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Review of Meaghan Brewer's *Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition*

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Brewer, Meaghan. *Conceptions of Literacy: Graduate Instructors and the Teaching of First-Year Composition*. Utah State UP, 2020, 208pp.

Graduate students are a continual point of interest for scholars in composition as they represent a large portion of the teaching population and the emerging minds in our field (Estrem and Reid; Dobrin; Dryer; Wisniewski). These conversations have become so integral to our work that in 2011, Reid and Estrem defined the area as Writing Pedagogy Education (WPE), which “encompasses the ongoing education, mentoring, and support of new college-level writing instructors” (223). Despite the recent designation of WPE, scholarship on graduate student training extends at least 40 years with early researchers focusing on types of training and ways of professionalizing graduate students (Dobrin; Latterell). More recently, scholars have turned their attention to the decision making of individual graduate students and how these choices are influenced by teacher training or other facets of identity (Dryer; Reid; Wisniewski). Meaghan Brewer’s new book, *Conceptions of Literacy*, complements these newer conversations about graduate students experiencing teacher training and the circular way these experiences shape WPE. Her central claim is that teacher educators must focus on graduate students’ conceptions of literacy to understand new teachers’ classroom decisions, experiences with training, and theorizing of writing and learning. She defines conceptions of literacy “as a set of values and beliefs about literacy that colors one’s way of viewing language and, consequently, the world” (15). The strength of her book lies in weaving New Literacy Studies and WPE scholarship together to better understand *all* teachers in writing programs and how the decisions we make are grounded in assumptions about writing and learning.

Brewer starts her book in a practicum classroom. Surrounded by new teachers in training, she reflects on her own beginnings and the changes she went through as a graduate student and in her research -- particularly in terms of her views on literacy. These reflections became the basis for her empirical research project where she traces the conceptions of literacy of seven new graduate instructors.^{1} [\[#note1\]](#) By drawing on graduate instructors’ literacies, she hopes to “productively challenge work on learning by bringing graduate instructors’ preconceptions to the fore and demonstrating how significant they are as the graduate instructors take up concepts presented to them in their practica” (30). Brewer uses Goggin’s mapping of literacy views, informed by Scribner and Knoblauch, to identify three conceptions of literacy most important to her participants: literacy for personal growth, social/critical literacy, and cultural literacy. Through a rich array of data sources, including teaching and practicum observations, interviews, and literacy narrative collection, Brewer is able to fully understand her participants’ conceptions of literacy and the ways they are “like identities ... dynamic and fixed” (126). These data sources are particularly useful for her work on individual graduate student experiences and follow in the tradition of other qualitative case studies in WPE (Ebest; Dryer; Restraino; Wisniewski). As previous literature on teacher training suggests, these changes happen overtime and in engaging with undergraduate students, mentors, conferences, and theoretical texts (Dryer; Estrem and Reid; Obermark, Brewer, Halasek). In Reid’s 2017 open letter to new GTAs she emphasizes the continual learning process as never ending—a similar tension explored in Obermark, Brewer, and Halasek’s work where they critique the traditional “one and done” approach to GTA training. Brewer furthers this research by suggesting that just as there is no one timeline for learning to teach, there is also no one worldview graduate instructors encompass about writing and teaching.

Brewer organizes her book in five chapters with an introduction and conclusion bookmarking three chapters on literacy conceptions of graduate instructors. Not only are her middle chapters catalogued by the three common domains of literacy, she also separates her participants by disciplinary backgrounds (rhetoric and composition, literature, and creative writing respectively). She ends each of these chapters with ways WPAs and mentors can support graduate instructors whose literacy conceptions mirror those in her study. For Lily and Karen, the two rhetoric and composition participants highlighted in the second chapter on literacy as personal growth, she suggests WPAs can affirm “the personal and expressivist roots of our discipline” (61). She offers readings such as Bartholomae and Elbow be put in conversation with other texts as a possible avenue for new teachers to enter into contemporary conversations. At the end of the third chapter, she explains that Jordi, Garrett, and Blake’s sense of literacy as textual interpretation—a common perspective for literature students—can be addressed in practica by having them “model a lesson” on close reading suggesting that “assignment graduate instructors to model lessons would be a way of engaging their funds of knowledge while also putting their conceptions of literacy into productive conflict” (92). In Brewer’s 2019 article in *Composition Forum*, “[“The Text is the Thing”: Graduate Students in Literature and Cultural Conceptions of Literacy,”](https://compositionforum.com/issue/42/text-thing.php) [https://compositionforum.com/issue/42/text-thing.php] she expands her third chapter further and focuses on these three participants to illustrate a wide range of solutions such as drawing on disability studies, designing projects and lessons where they define constructs such as “critical thinking,” and writing a literacy narrative. In Chapter 4, Brewer draws on threshold concepts and “troublesome knowledge” to explain how her creative writing graduate instructors—who draw on social/critical views of literacy—still struggle with reconciling literacy and pedagogy. Interestingly, it is in Chapter 4 where Brewer begins to discuss the disciplinary stakes of training new instructors, as we often use these spaces to justify and solidify the field of Rhetoric and Composition (Dobrin; Latterell). Brewer argues, “Instead, I think we can, in sites like the practicum, assert composition’s disciplinary knowledge while acknowledging how graduate instructors’ conceptions of literacy complicate or reveal the “troublesome” nature of this knowledge” (123). Throughout she is opening space for multiple conceptions of literacy while also upholding disciplinary values. Her suggestions at the end of each chapter for different participants reflects a “correcting” or a further way of thinking and complicating these literacies in the light of threshold concepts.

Brewer’s work both upholds various ideas about training graduate instructors -- such as linking practices with pedagogy and the need for continual training and guidance, while also resisting assumptions about the values and incoming knowledge of GTAs as separate from personal theories of writing (Dryer; Reid, Estrem, and Belcheir; Wisniewski). The central question for many WPE scholars is what is influencing graduate students’ decision making? Is it past experiences, teacher training, mentorship, disciplinary values, or all the above? Essentially, Brewer is answering this central question by suggesting these theories of learning and writing are intrinsically linked to conceptions of literacy. She makes the recurring claim that “graduate instructors come to their practica with powerful (but often tacit) preconceptions of what literacy is and should be and that these attitudes affect the way they teach their composition courses” (128). It is these conceptions of literacies and priorities that impact new teachers—and these are not bound by individual fields. Yet, each of her chapters are not only separated by conceptions of literacy but also disciplines. In her 2019 article, Brewer writes, “anxiety related to graduate instructor disciplinarity and its overlaps with conceptions of literacy is due to the truncated nature of graduate instructor training, as well as the subsidiary role of the practicum in the context of graduate instructors’ other coursework.” In attempting to disentangle graduate students’ disciplinary divisions there is an unfortunate introduction to a new division—those between conceptions of literacy and the relationship those conceptions have within disciplines. Within Chapter 4 on threshold concept where she traces two MFA students, she writes, “I had expected Max’s and Barbara’s beliefs, as MFA students, to be more like Lily’s and Karen’s: writing is personal and expressive and, therefore, can’t be taught” (98). Brewer’s own surprise about MFA students opens the conversation to readers about our assumptions of disciplinary stereotypes and is an essential chapter to guide WPAs on reconciling these assumptions. Unfortunately, we cannot disentangle the practicum course from disciplinary discussions and as Brewer points out in the end, “Making literacy more central both to the graduate practicum and the composition course graduate instructors teach might also involve shifting our priorities and our sense of disciplinary identity” (150). Part of her organizational structure of separating conceptions of literacy and graduate students by disciplinary fields reinforces these stereotypes—yet the evidence she draws from and solutions she poses helps teacher educators reflect on these assumptions and start disentangling them.

One of the biggest strengths of Brewer's book is the practical solutions she offers to her audience in the appendix section and throughout about ways to engage new teachers in reflection. Brewer suggests writing a literacy narrative allows graduate instructors "to consider and reflect on the understandings of literacy they brought to the course, a reflection I argue is crucial to their development as teachers" (142). Through reflection, graduate instructors can begin to understand where their conception of literacy came from and how they impact their reading of pedagogical texts and choices within the classroom. She argues to be impactful there must also include a revision to this original literacy narrative to illustrate growth. Additionally in her appendix she provides an "Assignment-Ranking Activity" where she has students choose between six assignments they might assign undergraduate students in order to understand their teaching preferences. Although many teacher training texts include suggestions for reflective writing (Reid), Brewer models examples essential to helping support new and continuing mentors of WPE alike. Further, the goal of these assignments is to complicate not only new teachers' expectations and practices but also those of the mentors. She argues that beyond individual graduate instructors' work, reflection must be met with responsive mentors who admit "to not knowing everything about writing" and an undergraduate curriculum where graduate instructors have an opportunity to explore their literacies (146). Her book provides practical direction for mentors and teacher educators, as well as helpful theorizing for WPE and literacy scholars, encouraging multiple audiences to take up this work in the future. She poses that many questions in WPE can use her work of weaving two scholarly threads as a model. In her conclusion, Brewer remarks that "Indeed, if we look to fields like linguistics and literacy studies some of the answers, or at least some better ways of framing these questions, already exist" (150). By encouraging us to look beyond our own field but to a wide range of disciplines she starts the healing process of disentangling differences between disciplines, conceptions of literacy, and the way we do WPE scholarship—upholding the ultimate goal of supporting the "long, developmental process of becoming teachers" (7) we are *all* engaging in.

Notes

1. Brewer uses the term graduate instructor rather than graduate teaching assistant to highlight the agency graduate students have in the classroom as instructors of record (4). ([Return to text. \[#note1_ref\]](#))

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