

**First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground**, by Jessica Restaino. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2012. 141 pp.

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This review emerges from our collective reading of Jessica Restaino's *First Semester: Graduate Students, Teaching Writing, and the Challenge of Middle Ground* in our composition pedagogy course. As a group of seven new graduate teaching assistants (TAs) and their course instructor, we relate to the experiences of Restaino's participants (also first-time TAs and new graduate students) who faced grading woes, limited curriculum input, and challenging interpersonal dynamics with their students. Restaino's *First Semester* offers a glimpse into the often-overlooked complications that TAs face as they work to balance the responsibilities that first-year writing programs require of their student-teachers. By focusing on graduate TAs, Restaino honors the many beginnings of graduate students, grounding our experiences within the theoretical structure of Hannah Arendt's three ontological categories of the human condition: labor, work, and action. For Arendt, labor is the daily cycle of effort, work is the creation of tangible products, and action creates long-term change. Examining the participants' experiences through this theory, Restaino makes a strong argument for valuing TAs' contributions to composition pedagogy and for sharing the work of co-creating first-year composition. We believe this argument is a key contribution of *First Semester*. Further, we appreciate that Restaino's descriptive portraits of TAs do more than *tell*—instead, they truly *show*—many of the complex conditions, relations, and responsibilities facing graduate students early in their careers.

*First Semester* contributes new ethnographic research on first-year composition and teacher education, valuing TAs' voices while weaving them with theory and with considerations of composition pedagogy, writing program administration, and graduate education. In doing so, this work builds on previous collections that value TAs' narratives, such as Tina Lavonne Good and Leanne B. Warshauer's *In Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing* (2000) and Wendy Bishop and Deborah Coxwell Teague's *Finding Our Way: A Writing Teacher's Sourcebook* (2004). At the same time, Restaino situates her study alongside research on graduate student preparation, pointing to Betty P. Pytlik's and Sarah Liggett's *Preparing College Teachers of Writing* (2001) and Sidney Dobrin's *Don't Call It That: The Composition Practicum* (2005) as two collections indicative of the need to theorize how graduate students learn to

teach writing. *First Semester* responds to this need by attending to TAs' narratives and valuing graduate students' experiences, while simultaneously theorizing the work involved in graduate teacher preparation. And, as with other recent publications in the Studies in Writing and Rhetoric (SWR) series, *First Semester* does so empirically—in a methodologically rich and detailed way.

Chapter one, "Arendt, Writing Teachers, and Beginnings," introduces the book's focus of examining graduate TAs' first semesters, identifying their "survival skills," and understanding these new teachers as the "shaky foundation on which writing programs . . . rest" (1-2). Restaino describes TA preparation as consisting of a brief orientation and typically a corresponding practicum or seminar on composition pedagogy, which aligns with our experience and represents the experiences of many of our peers throughout the country. Willing to share their negotiation of that "shaky foundation," four participants (Tess, Shirley, Nancy, and Anjel) provide Restaino access to their first semesters through a series of emails, interviews, and observations. The participants represent a diverse group in terms of gender, race, age, teaching experience, area of study, and approach to teaching and, as such, most new graduate teaching assistants will easily relate to their experiences. The participant case studies—introduced in chapter one and followed throughout the next three chapters—help us situate our own experiences within an Arendtian framework and provide the means through which Restaino argues for the importance of graduate students as contributing members of the university.

Restaino begins chapter two, "Labor and Endlessness: Necessity and Consumption in the First Semester," by acknowledging that many TAs must begin teaching before engaging with composition scholarship or developing their own theories on teaching. This chapter focuses on Tess's and Shirley's labors in process pedagogy, grading, and classroom management. They often feel drained and look for immediate solutions, ignoring the possibility that their efforts yield long-term, meaningful output when unification of theory and practice occurs. Restaino suggests that these early struggles to survive can prompt graduate students to adopt practices that are not theoretically sound. This concern leads Restaino to consider the tensions between practical application and theory and to argue for Arendt's notion of labor as the motor that drives teachers toward a balance between work and action. Further, Restaino discusses the resistance that these TAs expressed toward the externally imposed structure of the class and toward the writing process itself. As reviewers, we had some difficulty aligning our experiences with Restaino's description of Arendtian labor. Despite the challenges we faced as new instructors, many of us felt that the characterization of our labor as an arduous, endless cycle was extreme. We were glad, therefore, to see Restaino's conclusion that Arendtian laboring is not inevitable and cannot stand alone as a lens for analyzing the

first-year teaching experience. Instead, Restaino suggests that Arendt's ideas could serve as a launching pad for new analysis and research.

Chapter three, "Teachers-as-Students: Work and Action in the Middle Space," is Restaino's most extensive chapter, exploring the complex relationship between the experiences of TAs and Arendt's theories of work and action. Although Restaino acknowledges that applying the terms of work and action to TAs' experiences can be "messy," she argues that these connections work well in conversation with the pedagogical theories of Paolo Freire and bell hooks, among others (55). She suggests it is most useful to consider work and action in light of Christopher Higgins's writings on the importance of seeking a middle ground between these concepts in the classroom. Through the lens of the middle ground and in her descriptions of the participants' first semesters, Restaino connects TAs' experiences to the concepts of premature action (when individuals must take on a public role before they are ready), silence as a form of action (silence can provide an individual with a public presence), and the function of grading in Arendtian terms (different forms of grading can mean the difference between labor and work). Thereby, Restaino provides many possibilities TAs could consider helpful when deciding how to approach teaching. In our class discussions, this chapter appealed to each of us in different ways: some focused on Restaino's ideas on grading, while others were drawn to the concepts of premature action and silence as a form of action. We found that the range of responses highlighted the individualized and sometimes conflicting nature of first-semester graduate teaching experiences.

The final chapter, "Thinking What We Are Doing: Knowledge Making in the Trenches," provides a summary of Restaino's ideas and observations shared in *First Semester* and her motivation for writing this book. She asserts that the purpose of her research has been to encourage reflection across local contexts on the best practices of preparing and supporting TAs. Restaino mentions the work already being done by writing program administrators (WPAs) to promote better teaching in first-year writing programs, but this "exciting work happens amid the swirling sea that defines the still-conflicted positioning of composition in the university" (112). Hence, the book concludes with a call for action, prompting WPAs to reassess the role of TAs and to offer new instructors a "chance of real connection and real change agency" (116). Namely, while TAs should have space to experiment and develop as writing instructors, composition programs should also foster TAs' contributions to the field. While Restaino acknowledges that reform takes time, she reminds us that our actions as writing instructors matter.

Though perhaps primarily intended for WPAs, *First Semester* is valuable reading for writing instructors (faculty and TAs) as well. Many of us found it meaningful to read that the joys, struggles, and frustrations that we have expe-

rienced during our first semesters are not localized to our university. However, others among us see potential danger in prospective or new graduate students reading the book too early in their teaching careers. Because Restaino repeatedly emphasizes the struggles of instructors and only briefly discusses their moments of triumph, this book could give a false impression that teaching as a graduate student is primarily a negative experience. Additionally, a number of us felt that Restaino's case studies had merit independent of the Arendtian model of labor, work, and action. For some of us, the Arendtian theory felt at times imposed and therefore detracts from the impact of the case studies and the book as a whole. Ultimately, we recommend the book for graduate students as a supplement to their own pedagogical studies, but we also caution that readers should not become discouraged by Restaino's descriptions of the graduate student–teacher experience.

These criticisms acknowledged, Restaino's chapters, when taken together, effectively depict the struggles of new graduate TAs to balance the labor of grading and lesson planning with the desire to have a lasting impact on students and writing programs. Most significantly, we appreciate that Restaino defends TAs' needs to feel empowered while also feeling protected, supported, and encouraged by program directors and the institution itself. As readers, we especially enjoyed the case studies and Restaino's advocacy of praxis; we see aspects of ourselves in the case study participants, and their experiences remind us of the importance of grounding our own teaching practice in sound theory. We are honored by the priority Restaino places on graduate students and on their (and our) voices. Overall, *First Semester* shows that though graduate students often feel overwhelmed and underequipped to teach a writing course, we do, in fact, make significant contributions and leave a legacy.

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## Works Cited

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