Troublesome Knowledge: A Study of GTA Ambivalence with Genre-Informed Pedagogy

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Recognized as a threshold concept of writing studies and as a potentially useful tool for knowledge transfer, genre seems ubiquitous in first-year writing (FYW) programs. Yet, while genre-informed pedagogies gain prominence, little scholarship examines how graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) respond to genre-informed curricula. Hoping to understand how new GTAs experience teaching an imposed genre-informed FYW curriculum, this study collected written reflections and focus group interviews from 33 GTAs and examined their responses through a framework of threshold concepts scholarship. Based on how teachers describe challenges and benefits of a genre-informed curriculum, our findings suggest that ambivalence emerged for new GTAs who were both learning about and teaching genre as a threshold concept, which was more pronounced for novice teachers. Given the presence of threshold concepts in FYW, we present strategies for better supporting GTAs to tolerate ambivalence when teaching troublesome knowledge for the first time.

> *My students seemed to do okay with grasping the assignment prompt, though I'm not confident at all that any of them would be able to talk about "genre" as a concept very intelligently. (I barely can!)*
>
> —Parker, GTA and creative writing student

Genre has become ubiquitous in composition scholarship and pedagogy. Recognized as a threshold concept of the field, genre has been central to research of metacognition and writing transfer (Adler-Kassner, Majewski, & Koshnick, 2012; Bawarshi & Reiff, 2010; Yancey, Robertson, & Taczak, 2014). Genre appears 10 times in the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0)* (CWPA, 2014), and there is even a modest indus-

try of textbooks advocating genre pedagogies (Braziller & Kleinfeld, 2014; Devitt, Reiff, & Bawarshi, 2004; Jack & Pryal, 2014). At our institution, home to one of the largest writing programs in the US, genre has become a central concept and guiding theory in FYW.

Despite a boon in genre-based pedagogies, there is surprisingly little conversation about how novice instructors appropriate this threshold concept in their teaching. Recent writing pedagogy education (WPE) research has demonstrated many challenges inherent to teacher preparation, including the tension between theory and practice (Dryer, 2012; Estrem & Reid, 2012), the diversity of approaches to orientation and ongoing training (Obermark, Brewer, & Halasek, 2015), the identity crisis of practicum (Dobrin, 2005; Reid, 2004), labor conditions (Fedukovich, Miller-Cochran, Simoneaux, & Snead, 2017), GTA resistance to training (Hesse, 1993), and GTA confidence as teachers (Dryer, 2012). Yet the impact of specific curricular approaches to FYW on GTA training, such as teaching for transfer, writing about writing (WAW), or genre pedagogies, has garnered less attention. This is not to say that scholars and administrators ignore genre-informed pedagogies, as previous studies have examined GTA experiences in local contexts where writing instruction supports such an approach (Obermark, Brewer, & Halasek, 2015; Rupiper Taggart & Lowry, 2011), but a gap remains for research exploring how threshold concepts intermingle with GTA development.

Adler-Kassner et al. (2012) explain that threshold concepts are "portals" or gateways to learning, the necessary lenses through which members of a discipline develop, investigate, and answer scholarly questions. Threshold concepts such as genre in writing studies involve more than acquiring knowledge because once adopted they fundamentally transform how one views the world. Accordingly, threshold concepts trigger a personal transformation because this "troublesome" or "alien" knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2006, p. 3) requires viewing the world differently (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012; Land, 2016). Meyer and Timmermans (2016) argue these transformations "provoke a liminal state and create stuck places" (p. 32) that instigate cognitive, affective, and ontological conflicts. Liminality, according to Ellsworth (2005), is "being somewhere in between thinking and feeling, of being in motion through the space and time between knowing and not knowing" (p. 17); it is a capacious space for thinking, feeling, and being altogether, which means threshold concepts frequently accompany intense feelings of uncertainty with new knowledge. Despite a body of literature exploring GTA teacher development in writing studies, there are fewer accounts of how GTAs grapple with such troublesome knowledge as they learn to teach.

In this article, we apply a threshold concepts framework to understand how novice teachers describe the relevance of teaching genre-informed pedagogy in FYW curriculum. We found that new teachers generally saw benefits of genre, but they also described uncertainty and anxiety that posed teaching challenges. As a result, we examine GTA's ambivalence to learning and teaching genre to better understand challenges of teaching threshold concepts. Ambivalence—defined here as the felt tension between recognizing genre's relevance to teaching writing and struggling with the definition of the concept and its teachability—manifested in GTAs' reflections as uncertainty about how to teach genre, teacher confidence, and tensions with prior knowledge. If ambivalence is necessary to learning threshold concepts, then research should attend to anxiety and uncertainty in WPE. In other words, this study explores an important question for writing studies as a field: in the context of GTA training, how can we teach threshold concepts without doing more harm to an already fraught process of learning to teach?

Methodology

The data presented in this article were collected as part of a larger, IRB-approved study on graduate assistant teachers' evolving understanding of genre and genre pedagogy at the University of Arizona (#1608767682). Our co-researchers in the study have examined GTAs' changing conceptions of genre over one semester (Tardy, Buck, Pawlowski, & Slinkard, 2018). Here, we explore how new GTAs responded to genre as a teaching concept while teaching a genre-informed writing course.

Institutional Context

This study took place at a large, public university categorized with high research activity. Like writing programs at comparable institutions, ours is housed in a department of English with graduate students in applied linguistics, creative writing, literature, and rhetoric and composition, all of whom teach composition courses. The writing program serves roughly 6,000 undergraduate students each semester, most of whom complete two semesters of FYW. Incoming graduate students with teaching assistantships are assigned to teach FYW for at least one year, during which time they are enrolled in the required practicum course. All first-year GTAs teach a standard sequence before they can apply to teach other courses in the writing program or Department of English. During the study, there were 173 instructors in the writing program, 131 of whom were GTAs. Thirty-six of

these GTAs were new to the program and enrolled in the required practicum (see table 1).

FYW shared curriculum: Genre-informed pedagogy. During the time of this study, new GTAs taught the second iteration of a genre-informed pilot curriculum of English 101. We use the term "genre-informed" to represent a curricular approach designed with genre in mind, but perhaps not as centrally focused on genre as genre-based pedagogies described elsewhere (Hyland, 2003; Hyon, 1996). Genre was a key term in both FYW and teacher preparation and played a central role in the 101 curriculum, including an in-depth analysis of a public or academic genre, but it was not consistently emphasized across the course. We are also aware that "genre-informed pedagogy" is a broad term, and distinct traditions of genre theory have influenced writing pedagogies. These three different approaches have been sufficiently explored elsewhere (Hyland, 2003; Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2011); however, the focus on genre awareness associated with rhetorical genre studies (RGS) has gained the strongest foothold in FYW contexts, including ours. The pilot curriculum taught during the study promoted a genre awareness approach, in which instructors aimed to bring conscious attention to genres through discovery and help students analyze their potential influences on communities (Devitt, 2009). The course was supported by a popular FYW textbook (Palmquist, 2014), as well as a custom-published textbook and a handbook.

GTA orientation and practicum. New GTAs participated in a six-day orientation prior to the start of the fall semester, during which WPAs overviewed writing program goals and student learning outcomes, the English 101 shared curriculum, sample lessons, and institutional policy. Some orientation sessions focused expressly on genre awareness and teaching genre analysis, and GTAs collaboratively analyzed lesson plans as a genre. During fall semester, these GTAs participated in a graduate practicum as embedded training. In addition to large group sessions with a practicum lead, GTAs also met in small mentoring groups of four to six students with one teacher educator, a non-tenure-eligible assistant professor. Accounting for one credit-hour of the practicum course, these weekly mentor meetings were opportunities for GTAs to workshop ideas, discuss concepts and strategies, and learn about program curriculum. It's important to note that the teacher educators leading mentor groups may have had little experience teaching genre-informed pedagogy prior to the curricular redesign.

The GTAs were introduced to some basic principles for teaching genre awareness. Assigned readings included Dirk (2010) and Borg (2003), along with selections from Lockhart and Roberge (2015). Dirk's (2010) overview of genre theory from an RGS perspective was also assigned to FYW stu-

dents. GTA understanding of genre was heavily influenced by the Dirk reading, the student textbooks, and the genre analysis assignment guidelines (Tardy et al., 2018).

Study Participants

In total, 33 of the 36 new GTAs participated in this study. Participants were diverse in terms of disciplinary orientation, professional experience, and previous exposure to genre theory and pedagogy (see table 1). It should be noted that only about 15% of the GTAs had previously taught writing at the college-level while approximately 18% had used genre in their classroom.

Data Collection

Participating GTAs completed three written reflections over the course of the semester, responding to the same prompt each time: "How do you define genre? Include some examples of genres. Explain whether and/or how you see genre to be relevant to teaching first year writing. Write as much as you can." GTAs were given 15 minutes of practicum class time to write, and they submitted their responses online (see table 2). A member of the research team later anonymized the data set by assigning each GTA a number and a gender-neutral, mainstream Anglophone pseudonym. To protect participant privacy, we will refrain from using gender-specific pronouns in this paper.

As a means of triangulation, focus group interviews (FGIs) were conducted with 13 volunteers at the start of spring semester in order to elicit conversation about GTA experiences with genre as a concept and the curriculum.[1] To encourage dialogue during FGIs, we grouped participants into cohorts based on disciplinary orientation. The groups consisted of GTAs from applied linguistics (*n* = 5), literature and creative writing (*n* = 4), and rhetoric and composition (*n* = 4). The FGIs lasted approximately one hour each. After interviews were transcribed by the research team, the FGI transcripts were linked to participants' reflections from the previous semester.

Table 1

GTA Teaching Experiences

Degree program		Participants who had taught FYW	Participants who had taken coursework on genre	Participants who had taught genre or used a genre-informed approach
Creative writing *n* = 10	MFA *n* = 10	0	6	1
Literature *n* = 8	MA *n* = 3	0	2	0
	PhD *n* = 5	0	2	0
Rhetoric and composition *n* = 7	MA *n* = 2	0	0	0
	PhD *n* = 5	3	2	3
Applied linguistics *n* = 8	MA *n* = 5	0	0	0
	PhD *n* = 3	2	1	2
		5 (15%)	13 (40%)	6 (18%)

Table 2

Data Collection Timeline

Mid-August 2016	Reflection #1 (*n* = 33)	Pre-Semester Orientation *Introduction to genre and curriculum*
Mid-October 2016	Reflection #2 (*n* = 30)	Genre Analysis Unit *Class discussion of genre* *Genre analysis assignment*
Early December 2016	Reflection #3 (*n* = 33)	Preparation for English 102
Mid-January 2017	Focus Group Interviews (*n* = 13)	

Data Analysis

The research team—an associate and assistant director of the writing program and six doctoral students pursuing degrees in applied linguistics and rhetoric and composition—met regularly over the course of seven months to analyze the data. Following a constant-comparative method of double coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), we reviewed participants' reflections, identified preliminary themes, and further refined research questions. Initial coding (Saldaña, 2016) identified data connected to benefits and challenges of genre in reflections and focus group transcripts. Subsequent coding identified subcodes for perceived benefits and challenges. Individual team members applied subcodes to a subset of the reflections to compare and contrast and further refine the coding scheme (see figure 1). To support inter-rater reliability, coding results were discussed and discrepancies addressed amongst each pair of raters, following a method of collaborative coding (Smagorinsky, 2008). Finally, individual codes were applied by two members of the research team in coding software in order to visualize application of codes and participant information and patterns of co-occurrence.
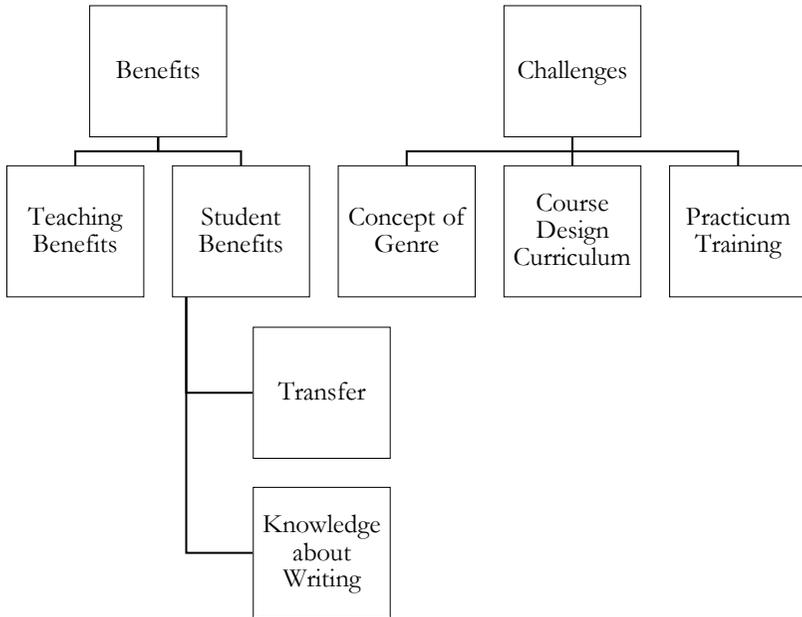
Figure 1. Coding Scheme Applied to GTA Responses

Limitations

Because the survey was administered during practicum meetings, a GTA who was absent would not have completed the reflection that day. In order to account for this limitation, we only included in our analysis the 33 respondents who submitted a survey response for the first reflection and at least one other. Of the 33 GTAs whose reflections were included in the data set, only six were missing either the second or third survey response. The survey was administered during practicum sessions, which also raises concerns about GTAs' comfort reflecting candidly about challenges while sitting in their teacher training class. However, challenges and uncertainty emerged in the reflections without prompting, which gives us confidence that the anonymity of responding was enough for GTAs to share their honest reflections. The FGI discussions were used to triangulate our findings across reflections and further illustrate patterns.

"Developing Genre as a Theory in the Classroom Is a Lot Harder": Ambivalence in GTA Responses

In general, there seemed to be a consensus among GTA reflections about the benefits of a genre-informed approach (see figure 2). GTAs' perceptions of the relevance of teaching with genre sorted into three dominant themes: teaching benefits, knowledge about writing, and transfer. While the latter two themes refer to perceptions of benefits for student learning, some instructors noted how a genre approach benefited their own teaching. For example, Elliot, from rhetoric and composition, said the genre-informed approach "helped me express the idea that an author can be an expert in one genre, yet completely inept in another," which "helped me break [students] of the idea that they were inherently good or bad writers." Elliot seemed to value the genre-informed approach for their own teaching because it "helped" to convey important ideas and practices. Bailey in applied linguistics saw potential for a genre-informed approach to help students build *knowledge about writing*, explaining that genre could "help develop an awareness to the 'formulas' and 'templates' around them and understand why there are these conventions." Almost half of the teachers saw potential for *transfer*, as the genre-informed curriculum could support students' ability to apply writing knowledge and practices in other writing contexts. Cameron, from applied linguistics, wrote that genre "would help [students] figure out the writing situation that they are in and adapt to their context."

However, upon closer analysis a more complex narrative of uncertainty developed for some GTAs, in which they articulated benefits of genre-informed pedagogy alongside stories about their struggle with its complexity and its teachability. Taylor, a GTA in rhetoric and composition who seemed familiar with RGS genre theory, predicted potential problems in their pre-semester reflection:

> *I think it is important for my students* to get a sense of genre in order to start learning the language they can apply to their own writing, such as audience, purpose, syntax and to understand the rhetorical situations they find themselves in; *however, developing genre as a theory in the classroom is a lot harder.* (emphasis added)

The italicized phrases in Taylor's reflection point to an instructor ambivalent about developing genre theory in the classroom context. They "think it is important," but their use of the conjunction "however" indicates a question: *I think it's important, but how does it work for me as a teacher?*
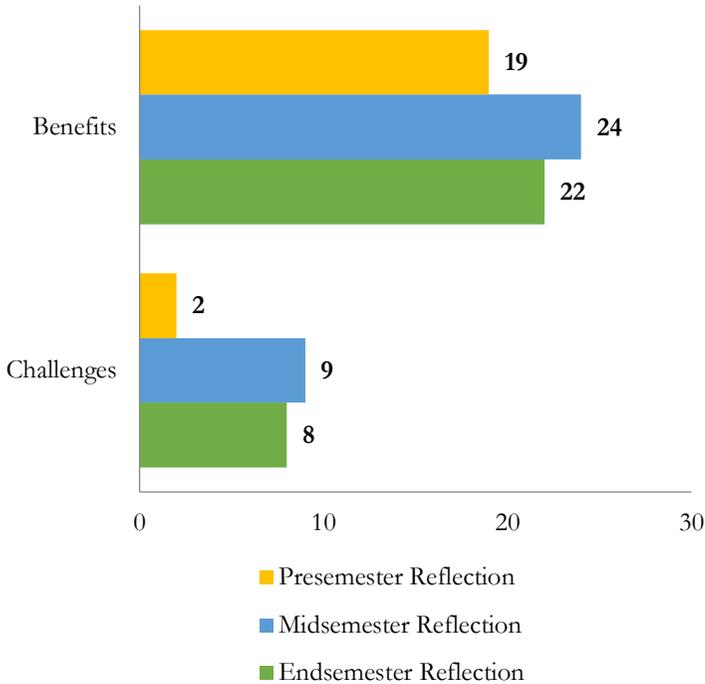
Figure 2. Number of GTAs Who Mention Benefits and Challenges of Genre

Some might argue that Taylor's concerns are common. After all, teaching is difficult and all teachers face similar self-reflective questions throughout their development. However, Taylor seemed already familiar with RGS genre theory before starting their GTA training at our program and yet remained uncertain about managing its complexity as a teacher. The majority of the new teachers in this study—and most new FYW teachers—did not have this background knowledge and were learning genre theory while teaching it. Our co-researchers found that GTAs' genre theories "became increasingly sophisticated or multidimensional" over time, but in some cases "this destabilization of their existing conceptions resulted in some confusion or even frustration," especially as they tried to present genre to students (Tardy et al., 2018). It is this pattern of confusion, frustration, and, eventually, ambivalence we address in this study in order to engage deeper questions about the role of destabilized knowledge in supporting FYW GTAs.

In the next section, we examine GTA's ambivalence to learning and teaching genre, a threshold concept of writing studies. Our exploration of

their responses will show a process of liminality in which GTAs feel they must simultaneously meet the demand to think newly about genre as at the same time they struggle with its teachability. These findings raise questions about whether and how threshold concepts instigate a double bind for new teachers in FYW.

Tensions with Teachability

Even though GTAs recognized the benefits of genre in teaching writing throughout the semester, we suggest there is a more nuanced, layered story of GTAs' tensions with the teachability of genre. In our data, about one-third of GTAs (12 of 33) identified a challenge related to teaching genre in the written reflections, with more instances of these challenges occurring later in the semester when genre took on a central role in instruction (see figure 2). This increase in challenges seems to align with literature on threshold concepts, which maintains that learning new knowledge instigates anxiety, uncertainty, and difficulty in the process of liminality (Land, 2016, p. 15). Often couched in remarks about the difficulty of genre as a concept or constraints of the curriculum, GTAs' voices reveal struggles with the teachability of genre.

In their written reflections, teachers displayed the challenges of teaching a concept they were still uncertain about. Darcy in applied linguistics wrote:

> To be honest, I am still confused about genre. With my students, I use the definition in *JTC* that it is a "category of text"—but I explain that it is multimodal (emails, PowerPoints, movies, commercials, syllabus, D2L announcements, etc.). I focus on Dirk's point that even if you know the "rules" (conventions), you might not reproduce a genre effectively, genres are socially created and reshaped, blended and renamed. I think my students are still confused.

Darcy demonstrates a rhetorical understanding of genre and indicates they have a central focus for teaching genre in the classroom, referred to as "Dirk's point." However, Darcy's liminal state ("I am still confused") seems to affect their teaching of students, who are also "still confused." Such difficulty with genre seemed prominent when GTAs described teaching a unit focused on genre analysis. Teachers often questioned the utility of genre as concept, noting the troublesome process of understanding genre from an RGS perspective. For example, Jaime, a student in creative writing, elaborated on the difficulty:

> I think it's really difficult to teach because it is the abstract idea that is as ubiquitous as oxygen in Writing Studies. It's right in front of our noses and students don't realize they engage with genre all the time. . . . Some students were able to connect with the idea that every piece of writing emerges from a template framework—that a résumé is a genre and the individual producing their own résumé is imbuing that genre with their individualized rhetorical situation. That a genre is activated by whatever rhetorical situation calls upon that genre to circulate into readership. I think it was hard to teach because genre is such a self-referential concept.

Jaime is able to define genre as "activated by whatever rhetorical situation," yet they conclude that it was "hard to teach." Kendall, also in creative writing, was a little more pointed, writing:

> It's a complicated topic that doesn't seem to be helpful to actually teaching what good writing is. . . . I like the idea of showing that the way you write responds to your rhetorical situation, but I'm not sure why that needs to be framed in the language of genre theory when these students aren't planning to study that in the future.

While both Kendall and Jaime were able to identify potential benefits of teaching the curriculum, they still seemed ambivalent about—or, in Kendall's case, resistant to—the concept of genre itself as part of their teaching.

Discussion in focus group interviews (FGIs) deepened insights from the written reflections while contextualizing how these tensions played out for some GTAs. Similar to patterns in semester written reflections, GTAs in FGIs were generally able and willing to discuss benefits of a genre-informed approach to FYW. However, they often qualified their claims when describing their teaching. Logan, a GTA from the literature program, offers an illustrative example:

> One of the best things that I thought was useful about teaching this [genre] is that it gave the students not just this kind of theoretical knowledge, which they may or may not need at this point, but thinking of communication acts as genres gave them kind of a set of more practical knowledge.

Here Logan seems attracted to the idea that students will gain the theoretical knowledge of genre and implies it will be useful, but also hedges that students "may not need" that knowledge. Logan further exhibited ambivalence when discussing the genre analysis unit. After presenting students with the more expansive definition of genre beyond "forms of artwork" and taking into account "syllabi and lesson plans and stuff like that,"

Logan found it difficult to help students identify boundaries of genre. They described class conversations as a "deconstructive loop" in which genres blend into each other, explaining it was "really hard when you get really unconventional genres or they're trying to pitch you something as a genre and you have to negotiate with it." Even as Logan seems to embrace a flexible definition of genre, they find tension in its application to the classroom. Logan explained:

> Another really hard part of it was helping [students] figure out how to be concise enough about genre when I myself was struggling with this dialectic [laughter]. Like, "Yes, that's a genre," but then, you know, when they give me an interesting alternative idea, I'm like, "I can see how that's a genre," you know? And then you get to the point where you yourself are starting to just kind of question it.

Logan exemplifies the ways in which learning a threshold concept can be a dynamic space with feelings of uncertainty leading to both breakthroughs and regressions. As Adler-Kassner et al. (2012) explain, learning threshold concepts is iterative and recursive (see also Land, 2016; Meyer & Land, 2006). Logan recognizes the potential benefits of genre and seems to grasp a new, more expansive disciplinary understanding of the concept, but when placed into teaching praxis, they are "starting to just kind of question it." Logan hints at how liminality within threshold concepts might impact their confidence or self-efficacy as a teacher, a topic we address in the next section.

Tensions with Self-Efficacy

Uncertainty, as detailed in the previous section, also provoked feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence in some GTAs. Rowan, an MFA student, illustrated how this anxiety may affect a new teacher's sense of self-efficacy:

> How does a not very good teacher think about genre? Well, not very well. I have a real problem with this new technical definition of the word. This technical definition says, Rowan, genre is any mode of communication in, and in some part defining, a community. For example: in-class notes. Students (the community) pass them to and fro (the communication) and, thereby, carve out a new fraction of themselves for themselves: the fraction that is misfit, malingering, monkeyshine mayhem. Hmm . . . But why call this a genre? The word genre comes from the French for gender, which suggests a kind of typology. Genre doesn't seem to have a whole lot to do etymo-

logically with communication modes, though I suppose the type of thing you are communicates itself to others. I wonder what the type of thing that I am communicates to others.

While much of this reflection is witty, clever, and creative, the sentiment connects back to Rowan's identification as a "not very good teacher" who does not think about genre "very well," even though their example (in-class notes between students) indicates a flexible understanding of genre. Here we see a new teacher struggling with the concept of genre while struggling with their own self-efficacy as a teacher.

Other GTAs expressly connected low self-efficacy with the concept of genre itself, such as Parker, who wrote, "I'm not confident at all that any of them would be able to talk about 'genre' as a concept very intelligently (I barely can!)." Riley, a PhD student in rhetoric and composition, reflected on the benefits of genre as "useful to students' knowledge transfer" but concluded, "I think the word itself is detrimental to the overall unit for both freshmen and instructors." Riley's word choice, "detrimental," captured the trouble they found with genre as it harms both students and teachers. These GTAs voice their felt sense of being thrust into liminality.

Similar tensions with self-efficacy emerged in conversations among peers in focus groups. For instance, Dana, a GTA in rhetoric and composition, indicated that their lack of confidence as a teacher was initiated by how the practicum prepared them to teach. According to Dana, "The way [the practicum] affected my understanding of the concept of genre, it complicated it in an unnecessary way. I didn't find it to be productive, and my students struggled with it a lot." They continued, "It was a *struggle*. They [the students] were *struggling* with it. I was *struggling* with it as a new teacher" (emphasis added). As a representation of GTAs' sentiment, Dana's sense of "struggle" reflected anxiety and decreased self-efficacy provoked by the liminal understanding of genre that we noticed in GTA semester reflections.

"We Never Used the Word Genre Like This": Prior Knowledge Matters

Theories of threshold concepts establish that new knowledge often accompanies intense feelings of attachment to old knowledge and resistance to the new (Meyer & Land, 2006). At the same time, prior exposure to the concept can allow for a less tumultuous path toward "postliminal" transformation in which the learner is using the concept in the ways of the discourse community (Adler-Kassner et al., 2012). Though we are cautious to draw generalizations, prior experience with genre and with some language-related techniques for analyzing genres seemed to be a factor in GTA responses to

teaching genre-informed pedagogy, often along disciplinary lines. When we disaggregated data by disciplinary programs of study, graduate students in rhetoric and composition accounted for nearly half of all coded excerpts in teacher challenges yet represented only one-fifth of participants. On the other hand, the applied linguistics cohort had the fewest coded excerpts related to challenges, seeming to indicate less ambivalence about genre as a teaching concept. This pattern was also reflected in the FGI discussions, in which a number of applied linguistics GTAs talked about teaching genre as a process of sharpening their understanding of the concept, whereas the rhetoric and composition GTAs emphasized challenges. In what follows, we present two brief case studies to demonstrate the way prior knowledge can affect appropriation of a threshold concept like genre.

Jesse was a first-year teacher in the PhD applied linguistics program who had recently completed their MA in applied linguistics. During the focus group interview, Jesse spoke about having "a pretty firm grasp on the concept of genre" but also recognized that "it took me years to get to that conceptual understanding." Even with prior knowledge, Jesse faced challenges and expressed reservations about the genre analysis assignment being a "really big project" that was "too much too soon." However, Jesse found teaching genre ultimately valuable, explaining, "I can say conceptually I understood it, but after teaching it I feel like I know it, which was cool." Prior experience with genre as a concept for language study may have helped Jesse transform their view of challenges when teaching it into an asset, a view shared by a few other applied linguistics GTAs who also discussed refining their own definition of genre through teaching in the FGI.

In contrast, Riley in rhetoric and composition demonstrated how less prior exposure can contribute to confusion. Describing interactions with students about genre during the focus group discussion, Riley explained, "There is no concrete definition that I could give. I couldn't find one. We couldn't come up with one." This confusion emerged again later in the discussion: "So our students are asking us these complicated complex questions and we're trying our best to answer, but we're not even sure what the goal of the assignment was." In these comments we see how Riley's uncertainty around the concept of genre seemed to weave its way into their sense of self-efficacy in the classroom. Returning to Riley's second written reflection, we recognized this tension again:

> I think the word itself is detrimental to the overall unit for both freshmen and instructors. We never really got a good grasp of solid understanding of genre, so it was very difficult to teach. Anticipat-

ing students' questions, misunderstandings, and informational needs for comprehending such an abstract idea was very challenging. I'd say about 50% or fewer of my students understand what a genre is.

Note how Riley invoked a collective "we" who didn't "grasp a solid understanding" of genre which made it "difficult to teach." While some uncertainty is to be expected and even necessary for new teachers, Riley's challenges in the classroom seemed exacerbated by teaching this "abstract idea" with which they were not fully comfortable. Unlike Jesse, who brought a prior theoretical foundation to expand through teaching, Riley did not yet feel these challenging moments in the classroom were useful for professional growth.

These two case studies reflect the tenor of FGI conversations; some GTAs were unsettled by the challenge of teaching an RGS approach to genre when it contradicted prior experience. Responses in FGI conversations confirmed a pattern we noted in semester reflections. For instance, in a mid-semester reflection, Kendall from creative writing expressed difficulty with genre as a concept in contrast to prior experience: "I don't find genre to be relevant to teaching first year writing. In my time in school, we never used the word genre like this, and I think it is overly confusing." Even though they were able to demonstrate a definition of genre aligned with the course outcomes for themselves, Kendall was still concerned that genre is "a complicated topic that doesn't seem to be helpful to actually teaching what good writing is" at the end of the semester. Genre as a threshold concept was especially troublesome for GTA training since learning a threshold concept unsettles not only what is known but what it is to make meaning of a new mental model (see Meyer & Land, 2006). It is this process of unsettling we see evident in the ambivalence many GTAs reported when teaching genre-informed pedagogy for the first time.

Implications for Writing Pedagogy Education and Future Research

Our findings have raised questions for us about the ways writing pedagogy educators can support GTAs teaching a threshold concept like genre at the same time as they are in the liminal process of learning. While the GTAs in our program seemed inclined to see the relevance of genre to writing pedagogy and potential benefits for students, their responses also demonstrated a persistent ambivalence. In their written reflections, ambivalence surfaced as the tension between the benefits of genre to student learning and the challenges of its teachability in the classroom. Such sentiments were expressed as uncertainty and decreased confidence in the classroom. In short, we believe this study offers support for continued exploration of genre-informed

pedagogies in FYW while indicating a need for more conversation about the ways writing pedagogy educators acknowledge and ethically support ambivalence as part of teacher training.

According to Land (2016), threshold concepts can be experienced as being thrust into liminality because the process of learning leads to "a reformulation of the learner's meaning frame and an accompanying shift in the learner's subjectivity" (p. 188; see also, Meyer & Land, 2006). This step is troublesome and often felt as a force because it requires a conceptual shift. It requires ambivalence. It requires uncertainty. As teacher trainers, we must identify strategies for tolerating ambivalence as a necessary achievement when learning threshold concepts. Following Land (2016), we are interested in exploring WPE and structures that begin with "concepts such as fragility, uncertainty and instability" as part of teacher development (p. 17). Given the troublesome nature of threshold concepts, we wonder if more time to process a new concept—perhaps one semester of composition pedagogy and writing studies theory coursework before class instruction—might help new GTAs like Riley who struggled to feel confident teaching genre. However, such an approach may not be feasible at most institutions, including our own. In the absence of intense study scaffolding meta-awareness of genre, we find it imperative to address the uncertainty and the emotional needs instigated by ambivalence with threshold concepts in GTA training for those considering a genre-informed approach. As a beginning effort, we offer suggestions for supporting GTA development using genre-informed approaches that may also be applicable to other threshold concepts.

First, developing one's own personal theory of genre is important. While Riley, Kendall, and Rowan offered clear evidence of the challenges new GTAs faced with the term, the confidence seemingly shared by applied linguistics graduate students with prior knowledge of genre suggests there is value in forming a theoretical framework. As Brisk and Zisselberger (2013) demonstrated in their genre pedagogy research, simply introducing genre theory is not sufficient, and connections between theory and practice need to be drawn explicitly. For example, they found one-on-one sessions with trainers and teachers to be most helpful in this process. Such opportunities should be considered with new GTAs expected to teach this threshold concept at the same time as they are learning it themselves.

Indeed, rather than offering a single framework, like the RGS-centered approach in our training, it may be helpful to make various genre pedagogies visible to new teachers. Educating GTAs on goals and practices of different genre-informed approaches may support them to build a robust theoretical framework like Jesse's. An instructor more inclined toward lan-

guage-based pedagogy, for example, may prefer the teaching-learning cycle of an SFL approach, while others may be excited by the critical cultural potential of RGS. More likely, instructors would draw from a variety of strategies, building their own approach. Regardless of the outcome, demonstrating that genre is an ongoing conversation in writing studies may provide strategies for reflecting on the role of uncertainty when learning threshold concepts like genre.

Along these lines, we need to find ways to engender a critically reflective stance that allows new teachers to see themselves as learners and developing teachers. Just as the WPA student learning outcomes treat writing as a developmental process that occurs over time, we should help new GTAs understand that teaching is similarly recursive and ever-evolving. As Adler-Kassner et al. (2012) explained, threshold concepts are initially "troublesome" because they tend to challenge existing beliefs, practices, or knowledge. For this reason, they suggest, it is important to work with threshold concepts consistently or else they might be disregarded, a particular concern for those of us in GTA training. From this perspective, we should not be surprised by GTA comments expressing doubts about genre after initial struggles in the classroom. It seems GTAs, like Dana, believed the practicum training was too abstract, further complicating teaching, which aligns with research about the challenge of theory in practicum (Michel, 2005). Rupiper Taggart and Lowry (2011) note that helping GTAs feel confident as teachers in the classroom is a perennial tension in GTA training, and we argue practicum must offer effective scaffolding that supports learning threshold concepts and helps GTAs feel confident when faced with uncertainty. As Land (2016) argues, the liminal space of learning threshold concepts requires a pedagogy for learning to live with uncertainty, although "such pedagogies cannot dispel anxiety, but seek to provide students with perspectives that will enable them to live with anxiety" (p. 17). We should be particularly aware of the potential for this uncertainty to push new teachers away from important concepts.

Finally, reflective teacher narratives could be a useful tool as shared readings, similar to the firsthand accounts about the difficulties of writing and writing as a process often assigned in FYW curricula. Selections from Restaino's (2012) narratives of first-semester teachers or Barr Ebest's (2005) work with GTA resistance may help new instructors to see themselves as part of a broader teaching and learning community. Opportunities for reflection and self-assessment can also help new GTAs take on a scholarly disposition towards teaching (Miller, Rodrigo, Pantejo, & Roen, 2005; Reid, 2009). Each of these strategies may attend productively and explicitly to the emotional demands of troublesome knowledge.

Conclusion

Genre has been recognized as a threshold concept of writing studies and as a potentially useful tool for transfer of knowledge in FYW pedagogies. Given the prevalence of genre in FYW-related publications like the *WPA Outcomes Statement*, textbooks, and TA training materials, our research attempted to learn more about how new GTAs respond to an imposed genre-informed FYW curriculum. Our findings suggest that GTA training should simultaneously support both the theoretical framing of a threshold concept like genre and the ambivalence felt by new teachers.

We are also left with questions that could be further explored in more research of local contexts, especially those implementing genre-informed pedagogy and utilizing other threshold concepts. Such a study might ask: How do GTAs experience threshold concepts of writing studies (like genre) as novice teachers and over time? Which threshold concepts seem to be most "troublesome" for new and experienced GTAs? What approaches might be most effective for introducing new teachers to threshold concepts? How can writing programs introduce other instructors on contingent contracts to the threshold concepts that guide curricula? The last few decades of composition scholarship have brought greater complexity to our understanding of writing development and introduced important threshold concepts for writing pedagogy. Answering some of the questions outlined here may better prepare teachers for implementing these concepts in the classroom, which should benefit future students and the discipline.

Acknowledgments

Note

1. More detail about data collection protocols and a descriptive coding scheme can be viewed at https://drive.google.com/open?id=1yr8JdONzvVEYN0J vEcGnOTddYaNJe0z7.

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