of coping will be, like, "I'll focus on being a teacher."

Rebecca's sense of loss surrounding her student identity is something that Alois shares. Though he has completed the requisite number of units to graduate, Alois continues to take classes while writing his thesis to avoid what he calls the "identity crisis" of no longer feeling like a student. While both Rebecca and Alois also discuss the joys of excelling as students, their attachment to their student identities is not solely related to their success. Instead, they continue to identify themselves as students because they feel nervous about letting go of an identity that has defined them for so long.

While some GTAs speak to the intrinsic rewards of being a successful student, other GTAs describe the extrinsic reasons why they need to focus on their student work.

Frances explains that:

Right now, [being a student is more important] just because I am very concerned about grades and what not. I need the A. And being a good student right now will make it possible for me to be a good teacher in the future. So one day, that will reverse, and being a teacher will be more important to me. . . Whether I attain my own classroom [i.e., a full-time teaching job] or a class here or there, just getting to that point, I can't be a good teacher without being a good student right now.

Frances highlights a point that several other GTAs make: As much as they love teaching, they need to focus on their student work so that they can complete their master's degrees and get the full-time teaching jobs that many of them want. Joe would agree with

Frances:

Being a teaching associate is an exciting opportunity, but without getting my master of arts degree, that experience would be for naught. I'm not going to be able to get work in this field without a degree. So, with that in mind, I knew that I would always justify putting off grading papers for writing my own.

Ultimately, then, GTAs' attempts to be perfect students are not just a way to satisfy their desires for praise and acknowledgement. This perfection also serves as a means to the end goal of becoming a full-time teacher.

Being the Perfect Teacher

Though GTAs do not yet occupy this role of full-time teacher, many are nevertheless striving to be the best teachers they can be. To label this striving "perfection" is perhaps a misnomer, since no GTA actually describes herself as a perfect teacher. Yet, as students who are very familiar with success and achievement, GTAs often crave the same level of accomplishment in their own classrooms, as Hannah's earlier narrative points out. On its own, this quest for perfection as a teacher would be daunting; as graduate students, it often feels impossible.

For many GTAs, the key to succeeding as a teacher is being prepared for days in the classroom. Beth describes her concern for these public moments:

The teaching does dominate, because you are in front of people and you have to do it. I mean. . . I can show up for one of my own classes, unprepared, and just kind of hope I don't get too bad of a grade.

Rebecca shares a similar concern:

I feel like I have to pick teacher over student because there are 30 kids relying on me, and if I went in there and did a really horrible job, it would be—I don't know, I would feel so bad about that. You know, there are more people: me not being a good teacher has a greater effect on more people than me not being a good student. Yes, so if I had to pick, I would pick [teacher], but that doesn't really happen very often.

Both Rebecca and Beth distinguish between the public failure of not teaching well and the private failure of not succeeding as a student. While Rebecca says that she does not have to make the choice very often, she nevertheless makes it clear that she would choose her public responsibilities as a teacher over her private responsibilities as a student. Beth, however, struggles with this public-private prioritizing on a daily basis.

Unlike some of the other GTAs, Beth works a second job, and she tells me that she simply does not have enough time to get all of her work done. The quote that accompanies the title of this section is Beth describing her harried life as a GTA: "I'm always late, and I'm hungry." She confesses to not studying for a recent exam and not always reading for her graduate seminars because of her teaching responsibilities:

I choose the work as a teacher, because I'm responsible for 8 to 80 people, not [my own] learning. So, in my own work as a student, I am just one person, and I can talk to my professors and say, "Look, I'm really sorry." I mean, I took a test Monday night. I hadn't prepared at all, and you know, what can I do? I couldn't *not* do what I had to do for my students because I had a test. You know. . . I needed to plan better over the weekend. So, the teaching work takes precedence.

As a GTA who also works a second job, I can empathize with Beth, and have made similar choices myself. Up until my final semester, I have generally put my teaching work before my student work, and have told myself that preparing for teaching will make me more relaxed and able to focus on my student work. The catalyst that has shifted my

perspective is my looming graduation date: as I approach graduation, I suddenly find myself prioritizing my thesis writing over all other responsibilities, since this is the final hurdle between me and my degree.

Yet I still resonate with Beth's and Rebecca's distinctions between public work and private work, and so do other GTAs. Edna tells me:

If it's grading, I'll do my own stuff. I'll just stay up later if I have to get grading done. But if it's something like lesson planning, then no, I'll leave my reading to the end, because I'm someone that always has to be prepared in the classroom. I'm not a winger.

For Edna and other GTAs, getting behind in grading seems to be less of a concern, since it does not affect their public "performance" in the classroom. Even Angelica, who talks about wanting to achieve perfection as a teacher and a student, admits that she will put off grading if she needs to get her own work done:

I think that there are some things that you can be flexible with, and some things that you can't. So, for example, if there's a paper due as a student, I will probably work on that first. Because if I'm a teacher in a class setting, and I need to get back some papers to students, I can share with them, "You know what, I don't have your papers today, but I'll have them for you in the next class period. . . I'm human. I wasn't able to get this done."

Nevertheless, nearly every GTA I spoke with mentioned grading as a huge burden. Joe explains:

You know, a constant struggle has been grading papers. It's like Nightmare on Elm Street with Freddy Krueger. It's the worst thing ever. And I want my students to do well. I'm invested in their well-being. But sometimes, reading 50 essays that are categorically poorly developed and poorly written becomes a mental task, and I find myself spending, you know, 30 or 40 or 50 minutes on an essay, and I can't do it. I can't read 50 essays at an hour a piece, you know what I mean?

Grading is the most common place where GTAs confess to falling behind as teachers, even though, like Joe, they acknowledge that grading is an important part of investing in students' success. The biggest hurdle to GTAs' success as teachers, then, is often their ability to manage their time. Mickie reiterates this idea: "Time management, I think, is the key to being a good TA." I will talk more about how GTAs manage their time later in the chapter.

For Mickie, the pursuit of excellence also stems from identifying more strongly as a teacher. Unlike many of the GTAs mentioned above, Mickie says she has always identified herself more as a teacher:

I think I consider myself as teacher, because, I mean, I have loved teaching right from the day I started teaching in India. I mean, my first experience was a bit intimidating because I was facing a crowd of 100 people for my first class. So, that was quite intimidating, but I think I just fell in love with teaching from that point.

Mickie is one of two GTAs who had taught her own class before becoming a GTA. This past experience makes her more inclined to see herself as a teacher, and also inspires her to prioritize her teaching work above her student work. As mentioned earlier, Mickie also asks her students for constant feedback about how her class is going. Throughout her interview, she emphasizes the fact that criticism is essential to her development and success as a teacher. She tells me several times about how she seeks out feedback from her students as well as her supervisor. Her frequent emphasis on criticism and feedback suggests that, in her case, the desire to succeed as a teacher eclipses her desire to succeed as a student. Yet regardless of which role GTAs see as more important, all GTAs have to negotiate the perfection-reality dialectic.

Strategies for Negotiating the Tension between Perfection and Reality

In most cases, GTAs negotiate this tension using mental strategies as well as more practical time-management strategies. The first two strategies, *compartmentalizing* and *compromising*, are practical strategies that GTAs use to manage their time. These two strategies correlate to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) segmentation and balance, respectively. The third strategy, *changing your attitude*, is primarily a mental strategy, though it also has practical effects on GTAs' behavior in the classroom. This strategy relates most closely to Baxter and Montgomery's notion of reaffirmation, which involves taking a more positive view of a tension. Though the emergence of these particular strategies did not surprise me, what did surprise me are some of the choices that GTAs make in terms of *how* they employ these strategies. In this section, I will define and address each of these three strategies in detail.

Compartmentalizing

Many GTAs seek to compartmentalize their roles in their quest to succeed. By compartmentalizing, I mean dividing your time and attention so that you can focus on one role at a time instead of trying to juggle multiple roles at once. Joe defines this strategy when he explains:

I guess I compartmentalize both roles. So there are times when I'm really an instructor, and that's what I'm doing, and there are times when I'm a student, and that's really what I'm doing. I guess if I had to choose, it's like the ultimatum: Beatles or Elvis?

In Joe's way of thinking, GTAs could potentially invest themselves fully in whatever role they are working on, and thus be more likely to achieve the different types of success that so many of us crave.

While this may sound like a logical strategy for negotiating the tension between perfection and reality, GTAs are quick to explain that compartmentalizing their roles is a difficult task. Alois, who holds a research position on campus in addition to his GTA and student roles, explains his attempts to compartmentalize his three roles:

I tried to compartmentalize the three identities, and did not realize that they do struggle with each other as much as they complement each other and support each other. There are times that they do [support each other], but you know, I'm one person, and I have limited resources, and just because they are limited, that doesn't mean that I'm *less* of a person. It just means I'm a person.

For Alois, this is a turning point: he realizes that his limited resources don't make him a failure, they simply make him human. Having made this realization, he then begins to search for reasonable compromises between his three roles, which I will explore in more detail later.

Like Alois, Thomas also holds a third job on campus, and he says that his "three job roles become very intermingled at any given moment." When he walks into his GTA office, he says it is often difficult to decide what portion of his work to focus on, because "it gets mixed up and you're in one head space." For Thomas, the most confusing part is when he has to move through different levels of autonomy in the same day:

The most interesting shift for me in the day was my first semester of teaching. From 8 to 11, I would teach two sections, so I'd have full autonomy on my own. Then from 2 to 4, I was co-teaching as a teaching assistant. . . so I went from full autonomy to like, half autonomy. So, it's like, I'm teaching, but I'm teaching the way that other teacher wants me to teach. That same night, I would go to a graduate seminar to be a student. So, in one day I would go from full teacher to half teacher to student, and it was such a weird shift because I have to constantly change my relationship to everything. Like you get in this spatial relationship, like your relationship to the classroom, and to where you are in the classroom. Like tonight, I have my graduate seminar in one of the classes where I teach in the morning. . . . When I walk into the classroom, the classroom space is entirely different to me. It's the same physical location, but it's an entirely different

space. As soon as you walk in, I don't even recognize it as the same place because of how I'm coming into it. That's also weird.

Thomas describes a feeling that is at the heart of my own confusion as a GTA. For me, it is difficult to feel the freedom and responsibility of standing at the front of the classroom, and then, in the same day, to shift over into sitting in my students' desks and relinquish the teaching role to my professor. Even though, like Thomas, I find great joy in being a student, I also find myself exhausted by the shift.

Edna voices a similar frustration about shifting roles. She offers one possible way to compartmentalize and avoid this type of exhaustion:

What I did last semester I think is probably the best thing I could have ever thought of, which was I taught on days that I didn't have class. So, I had classes Mondays and Wednesdays, and I taught Tuesdays and Thursdays, which was great because then I wouldn't have to go, "Okay, I just taught a whole lesson on feminism, and now in an hour I have to go my own class." It was very difficult to switch gears for me. So, I try to coordinate it that way.

While not all GTAs will have this luxury, the idea of creating space between GTAs' teaching times and their student times is something that both GTAs and their supervisors may want to consider.

Compromising

In addition to attempting to compartmentalize their roles, many GTAs also find themselves making frustrating compromises to achieve balance. While many will admit that perfection is appealing to them, they also recognize, as Alois does, that they have "limited resources" when it comes to managing their time. As I began this research, my own tendency was to compromise my student work and prioritize my teaching work, and I expected to hear other GTAs say that they do the same thing. Instead, what I found is

that many GTAs adopt one of two different compromises: either compromising each role equally, or sacrificing their personal lives so they can avoid compromising either of their academic roles.

Compromising each role equally. After describing his difficulties with compartmentalizing, Alois tells me how he balances his attempts to compromise:

I don't think I've ever compromised one for the other. I think I've gone back equivalently, like, "Okay, I'm going to not find three more articles for that research paper, but I'm also going to spend five minutes less per hour [on grading]." Do you see what I mean? So it's proportional.

Rebecca shares a similar sense of balanced compromise: while she says she would never skip class to grade students' papers, for example, she might choose to read "just 3 of the 4" articles for one of her own classes to finish grading.

Avoiding compromise through sacrifice. For several GTAs, though, sacrificing personal life feels more comfortable than making academic compromises. Angelica tells me that she has rarely chosen to compromise her work as either a student or a teacher. Instead, she says, "You make sacrifices to make things work." For her, this often means cancelling on her friends at the last minute so that she can "hibernate in my home" to get her work done. Angelica acknowledges that this is not the healthiest strategy:

Sometimes I don't feel as mentally healthy as I need to be because I think schooling can be very draining and very stressful for me. I think that's a really important aspect, because sometimes I feel education can dictate my life, and how I live my life because of the stress, because of all the emotions that are going into making sure that I get the reading done and write everything. And because I'm a perfectionist, [I'm] feeling that I'm not doing what I need to do.

While Angelica affirms that "I really enjoy education, and I'm doing this for a reason; I want to be here," she also recognizes that her coping strategy may not be sustainable in

the long run. She is not alone in her decision to make personal sacrifices, though.

Hannah also chooses to compromise other elements of her life:

So, it's not that either you study or you do your teaching stuff. There are other parts in your life too, and you probably compromise with those other parts. You think, "Okay, my family can survive six months without me while I do this teaching thing and this studying thing." Yeah, I think I compromise more with my other life than with studying or teaching. I don't have to balance them. I kind of have them take over, and compromise everything else.

For Mickie and Beth, the sacrifice is similar: they choose to prioritize their academic responsibilities at the expense of their personal lives. Mickie says that she loses out on "quality time with my husband," while Beth says, "I don't really have any social life. . . . I don't really have the time."

For Beth, the decision to sacrifice in this way comes from her frustration about not being able to invest herself fully in any of her academic roles: "The way I feel right now is that all the things I'm doing—and this is just my situation—I *could* be doing them fully. . . . but I am not able to do any of them more than partly." Although Beth sees this as a frustration unique to her own situation, it is actually a sentiment that many GTAs share. Edna sums up this frustration of juggling the roles of teacher and student:

It's stressful, I mean, I can't wait until I'm either one or the other. So, it's just sort of like, "Wow, how amazing of a teacher will I be when I just have one thing to do?! I just have to teach every day? Yes!". . . . It's going to be amazing.

Changing Your Attitude

One of my favorite sayings is, "Change your attitude, change your experience." For some of the GTAs I met, this expression describes the strategy they use to negotiate the perfection-reality dialectic. For these GTAs, changing their attitudes seems to be a direct response to their conflicting desires for perfection. While they strive for

excellence, they also emphasize the importance of not taking things too seriously. In most cases, this attitude shift is strongest when they talk about their teaching, since this is the area where they are each inclined to seek perfection most often. In offering advice to new GTAs, Joe says:

So, if you don't take it too seriously, if you don't take your effect on them [the students] so seriously, you will be able to keep some distance. Understand that you are one of many instructors; you're doing the best that you can. And if they don't get it all now, it's a bummer, but you don't need to commit hari-kari because you've dishonored the emperor, you know what I mean?

Here, Joe recognizes that the work he does is important, but that he must maintain a balanced perspective about the role he plays in his students' lives. Alois shares a similar perspective: "I don't take it [teaching] too seriously, even if I take it seriously as I take anything else. You know. . . I laugh at myself when I take teaching too seriously. There's a value in that." For both Joe and Alois, the decision to not take things seriously does not mean that they neglect their teaching responsibilities. Instead, their mental shifts in attitude help them be more balanced in their approaches to school.

GTAs who opt for this mental shift in attitude also mention its practical consequences in their classrooms. Edna, who advocates a less serious attitude, explains:

I've always been a very casual person, and so I try to keep that sense of fun or spontaneity in the classroom. . . . I try to have a rapport with my students. So sometimes, to some guys, you have to be a little sarcastic, poke them a little bit. With the girls, it's more like, "Oh, let's talk about our feelings," you know, that sort of thing, which I may not be as good at. But I mean, I think it's just really not trying to take the world too seriously. So, we have a little bit of fun when we're doing it.

For her, having a light-hearted attitude improves her relationships with students and helps her create an engaging classroom climate. In a different vein, Thomas uses the attitude of

not taking things seriously as a way to inspire his students to take risks. He explains to me how he approaches his students with the attitude of:

“Don’t take yourself too seriously. I don’t fucking care how you talk in class. I’m not here to grade your grammar. Spare me the niceties—just talk to me, you know, say the uncomfortable thing.” You know, if I don’t hear the homophobe say “f-g” out loud, then nobody ever criticizes the homophobe for saying it, and then the homophobe never changes, never learns, never understands.

In this case, Thomas sees taking things less seriously as a way to break down barriers of political correctness in his classroom. By encouraging students not to worry too much about perfect language or perfect behavior, he hopes to stimulate difficult and important conversations among his students.

While an attitude shift will not eliminate GTAs’ time management conundrums on its own, it may help GTAs relieve some of the anxiety that comes from trying to achieve perfection. Thus, Edna, Alois, Thomas, and Joe offer their stressed, self-sacrificing peers a way to navigate their challenges with humor and hope.

The Structure-Freedom Dialectic: Hold Me Up, Let Me Fly

The first two tensions that I have discussed focus mainly on GTAs’ relationships with other people. Distance-closeness addresses the tenor of GTAs’ relationships with students, while perfection-reality addresses GTAs’ relationships with themselves, their students, and their professors. In contrast with these more personal tensions, the third tension that emerges from these narratives is more of a structural tension. In other words, GTAs experience this tension not so much in relationship with a particular person or group of people, but rather in relationship with the overall structure of their training programs, departments, or their universities.

This tension, which I will call structure-freedom, stems from GTAs' conflicting desires to not only have structure and support as they venture into teaching, but also to have the freedom to be creative and to shape their classrooms according to their own interests and personalities. To be clear, GTAs do not articulate this tension as *solely* structural: in certain cases, a specific person (generally a GTA supervisor) mitigates or amplifies this tension. In other cases, though, GTAs identify this tension as originating within the program as a whole, rather than from any one person. In this section, I will look at why GTAs value both structure and freedom, and will then present the strategies that they use to negotiate this tension.

Desiring Structure

As new teachers, GTAs desire a certain amount of structure to support and guide them as they develop their confidence. Rebecca, a second-year GTA, describes the attitude of incoming GTAs: "As an incoming GTA, you're really scared, and sometimes [want] structure, support, definitely. You[r attitude is]: 'I want an answer, I'm worried about this, so give me something to grab on to that's going to make me feel better.'" Hannah, a first-year GTA, would agree with Rebecca. She says she was nervous before she began teaching, and receiving a syllabus from her supervisor alleviated a lot of her fears. Even though she was not allowed to alter the syllabus during the first semester, she says:

I really appreciate that we had to keep it [the syllabus] the way it was at first, and also it takes a lot of the responsibility off us. If you do it as you're supposed to do it in the first semester, then you really know if you want to change something. And it was a good syllabus. There was nothing wrong with it.

Here, Hannah alludes to the fact that she was allowed to change certain aspects of her syllabus in her second semester, which she appreciated. She explains, “Now I get to modify it a little bit. . . . but I wouldn’t have known as well how to modify it six months ago.” Structure, in this case, relieved some of the stress of “responsibility” for the course, and liberated Hannah (and others) from a certain amount of anxiety.

Like Hannah, Angelica appreciates that “[her university] did put together a system so that we weren’t just thrown into the classroom. They give us a format like, ‘This is your syllabus. Here are your [assignments]. This is what they look like.’” After teaching with this structure for a semester, Angelica felt more confident about rearranging certain aspects of her syllabus to better suit her interests. Beth, who is in her first semester as a GTA, is similarly thankful that her department chair offered her a clear, specific plan of what pages to cover each day in her introductory language course. She explains: “Having that guide laid out is really, really helpful. And I would say that I recommend that in any department, rather than just having the TAs trying to figure it out all on their own.”

Another benefit of structure is the confidence that it gives GTAs to make subsequent changes in their classroom. Like Hannah, Alois was required to use an assigned syllabus during his first semester of teaching. Instead of seeing this as constraining, Alois says:

The fact that we were given a syllabus template and told, “You must use this [syllabus] your first time out,” the framework of the class was so useful. And I think that was what empowered me in my second year to really fuck with the course, to really tweak it.

Thus, Alois sees this initial structure as a foundation that enabled him to adapt and change his course later on.

Even GTAs who advocate for less structure acknowledge that some structure is necessary, particularly because GTAs teach introductory courses that meet general education requirements, and thus have strict course learning objectives. Joe, who is the most vocal of the GTAs about wanting less structure, still admits the necessity of certain guidelines:

There is a pretty strict set of policies that composition instructors are required to follow, and those are outlined by the department and those are included in the syllabus. . . which works in many ways. There needs to be a rhetoric, if you will, a standard.

In this case, structure is necessary because the university needs to ensure that all students taking a certain introductory course will have a chance to achieve the same learning objectives. If there were no cohesive “rhetoric” to a particular course, as Joe puts it, students might miss out on the chance to learn valuable material or essential skills.

Overall, GTAs’ desire for structure seems to come from wanting to feel less anxious and to have a solid foundation as new teachers. From this solid foundation, we can build up our confidence as teachers. I see my students go through a similar process in my public speaking classes. I start out by teaching my students the elements of an effectively structured speech. While I don’t think that my linear structure is the only way to give an effective speech, I do believe that learning this structure gives students a solid foundation on which they can build their confidence as speakers. Once they are familiar with this structure and feel more confident, they can then branch out and experiment with other, more creative ways of structuring their speeches. Similarly, as GTAs become

more confident as teachers, we feel more comfortable tinkering with our syllabi and our lesson plans, and we start to infuse our classrooms with our own personalities.

Desiring Freedom

GTAs' desire to shape their courses in creative ways forms the opposite side of the structure-freedom dialectic. While structure can feel empowering to new GTAs, more experienced GTAs often yearn for the freedom to experiment and take risks in their classes. This tension between structure and freedom is reminiscent of the predictability-novelty dialectic that emerged from Prentice and Kramer's (2006) ethnographic classroom study. In their study, students appreciated the fact that the professor had a similar structure for each class meeting, but they also liked that he introduced a variety of materials and activities within that familiar structure to keep them engaged. Similarly, GTAs' tension between structure and freedom emerges when they talk about the organization and content of their courses. Hannah talks about how she does not agree with every element of the assigned curriculum for her course, particularly when it comes to defining what a persuasive speech is. She explains:

Who are you to say that that's a bad speech? [Or] it's not persuasive? For somebody, it is. For somebody, it's not. So. . . we have decided that *this* kind of speech is a good persuasive speech. Of course, it comes from Aristotle and Plato, and it comes from 2000 years ago, and there's research for 2000 years to show that it works, but I don't know. I don't always agree with the stuff we teach, and there is so much variety and variation. . . . I teach what I'm supposed to teach, but I might tell them that it doesn't always work this way. I want them to be keeping in mind that [persuasion is] contingent all the time. It depends on so many different things. And also, I think it might kill their creativity in speeches if we give them too strict guidelines.

Here, Hannah highlights two key issues. First, she articulates her own desire to challenge the prescribed curriculum, which she does by qualifying and contextualizing the material

for her students. Then she also describes another aspect of the structure-freedom dialectic that she negotiates with her students. She wants to offer them enough structure that they aren't lost, but she also doesn't want to "kill their creativity" by giving them too many guidelines. Thus, she navigates the tension between structure and freedom on several levels.

Like Hannah, Joe is happy to be able to shape his class to match his interests. He tells me that because of his seniority as a second-year GTA, he has been able to replace some of the short stories in his syllabus with a full-length non-fiction book. He sees this change as important

[not only] because it's a good read, [but also] I think it demonstrates how you can create an argument over the course of a longer work, you know, instead of over 20 pages or something like that. And so that was often very exciting, to be able to invest a little bit more of myself into the syllabus and choose something, you know a book, a work of art.

For Joe, there is a dual pleasure in this experience. He likes being able to introduce a "good read" into his course, and he also likes that he can personalize his class by introducing his students to his favorite literature. He identifies this freedom as a characteristic of successful GTA programs:

I am for hands off for the most part, I must admit. I think it's important not to have total free reign, not like you can do whatever you want, but to create a kind of base and to allow each individual TA to work with those fundamentals as he or she would like. Because you are giving people the opportunity to invest themselves in what they're doing, and that brings out the best in people. If there is such a tight hold on what they can and cannot do, I think people will become detached from the task and will become automatic.

Joe sees freedom as a necessary condition for creativity, and mentions this repeatedly during this interview. Rebecca expresses similar concerns about training programs when she says:

I think the ideal program would give you enough practical [guidance] to not make you feel like you're going to die of uncertainty and just like feel like you're drowning, but not give so much [structure] that that starts to become your focus. I do think that first week [of GTA training]. . . really shapes how you start to view teaching. So if it was approached in our program as, "You need to do this, you need to do this, you need to do this, and you need to do this," then I think we'd turn into these teachers that are very rigid.

Alois' narrative confirms both Joe's and Rebecca's ideas. As I mentioned earlier, Alois appreciated his required syllabus in his first semester, and has since enjoyed being able to "really tweak" his course in his subsequent semesters of teaching. He explains:

Well, I've been allowed to completely reformat the public speaking course. For me, it's like I have one foot in having the experience of a lecturer before actually being a lecturer. It's been a really rich experience. . . . I feel like I'm allowed to make mistakes, and it's empowered me to find that creativity as a teacher that I find so valuable.

In Alois' case, reformatting his course has enhanced and deepened his teaching experience, and has made him even more excited about teaching. The shared enthusiasm that GTAs express about freedom is important because pursuing freedom gives them the chance to become even more invested in their teaching.

Strategies for Navigating the Tension between Structure and Freedom

GTAs generally negotiate the tension between structure and freedom by taking advantage of the unique "job security" that comes with being a GTA. In doing so, they demonstrate Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) strategy of spiraling inversion by moving between different poles of the tension over time. They generally start out by relying on

the structure that their programs and supervisors offer them, and then take progressively larger risks as they become more confident about teaching. In particular, GTAs take risks that they think they might not otherwise be able to take once they become full-time teachers. These risks vary in size and scope, and are either “sanctioned” by their supervisors or handled more “covertly” by GTAs. In this section, I will first discuss the unique position that GTAs occupy, and will then examine the different types of sanctioned and covert risks that they take.

Occupying a Unique Position

Several GTAs highlight the fact that GTAs have more latitude than other instructors because they are still students. When asked what advice she would give to new GTAs, Frances replies:

Try to learn everything that you can learn while you are a GTA, because you have a little bit of room to make mistakes, and as soon as you are not a GTA, I think that space diminishes. And so learn from your mistakes to make them more valuable. . . and also appreciate that GTAs are set up for a learning experience—it’s kind of that liminal space between student and teacher.

Frances points out that since GTAs are having a “learning experience,” they are more able to experiment because people expect them to make mistakes. She encourages GTAs to “own your class, and own your syllabus, and don’t be afraid to use your expertise and offer something that students might not get in other classes.”

GTAs explain that this freedom is essential to their development because it gives them a chance to figure out their classroom personas and their teaching styles. Angelica says that her GTA experience is crucial to her long-term success as a teacher, because she

sees herself as “creating my identity as a teacher right now.” Edna would agree with Angelica. She explains:

One of the greatest benefits of being a TA is that we can experiment with everything and since it’s not really going to affect our jobs, it’s kind of great. So, I’ve tried to incorporate a lot of technology, you know, trying to figure out what is my classroom persona.

In encouraging other GTAs to take advantage of their unique position, Edna echoes

Frances:

Be creative. I mean, in the real world, if you’re teaching you’ll never know if your principal is going to walk in and say, “Hey, what the heck are you doing?” So, [as a GTA], it’s a lot more like, they [supervisors] come in twice a semester and the rest of the days, if you want to try something completely off the wall, try it, and they won’t see if it completely falls apart.

While some supervisors might cringe at the idea of GTA classrooms “falling apart,”

Edna’s suggestion is nonetheless a valuable one. Because she feels comfortable and secure in her job, she is willing to try out a variety of teaching methods: “Sometimes I will try group work or lecturing, like, students have no idea of what’s going to come at them that day. Sometimes, it’s games. . . . I mean it’s just, you know, different ways they can be interested.” If GTAs are experimenting with different teaching methods and looking for different ways to engage their students in the course material, they become more versatile, adaptable teachers, a characteristic that ultimately benefits their students.

Sanctioned and Covert Risk-taking

Many of the risks that GTAs discuss are decisions that have been sanctioned by their supervisors. As mentioned earlier, Alois’ supervisor supported his efforts to reformat his class. When Edna decided that one of her course textbooks was too expensive and “over [her students’] heads,” she and several other GTAs “revolted, and

chose a completely different book,” with their supervisor’s approval. The advantage of having their supervisors’ support is that it makes GTAs feel even more confident about taking risks. Alois explains: “I’m pretty sure our supervisor articulated that. . . you could really mess it up and it’s not the end of the world. So I went into it with a risk-taking attitude of wow, if I really stink it up, that’s great.” Edna offers a similar perspective about her supervisor: “He’s very big on helping us to try different things.” In both cases, these GTAs characterize their relationships with their supervisors as open, involved, and encouraging, which seems to encourage risk-taking.

GTAs with supervisors who are less involved or less supportive of risk-taking are more inclined to take covert risks. Beth, who describes her supervisor as “breathing down her neck,” says that her supervisor does not like the idea of Beth including supplementary exercises from the Internet in her lesson plans. Although she did not explicitly tell me that she hides these exercises from her professor, I got the sense from our conversation that she continues to integrate these exercises into her course, perhaps without telling him.

Thomas experiments with covert risk-taking for different reasons than Beth. From his description, I gathered that he and his fellow GTAs are not as closely supervised as many of the other GTAs I met. He is assigned to a different faculty mentor each semester, and has infrequent contact with his course director. This means he generally takes risks without seeking their advice. For example, he tells a story of removing several required topics from his syllabus, since he realized that he focuses more on other concepts, and he wanted his syllabus to reflect his course more accurately.

When the course director pointed out that he had forgotten to include certain concepts that relate to course objectives, he told her: ““Oh no, no, I do those things, I just do them in conjunction with this and this,’ and I said, ‘I’ll be more than happy to revise,’ and she said, ‘Yes, yes, please revise it.’” He revised his syllabus to meet the course objectives, yet continued to teach in the same way as before, i.e., focusing on the concepts that are more interesting to him. He is quick to justify his decision, explaining that “I *have* addressed [the required concepts]. I just don’t do it like the way it says in the book. . . . Anyways, like I said, they would never know if I did or if I didn’t.” Thomas’ story surprised me, since my own GTA cohort is more closely monitored; it is hard for me to imagine simply ignoring or dropping certain required concepts from my class. I am not sure what to make of his story: I sympathize with his desire to teach what he believes is most important, and yet I also wonder what other insights might emerge from a more developed conversation with his supervisor about restructuring his class. While this study does not address GTAs’ relationships with supervisors in depth, these relationships obviously have great impact on GTAs’ experiences, and are worthy of future study.

Whether or not GTAs feel supported by their supervisors in their risk-taking, all of them identify this risk-taking as central to their growth as educators. As such, this is an important strategy for GTAs to consider when negotiating the tension between structure and freedom.

* * *

In this chapter, I have addressed two research questions: RQ1: How do GTAs articulate challenges and concerns about their roles as GTAs? and RQ2: What tensions

emerge from GTAs' narratives of role conflict and identity management? Using these questions for guidance, I have identified and analyzed three dialectical tensions that emerge from GTAs' narratives (distance-closeness, perfection-reality, and structure-freedom). Since one of the goals of this study is to introduce GTA voices to the body of research about GTAs, I have positioned these GTAs' narratives at the center of my analysis, and used them to illuminate and clarify the joys and challenges that GTAs face.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the implications that these tensions have for GTA training, supervision, and mentorship. I will start by addressing the significance of these findings for GTAs and their supervisors, and will conclude by examining the significance of this research for students and educators more broadly.

CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS

In my first semester as a GTA, I lost ten pounds on what I've since dubbed the Teaching Anxiety Diet. Every Monday and Wednesday, which were the days I was scheduled to teach, I would wake up, fix my breakfast, and sit down nervously at my dining room table. It usually only took a few seconds for my inner critics to start their worrying: *What if my students hate me? What if today's lesson bombs? What if they get bored? What if someone gets upset? What was I thinking when I applied for this?! I hate this job!* And every Monday and Wednesday, after a few minutes of this mental chattering, I would pour most of my breakfast down the drain. Some mornings, I managed to swallow a few bites. Other mornings, just the smell or sight of the food made me feel nauseated. On days when I convinced myself to swallow a few bites, my anxiously churning stomach often sent the food back up a few minutes later. Since I wasn't scheduled to teach until 1:30, this process sometimes repeated itself at lunchtime. Only after teaching my class would I feel my appetite return, at which point I'd rush to eat lunch, feeling relieved to be hungry again.

But somewhere in the middle of this nauseating cycle, I fell in love with teaching. Even on days when I thought I would throw up in the hallway on the way to class, my nerves would wash away as soon as I stepped inside my classroom. My students made me laugh and made me feel proud. They made me rethink what I know about teaching, and they stretched me to grow. Like the GTAs I interviewed, I relished the chance to make a positive difference in my students' lives. By the end of that first semester, I was

eating breakfast and lunch again (on most days), and was convinced that becoming a GTA was the best decision I'd made in graduate school.

This transition would not have been possible without my GTA friends and my supervisor. Without their encouragement, their advice, and their willingness to listen, I am convinced that I would have left my program halfway through my first semester. From talking with other GTAs, I know my experience is not unique. When I was deciding which master's program to attend, I spoke with several GTAs at my current university to find out what they liked and disliked about the graduate program. One conversation in particular stands out for me. A woman who was about to graduate, and who had worked for four semesters as a GTA, told me that if it weren't for her experiences with the GTA program, she didn't think she would have made it through graduate school. She told me how the GTA community was so strong and supportive, and how she probably would have left the program had it not been for the encouragement of her GTA peers. Now, two and a half years later, here I am in her position, feeling exactly the same way.

Strengths and Limitations

It is largely my gratitude for my GTA friends and supervisors that inspired me to do this research. My own tumultuous start as a GTA made me wonder why this experience can be so difficult to navigate. Beyond the obvious challenges of time management, I found myself wanting to understand the myriad tensions that GTAs face in our dual roles as teachers and students. When I looked for answers in GTA research, I was surprised to find that this research largely ignores the narratives of my GTA peers as

sources of knowledge. My research, then, has been a way for me to place GTA narratives at the center of GTA research. My goal is not simply to add *more* voices to the conversation about GTAs, although I do believe that we need to include more GTAs in this scholarly conversation. Instead, my goal has been to complement existing research by examining GTA narratives in a more focused and nuanced way, so that our community can ultimately gain a deeper, richer understanding of how GTAs negotiate their experiences. With this in mind, I believe this research successfully complements existing GTA research by providing insight into the successes and struggles of GTAs from the perspective of GTAs themselves.

Some researchers might see the number of participants in this study as a limitation, since I draw my conclusions from 10 interviews. Yet the goal of this study is not to generalize about all GTAs. Instead, the value of this study lies in its ability to complement and complicate quantitative studies by looking more deeply at the knowledge and wisdom that emerges from GTAs' own narratives. For example, as I mentioned in Chapter 2, Roach (2003) asks pre-service GTAs to describe their anxiety and to identify potential coping strategies they think might use to address these anxieties when they start teaching. My research expands on this type of study by exploring in detail the different coping strategies that certain GTAs actually use to negotiate their anxiety and their tensions. In other words, we don't just learn the average level of GTA anxiety, or find out what GTAs think will happen to them. Instead, by delving into the richness of their stories, we come to understand how and why GTAs negotiate their experiences the way they do. Thus, analyzing GTAs' narratives is important because it

can provide valuable advice and insight for future GTAs and supervisors. This exploration also helps us understand how different coping strategies may affect the lives of GTAs and their students.

In Chapter 3, I indicated that the majority of the participants in this study identified as White, which I see as a limitation of this study. While I did not set out specifically to interview GTAs about how their ethnicity or culture influences their GTA experience, I am nevertheless disappointed that my sample ended up being relatively homogenous along this particular dimension. In the section on future research, I will discuss in more detail the ways that I think culture could be explored more deeply in future studies.

How Findings Relate to Research Questions

In response to my first research question, I found that dialectical tensions are indeed a useful way to analyze the challenges and concerns that GTAs describe. As mentioned earlier, this study uses dialectical theory in a new way by applying it to narratives about a web of relationships instead of narratives about a group or a dyad. This study suggests that dialectical theory can also be a useful framework for exploring tensions that emerge in stories about multiple relationships. Yet as Baxter and Montgomery (1996) explain, the goal of dialectical research is not merely to *identify* such tensions (p. 44). Instead, by analyzing GTAs' narratives through the lens of these dialectical tensions, we can better understand the ways that GTAs choose to *navigate* these tensions.

In response to my second research question, I identified three tensions that stand out as most salient for the GTAs I interviewed, given the questions that I asked, and then discussed how GTAs navigate each of these three tensions (distance-closeness, perfection-reality, and structure-freedom). These tensions offer insight about some of the most challenging aspects of the GTA role. Not only do GTAs struggle with logistical issues like time management, but we also struggle with larger questions of who we are as scholars and educators. We want to relate to our students and make a difference in their lives while also holding them to high standards and earning their respect. We want to excel in the new and unfamiliar world of teaching without sacrificing our familiar identities as successful students. We want enough support and structure to get us started, and we also want room to experiment, to make mistakes, and to grow.

The most important idea here is that GTAs do not have to resolve these opposing tensions by choosing one side over the other. Instead, as seen in these interviews, we use strategies like compromising, compartmentalizing, and risk-taking to negotiate these tensions. In most cases, these strategies lead us closer to what Baxter and Montgomery (1996) describe as “‘both/and’ status” (p. 6). Instead of trying to resolve or eliminate these tensions by choosing one side of the tension over the other, we find ways to navigate between the different extremes of each tension. As we experiment with coping strategies like segmentation, spiraling inversion, balance, and reaffirmation, we find ways to be demanding *and* compassionate, successful *and* balanced, structured *and* creative. This study takes the first step in exploring GTAs’ coping strategies, but more work remains to be done. Both GTAs and their supervisors can benefit from further research

about how GTAs use these coping strategies, and what effects these strategies have on GTAs' success as teachers and students.

Understanding how GTAs negotiate this “both/and”-ness is valuable because this knowledge can inform and improve GTA training and mentorship. One of my goals for this research was to undertake a study that would be meaningful and useful for the group I was studying. I do not want to study GTAs solely for the sake of understanding their experience. I want to use and implement this knowledge to help future generations of GTAs and supervisors navigate the experience with greater ease and confidence. Not only have these tensions worked their way into recent conversations that I've had with my GTA friends, but I also see these tensions as a useful discussion topic for my department's upcoming GTA training sessions. Since I hope that this research will spark many more conversations among other GTAs and their supervisors, I will explore the implications of this research for GTAs and supervisors in greater detail in the next section.

Implications for GTAs and Supervisors

These interviews provide numerous insights into the tensions that GTAs face and the factors that contribute to their success. In terms of offering advice to future GTAs and their supervisors, I will focus here on two factors that emerge as most significant and relevant: community and mentorship. When engaged thoughtfully by GTAs and supervisors, these two factors can provide a strong foundation from which GTAs can navigate the numerous tensions of their roles with confidence. After discussing

community and mentorship, I will also offer two suggestions for how GTAs can respond to the dialectical tensions discussed in this study.

Cultivating Community

As GTAs, we need a strong community of peers, mentors, and supervisors to help us negotiate the tensions we experience. Every GTA in this study talked about the importance of her or his relationships with other GTAs. This supports previous research that highlighted relationships with peers and supervisors as essential to GTAs' socialization (Myers, 1994, 1998; Staton & Darling, 1989). GTAs who have close relationships with their peers identify these relationships as a crucial source of intellectual and emotional sustenance. Hannah identifies her GTA cohort as a “really solid support network” that helps her learn and grow as a teacher and a student, while Alois mentions the “bitch sessions that are so important,” both for letting off steam and getting advice from other GTAs. Edna is happy to join her fellow GTAs for lesson planning one night, and for karaoke the next. And as Rebecca and Thomas look ahead to their approaching graduations, they both talk about the powerful sense of loss they expect to feel when they graduate and move on from their GTA communities.

These peer relationships are vital because they offer us a space to discuss the tensions that we experience and share ideas about navigating them. For example, the conversations I have had with my GTA friends throughout graduate school have helped me address the perfection-reality tension that I face in my own life. When I am pushing myself too hard, either as a student or as a teacher (or both!), I need my GTA friends to rein me in and remind me to take better care of myself. Since they are struggling with

similar challenges, they can recognize and empathize with what I am going through, and we support each other through the chaos.

Other GTAs who are not as close to their peers express a desire to build these relationships. Beth, for example, is frustrated that she hardly ever sees her fellow GTAs, and only gets to talk with them about teaching during the short breaks in their graduate seminars. She would appreciate more opportunities to interact with her peers and to exchange ideas for classroom activities and lesson plans. Frances, too, wishes there had been more interaction between her and other GTAs during her first semester of teaching, so that perhaps she could have received advice from someone who had already dealt with the challenges she was facing.

This desire for community is not limited to the GTA community. A recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Fogg, 2009) describes graduate school as “an incubator for anxiety and depression” (para. 1), and highlights the prevalence of mental health issues facing today’s graduate students. The article argues for the importance of social support networks for graduate students. By cultivating community among GTAs, we can not only nurture them as teachers, but also support their development and success as graduate students.

Building community among GTAs involves a commitment from GTA supervisors as well as GTAs. To some degree, the development of GTA relationships depends on how much GTAs like one another: as Frances points out, she is close to some of her fellow GTAs, but does not like certain others. Yet there are also structural issues that affect the growth of a GTA community. As Beth explains, one of the reasons that it is

difficult for her to connect with other GTAs to exchange ideas and get advice is that she only sees her fellow GTAs in the graduate seminars that they take together. They have brief conversations during breaks and while walking to their cars, but they do not have any other meetings during the year to talk about teaching. Hendrix et al. (2007) point out the value of having regular, mandatory GTA meetings where both “pedagogical and discipline-related issues can be promoted” (p. 65). Indeed, these mandatory meetings would give GTAs like Beth a chance to develop the supportive community that GTAs cite as crucial to their survival.

Finding Mentors

While GTAs’ relationships with peers are important sources of personal and professional support, they also need more experienced mentors to support their development as teachers. Nearly all of the GTAs I met mentioned the value of having someone from whom they can learn more about pedagogy. For some GTAs, this mentor is her or his GTA supervisor. For others, it is a more experienced GTA, or a faculty member who has expressed interest in the GTA’s teaching. Some of the first-year GTAs I met had been assigned second-year GTA mentors, while other GTAs were assigned full-time faculty members as mentors. Other GTAs did not have formally assigned mentors, but instead sought out mentors more informally.

While further research into different types of GTA mentoring relationships would be valuable, the GTAs in this study point out that all of these types of mentorship can be useful in different ways. As Alois explains, having a more experienced GTAs as a mentor is valuable because it gives first-year GTAs a person to go to with “the real

practical [questions] you don't realize to ask until the morning you're going to teach your class." Edna, who often looks to her GTA supervisor for advice, explains that his mentorship is useful because

he tries very hard to troubleshoot. Obviously, he can't be there every moment of the day, but. . . he's going to say, "Okay, in a real teaching situation how would we take care of this? If you had to think of something spur of the moment, what would you do?"

Like Hendrix et al. (2007) and Sprague and Nyquist (1989), nearly all of the GTAs in this study discuss the importance of having a mentor who cares about teaching. Some GTAs express frustration that their assigned faculty mentors show little or no interest in observing their classes or sharing constructive feedback. It is disheartening and discouraging for a new teacher to have a mentor who treats the task like an unwelcome burden. Thus, it is crucial for departments to hire GTA supervisors who care about pedagogy and the mentorship of new teachers. It is also important for these supervisors to consider introducing mentors into GTA programs, and to make sure that these mentors are invested in the role and take an active interest in GTAs' development as educators. If mentorship is not a formal part of a university's GTA training programs, GTAs would do well to seek out these relationships on their own. In this situation, GTAs should look for mentors who care about pedagogical issues and who are committed to supporting GTAs throughout their development as teachers.

Like peer relationships, mentoring relationships can be a space for addressing tensions that GTAs face. For example, mentors can help GTAs navigate the distance-closeness tension by asking GTAs to reflect on who they want to be in relationship with their students, and by sharing insights from their own careers. Mentors can also help

GTAs anticipate the ways in which their tensions may shift or change as they progress in their teaching careers. For example, several of my professors have mentioned that one of their challenges as more experienced teachers is to stay connected and close with their students as their age gap widens and their life experiences diverge. Mentors can help GTAs address the perfection-reality tension by sharing advice from their own careers and by helping GTAs develop more reasonable expectations for themselves. Finally, mentors can support GTAs as they push the limits of the structure-freedom tension, and can act as a sounding board for GTAs who want to develop new activities or assignments, or who decide to restructure their classrooms. In each of these cases, I think of a good mentor as a sounding board and a reflecting pool: a mentor helps you work through your own decisions (without telling you what to do), and she or he also helps you see yourself more clearly.

Suggestions for Coping with Tensions

While having a strong community and thoughtful mentorship will position GTAs for success, GTAs also need to consider how they will confront dialectical tensions when they arise. Even the most supported GTA will have difficult, stressful moments, and it is important for each of us to think about how we will respond when we feel the conflicting tugs of dialectical tensions. In Chapter 4, I highlighted a variety of strategies that different GTAs use to navigate the dialectical tensions discussed in this study. Based on these interviews and on my own experience, I would also like to offer two other suggestions for how GTAs might navigate these tensions.

Talk about Teaching with Humility, Openness, and Trust

As GTAs, one of the greatest gifts that we can give each other in our communities is the willingness to make teaching a public practice instead of a private one. Instead of trying to navigate tensions on our own, we can support each other by talking about our dilemmas candidly and compassionately. Palmer (1998) writes about teaching as the most private of public professions: although teachers always practice their craft in front of other people (students), they rarely invite their colleagues into their classrooms (p. 142). He contrasts teachers with other professionals like lawyers and doctors, who practice their crafts in front of one another, and thus are more likely to hold each other to certain standards of performance.

I agree with Palmer that this isolationist approach to teaching can be dangerous. When we stop talking about what is happening in our classrooms, we not only lose the opportunity to challenge and learn from each other, but we also sacrifice the chance to nurture the personal relationships and scholarly communities that will sustain us over the long run. Tompkins (1990) offers a similar and striking metaphor when she writes:

. . . teaching was exactly like sex for me—something you weren't supposed to talk about or focus on in any way but that you were supposed to be able to do properly when the time came. And the analogy doesn't end there. Teaching, like sex, is something you do alone, although you're always with another person/other people when you do it: it's hard to talk about to the other while you're doing it, especially if you've been taught not to think about it from an early age. And people rarely talk about what the experience is really like for them, partly because, in whatever subculture it is I belong to, there's no vocabulary for articulating the experience and no institutionalized format for doing so. (pp. 655-666)

Like Tompkins and Palmer, all of the GTAs I met spoke about the value of talking with other GTAs about teaching. Beth mentions that these exchanges “improve the possibility

of instruction,” while Angelica says they “open new possibilities for the teacher next to [you].” As new teachers, we need the chance to talk about what we love about teaching and what frustrates us.

In these conversations about teaching, it is important for us to lay aside our desire for perfection and approach these conversations with humility, openness, and trust. Palmer (2004) writes about the pain of living a divided life, i.e., the ways in which we shield core parts of our inner selves from the outer world by developing internal and external personas. For teachers, this often means wearing the mask of a flawless intellectual who shows no signs of weakness, insecurity, or vulnerability. We adopt this type of self-division out of fear: fear of judgment, rejection, and failure. In Palmer’s eyes, this self-division is one of the greatest forms of personal suffering. Our goal, both as teachers and as human beings, is to move toward wholeness and integrity—literally, an integration of our internal and external selves. Palmer (2004) explains that this wholeness “does not mean perfection: it means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life” (p. 5).

For GTAs, especially those caught in the tension of perfection-reality, I think a key part of finding this wholeness is establishing communities where, as Palmer suggests, we can speak aloud our fears and listen for our inner wisdom (Palmer, 2004, p. 54). Palmer calls these communities circles of trust, which are intentional gatherings of people who agree to listen to each other’s fears without judging, offering advice, or trying to fix each other. Instead, a circle of trust functions as a space for individuals to voice their own concerns and then listen for their own guidance. While GTA programs might not

follow Palmer's exact guidelines for a circle of trust, I nevertheless see GTA communities as fruitful spaces for recognizing and supporting the wisdom that we already have within us. It is important for GTAs to invest energy in developing these types of relationships with peers, and it is equally important for supervisors to build these encounters into the structure of GTA programs. If a GTA does not find this sense of trust and openness within her or his own GTA community, she or he could turn instead to like-minded colleagues in other departments or to a university's center for faculty development.

We will get the most out of these relationships by being candid with each other about where and how we struggle. In his interview, Alois talked about the value of being "transparent" and "genuine" with his students. This is useful advice for us as GTAs as well. In my department, our supervisor encourages us not only to speak openly about our struggles with each other, but also to let our students see us flounder from time to time. As much as I resisted this suggestion at first, she has helped me realize that trying to be perfect for my students is ultimately less valuable than modeling for them what it means to be fully human. While I still prepare thoroughly and strive for creativity and innovation in my classroom, my GTA friends are quick to remind me that it is OK not to have everything perfectly figured out.

Celebrate the Liminalities of the GTA Role

In addition to talking about teaching, we would do well as GTAs to embrace the liminalities of our role. For a limited time, we get to occupy the unique space between teacher and student. While this space feels fraught with tension, it is also an experience

worth celebrating. The idea of celebrating the GTA position arose in several interviews, and relates to Baxter and Montgomery's (1996) notion of reaffirmation. Earlier, I discussed how GTAs negotiate the structure-freedom dialectic by using their GTA status as justification for taking risks in the classroom. Our liminal status as teachers and students also offers us other valuable opportunities that we can embrace. For example, Thomas tells me that when he is grappling with new concepts or is having trouble understanding a topic from one of his graduate seminars, he often takes his questions to his own students. He explains his attitude about sharing his questions with his students: "I'm coming in almost aligning myself with them, like, 'This stuff's confusing me. What do you all think?'" Interestingly enough, I have gotten much better answers to things from my [undergraduate] students [compared to graduate seminars]." By engaging his students in a shared learning process, Thomas not only expands his own understanding of core concepts from his discipline, but he also "aligns" himself with his students and uses this questioning as a way of establishing rapport with them.

This strategy of embracing one's student identity speaks especially to the tension of distance-closeness, in which some GTAs express a desire to distance themselves from students because of their own self-doubt as a teacher. While other GTAs may feel uncomfortable sharing their student identity with their students in this way, Thomas's story offers us one possible way to reframe our distance-closeness tension. Instead of pretending to be perfect teachers who know all of the answers, we can instead embrace our identities as students and new teachers. We can use these identities to connect with our students and to join with them in the creation of knowledge.

Ideally, this decision to co-create knowledge with our students will not stop when we graduate. Many of the GTAs in this study talked about the importance of being life-long students. As Joe explains, “Being a student is a state of mind as much as it is a vocation. I think at some point if you really believe that there is nothing for you to learn, you’re in deep trouble.” Frances, too, explains that she will “always be a student,” even when she has moved on to full-time teaching. For these GTAs, being a student seems to involve maintaining an intellectual curiosity as well as a sense of humility; as Joe puts it, when we think we know everything, we’re in trouble. This idea of maintaining a student mentality relates to Freire’s (1970/2003) philosophy of problem-posing education, in which “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 80). If, as GTAs, we can practice embracing our roles as problem-posing teachers, we can cultivate healthy habits of intellectual curiosity in our classrooms that will serve us well in our futures as educators.

Implications for Students and Educators

While this research offers useful insights for GTAs and their supervisors, it also has broader implications for teachers and students in general. In conducting this research, my primary goal was to identify the tensions that GTAs experience in their roles and the strategies that they use to negotiate these tensions. However, as Staton and Darling (1989) have pointed out, no one makes a career as a GTA. Thus, some might argue that understanding the GTA experience holds limited significance, since GTAs

spend a relatively short portion of their professional lives in their roles. Yet the particular tensions that emerged from these GTAs' narratives are, to a large extent, *not* exclusive to the GTA experience. Instead, GTAs will likely continue to negotiate these tensions in different ways as many of them transition into full-time teaching careers.

From my casual conversations with other lecturers and professors, it seems clear to me that the question of distance and closeness with students is a tension with which many educators grapple. And while tenure-track professors and lecturers do not experience the perfection-reality tension exactly as GTAs do, they nevertheless face the often conflicting desires to focus on and excel in teaching, research, and university service. Thus, the tensions that characterize the GTA experience also, in different ways, infuse the lives of many university instructors. And since all but one of the GTAs I met plan to continue their careers as teachers, I believe we can contribute to the overall success and welfare of post-secondary instructors by addressing the needs and concerns of GTAs. Specifically, by helping GTAs learn to negotiate these tensions in constructive and healthy ways, we help them develop "best pedagogical practices" that will continue to serve them well throughout their teaching careers.

Supporting GTAs as educators is particularly important because of the impact that it can have on students. GTAs usually teach introductory courses, which means that they are often one of the first instructors that students meet within that department, and sometimes also the college environment in general. (During my department's GTA training, we often remind each other that we're not just teaching public speaking, we're also teaching "how to do college.") The experiences that students have in a GTA's

classroom are likely to have an impact on their perceptions of that GTA's department and the university as a whole. Thus, it is important to pay close attention to GTAs' development as instructors, so as to ensure the best possible learning environment for their students (both the students they teach while they are GTAs, and those they teach later in their careers). For example, if GTAs learn to take thoughtful risks in the classroom (as the GTAs in this study advise), they may become more supple and innovative educators. This in turn benefits their students, since teachers can then adapt to different situations and address course material in a variety of ways. And GTAs who strive for balance in their personal and professional lives are probably more likely to stay in teaching for the long run instead of burning themselves out with their exhausting perfectionism.

All of the GTAs in this study spoke about the satisfaction they feel from building relationships with students, and making a difference in students' lives is obviously important to them. To maintain this level of involvement and dedication, GTAs need relationships with peers and mentors to sustain and nourish them, and to help them negotiate the tensions that arise from their conflicting roles. By helping GTAs develop these crucial relationships while they are new teachers, we can ensure they will have the support network they will need to continue teaching, thus giving them the chance to make a difference in their students' lives for years to come.

Directions for Future Research

As mentioned earlier, this is an exploratory study that points to many other possible veins of GTA research. In the interest of bridging the gap between quantitative

and qualitative GTA research, I think it would be valuable to use these interview studies to develop a survey instrument that could be offered to GTAs nationwide. While I do not suggest a shift back to exclusively quantitative research, I do think it would be useful to find out the extent to which the tensions that these GTAs express also reflect the experiences of their peers in different regions and different types of institutions. Surveys would be a good way to gain insight into a broader population. By pairing in-depth interview studies with broader survey data, we can develop an even more holistic understanding of the GTA experience and can provide better support to GTAs.

Moreover, I am interested in examining how GTAs' cultural identities affect the tensions that they experience. The GTAs I interviewed identified primarily as Caucasian/White, which in this case was a byproduct of my convenience sampling method. (Most of the GTAs who responded to my interview requests happened to identify as Caucasian.) And while ethnicity is not the only factor that should influence which GTAs we study, it is definitely important to consider the impact that ethnicity and other cultural identities can have on the GTA experience. For example, this study included two international GTAs, both of whom talked about how their international backgrounds influence their experiences in the classroom. In following the work of Hendrix et al. (2007), it would be interesting to focus more specifically on the ways that cultural identities (e.g., race, gender, social class, sexuality, ability, etc.) intersect with the GTA identity.

Several GTAs in the study also pointed out the value of doing a longitudinal interview study of GTAs, e.g., interviewing GTAs when they first start teaching, when

they are more experienced GTAs, and then when they move on to full-time teaching. This type of study could offer even greater insight into the long-term effects and benefits of GTA training programs, and would further clarify the factors that have the greatest positive influence on GTAs as educators.

Final Thoughts

If there is one idea that I hope all readers take away from this research, it is the idea that we must gather in community to talk about teaching and to support one another as we take risks. As GTAs, our stories about teaching are numerous: we relish teaching, we dissect teaching, we question teaching, we rage against teaching, and we celebrate teaching. Sharing these stories can help us build relationships that will sustain us as teachers long after we graduate from our GTA programs. Yet sharing our stories does more than just strengthen our relationships. As Shaw and Nederhouser (2005) argue, “stories have provided potent means of perceiving, organizing, and communicating human experience. Stories, then, represent powerful, universal ways of knowing” (p. 85). After listening to the stories of these GTAs, I am even more convinced that this is true.

Stories offer us not just catharsis, but also wisdom and understanding. By exploring and analyzing GTAs’ stories, we can better understand the tensions that GTAs face. In turn, we can create training programs that support and nurture them as educators, and that ultimately contribute to the thoughtfulness and engagement of future generations of university faculty. So whether our conversations about teaching happen in hallways, classrooms, stairwells, or conference rooms, we *must* continue these conversations, because they form the heart of our community. As we join together to voice our fears

and struggles, I hope we can draw on the shared strength of this community and enter our classrooms with renewed energy, creativity, and passion.

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APPENDIX A: IRB Approval to Conduct Research



San José State
UNIVERSITY

**Office of the Provost
Associated Vice President
Graduate Studies & Research**

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San Jose, CA 95192-0025
Voice: 408-924-2427
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E-mail: gradstudies@sjsu.edu
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To: Jennifer Hennings

From: Pamela Stacks, Ph.D.
Associate Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pamela C. Stacks".

Date: December 22, 2008

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

“Tales of teaching: exploring the dialectical tensions of the GTA experience from the GTA perspective”

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Dr. Pamela Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subject's portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond December 22, 2009 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2427.

Protocol #S0804370

cc. Deanna Fassett, 0112

The California State University:
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico,
Dominguez Hills, East Bay, Fresno,
Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy,
Monterey Bay, Northridge, Pomona,
Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Diego,
San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

APPENDIX B: Agreement to Participate in Research



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Agreement to Participate in Research

Responsible Investigator: Jennifer Hennings

Title of Protocol: Tales of Teaching: Exploring the Dialectical Tensions of the GTA Experience from the GTA Perspective

You have been asked to participate in a research study investigating the experiences—the successes and the struggles—that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) have as they balance their roles as students and teachers.

You will be asked participate in 1 or 2 interviews (each approximately two hours long) with Ms. Hennings, a graduate student, at a time, date and location that is mutually convenient; these discussions will be audiotaped.

While you are participating in this study, you may choose to reflect on personal experiences that are challenging or uncomfortable. You may enjoy having the opportunity to share your experiences as a graduate teaching assistant.

Although the results of this study may be published, no information that could identify you will be included.

You will receive no monetary compensation for participation in this research study.

Questions about this research may be addressed to Jennifer Hennings, (408) 924-5389, <jenhennings@gmail.com>, or Dr. Deanna L. Fassett, (408) 924-5511, <Deanna.Fassett@sjsu.edu>. Complaints about the research may be presented to Dr. Dennis Jaehne, Department Chair, Department of Communication Studies, (408) 924-5360. Questions about research subjects' rights, or a research-related injury, may be presented to Dr. Pamela Stacks, Associate Vice President, Graduate Admissions and Program Evaluations, (408) 924-2427.

No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose to not participate in this study.

Your consent is being given voluntarily. You may refuse to participate in the entire study or in any part of the study. If you decide to participate in the study, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative effect on your relations with San José State University or with any other participating institutions or agencies.

At the time that you sign this consent form, you will receive a copy of it for your records, signed and dated by the investigator.

- **The signature of a participant on this document indicates agreement to participate in the study.**
- **The signature of a researcher on this document indicates agreement to include the above named participant in the research and attestation that the participant has been fully informed of her or his rights.**

Participant's Signature

Date

Investigator's Signature

Date

The California State University
Chancellor's Office
Bakersfield, Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills,
East Bay, Fresno, Fullerton, Humboldt, Long Beach,
Los Angeles, Maritime Academy, Monterey Bay,
Northridge, Pomona, Sacramento, San Bernardino,
San Diego, San Francisco, San José, San Luis Obispo,
San Marcos, Sonoma, Stanislaus

APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol

RQ1: How do GTAs articulate challenges and concerns about their roles as GTAs?

1. What would you like your pseudonym to be? What field are you in?
2. Describe your institution. What are you asked to do as a GTA? (What are your daily classroom responsibilities? What role do you play in developing syllabi and/or curriculum? What are your lesson-planning and/or grading responsibilities?)
3. What motivated you to become a GTA?
4. What were your expectations about the GTA role before you started? How has it turned out to be similar/different than what you expected?
5. What sort of teaching experience (if any) did you have prior to becoming a GTA?
6. What sort of training did you participate in prior to becoming a GTA? What sorts of on-going training and development activities are available at your institution? (To what extent do you participate in these?)
7. In what ways did you feel prepared for the role? In what ways do you wish you'd been more prepared?
8. What is the best or most rewarding part about being a GTA? In what ways has this changed with time? Can you think of a specific experience that stands out as most rewarding?
9. What is the most challenging part about being a GTA? How have these challenges changed with time? Can you think of a specific experience that stands out as most challenging? How did you handle this challenge?

RQ2: What tensions emerge from GTAs' narratives of role conflict and identity management?

10. Describe yourself as a teacher. Tell me about a particularly memorable teaching moment.
11. Describe yourself as a student. Tell me about a particularly memorable student moment.
12. Do you think of yourself more as a teacher or a student? Is one role more important than the other?
13. Tell me about your relationships with other GTAs in your department. How do GTAs interact? What is your interaction like with other GTAs? (When/how often do you see them? What do you talk about?) How do you think your experience may be similar/different to that of other GTAs?
14. Tell me about your interactions with professors and other faculty in your program. What do professors think about GTAs? Do your professors know that you're a GTA?

15. Have you ever had to choose between your work as a teacher (e.g., grading or lesson-planning) and your work as a student (e.g., studying, researching)? Which did you choose? How did it feel?
16. What would the ideal GTA training program look like, in your opinion?
17. How are you supervised and evaluated? What is your relationship like with your GTA supervisor?
18. What do you plan to do after you graduate? Has being a GTA influenced your plans?
19. Any final thoughts or reflections you'd like to share?