Introduction

Of all academic disciplines, we do as little to prepare their instructors for the classroom as creative writing. Creative writing graduate teaching assistants (TAs) are typically given little more than a sample syllabus and a few vague guidelines ("teach a class that has at least two genres"). Compared to the TAs of most disciplines, we creative writing TAs are also less likely to be paired with faculty mentors to guide our work. Furthermore, while other areas of English often require a prerequisite or concurrent course in pedagogy for their teachers, creative writers "are much less likely than their counterparts in literature and composition to experience organized training to teach what they teach." Many universities are just beginning to have similar requirements — or even options — for creative writing instructors.

As a result, many TAs enter the classroom with little more at our disposal than the exercises we encountered as students, an approach that assumes creative writing instructors "can best learn through osmosis, individual trial and error." A colleague of ours once compared her first day as a teacher to a new soldier leaping from a helicopter into a war zone: she hit the ground running and hoped for the best. While this instructor's metaphor is drastic, the emotion behind it will be familiar to many teachers: the thrill and terror of standing before the twenty faces of your own classroom for the first time and wondering, what in the world do I do now?

The institutional lack of pedagogical discussion contributes greatly to both this frustration and this exhilaration. We TAs enjoy the opportunity to innovate, but often have little on which to fall back when our experiments fail. We question why lessons and exercises that enthralled us as students fall flat when we try to replicate them as instructors. We wonder, as Kelly Ritter did during her graduate studies, "Am I the only one who wants a stronger connection between