

Chapter 10

Navigating Uncertainty Together

Pandemic Lessons Learned from Training New GTAs in Teaching Public Speaking

Anne C. Kretsinger-Harries, Elizabeth Helmick,
Kate Challis, and Ali Garib

Amid the ongoing, uncertain, and evolving context of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new generation of scholars is learning to teach. Broeckelman-Post and Ruiz-Mesa (2018) argue that for communication studies, “high quality GTA training is a solid investment in the quality of undergraduate education, in the quality of faculty teaching done, and in the future sustainability of the discipline” (93). Likewise, Valenzano, et al. (2014) remind us that “many faculty members in communication departments found their instructional start in the basic course, and learned to hone their pedagogy there before moving on to teach upper-division courses and seminars” (363). Notably, a GTA’s first years of teaching are crucial for cultivating a sense of “teacher efficacy,” the confidence in one’s ability to help students learn (Hoy and Spero 2005, 343–344). Yet, as Joyce, et al. (2019) have noted, more research on GTA training is needed, given the crucial role that GTAs play in the success of basic communication course programs (27). As such, it is important to reflect on the experiences of this cohort of GTAs who taught for the first time amid the pandemic to account for what can be learned from this unique experience and how these lessons might impact future practices of pedagogical training.

The fall 2020 semester unfolded amid the evolving global COVID-19 pandemic, which altered life as we knew it, forcing widespread changes on college campuses. Higher education was confronted with budget strains, changes in teaching modalities, campus safety concerns, and general uncertainty. These challenges tested the limits of conventional wisdom on pedagogical training, as basic communication courses moved online on a large scale and instructors and students alike navigated new modalities and unprecedented

teaching scenarios. In many cases new GTA training also moved online or took a modified form, which presented challenges for course directors tasked with helping new GTAs through this unique situation while also navigating it themselves. Furthermore, the impacts of the pandemic will have a ripple effect as these new GTAs eventually transition into more traditional face-to-face environments, in many cases without the applicable pedagogical training they typically would have received as first-time teachers.

This chapter examines the teaching and training challenges experienced by one “pandemic cohort” of graduate students and their basic course director, to determine what enduring lessons might be gleaned for the future of GTA pedagogical training. Responding to Broeckelman-Post and Simonds’ (2020) call to involve graduate student in instructional communication research (171) and to Hennings’ (2011) observation of “a lack of GTA voice in the research about GTAs” (128–129), this project is both: (1) a collaboration between a basic communication course director and three GTAs who taught public speaking for the first time amid the pandemic, and (2) a collection of the experiences of one pandemic cohort. We agree with McRae (2010) who asserts that “the GTA subject position offers important insights about what it means to teach the foundational course in communication, and it also can reflect the constraints of the ways the foundational course is conceptualized” (175–176). Accordingly, in this chapter we hold up GTA experiences as important evidence of what teachers and scholars are learning about themselves, their teaching, and the discipline from the experience of teaching for the first time amid the pandemic. As such, this chapter makes space for GTA voices by allowing their experiences and reflections to guide our insights.

Together, the authors of this chapter navigated the pandemic’s ongoing challenges in fall 2020 and then worked together in the months afterward to examine and reflect on this experience. Working collaboratively, we surveyed our full cohort of twelve new public speaking GTAs to examine the most pressing challenges they faced. We generated a set of survey questions to probe themes that emerged during our fall graduate pedagogy seminar discussions, including building cohort community, developing instructor credibility, facilitating community in online classrooms, supporting students amid the pandemic, using technology, and developing professionally. We distributed this survey anonymously through Qualtrics after the fall 2020 semester had finished and then reviewed the survey responses to identify common themes.

In what follows, we weave together the survey responses from the pandemic cohort with our own reflections. We begin by describing how graduate pedagogy training changed amid the pandemic. We then explore the most substantial challenges faced by the GTAs, including navigating cohort community, building instructor ethos, developing communication skills, and

performing empathy for students. By exploring these themes we build an archive of the unique experiences of GTAs who taught public speaking for the first time amid the pandemic, while also highlighting how the pandemic context has revealed new opportunities to strengthen new GTA training. We conclude with advice for basic course directors on how future iterations of graduate pedagogy training could evolve to reflect what we have learned during this challenging time.

NAVIGATING THE SHIFT ONLINE: EARLY PANDEMIC DECISIONS

When classes first moved online at the start of the pandemic in March 2020, every aspect of the upcoming fall semester was thrown into uncertainty. The course director spent the spring and early summer months weighing possibilities while navigating emerging information about the pandemic and evolving messages from university administration concerning modalities for the fall semester. When it was finally determined that online learning would be a necessity for the months ahead, the course director worked with faculty to convert the existing web-blended version of the course to a fully realized, asynchronous online version, including pre-made lecture videos, assignments, and grading rubrics.

This transition to an online format was an exercise in what Morreale, Thorpe, and Westwick (2020) call “crisis pedagogy” (117). While the development of the online course was informed by scholarship on best practices of teaching public speaking online, it was created in the crisis context of the pandemic with minimal opportunities to pilot and revise the course before rolling it out to hundreds of undergraduate students in the fall semester. The course director settled on an asynchronous format to allow flexibility for a student body that, due to the pandemic, suddenly had to grapple with a host of learning and lifestyle variables such as limited internet access, inconvenient living situations, a variety of learning modalities, and ongoing COVID challenges ranging from personal risk and illness to family health crises.

At the same time, however, this population of students was largely unequipped to move online. After all, as Easton (2003) has argued, online learning is best suited to students who not only have opted into this modality, but who are older, highly motivated, self-disciplined, and comfortable communicating openly with their instructors (88–89). In contrast, our largely traditional undergraduate student body was predominantly accustomed to face-to-face, on-campus learning, which was important to keep in mind when designing a course that would “support students’ self-management of learning, self-monitoring of their learning, and motivation to engage in learning”

(Miller 2010, 161). As Vallade and Kaufmann (2018) learned from surveying online learners, “unclear, inconsistent, or confusing course structure or organization prohibit[s] students from learning” (373). Accordingly, the course director focused on the development of a clear, well-structured course with ample infrastructure to guide students through the new terrain of online learning, including a user-friendly navigation, detailed yet concise instructions, regular weekly deadlines for readings and assignments, and ample built-in reminders.

The asynchronous online format was also intended to support the more than twenty instructors—primarily GTAs—who would teach the course. Broeckelman-Post, et al. (2019) argue, “It is better to have the disciplinary experts build and assess the effectiveness of online courses” to ensure a quality and consistent experience for students (145). This was especially relevant at our institution, where roughly half of our instructors were new graduate students and the rest were largely inexperienced with online teaching. On top of this, the vast majority of our instructors came from disciplines beyond communication, with limited subject-matter expertise. The fully-formed, standardized, asynchronous course allowed these instructors to hit the ground running at the start of a chaotic semester. As one GTA expressed in their survey response, “Having a course shell already written and tested made a huge difference in my confidence instructing this class.”

With this new modality and ongoing COVID safety concerns, pedagogy training for new GTAs needed to be overhauled as well. In a “normal” year at our institution, new GTA training begins with a weeklong face-to-face orientation week and continues throughout the semester as a three-credit graduate pedagogy seminar. In line with recommendations from scholars like Broeckelman-Post and Ruiz-Mesa (2018) and Fassett and Warren (2012), training topics include mastery of public speaking course objectives and curriculum, classroom management and facilitation, discussion of relevant pedagogy literature, practice speech grading and writing feedback, and use of course learning management systems (LMS).

Scholarship on best practices of new GTA training typically focuses on this kind of face-to-face training for new instructors teaching in face-to-face environments. For instance, Fassett and Warren (2012) recommend that training include practice lesson planning, microteaching practice lessons, simulation and discussion of difficult classroom moments, practice grading, and discussion of assigned pedagogy readings, offering advice for how to accomplish these activities in a physical classroom. While many of these topics were still relevant in the pandemic year, they took on new and different dimensions in the online teaching context. For instance, lesson planning was not an immediately pressing skill for new GTAs teaching asynchronous online classes, nor was simulation of difficult classroom moments, since the online teaching

context afforded GTAs more time to seek advice when challenging issues arose in the online space. More crucial, however, was familiarizing GTAs with the asynchronous online course materials and technologies.

To convert the training to an online modality, the course director created a series of prerecorded orientation videos introducing new GTAs to the online public speaking course they would teach, instructions for setting up and customizing their course LMS, and basic online teaching tips. Instructors were asked to review these materials asynchronously in preparation for synchronous Zoom one-on-one conferences and group meetings scheduled for the week prior to the semester. Following this orientation week, the semester-long pedagogy seminar downplayed face-to-face teaching simulations, lesson planning approaches, and discussion of classroom management, in favor of ensuring familiarity with the course LMS, technology tools, and strategies for communicating with students and fostering engagement online. Emphasis was still placed on public speaking course learning objectives, curriculum, assignments, and grading, but overviews of these topics came through guided explorations of the course LMS, viewing and grading recorded student speeches, and other online exercises.

While the online training provided necessary support, under the unique circumstances it was undoubtedly an entirely different first-semester teaching and learning experience from what new public speaking GTAs typically receive. These unique experiences, compounded by additional layers of uncertainty, led new GTAs to experience both challenges and opportunities fueled by the pandemic context. In the following sections, we discuss the main themes that emerged.

NAVIGATING GTA COHORT COMMUNITY

Basic communication course directors play an instrumental role in fostering a sense of community among instructors that supports the course as a whole. As Hershberger (2021) asserts, “establish[ing] the course as a unified front committed to student learning” and providing space for instructors to “empathize with each other as they share similar experiences” can, in turn, “have a positive impact on the health of the course overall as GTAs feel support from both their peers and the [course director]” (328). This role is especially important for new GTA cohorts as their experience teaching becomes for them an early “point of connection and common ground” (Huber 2019, 178). Additionally, as Myers (1998) highlights, “supportive communication relationships with peers” is a “primary socialization” mechanism for new GTAs who rely substantially on their peers for “sense-making, direction, and most importantly, comfort” (66). In the typical year, part of this sense of community forms in

the fall graduate pedagogy seminar through in-class discussions, shared readings, assignments, and projects assigned by the course director. It also arises organically through unstructured activities such as informal conversations that occur before and after class, during office hours, and in the hallways where GTA and course director offices are located. In the context of the pandemic, many of these unstructured opportunities vanished as instructors worked from home and both training and teaching occurred online.

The substantial negative effects of graduate school on mental health have been well established, even pre-pandemic, so much so that these impacts have been labeled a mental health “crisis” (Wedemeyer-Strombel 2019). The stressors of graduate school are uniquely challenging for students balancing the demands of higher learning with first-time teaching responsibilities and faced with “insecurity regarding their teaching capability, time/role conflicts, and uncertainty regarding their department status” (Hendrix 2000, 161). Because of this, mental health services and other campus resources are always shared with new GTAs during orientation and across the fall semester. However, the COVID-19 pandemic further compounded the personal challenges that students typically face upon entering graduate school. Survey responses demonstrate that the first impacts of these challenges were felt during the early stages of online orientation and training. As one GTA reflected, “I had moved halfway across the country to start a graduate school program in a new city where I didn’t know a single person. In addition to this, the pandemic made it unsafe to get out and meet new people. The social isolation affected my self-esteem and general happiness.”¹

Notably, within the new GTA training context, the lack of in-person interaction inhibited rapport and bonding among the cohort, particularly at the start of the semester:

I felt particularly disconnected the first few weeks of the course. The dreaded self-introductions sounded extra cringe-y as I watched my tiny digitized reflection within my Zoom square. I think I attempted to tell a joke, but if anyone laughed, I couldn’t hear it, because everyone was muted. I couldn’t decide what was worse: the blank faces or the blacked out Zoom squares. I felt like a lonely fraud. What was I doing here?

A second GTA reflected on how the online training modality limited the cohort’s ability to build community: “Rapport is often built in the ‘between times’—the snippets of conversation before and after class. Due to the online nature of the [fall pedagogy seminar], there was much less opportunity for chit-chat. And most chit-chat was broadcasted for the group. This is a detriment for introverts like me who experience anxiety during group interactions.” Another new GTA added, “Zoom was really difficult for me to navigate. In the best

of times, I already struggle with major social anxiety. Without the immediate nonverbal feedback of my peers' body language (Are they listening to me? Do they understand me?), I tend to assume that my peers think the worst of me." As these reflections illustrate, the online modality of graduate teaching training contributed to feelings of isolation, social anxiety, an imbalance in GTA participation, and a delayed sense of community at the start of the semester.

The synchronous component of the fall graduate pedagogy seminar was instrumental to community building as a space where the cohort and director exchanged experiences and bounced ideas off each other in real time. The course director worked to facilitate a stronger sense of community among new GTAs by incorporating breakout discussion sessions that allowed them to connect with their peers and with more experienced GTA peer mentors who occasionally joined the meetings. While the peers discussed questions and swapped experiences, the basic course director hopped from one virtual pod to the next to check on progress. This intimate, small-group dynamic offered quieter GTAs more time and security to speak and offered everyone a chance to bond. One GTA noted, "[Our instructor] made extensive use of Zoom breakout groups, which was really important because it made sure that everybody got a chance to talk." Another shared, "Breakout groups were great. Being able to talk in small groups with multiple different people helped me get to know my cohort much better than being in a large group." Other GTAs stated that small-group breakout sessions functioned to build rapport among peers, while others noted that they would log into Zoom early to interact informally with the course director.

Ultimately, then, the first theme that emerged from our survey was the substantial impact the online learning environment had on the new GTAs. It created significant hurdles socially, academically, and pedagogically. The online format of training compounded the uncertainty of the students' first-semester teaching, making the formation of meaningful community more difficult. However, because all GTAs in our cohort attended class regularly and made participation a priority, the synchronous format worked for the graduate seminar in a way not necessarily transferable to all learning contexts. Virtual classroom strategies such as synchronous meetings, small-group breakout rooms, and facilitated connections with experienced peer GTA mentors proved effective for overcoming the myriad challenges of the pandemic context.

NAVIGATING INSTRUCTOR ETHOS

A second theme that emerged from the new GTA surveys was the issue of instructor credibility. As Dannels (2015) argues, this credibility "is a

complex, communicative process that involves your behavior and the students' perceptions of your behavior" (23). The establishment of instructor credibility is important both for instructor confidence and for student learning, as students who perceive their instructor as credible typically are more motivated to learn, hold greater respect for their instructor, communicate more openly inside and outside of class, and demonstrate increased learning (Dannels 2015).

Scholarship on credibility in the classroom typically focuses on face-to-face instruction. Dannels (2014), for instance, notes that when GTAs attempt to "manage their students perceptions of them," they experience a sense of imposter syndrome, with concerns relating to age and setting themselves apart from the undergraduate student body (94). She also notes that instructors may worry about not having all the answers, giving wrong answers, being challenged about subject matter, lacking adequate expertise, or encountering students with superior expertise (Dannels 2015). However, many of these concerns were not relevant in the asynchronous, online context. Age was rendered mostly invisible, and instructors had ample time to answer questions and challenges via email, even seeking advice for difficult scenarios before responding.

As instructor credibility took on a different form amid the pandemic, so did the imposter syndrome experienced by the new GTAs. For instance, one GTA stated:

I definitely felt that I was a bit of an imposter. I was learning how to implement technical pieces of the class (how to use Studio in Canvas, how to hide grades from students, how to navigate the rubrics, etc.) but I was supposed to be the reliable instructor. Many of my students called me "Professor" in their emails . . . I didn't want to tell them, "This is my first time teaching this class!"

As this student notes, the online learning management system (Canvas) was preloaded with everything from the assignments, rubrics, lecture videos, and resources. All new GTAs recorded "meet your instructor" and "course overview" videos which undergraduate students were assigned to watch in the first week of the semester. Beyond this, instructors were provided with opportunities to customize their courses through the addition of supplementary instructor-created videos, the posting of weekly course announcements and reminders, assignment feedback, and customization of smaller mini-speech assignments.

Due to the time constraints of being a new graduate student and the learning curve that comes along with teaching a course for the first time, most new instructors focused their customization efforts on their weekly Canvas announcements and their assignment feedback. As a result, the new GTAs

were administering a course that, on the whole, someone else had created and handed to them. As one GTA noted, “I worried that students would see me as under-qualified since the lecture videos were recorded and added to the online Canvas [course template] by another instructor.” This new form of imposter syndrome stemmed not from a lack of expertise, but from a lack of creative agency.

Yet, unlike an in-person teaching scenario wherein instructors create and lead face-to-face lesson plans, asynchronous online teaching allowed unique opportunities to perform instructor credibility by leaning into the technology tools provided. Essentially, the Canvas templates enacted a level of credibility on behalf of the instructor. One GTA illustrated this phenomenon when they reflected, “Having a complete and well structured online class helped build my credibility as an instructor. This was later confirmed with the student [teaching evaluation] survey results.” Another described how the complete course template helped them master the curriculum: “I put the work in to thoroughly understand the content of the course, as well as utilizing the language within the [Canvas] course [template when communicating with students].” Other GTAs noted how the complete course template and asynchronous online format made space for them to focus on other essential skills such as grading and providing meaningful feedback.

Survey results also demonstrate that GTAs saw a relationship between instructor credibility and instructor immediacy. This is not surprising, because even in the face-to-face environment new GTAs are attuned to the dynamics of “negotiating relationships” and “managing identities” (Dannels 2014, 99–100). In the context of online instruction, GTAs had to find different ways of creating this sense of immediacy. “My synchronous virtual meetings with my students helped me establish my knowledge and credibility by providing them with recommendations and or clarifications. Also, my email communication with the students helped establish my presence as their instructor,” described one GTA. Another GTA viewed their email interactions as a form of humanization: “[My emails give] students a chance to feel that I am not simply a profile on Canvas or a TA who was told to grade their work. I want them to know that I pay close attention to the work they put in.” As these reflections illustrate, GTAs turned to email correspondence and synchronous online office hours to foster immediacy with students.

These forms of online immediacy, however, significantly compounded existing stressors for GTAs. The pandemic dynamic blurred the boundaries between home life and work life. Since GTAs were steps away from their computers at all times, working hours became hyper-flexible to the point of being ubiquitous. This sometimes led to potentially untenable conceptions about how readily available an effective instructor needs to be. For

instance, one GTA's reflection shows a tendency to become overly available to students:

I also learned that I need to monitor my email at all times because students could need help at any moment and in a situation like the pandemic, I think it was very important to be available to my students at all times even though that would take more effort and time on my side, but it guaranteed that I supported them in every way possible during the semester.

Another echoed this tendency toward over-availability: "I was very careful to respond to my students' email inquiries instantly and sometimes I responded one or two minutes after receiving their emails. I think this [encouraged] them to send more inquiries as they would not have to wait long for a response." GTAs were not required or instructed to be available to their students to this extent, but some over-extended themselves as a way to establish goodwill and community with their students. GTAs were required to hold two office hours per week per course and to clearly communicate a reasonable response time for student-instructor email communication. Time management can be a challenge even in a "normal" semester, as GTAs juggle the roles of instructor and student simultaneously (Dannels 2015). In the online context, however, striking a balance proved even more difficult for GTAs, particularly given that so much of their own teaching, coursework, and socializing happened in the same online spaces.

NAVIGATING INSTRUCTOR COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A third theme that emerged from the survey of new GTAs was growth in their own communication skills and understanding of public speaking. As one GTA reflected in their survey response, "Teaching public speaking is also a great opportunity to improve a teacher's communication skills and not just the students." At the authors' institution, the introductory public speaking course is housed in a large English department that includes several graduate programs. As such, GTAs who teach the introductory public speaking course come from a variety of disciplines, including applied linguistics, creative writing, literature, English education, and rhetoric and professional communication. Thus, the majority of GTAs who teach public speaking are new to the discipline of communication studies. In the basic course director's experience, she observes that new GTAs who teach the public speaking course grow alongside their students in their own understanding of public speaking as a discipline and in their own public speaking and communication skills. GTAs

commonly share that they observe an evolution in their own ability to craft well-organized, engaging, and effectively-delivered presentations both in teaching scenarios and in their own graduate courses. These same phenomena occurred in the fall 2020 pandemic scenario, but in different ways.

The online pandemic teaching and learning context heightened GTA attunement to different aspects of the public speaking skillset within synchronous contexts. Survey responses indicate that GTAs noted the importance of nonverbal communication behaviors such as posture, body language, and gestures, which one GTA described as “all the more important” in the online context when attempting to build a sense of immediacy with virtual audiences. GTAs also demonstrated growth in their understanding of the technological dimensions of professional online communication such as how to “make eye contact” by looking directly at the webcam, how to angle the camera and set up lighting so that the speaker can be clearly seen, and how to navigate audio- and video-recording technologies. Additionally, GTA survey responses display attunement to critical listening skills. When reflecting on their experience with the graduate training seminar, some GTAs found it difficult to interact virtually with colleagues fearing that their participation might interrupt others. As one GTA noted, “It is difficult, at times, to read people’s reactions in an online format. So I had to be more observant.” Ultimately, then, the skills that the pandemic cohort developed were those that the online pandemic teaching context highlighted and necessitated. These skills—though different than those cultivated in normal times—are ones that will serve GTAs in both online and face-to-face communication contexts.

In the online teaching context, GTAs also gained more extensive practice in written communication skills than they typically receive in face-to-face teaching contexts. One GTA noted the difficulty of striking a balance between brevity, clarity, and detail: “I . . . had to be wary in my feedback both in emails and assignments to ensure that students were getting the right amount of information in a concise manner.” This reflection illustrates Vallade and Kaufmann’s (2018) contention that in the online classroom, “the lack of opportunity for online students to ask questions or follow up with an instructor during FtF class time makes the use of email even more important to student learning in online classes, particularly when they are confused or need help” (372). Accordingly, GTAs also expressed frustration with how easy it is to miscommunicate information in the written, online context. Students’ difficulty or failure to follow written instructions for using technology added a significant workload burden for the GTAs, in many cases requiring them to address panic and frustration from struggling students. In response to some of these communication challenges, however, GTAs developed an ability to translate complex ideas or instructions into simplified language. These GTAs focused on using clear and concise language in their email communication

and assignment feedback to create shared meaning between students and their instructor.

NAVIGATING INSTRUCTOR EMPATHY

Finally, as one GTA aptly noted, “Teaching is as much about the relationships and support of a classroom as it is about the content.” The stressors of the pandemic greatly influenced the types of support undergraduate students needed throughout the semester. COVID-19 swept through the student body, with many students ill or quarantined at any given moment. Students also grappled with illness and deaths among their families and friends across the country. On top of this, many students navigated online coursework for the first time, overcoming technological barriers and time-management challenges without the social support typical of university life. Students who were unaccustomed to self-directed time management struggled to meet deadlines. As a result, GTAs of the pandemic cohort gained extensive experience navigating the gray areas of student support.

Across the fall semester, discussion of how to balance course policies with students’ extenuating circumstances was a constant agenda item in our seminar class. GTAs expressed concern over how to uphold course policies regarding the timely submission of coursework and keep students on track in the course, while still demonstrating grace and empathy when their students were struggling. The extra effort of sending reminder emails proved effective for many GTAs; however, it stirred up feelings of insecurity about “pushing” students to complete their tasks. This type of labor was viewed as “hand-holding” or micromanaging by some instructors. One GTA admitted to waiving all late penalties in an effort to extend grace in their class sections but later felt self-conscious in light of how their peers handled late work. The complexities of these experiences are evident in the following GTA reflection:

The main way that I helped support my students was by being extremely lax on my due date policies. Turning in an assignment by a specific deadline is, of course, a valuable skill. But I wanted to evaluate their ability to give and analyze speeches more than their ability to be punctual and follow directions, especially because there were many issues with internet connectivity, students with coronavirus (I was informed every time a student was not allowed to come to my class due to health reasons, even though I was teaching online and asynchronously), and just general stress.

This GTA’s reflection exhibits empathy in balancing the rigidity of course policies with desired student learning outcomes, a crucial skill that new instructors learned by necessity across the stressful, unpredictable semester.

These gray areas were further complicated by the degree of emotional vulnerability expressed by students. One GTA offered an illustrative example:

One student emailed me at around 9 pm, mere hours before the first major speech video recording was due, desperately asking for an extension. Despite the late hour, I felt obligated to respond and granted her a 24-hour extension. She asked to meet with me on a video call the next day and arrived in tears. She expressed that she was stressed out by the sheer amount of coursework due in all her classes, the stress of the job fair going on that week, and the overall chaotic nature of the semester. I was able to talk her through the assignment and she left much calmer. She sent me an email the next day apologizing for her emotional outburst and expressed deep embarrassment over the situation.

The vignette above illuminates the emotional toll the pandemic inflicted upon the student-teacher relationship. For some GTAs, upholding strict guidelines meant denying the pandemic's impact on a student's life. As students themselves, the GTAs understood the overwhelming combination of pandemic fatigue and school-related pressures. As a result, the GTAs got a crash course in referral skills by introducing their students to student counseling services, stress management resources, and crisis hotlines. Multiple GTAs related stories about students disclosing personal details related to their health and home life when asking for extensions. Other GTAs found that reaching out to the students who were missing work led these students to confide in them.

Student support is never one-size-fits-all. By the end of the semester, most GTAs felt called to be more gracious and empathetic to students amid and post-pandemic. One GTA summed up this impulse well:

My experience teaching amid a pandemic shaped my teaching philosophy regarding flexibility and compassion. I granted far more extensions than I anticipated because nearly a dozen students reached out for accommodations. Moving forward, I anticipate that I will continue to model grace and understanding when students take initiative to communicate their struggles and verbalize their need for extensions. I will also continue to proactively email students who are falling behind as a way of checking in with them.

This reflection demonstrates how first-time GTAs navigated their students' need for emotional and academic support through compassion. Amid the pandemic, empathy and flexibility became part of the teaching ethos—a part that will stay with them as they continue to teach and grow as instructors.

CONCLUSION AND TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS

All in all, this cohort of GTAs confronted a difficult situation that was challenging on multiple levels, but in so doing they learned invaluable lessons that will inform the future of their teaching and professional careers. As we move out of the pandemic and toward a “new normal,” it is clear that online learning is here to stay. “Increasingly, departments are urged to develop courses online, to meet the needs of a variety of populations and improve the bottom line of universities who are facing enrollment issues,” notes Chatham-Carpenter (2017, 492). In fact, as recently as 2018, one-third of all U.S. college students enrolled in at least one online course (Lederman 2019). In this context, basic course directors should be attuned to the lessons learned from the pandemic year as they plan future training for new GTAs and ongoing mentoring for the pandemic cohorts that they advise. While the COVID-19 pandemic is recent enough that we do not yet have all the answers, we have identified a few key recommendations for the consideration of basic course directors.

First, we must be careful not to forget the pandemic cohort of graduate students who learned to teach in this unique context. As these instructors transition into new teaching situations, additional mentorship will be needed on topics and skills such as lesson planning, classroom management, and facilitation of live discussion, which were minimized in their training due to the demands of the pandemic. At our institution, for instance, GTAs gained only minimal experience with lesson planning for face-to-face classes through a seminar project that required each GTA to model a sample lesson plan synchronously online. Our survey found that almost all instructors indicated apprehension about the transition into the physical classroom, so course directors should be ready to provide appropriate support.

Conversely, for future cohorts of new GTAs, graduate pedagogy must take on a dimension of multimodality to prepare instructors for the various teaching contexts they may encounter. This could take the form of synchronous and asynchronous online modules in otherwise face-to-face orientation or graduate training to familiarize students with these formats. Such models would also provide a space to include readings and discussions on best practices and particular challenges of online teaching. Course directors should also invite critical thinking about online teaching modalities by assigning the work of scholars like Huber (2020), who brings a critical pedagogy lens to online teaching, arguing that “online education structurally compels teachers into ‘help desk’ positions” to the effect of “limiting instructor dynamism and foreclosing opportunities for relationship building, problem posing, and collaboration” (464–465).

Additionally, basic course directors should consider including assignments that ask new GTAs to create video lessons for online classes, to practice

online teaching, and to develop and hone online communication skills. Formal GTA training programs can promote increased instructor self-efficacy and confidence by requiring practice in multiple modes of performance-based aspects of teaching (Young and Bippus 2008, 124–125). When GTAs were asked in our survey about what things they would do differently when teaching online in the future, several responded that they would like to incorporate more multimodal materials in their courses. One GTA noted that they would “create more video announcements, instead of written announcements.” Another GTA reflected: “I plan to use video or audio feedback on major assignments. I feel like putting a voice to my feedback instead of simply typing out my responses will give the students a chance to feel that I am not simply a profile on Canvas or a TA who was told to grade their work.” Drawing on these ideas, we advise that course directors should create opportunities for GTAs to feel ownership and agency over the online course they teach. For instance, course directors should build more required customization projects into GTA training, perhaps including introductory videos for major speech assignments or mini video lectures on specific course concepts. These videos could be included in online courses or posted to the course LMS for face-to-face learners to review as supplementary course materials.

At a more basic level, communication pedagogy courses should provide some training in written communication, to prepare GTAs both for online teaching scenarios as well as for the vast amounts of email and assignment writing that come with face-to-face teaching. As the survey results show, our GTAs spent much of their time on email communication, course announcements, and written feedback, and miscommunications in these contexts were rampant. As Miller (2010) writes, “Rather than relying on the face-to-face communication characteristic of the traditional classroom, online communication relies on the ambiguity of text based communication where fine communication nuances may not be as evident” (163). Thus, pedagogy courses should provide models and practice opportunities for students to cultivate these skills and to receive instructor and peer feedback.

This pandemic experience also points to at least two areas of needed research within the field of basic communication pedagogy. First, we know from Hennings (2011) that GTAs feel pressure to be “perfect” teachers, and we saw this take on a new and different form as so much of the student-teacher relationship took place in online spaces. Additional research is needed to examine this “perfect teacher” fallacy in terms of workload, email responsiveness, and instructor availability, particularly in online contexts.

Second and finally, basic course directors need to develop new and innovative ways to train graduate students to negotiate the stressful “gray areas” of teaching and to balance expectations with grace. One possibility is to turn to the work in composition studies on “emotional labor,” to contemplate how

this scholarship can enrich our thinking on the graduate pedagogy training experience (Micciche 2007). While gray areas and emotional labor have always been parts of teaching, the pandemic made this explicit as instructors and students alike navigated new levels of stress and uncertainty together.

While we all look forward to a “return to normal,” the changes to teaching and learning that have taken place amid the pandemic will undoubtedly have some lasting institutional effects. We must remember that, moving forward, basic course directors will be training new GTAs to teach in this changed environment, and new approaches will be needed to account for the multitude of teaching contexts and corresponding challenges that future generations of graduate teaching assistants will face. But of equal importance, we must continue to incorporate graduate students into our research and thinking on communication pedagogy and to allow their experiences to inform the future of introductory communication courses and pedagogical training.

NOTE

1. The survey we conducted went through the IRB approval process and was declared exempt. All names and identifying information have been removed.

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