Four years ago, as a new Writing Program Administrator scheduled to teach composition pedagogy the following term, I sat in a CCCC conference room watching Stephen Wilhoit place a series of transparencies on the overhead projector as he outlined how much there was to do in such a class. In seven categories, Wilhoit listed some 25 separate issues that new TAs needed to study. As it turns out, he was being mercifully conservative: in his recent book, The Allyn & Bacon Teaching Assistant’s Handbook, he includes 13 chapters with nearly a hundred separate topics and hundreds more subtopics. Seeing my future unfold in front of me that morning, I began to create intricate reading lists and marching plans for my pedagogy students. Weeks later, in my office, I found my course options increasing further. One new anthology dedicated to preparing new teachers of composition offered ten chapters of information on topics crucial for new TAs; another reprinted dozens of key articles from the field’s best journals; still others offered classroom scenarios, excerpts of representative student writing, model syllabi, historical and pedagogical overviews. And always there were more topics and tasks and articles, all waiting for me to cover them in my fifteen-week class.

It is axiomatic among writing program administrators generally, and more specifically among those of us responsible for preparing teachers of composition, that we have far too much to do and far too few resources. In addition, compositionists have begun to construct disciplinary narratives that depend upon revealing—even celebrating—just how much a writing teacher, a program administrator, and/or a teacher of teachers has to know, do, and cover to be a successful professional. These narratives make visible the work that we do, which benefits our professional reputations. Yet particularly in the...
case of composition pedagogy instruction, I worry that narratives emphasizing comprehensiveness and scope may come to overshadow equally important narratives about inquiry and process. A coverage-based pedagogy, in many ways so well suited to the institutional geography of introductory, certification-focused courses that a pedagogy seminar seems to occupy, can too easily become a default approach that limits rather than expands our options.

As we develop and improve courses for teachers of composition, then, I argue that we need—very deliberately, publicly, and collectively—to focus on uncoverage, to emphasize discoveries that lead to long-term learning over immediate competencies. That is, we need to conceive of the pedagogy course at its foundation in the way that we now conceive of first-year writing: as an intellectual engagement rather than an inoculation, as practice in a way of encountering the world rather than mastery of skills or facts, as preparation for a lifetime of thinking like a teacher (see Recchio, “Parallel” 57). The exploratory, inquiry-driven, reflective study that educators argue promotes high-quality, flexible, satisfying writing and teaching should be set out as a first priority in our curricula.

Certainly, many of us work toward such goals in our pedagogy courses now. In promoting uncoverage, we emphasize pedagogies that focus strongly on “constructive interrogation” of teaching strategies (Swyt 26), pedagogies that help teachers develop “a language for talking about teaching” rather than a collection of teaching activities (Latterell 15). We hope that encouraging new teachers to uncover root questions, contradictions, and unsolvable problems in composition will prepare them to be “conscious . . . and curious” so that they can become able to “critique and reform the profession rather than simply reproduce it” (Lindgren 294-5). However, facing both increasing opportunities and multiple pressures to use the pedagogy course to cover more and more material, without a concomitant increase in time and resources for pedagogy instruction, individual teachers may find that our intuitive resistance will no longer be enough. The time we spend covering “just a little more” theoretical or practical information may devour the time we intended to provide for reflection on and discovery of related questions. It is clear that the challenges posed by the default-nature of coverage pedagogy are not merely local or personal: they are disciplinary and institutional, and they thus need to be named, discussed, and deliberately resisted if we are to have a theory of composition pedagogy that reflects central values and best practices in composition/rhetoric and teacher education, one that features uncoverage as a primary goal.

Blending coverage and uncoverage is, to be sure, only one of the challenges facing teachers of composition pedagogy. As Catherine Latterell and others have noted, composition pedagogy seminars already struggle to balance teaching theories and teaching practices of writing instruction. Given
Institutional and financial constraints, pedagogy instructors also operate within a set of additional paradoxes. Writing-teacher instruction cannot be quick, although we often have very little time in which to provide it; it needs to be multifaceted and to encourage higher-order thinking even though we are usually working with novice students of both pedagogy and composition. It needs to allow for trial and error, resistance and internalization by the teachers whom we place, often at the very beginning of their pedagogy education, into a program charged with offering consistent, equitable writing education to hundreds or thousands of undergraduates. Faced with a course that apparently needs to be everything to everyone in 12 weeks (or 6, or 3), making uncoverage one’s top priority may seem impossible or even ill-advised. Yet aiming for coverage as a primary goal—deliberately, as I found myself doing while constructing my first syllabus, or unconsciously, as I have found myself doing more recently—can undermine all of our other goals, limit all other reforms we might make. And major reforms may be more necessary than it seems at first glance. Although full-credit graduate pedagogy seminars are relatively new to many institutions, they have often evolved from earlier, more limited “TA Orientation” formats, and thus their pedagogies may require reform in order simply to meet the needs of the composition courses into which we are sending TAs. As Judith Goleman explains:

Preparing literacy instructors to construe their classroom discourse as . . . an ongoing negotiation is sufficiently different from traditional practices to warrant the development of an explicit pedagogy. The predominant quick-start model of TA preparation is the residue of an earlier rhetoric that concerned itself mainly with arrangement and mechanical correctness. Preparing TAs in the old way for a new rhetoric constitutes a contradiction that will produce inadequately transformed writing instruction. (95)

In order for us to begin to transform the pedagogy of the pedagogy seminar, the coverage roots of the “old way” and the continuing pressures to stay true to those roots need first to be exposed and named and then to be directly countered. In the sections that follow, I name several of the strongest pressures moving us toward coverage and then discuss two uncoverage strategies—problem-based inquiry and discovery drafting—that might help pedagogy instructors plan their way out of the coverage trap.

Covering composition pedagogy: “More by default than by design”

As I noted, it’s not that compositionists are unaware of the pitfalls of coverage-based pedagogy, nor that we have ignored other approaches for teaching composition pedagogy. But coverage models are institutionally pervasive,
materials and rewards for coverage approaches are increasingly available, and the resources necessary to support transformed pedagogy curricula are scarce. As Richard Marback notes, the composition pedagogy course he taught—like those that many of us have inherited—had acquired its multiple roles in the English Department curriculum “more by default than by design” (101). In an institutional setting where coverage is the default approach, creating curricular alternatives for composition pedagogy education should begin with increased alertness to the many vectors of coverage pressures, if we are to instigate a carefully orchestrated resistance and (re)design.

To begin with, pedagogy instructors may benefit from directly acknowledging the various institutional pressures that we face to cover disciplinary material—pressures built into the systems in which we teach.

- The pressure of prevalence: Administrators, colleagues, and students are comfortable with courses that survey knowledge broadly.
- The pressure of introductory status: The pedagogy seminar is often a true introduction, offering ideas and approaches completely new to most students (a rare occurrence in graduate education), and coverage is often construed as an appropriate or even mandatory introductory pedagogy.⁴
- The pressure of certification: When constructed as a class that serves a first-year composition program—providing competent teachers for hundreds of students—the pedagogy seminar is expected by TAs and by administrators to cover what those teachers need to know, to guarantee a basic knowledge and competency in the field.⁵

In addition, those of us who design composition pedagogy syllabi may feel coverage pressures from within our own discipline and our local programs.

- The pressure of disciplinary breadth: Composition/rhetoric is historically broad and increasingly multidisciplinary; we continue to expand our reach with new technologies, literary and cultural theories, and pedagogies; and knowledge new and old is becoming more visible and available for easy coverage via textbooks and anthologies.
- The pressure of pedagogical and local breadth: Even without opening a single anthology, a pedagogy course can be overwhelmed by the task of covering the basics of teaching, of teaching writing, and of teaching writing classes in a particular program or curriculum, to the satisfaction of TAs and administrators.⁶

Finally, a related disciplinary pressure has emerged in recent years out of the growth and stability of composition/rhetoric as an academic field: the pressure
of professionalization. Aiming for coverage in the required pedagogy course allows us to reassure ourselves and others of the field’s solidity and professional status. Moreover, coverage—a common language in the institutions in which we seek status—helps us to professionalize the teaching of composition, so that it is not just something that “anybody can do,” so that we can more forcefully demand resources and compensation for teachers and programs.

Composition pedagogy instructors are thus likely to find ourselves caught between two powerful forces: a strong commitment, rooted firmly in the theory of composition/rhetoric and our daily pedagogical practices in first-year writing courses to inquiry-based education; and strong internal and external pressures to provide a definitive answer to Edward White’s recent question, “What is the minimum amount of theory and history necessary for responsible teaching of writing?” (emphasis added). I worry that familiarity with or even admiration of more reflective approaches (like the ones proposed by Latterell, Goleman, and Yancey [Reflection], among others) will not be enough to enable resistance to coverage—particularly for new instructors, for those in institutions with meager teacher-preparation resources, or for those who are recruited to the job of teacher-preparation without adequate preparation in the field themselves. Active resistance of coverage pressures that come from all directions and a determination to re-frame the choices entirely will be necessary to help those instructors, and such resistance needs to be overtly supported in disciplinary conversations. Composition studies has a long history of being successful at such re-framing: we may need all of our experience and resources to help teachers successfully (re)design one of the discipline’s keystone courses.

Foregrounding Problems and Difficulties: Strategies for Uncoverage

Building uncoverage into a composition pedagogy syllabus in the face of multiple coverage pressures requires attention to both the goals and the structures of the individual course. Such revisions will more likely succeed when they are supported by clearly articulated disciplinary frameworks and pedagogical theories. We may thus need to remind ourselves, and deliberately advise our colleagues, that new or pre-service teachers of writing do not come into an orientation or seminar as blank slates nor exit it prepared to put into practice everything that has been read, discussed, or performed. As George Hillocks and Robert Parker, among others, explain, new teachers already have theories about teaching, rooted in contexts and experiences that may be obvious or long buried, and not all of those theories need to be corrected or converted. Moreover, we know from experience and can more publicly emphasize that a single course cannot “fix” new teachers. It can still be tempting to view the course primarily through an administrative lens—emphasizing what Christine Farris describes as our need for “consistency across hundreds of sections of
— and thus to fall into coverage and fall away from encouraging the “confident, reflective teachers” whom Farris hopes we can watch “grow and change in interesting ways” (102). Deliberate uncoverage pedagogies help us resist by foregrounding Donald Schöns reflection-in-action as a goal for new teachers that is equally as valuable as the goals of schema and repertoire that a coverage-based pedagogy seminar provides. Reflection-in-action can help us trust that new teachers will continue to strive for all three of these goals over many years in the field. This three-way balance is crucial: uncoverage pedagogies need not create “content-free” classrooms for new writing teachers any more than they have for students in composition classrooms. Indeed, it is vital that new and continuing composition teachers review provocative ideas and theories, histories and best practices in the discipline, as long as those theories and histories are clearly approached as results of and invitations to dis-covery, not ends in themselves. The more pedagogy instructors find themselves under pressure to cover material, the more they will need to (re)emphasize uncoverage as a primary goal.

The two uncoverage models I examine here seem the most common in composition studies, the most accepted by academic culture in general, and the hardiest. They require enough time and infrastructure and provide enough rich engagement that there is significantly less time or need to resort to coverage as a pedagogical strategy. Neither is in itself particularly new or innovative: the first, a problem-based strategy, could also be characterized as an inquiry-based or contact-zone pedagogy; the second, which I define later as a discovery draft strategy, uses a writing-workshop structure to draw on the familiar idea that writing is a mode of learning, one particularly useful for composition teachers. The two are not mutually exclusive, nor do they prevent an instructor from designing curricula that also plan to cover some important issues or texts. In fact, in the past four years I have used both of these modes together, increasingly relying on them to help me plan pedagogy courses that satisfy me as a teacher and as an administrator. As I have been adding new approaches, however, I still find in my course framework clear indications of its coverage origins. Indeed, because of the tentative and incomplete transformation of my own current pedagogies — and because, unlike many graduate pedagogy instructors, I am fortunate to teach a course that reaches TAs at least a semester before their first teaching experience — in the following pages I offer descriptions of my own assignments and strategies as theories-in-practice rather than as specific models for best practices in pedagogy curriculum design.

Problem-based uncoverage: We see examples of problem-or question-based learning in all kinds of “special” or “advanced” courses around us, courses deliberately constructed away from default settings. Such courses focus at a basic curricular level on observation, interpretation, imagining, hypothesizing,
testing, evaluating, and so forth” (Hillocks 13). While it is possible to “add in” a case-study or individual research project to a coverage-based course, this approach can seem to merely require one more thing to cover. If inquiry into knotty, unsolvable problems is to unseat or more evenly balance coverage, it needs to be built into the fundamental design of the course.

One example of such a model, focusing primarily on an approach to reading disciplinary materials, is directly articulated by Wendy Swyt: “I propose that we bring [Patricia] Bizzell’s notion of a rhetorical ‘contact zone’ to our teacher training occasions…. [W]e might offer clusters of essays that depict some of the complex negotiations of difference in the writing classroom” (28). Swyt suggests developing one course unit, for instance, around an eight-essay cluster (including student writing) to help teachers examine classroom conflicts that focus on issues of identity or diversity in order to discuss “the rhetorical complexities of location and authority in writing” (29) and “see how a range of rhetorical positions politicizes the very stance that they adopt” (30). In doing so, she is hoping to unsettle her students, to allow them to gain what Nancy Welch calls “an awareness of [their] assumptions as assumptions … [and] an awareness that these assumptions [are] in tension with other constructions” (399). By choosing texts that deliberately contradict each other in multiple ways and scheduling ample time for inquiry and reflection, Swyt makes a significant, visible commitment to a pedagogy that can help current or future teachers develop tolerances for ambiguity and become comfortable investigating rather than solving problems.

By the end of her class description, coverage pressures seem to creep back in, as Swyt suggests four more essays that might more thoroughly complicate new teachers’ understanding of identity issues—here again, even measured multiplicity can seem to require coverage. Yet the act of scheduling adequate time for such readings and discussions to bear fruit makes it very difficult to slide fully into a coverage pedagogy. One could hardly manage a syllabus full of a dozen such topics, each with eight articles to read; a syllabus built around even one or two such units would thus need to relinquish a substantial amount of coverage in other areas. The new structure would not, by itself, smooth the way out of the coverage trap: the teacher of the course would still have to wrestle regularly with his or her coverage-conscience and with concerns about his or her role in preparing new teachers and certifying them as prepared. Trusting that questions about assignment design or collaborative learning would come up for investigation during a lengthy inquiry into diversity and identity would be difficult (for instructors and for new teachers); expecting that teachers who learn to investigate knotty diversity issues might well use the theories they uncover and develop to devise their own intelligent processes of assigning writing would require a leap of faith; allowing students
in a pedagogy class to raise and choose issues (not just how-to topics) for in-depth investigation seems like something one should reserve for one’s most experienced students/teachers. Yet some such trust or allowances are likely to move the pedagogy class out of coverage into more engaging pedagogies.

My own pedagogy syllabi have not yet reached such a level of trust; they are still built around units I design on responding, assigning, collaboration, teacher roles, and situations for writing classes, topics I feel compelled to cover overtly. As a result, I have had to construct an alternate inquiry-approach to unseating coverage, building each of our discussions on the “foundations” of unsolvable questions. As one example, for a peer-review workshop the second day of class, my seminar students write a short essay answering the question, “Do you think that first year composition classes best serve students if they focus primarily on encouraging students to develop their independent voices, or do they best serve students when they focus more strongly on helping the students master the conventions and meet the expectations of American academic prose?” I strongly suggest that my students not simply answer “both.” They don’t know enough to answer this question, they tell me, worried and sometimes angry; they’ve never taken composition before; they haven’t read anything about the discipline; it’s not even their field. Alicia sends an email to the group: “I interpreted ‘voice’ as a student’s own personal writing style. . . . [I]n class, I realized that everyone had a slightly different interpretation of ‘voice.’” Catching me in the hallway, she says she’s worried she did the assignment all wrong; I try to reassure her, delighted at the discovery she’s made and shared. (Maybe next year I’ll remember Alicia and be brave enough to take another Peter Elbow article off our must-read list.) Despite their concerns, I have not had any students who couldn’t write—and intelligently support—an answer, their own answer. They thus begin by taking stock of the “influences on [their] teaching that come from sources [they] can no longer identify: values, attitudes, beliefs” (Hillocks 37). Most importantly, we set up the course with a question at its heart, and students begin a long semester of uncovering answers and further questions.

As our peer reviews and discussions continue, students find themselves immersed in the fluidity of this issue (and others). Belinda notes in a reflective post-script, “I kept having revelations on what I [thought] was right . . . only to find that I contradicted myself as soon as I began to try to put the words on paper.” As it turns out, my classes have generally run about 3:1 in favor of conventions—despite Alicia’s “surprise . . . that I was the only one [in my peer group] to argue [for] conventions over voice”—but regardless of the individual arguments, we uncover the fact that there is a live question, a conflict, right there in the room with us, before many of us have read anything in the field. Sometimes the conflict comes even closer to home. Writing about
her revised essay, Charlotte explains her dilemma: “The writer in me wants to argue that personal voice is a key factor. . . . The teacher in me has decided that the primary goal . . . is to prepare students to write effectively . . . even if effective means somewhat dull and uninspired. . . . [In this essay,] I sold out my inner writer to my inner teacher. May she forgive me.” Wendy, facing a similar conflict, draws an alternate conclusion: “A focus on [conventions] did not ring true to my own core of truth,” so despite having previously focused primarily on teaching such conventions in her own classes, she remarks that “the strongest part of my essay is . . . where I offer clear reasons as to why I place the encouragement of voice over a focus on prose [conventions].” Finding out the exact places where individual students take (and wrestle with) their initial stands is intriguing; having them all take part in our early, lively focus on inquiry and discovery is invaluable; noting that we can begin the course with discovery rather than coverage is immensely encouraging.

Moreover, as we proceed through the topical groupings of texts, we can and do continually loop back to how the theories we’re reading feed into the question of “conventions vs. voice,” helping place other teachers and theorists into our own exploratory conversations rather than implying that they have the answers to all of our questions. Looking back, Evelyn explains, “I wish I had read [the assigned articles] before I wrote [the first] essay. . . . I changed my mind about the way I need to respond to student essays.” Despite Evelyn’s frustration at having presented what she now feels was an uninformed argument, I am pleased that her early draft exists to complicate what might have been a complete conversion to what she read. And I am excited to discover, a few lines later in her response, a paragraph that shows her selectively balancing ideas from assigned readings with her own convictions: “I still believe that it is our responsibility to. . . .” More recently, I have also begun deliberately opening the subtopics of discussion by brainstorming problems and questions with the students—upgrading the practicum discussion prompt of “What questions do you have (about your own teaching)?” to a more evocative starting point: “What are some of the unsolvable questions or tension-points concerning responding to student writing?” Having practiced discussing some basic tensions in their first essay, students are generally quick to see them in other contexts. My syllabus still looks like a list of topics and readings, but I’ve deliberately cut my topics from six to five and my reading list by 25%—and I’m finding that I worry just a little less about covering them all.

A second assignment I use also places the texts in a position secondary to discovery of questions. In Part 1 of their first major essay, the Exploration Essay, I ask students to write about how they write or teach (writing) or how they want to write or teach (writing) or how they learned to write or teach (writing). This is a personal essay, with stipulations that they not simply wax
romantic and that they dig for honest, complete answers. I very deliberately do not ask, at this point or later, for them to write a teaching philosophy statement; I want them to hold off on forming a cohesive, clearly articulated plan as long as possible. Because they’re exploring, they can go well beyond what they think a “good” teacher should want/learn/do. I’ve received essays that describe their authors as hybrids of film-noir detectives and displaced punk rockers or as blends of Virgil and James T. Kirk; one teacher recalls her teacher-grandmother whose students sent presents and candy at Christmas; one re-examines years of dejection at being an unsuccessful writer in English, her third language. All these writers discover how their own “contact zones” shape them in complicated ways as teachers or writers; such roots will likely affect them far more than anything I will ask them to read or discuss during our class, and being aware of one set of relationships between experience and teaching or writing helps them practice asking questions about others.

I see these discoveries as fundamental to preparing new teachers: more deadly to a teacher than Richard Fulkerson’s “modal confusion”—the assigning of an expressivist essay that is then graded formalistically—is an unknown, unresolved, covered-over conflict or link connecting the way a person wants to behave and be treated with the way she is acting or treating others. Once a student such as Naya explains that her formative experience was being asked to teach kindergarten for a year without any preparation, guidance, or knowledge of the expectations of the job, she can understand more about why it is “not only my interest in learning . . . but the constant fear [of looking] stupid in front of my students [that] motivates me to learn more and more in this area,” and she can consider ways to design assignments not based on the control of the five-paragraph-essay. “Coverage” can push all of us, teachers and students, to overlay new knowledge onto previous experiences, like frosting an uneven cake; in the highly unstable plate-tectonics of classroom teaching, though, things tend not to stay covered.

In a revision and expansion of these essays near the end of the semester, students are asked to incorporate the words and ideas of half a dozen authors we’ve read during the term. Sometimes the outside voices appear as they might have in a regular scholarly essay—though they still need to be matched to, not allowed to override, the writer’s own earlier discoveries. As Belinda notes, “I do not think that theory [alone] would accurately and adequately convey why I want to teach composition.” Other times, the outsiders are involved in almost literal dis-coverings: one writer becomes David Bartholomae commenting on sections of the writer’s earlier draft; one constructs a drama in which several famous theorists arrive, like Ghosts of Compositionists Past, to sit in his bedroom and converse about teaching. Even the more traditionally structured essays compile their own “clusters of essays” to investigate “complex negotia-
tions”; if they are not the exact clusters or questions I would have considered crucial to cover in a pedagogy class, they still provoke lively inquiry, promote “thinking like a teacher.” Former students sometimes say they’ve modeled teaching philosophy statements on these essays, but that was never the point. The point is in the process, a way of owning some ideas about teaching writing while leaving them open to further inquiry. I do not have data to be able to affirm that exploratory exercises such as these are more effective at covering the issues and “remediating” potential five-paragraph-essay teachers than lessons on specific composition theories supplemented by a slew of reading assignments. Yet prioritizing this approach in my pedagogy seminar has helped it feel more like a course of inquiry, more congruent with what I do—and what my students will do—in the profession.

Discovery-draft uncoverage: It’s not coincidental that my version of a “contact zone” pedagogy relies heavily on writing assignments. Although Swyt’s proposal demonstrates that there need be no direct equation of “reading” with “coverage,” emphasizing specific kinds of writing in the course helps me build a strong uncoverage pedagogy. The first benefit that I see from this approach is merely structural: I have found nothing so useful in levering myself out of a coverage mentality than scheduling significant chunks of class time to write, review, and revise. The second is a conceptual benefit: we are practicing a live, complex writing pedagogy, engaging authentically in the process we (plan to) teach. A third gain is more directly tied to inquiry: carefully designed writing assignments, workshops, and revision opportunities allow writers to discover new and/or important ideas, help them bring multiple viewpoints into the classroom on a regular basis, and encourage them to move toward change, reflection, and renewed inquiry. Whether or not one believes that graduate students need instruction in and practice with their writing, building the composition pedagogy course upon a foundation of exploratory writing assignments provides another way for students to begin to develop long-term habits of inquiry and reflection.

As with a problem-solving approach to uncoverage, an approach based on writing assignments and writing workshops needs to be deliberate, even exaggerated. One exaggeration might come in the form of “time on task”: in my most recent pedagogy course, for instance, I scheduled 40% of our class meeting days as writing workshops in a variety of formats. Moreover, individual writing assignments serve the inquiry-and-reflection goals of the composition pedagogy course best when they have two additional features. The first is what I think of as a “productive difficulty” component: a substantial amount of the writing assigned needs to lie outside the skills already mastered, or at least comfortably confronted, by the students. Otherwise the writing completed by a group of students most worried about their lack of disciplinary knowledge
can become more a matter of covering the information than participating in a creative, rhetorical negotiation. Students may be writing but not discovering very much. Thus while teaching-journals, response papers, and essays that directly mirror the assignments given to first-year students can serve various constructive purposes in the class, they may not suffice to bring a workshop mentality into full bloom. Second, some if not all of the writing assignments need to be explicitly and extensively exploratory and/or reflective, focused on investigating possibilities rather than drawing conclusions or covering information. Given Parker’s explanation of the rich repertoire of “theories-in-use” that new teachers bring with them (413) and Ruth Ray’s suggestion that reading personal essays allows the pedagogy instructor and classroom peers to be “real reader[s]” rather than only judges of final products (151), some assignments in the pedagogy course ought to encourage writers to discover their own theories and assumptions. Research essays, critiques of articles, short or isolated freewrites, and even the ubiquitous teaching philosophy statement can move writers and teachers too quickly past reflection and/or emphasize a focus on end-products, coverage, and mastery; these also may need to be carefully redesigned to function as pedagogy course uncovery assignments. In general, I link these two features under the familiar term “discovery draft”: a pedagogy class workshop should have an intense focus on authentic discovery drafting.

In my class at Oklahoma State, for example, the students’ work on our two-part exploration essay allows them to discover their own patterns of thinking and experience. They also have a chance to discover how they work as writers: both parts of the assignment ask for a kind of writing that is unfamiliar or at least defamiliarized. Personal essays “written for a grade” have not been a significant part of most of my students’ recent experience, even those who are studying creative writing, and the task of adding “theory” back into a personal essay requires a kind of genre-combining familiar to many compositionists and teachers but new to many of my students. Naya notes both kinds of challenges in composing her first draft: “I must confess that I was totally lost and found it very hard to venture into something out of the way of regular writing. . . . [Also] I have no answer to the question that I have to respond to.” For Naya, as for other students working on this assignment, “mastery” and “coverage” seem far enough out of reach (or relevance) that those goals almost entirely fade from the scene. Even later in the process, as the essay starts to become more academic, the defamiliarization and difficulty continue: “I had a more difficult time . . . adding in the theorists. I wasn’t sure what our balance should be between narrative and theory,” writes Kelley. Ray recommends that as instructors in graduate composition programs, we need to ask ourselves, “Did we acknowledge and encourage ambivalence, ambiguity, and multiplicity, or did we prematurely impose order and structure on our thinking?” (157); de-
liberately emphasizing a writing workshop featuring unfamiliar, exploratory approaches helps me answer “yes” to the first half of Ray’s question.

A second assignment I use more closely resembles traditional academic analysis: students write a synthesized argument drawing on three articles we have read, a task that also mirrors an assignment required of composition students in our program. In the pedagogy course, however, we use this as an option to make maximum use of productive difficulties. Pedagogy students write and share what Anne Lamott calls “shitty first drafts” (sometimes for the first time in their adult lives). We also talk at length about the stresses of creating an “original” argument in a field they’re not expert in, writing about secondary material and abstract concepts rather than about literature or more concrete research data, and revising their processes and texts wholesale while under grade pressures. Again, encouraged to play with the three articles rather than conduct official research, students make discoveries on multiple levels; in addition, the difficulty of balancing four voices in a six-page essay helps prompt many students to focus more on problems or questions than on solutions. Marc, for instance, reading essays by Bartholomae, Robert Brooke, and Catherine Lamb, finds that carnival is an even more slippery metaphor than he had expected, and he explores to what degree students and teachers might return from a carnival experience but “never quite return to exactly who we were.” Writers like Kelley may also discover questions about their own writing processes:

When I have to turn in drafts of things, it really messes me up. . . . For this [synthesis] paper, I actually finished all my thoughts and even got to the conclusion, thinking I would go back later and “flesh” it out some. WRONG!!! I completely lost any kind of momentum I had with the paper. . . . At least I have learned some valuable information about my composing process. . . .

Keith, facing revision challenges that are similarly unusual for him, connects his experience to those of his students:

After writing [an] essay, the only changes I usually make are grammatical/structural (that is, cosmetic). . . . Thankfully, the [peer] comments . . . pointed out some changes that I should make . . . Like many of [my students], I too tend to feel that once I’ve finished my essay, it is done and . . . it does not need any major changes. The reality is, though, that oftentimes it does, and we need to be able to work past those feelings in order to create better writing.

For Keith and Kelley, these are felt experiences, discoveries that something they have been told (or read) should be true is actually operating in their own practices as writers.

Watching these students move between formal and reflective writing helps us see how productive difficulty and reflective exploration are interlinked,
constructive activities for writers and for teachers. Further, their comments reveal how much we can uncover in carefully designed writing workshops in a pedagogy class. While it is not true that “anyone who can write can teach writing,” it may be closer to truth than a coverage-model lets us admit that writers taking time to share strategies and experiences with one another and to reflect on possible connections between their writing and their teaching can learn much of the material we would otherwise set forth in chapters and essays and handbooks.

The problem is not that somewhere out there whole legions of composition pedagogy students are being prevented from writing or reflecting or that pedagogy instructors set out, individually, to provide future teachers with a one-dimensional, static view of the profession to which we are all deeply committed. Indeed, the ubiquity of approaches such as the ones I have been outlining has probably been a significant factor in keeping composition pedagogy seminars from plunging headlong toward classes based on a Norton Anthology of Composition Theory. Yet the pressures to move the pedagogy seminar toward remediation and/or coverage continue to weigh on pedagogy instructors’ minds, to show up in conference presentations and department meetings and informal discussions, to tease us into contemplating questions (and designing books and syllabi) concerning the “minimum amount of theory and history” that writing teachers should know. Like the teacher-researchers Ray describes, we need “to determine what classroom conditions seem to encourage students to problematize their knowledge and what conditions limit or mitigate against this process” (156). Articulating problem-based instruction or discovery drafting—or some other uncoverage strategy I have not included here—as a foundational approach for a composition pedagogy course could be an important step toward publicly and collectively resisting these pressures, toward rebuilding the pedagogy course on our own terms.

The perils and potentials of uncertainty

A final pressure toward coverage in composition pedagogy that I have not yet directly discussed comes from the pedagogy students themselves. Recchio’s analysis corroborates my own experiences as both a TA and a teacher of TAs:

The concept of uncertainty as an enabling condition for anything—much less for teaching and learning—is not exactly what new TAs expect or want to hear…. Most want to be shown…what to teach and how to teach: what texts to use, what assignments to give…how to grade, how to run workshops, how to establish one’s authority in class, how to address questions of rhetoric, of grammar, of style, and so on. (“Essaying” 255)
I am fortunate to have my uncoverage strategies enabled by a multi-level mentoring program that covers many of the “what … and how to teach” questions and by the fact that my pedagogy students are not concurrently teaching for the very first time. It is, therefore, “easy for me to say” that a pedagogy course need not focus on coverage or remediation; it is at least easier for me than if I had a more immediate need to prevent new TAs from leading their students into pedagogical quicksand. Beyond that, though, I need to emphasize that even without facing the panic of instructors needing immediate help with next Monday’s class, my students find an uncoverage approach surprising, discomfiting, and even disabling. An email post from Evelyn gives a fairly mild expression of their considerable discomfort: “[T]his week … contradicted everything that I have been taught about teaching writing and reading student writing. I even wrote about it in my Post Script … To all the students I’ve made writing-phobic in the past, I repent.” Moreover, TAs’ concerns aren’t limited to worries about trying to survive as a TA or difficulties adjusting to the overall demands of a graduate school schedule. Graduate school just seems, by definition, not to be a place for not-knowing, to be instead a place for covering—in one way or another—any exposed ignorance. And as all of our anxiety dreams tell us, almost no place feels as exposed as the front of a classroom. Uncoverage is difficult and risky, demands much from both students and professors, and is thus not particularly popular.

Uncoverage poses disciplinary questions as well. Should there be no canon of material that composition teachers are expected to know? If there isn’t, how will we know that someone in particular—as opposed to “anyone off the street”—is qualified to teach writing? Given the common situation in composition programs in which teaching writing has been relegated to our most novice teachers, what tool besides the pedagogy course do we have for ensuring that the intellectual work of teaching writing is made visible to both its practitioners and its critics? I find these questions both compelling and a bit disingenuous. Of course composition pedagogy seminars should have “standards” and clearly stated outcomes just as first-year composition classes and programs should. Indeed, we should have such standards even more available than we do now: as compositionists, we should be doing more than publishing isolated syllabi, creating long, unattainable wish-lists of things our teachers should know, and developing another wave of textbooks and anthologies offering up the whole field of composition on a large silver platter. As with first-year composition, any kind of discipline-wide understanding would need to be modified to fit local students and resources. Yet without some kind of broader guidance, the composition pedagogy course will remain at risk for the same kind of overdetermination that first-year composition faced (and still faces in many situations). As one of the pedagogy instructors surveyed by
Latterell points out, solving a problem within a single set of classroom walls may not have much effect at all on the “centrifugal pressures that complicate...the safely enclosed world of the classroom” (17). Discussing composition pedagogy as an issue worthy of all compositionists’ attention and articulating clear strategies for improving that course beyond the safe worlds of our own classrooms may help us effect the larger changes we hope for in the teaching of writing.

Sociologist Susan Pitchford argues convincingly that “graduate students [should] stake out a teaching territory in their career. By this I mean that we should develop ‘teaching agendas’ in the same way that we develop research agendas” (qtd. in Hutchings 133). If we are to fully support composition instructors in developing a lively, inquiring teaching agenda parallel to the work they do as scholars, we need to begin preparing them for such a mindset from the beginning of their education. Building on a strong preparation in thinking like teachers, they can then help us continue to professionalize the teaching of writing without covering over the wonderfully energizing ambiguities, conflicts, and questions at the heart of the discipline.

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Notes

1 Contextual information, course information, pedagogical information, theory, technology, upper level courses, and student information.

2 See, for instance, the CCCC Position Statements on Scholarship in Composition and on the Preparation and Professional Development of Teachers of Writing.

3 The syllabi and pedagogical statements collected in Composition Studies’ 1995 special issue on composition pedagogy demonstrate some of the tensions between inquiry and coverage. Although a reading list is by no means an accurate measure of an instructor’s pedagogy, the variances in these lists (in the number and topic-range of the required texts) suggest that “what to cover” is as open and pressing a question as “how to teach.” Comments from individual instructors touch on the course’s need to be “an overview of knowledge” (Winslow 9) and/or a place for “questioning rather than telling” (Dunbar-Odom 18). Ruth Mirtz explains that she designs her course explicitly “for discovery and exploration” (25), though she also notes that the “organization and emphases” of her local program place limits on her pedagogy (26). Yet while many of these syllabi and commentaries reveal a conflict between covering local or disciplinary information and encouraging inquiry and discovery, discussion of that design challenge is surprisingly infrequent and brief.

4 An irony here, as Margaret Marshall points out, is that departments only infrequently offer an “intermediate” or “advanced” course in (composition) pedagogy (126), so a single seminar must operate at all three levels.
What more could we do,” asks Clyde Moneyhun, regarding both first-year composition and graduate study in the field, “if we gave up the credentialing function as our main product?” (409).

As one of my reviewers points out, while experienced writing teachers and pedagogy instructors may be better able to resist external disciplinary pressures, we may experience more self-inflicted pressure to convey to our students all that we have come—over time—to know about the field and the local context.

Professionalizing teachers is a difficult business. Marshall discusses the history of such efforts at length and argues that when professionalization efforts are based primarily upon knowledge-mastery, they undercut their main goal by actually “reducing opportunities to help teachers make independent, informed judgments, an essential function of a professional” (10). Chris Clark concurs, noting that in some quarters “professional development” of teachers “implies a process done to teachers . . . [and implies] that teachers have deficits . . . that can be fixed by training” (qtd. in Swenson 306). Marcy Taylor and Jennifer Holberg argue further that the construction of graduate student teachers as a problem that needs fixing is another arm of professionalization: “It is not surprising . . . that one way the emerging discipline of composition would attempt to assert its status is through controlling (naming) insiders/outsiders” (612).

The pedagogy seminar at Oklahoma State comprises roughly equal numbers of students who have never taught and who are concurrently tutoring in the university writing center as well as shadowing first-year composition teachers, and students who enter the program with previous teaching experience who are concurrently teaching two sections of first-year composition. A strong, multifaceted peer-mentoring program, a resource-rich program website, and twice-yearly professional development sessions required of all continuing instructors supplement—and thus reduce local/practical coverage pressures on—the OSU pedagogy seminar.

Richard Gephardt suggests that similar enduring questions could come from any of composition’s “three overlapping frameworks . . . Classical/Existential, Thinking/Writing, and Product/Process” (136). All three are chicken-vs.-egg paradoxes: should teachers teach more as if writing leads to thinking or as if thinking leads to writing? “Obviously,” he notes, “neither [half of a framework] can be put aside without seriously oversimplifying the writing process. But differences in emphasis do result in different methodologies” (137).

All student names are pseudonyms.

As Ruth Ray explains, writing can serve all these purposes and more: when used as part of an “interpretive, process-oriented graduate program,” writing can serve “to generate and sustain a conversation with established scholars; to connect personal knowledge with theoretical knowledge; to reflect on experience; to test the consequences of following various theoretical perspectives; to articulate hypotheses, beliefs, assumptions, and personal theories; and to express doubts, anxieties, hopes, and fears about entering the scholarly community.” As she
concludes, “[G]raduate students write in order to construct the field for themselves . . .” (148).

12 Tori Haring-Smith asserts that writing workshop models “seem inappropriate for graduate teaching assistants within English . . . [who] have been writing regularly in their other seminars and, presumably, have been criticizing one another’s work” (34); Yancey counters that “many, perhaps most [TAs], have not [taken] a first-year composition class themselves” and raises concern about how “they understand writing as an activity foundational to a successful academic career” (“Professionalization” 66); and Sally Barr Ebest suggests that students in composition/rhetoric in particular need practice with the “reflection, the use of subjective evaluation, . . . the authority and exposure of the personal voice[,] and . . . the freedom and necessity of determining form and drawing conclusions based on their own findings” that are common in research in the field (79).

13 As Ray notes, we need to be wary of “a final-product orientation . . . [and] concerns harbored by students who have been evaluated exclusively on the basis of final papers submitted under the fiction that their research is ‘complete’” (107).

WORKS CITED


---. “Re-Defining Graduate Teacher Training: Preparing TAs as Classroom Instructors.” Conference on College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, MN, 13 April 2000.