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ABSTRACT

Graduate teaching assistantships began in the late 1800s as a means of attracting individuals to graduate studies. Initially, stipends were awarded to students without the expectation of service; however, after World War II graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) were expected to function as graders and, ultimately, classroom teachers. Over 100 years later, graduate assistantships are still offered and many of the same questions also exist regarding whether training is necessary or if previous study of a discipline's subject matter suffices as a prerequisite for teaching. This paper briefly outlines the importance of the basic course in the communication departments of colleges and universities. Having established the importance of the course and the fact that GTAs typically are responsible for teaching the basic course, the following areas are discussed: (1) common problems encountered by GTAs; (2) the training needs of GTAs; and (3) enhancing the teaching skills of GTAs. Finally, the paper articulates areas of concern not addressed in the paper but worthy of note--training and support systems for the GTA of color. Contains 31 references. (Author)

# Preparing Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) to Effectively Teach the Basic Course

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Abstract

Graduate teaching assistantships began in the late 1800s as a means of attracting individuals to graduate studies. Initially, stipends were awarded to students without the expectation of service, however, after WWII graduates were expected to function as graders and, ultimately, classroom teachers. Over 100 years later, graduate assistantships are still offered and many of the same questions also exist regarding whether training is necessary or if previous study of a discipline's subject matter suffices as a prerequisite for teaching.

This paper briefly outlines the importance of the basic course in the communication departments of colleges and universities. Having established the importance of the course and the fact that GTAs typically are responsible for teaching the basic course, the following areas are discussed: 1) common problems encountered by GTAs, 2) the training needs of GTAs, and 3) enhancing the teaching skills of GTAs. Finally, areas of concern not addressed in this particular paper, but worthy of note, are articulated - e.g., training and support systems for the GTA of color.

> For ten years an influx of students has been making it necessary to provide more teachers. The financial conditions of the institution made it necessary to get cheap teachers....gradually it became accepted that there must be in each department a considerable number of young people...with little or no previous experience in teaching, who would have to be turned loose upon the large group of Fresnman each year and replaced two or three times during the year!...to improve this situation, more money would be needed; and, having obtained it, the next step, of course, would be to improve the quality of the teaching staff...(Rightmire, 1930, pp. 158-159)
> (Empnasis added)

According to Allen and Rueter (1990), graduate fellowships can be traced back to the late 1800s when small stipends, without service requirements, were awarded in order to attract individuals to graduate studies. These authors indicate that graduate students were used as graders following WWII to address the great influx of veterans into the post-secondary educational system. Ultimately, graduate students on fellowships were moved into the classroom as teachers in order to maximize the use of campus funds by employing graduate students rather than professors.

In an overview of the history of teaching assistants (TAs), Chase (1970) cites four reasons for the use of TAs as follows:

1. Meeting the financial needs associated with attending graduate school and, thereby, attracting students to graduate study.
2. Meeting post WWII college and university enrollment increases.
3. Attracting students to train in scarcely occupied scientific areas after the launching

of Sputnik.

4. Addressing parental and student dissatisfaction with undergraduate education as exemplified by the 1964 campus demonstrations at the the University of California, Berkeley.

The first successful (documented) fellowship program was initiated at Jonn Hopkins University in 1876. Twenty fellowsnips, were awarded as a recruitment tool, each year at Jonn Hopkins. In the early 1900s, as graduate fellows were expected to provide a campus service in exchange for their stipend, scholars considered questions regarding who should be awarded graduate fellowships, what the responsibilities of graduate fellows should entail, and whether these individuals should be trained. The answers, in reference to the need for teacher training, ranged from Duke University's Dean Wannamaker's resolution to "secure capable men as graduate students" to University of Indiana's Dean Payne indicating the need "to strengthen rather than lessen the research requirement" (Gray, 1930).

As we approach the twenty-first century, post-secondary scholars continue to address questions regarding who should receive fellowships, what the corresponding responsibilities should be, and what training, if any, is needed for graduate teaching assistants. The importance of addressing such issues is heightened when a department offers a required general education course to the campus undergraduate

population which is typically taught by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). According to a survey conducted by Trunk, Becker, and Hall (1986), approximately 85% of the post-secondary institutions in the United States require non-communication majors to enroll in one communication course in order to graduate. This one course is typically referred to as the "basic course" although its content varies from campus to campus, ranging from public speaking, interpersonal communication, rhetoric, or hybrids which combine several content areas to provide an overview of several facets of the Speech Communication discipline.

In addition to being viewed as critical to the education of the undergraduate student population, basic courses, in general, provide critical services to the departments in which they are housed. Basic courses generate credit hours and, as result, funding is produced not only to perpetuate the existence of the course itself but the funding of other courses within the department as well. In addition to the revenue and the corresponding jobs, the basic course in Speech Communication serves as: 1) a means to recruit majors into the discipline, and 2) an easily accessible source of undergraduate research participants. Bolleau and May (1985) describe the basic course by saying "if 'the eyes are the mirror to the soul,' then the basic course is the 'mirror' to the discipline."

Even though it serves critical departmental and campus functions, the basic course is often shunned by experienced faculty and relegated to GTAs. Boileau and May (1985) note that for many professionals, their first exposure to teaching is the experience associated with teaching the basic course. Over the past twenty years, GTAs have been used to teach the basic course and, given the economic benefit, they will likely continue. This paper addresses the: 1) problems generally encountered by GTAs employed to teach the basic course, 2) training needs of GTAS, and 3) means to assist GTAs in enhancing their teaching skills, and 4) absence of research regarding the classroom experiences of graduate teaching assistants of color.

## Common GTA Problems

A review of some of the literature on GTAs indicates that they are typically faced with a lack of training, insecurity regarding their teaching capability, time/role conflicts, and uncertainty regarding their departmental status (Allen & Rueter, 1990; Buerkel-Rothfuss & Fink, 1993; Epstein, 1974; Haggerty, 1927; Koen & Ericksen, 1967). The absence of training may be partly grounded in the notion that "many departments choose to ignore direct instruction in teaching methods in favor of the notion that bright people learn to teach by teaching" (Allen & Rueter, 1990,

p. ix). Insecurities associated with teaching capability are likely linked with situations where there is little or no training and/or mentoring serving as a support base for GTAs.

A related problem is not the absence of training but the absence of independent decision-making (Nadler, 1985; Trunk, 1992). This problem surfaces when GTAs are assigned attending campuses which offer multiple sections of the basic course -- usually a large number of sections. In this latter case, the basic course director and/or department chair may decide to ensure continuity across sections by dictating that, all faculty (GTAs included) teaching the basic course will do so in an identical fashion - e.g., using identical syllabi, assignments, exams, etc. Although it is undeniable that structure is then provided for the GTAs, independent thinking (internalizing the process of creating, planning, and executing assignments) becomes an issue. McKeachie (1969) captures this problem when he states:

> Enjoyment of teaching is important not only for the enthusiasm which the professor communicates to his students but also in determining his interest in continued improvement. Both of these important values are likely to be lost if teaching becomes so routinized and depersonalized that it is no longer fun (p. 239)

Thus, it becomes important to balance the GTA's need for structure with his/her need for independent thinking - the need to place a "personal stamp" on the course s/he teaches.

GTAs juggle the roles of "graduate student" and "teacher" (in addition to their "person" role which connects them to family and friends outside of the university setting). GTAs are responsible for teaching one of the most important courses in the department yet typically are not held in high esteem in their departments - they lack status. According to Willer (1993), GTAs must be taught how to professionally communicate to their undergraduates (given the age similarity) that they are not 'just another student.' In addition, I would add, they must maneuver department professional stratas which place them virtually at the bottom - just above the graduate student without an assistantship - despite their massive teaching responsibility. Koen and Ericksen (1967) capsulize this experience by saying:

> All of these concerns is some feeling by the graduate student that in the University Play he is a minor character or understudy and that the major roles (Juvenile Lead, Hero, Heroine, Villain) are assumed by others (p. 30)

Many of the problems generally associated with graduate students being assigned to teach the basic course can be linked to the need for information. In order to alleviate some of the anxiety and fear associated with classroom

teaching, GTAs need information (especially those enrolled in M.A. programs whose ages are very similar to that of their students).

## GTA Training Needs

According to Chase (1970), the purpose of the GTA should be redefined in order to avoid exploiting graduate students. Chase proposes that assistantships be conceptualized as: 1) an integral part of an individual's graduate education, 2) a means to provide valuable teaching experience, and 3) an experience where an individual (regardless of his/her professional goals) could profit from the intellectual and organizational demands of the task.

Wulff (1992) discusses two basic categories of GTA training - group-based and individual-based interaction. Training which promotes group-based interaction is exemplified by activities such as workshops, microteaching, seminars, and coursework. Individual-based interaction (which was supported by Rightmire in the late 1920s) includes activities such as dyadic counseling with the basic course director, instructional observation, and videotape critiques. Wulff notes advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the training methods and, ultimately, advocates that basic course directors combine several methods when creating training programs.

Another training option is mentoring. Mentoring can serve several different functions: 1) initial orientation to campus and community, 2) social introductions to faculty, staff, and other graduate students and GTAs, 3) graduate academic advising, 4) training for classroom teaching, and/or 5) providing expertise in one's specialized area of study (Gray & Murray, 1994).

As noted earlier, training programs range from those according GTAs complete freedom (no training) to those dictating sameness across all sections of the basic course (Nadler, 1985; Trank, 1990, 1992). In his chapter in the book entitled, Preparing Teaching Assistants for Instructional Roles, Weaver (1992) describes a 17 year old GTA training program which appears undergirded by the principle or sameness as a means of providing consistent teaching and grading. For instance, Weaver speaks of the ability to move students from one section of the basic course to another without a loss in content, staff meeting discussions providing consistency in grading, and other GTAs being able to substitute for their colleagues in emergencies. One key benefit, of course, is the implementation of structure.

However, as a basic course director, I agree with Nadler's (1985) notion of comparability. Both Nadler and Trank (1990, 1992) advocate programs which provide structure but which maintain a significantly different approach to the

basic course than that advocated by Weaver (1992). Specifically, Nadler believes autonomy allows for differences in the way sections of the basic course are taught which can nonetheless be comparable. He suggests, that:

1. The mandatory teaching units be identified, thus, forming a core curriculum.
2. The same number of tests be given in each section. Each GTA will design his/her own tests and have them preapproved prior to distribution to the class.
3. Common readings be established across each section with an understanding that limited additional readings can be selected by a GTA for his/her sections.
4. A set of written assignments will be agreed upon by the course director and the GTAs. Each GTA is accorded the freedom to select from among the pre-approved assignments.

A training program based on comparable autonomy requires structure and support for GTAs and is "far from being a laissez-faire form of course direction, [it] is actually an involved, non-directive method which provides the greater benefit...for the undergraduate students, the graduate assistants, and the director..." (p. 10).

However, even when one selects what I have labeled, comparable autonomy, GTAs still require additional information. In order to address the need for information and making the assistantship a valuable experience (for both GTA and undergraduate), Comeaux and Aitken (1989) propose

that course directors nurture an interest in the basic course, provide strategies and techniques for teaching the course, alert GTAs as to what to expect from undergraduate students, and inform them of university and department policies and procedures. When training GTAs, scholars also note the importance of communicating professionalism and appropriate authority in the undergraduate classroom (Buerkel-Rothfuss & Fink, 1993; Willer, 1993). Cultivating a professional image entails being well-prepared, demonstrating one's knowledge, wearing appropriate dress, and establishing prior experience.

Regardless of which training method, or combination of methods is selected, this basic course director believes that GTAs must be provided with the following information whether they teach the basic course independently or are assigned to the performance/discussion segments of the course:

1. The rationale for the course and its required (or suggested) units of study. GTAs cannot be expected to teach a course or answer questions regarding aspects of the course if they: a) do not see the value in the course, and b) have not been afforded the opportunity to explore how the content and assignments fit together.

2. The departmental and campus policies which pertain to anyone teaching in the classroom. GTAs should know what recording keeping is required, how long files must be kept, who is responsible for maintaing the records, etc. They should also be well-versed in campus

sexual harassment procedures, campuses services to undergraduates such as tutoring and disabled student services. Rather than solely providing written materials, guest speakers can be invited to your regularly scheduled meetings with GTAs.

3. Appropriate venues for sharing their classroom experiences - positive and negative. Particular classroom challenges can be anticipated and acceptable resolutions discussed with the GTAs. In addition, actual challenges (and triumphs) should be discussed. GTAs should be informed with whom to speak and under what circumstances. For instance, should they see the course director during office hours, call him/her at home, wait for the next scheduled group meeting, etc.

4. Reappointment information should be clearly articulated before a graduate student accepts his/her appointment and during the assistantship. The criteria for evaluation should be known to the GTA, basic course director, and the department chair (Nowlis, Clark, & Rock, 1968).

5. If possible, an internship should precede the actual classroom teaching to allow graduate students to observe the classroom dynamics associated with teaching the basic course and to gain a better understanding of the types of questions and behavior to expect from undergraduates. The internship should not consist of observation alone but, minimally, should be combined with: a) a directed journal documenting and analyzing the classroom experiences, and b) conversation with the faculty member teaching the course regarding their organization, planning, and grading.

6. Even in standardized courses, there should be room for the individual GTA's personality and interests to be reflected in the class in order to encourage enthusiasm in teaching the course. Discussions should be initiated regarding how students would like to teach mandated units of study and feedback should be provided regarding the appropriateness and acceptability of

their ideas.

In addition to providing opportunities to reflect upon the rationale for the course and how to teach the course, GTAs should be given the opportunity to improve their teaching. Seeking advice and initiating teaching evaluations are common ways of obtaining data to enhance one's teaching.

## Enhancing Teaching Skills

When reviewing GTA strategies, Allen and Rueter (1990) mention the need for graduate teaching assistants to take time for self-reflection, learning how to teach, and adjusting their teaching. Further, they mention several forms of evaluation which allow GTAs (or experienced faculty) to begin steps to improve. Allen and Rueter note four sources of evaluation - student (e.g., undergraduates enrolled in one's course), peer, supervisor, and self-evaluation. They also indicate that evaluation can be written, oral, and, even, on-going rather than simply occurring at the end of the term. Ryan and Martens (1989) offer two additional sources from which GTAs can seek information and advice - campus instructional development centers and teaching journals within one's disciplinary area.

Information which can identify strengths and weaknesses and, ultimately, provide a frame for improving a GTA's teaching can also be obtained by non-evaluative feedback. Non-evaluative feedback would consist of observing classroom participation, students' verbal and nonverbal communication cues during class, noting the most frequently missed items on examinations, and directly asking students for input.

While the desire to teach well is typically assumed as we assign GTAs to the classroom, it is imperative that barriers to the improvement of teaching be acknowledged and, if not removed entirely, reduced in number. According to McKeachie (1969), barriers to the quest for improvement exist for new college teachers and include:

1. The effort involved in collecting data, identifying areas for improvement, and designing a plan for improvement.

2. The fear of loss of status. If a strategy for improvement fails, the GTA's students may perceive him/her as not having any (or very little) knowledge.

3. The fear of failure. This barrier entails imagining catastrophic results from an attempt to experiment in improving one's teaching.

4. Unfavorable reactions from colleagues. The GTA may be perceived as "deserting the tried and true academic traditions in order to curry student or administrative favor" (p. 239).

Thus, it is imperative that course directors construct

their primary responsibilities as professor, guidance counselor, and supporter rather than supervisor, overseer, and reprimander. The identification (and communication) of such perceived responsibilities will likely enhance the director's ability to encourage improvement - in particular, when using the individual-based, TA-Supervisor interactions (Wulff, 1992) such as individual consultations, classroom observation, and videotaped critiques.

## Additional Considerations

Given the changing racial and ethnic demographics of the United States, the aforenoted options for designing a training program, while admirable compared to complete freedom, are nonetheless inadequate. It is imperative that course directors consider who is being taught, who is teaching, and how content and assignments responsive to a multicultural society can be incorporated into the basic course. The attitudes of the department faculty towards multiculturalism (including GTAs) must be explored and openly discussed as part of designing not only the basic course but as a preliminary step to training GTAs in teaching any course (Banks, 1994; Darling, 1992).

Research is prevalent regarding the international teaching assistant (Anderson-Hsieh, 1990; Nelson, 1990; vom Saal, Miles, & McGraw, 1988). An Educational Resources Informational Center (ERIC) computer-based search in the summer of 1993, conducted by this course director, produced no citations regarding graduate teaching assistants of color. The search was conducted using the term "socialization," combined with "graduate students," "teacher," "teaching assistants," "minority graduate students," and "minority teaching assistants." The ERIC database covered the period 1982 - mid 1993.

Although information could not be located specifically addressing the classroom experience of GTAs of color, the classroom has been documented as a hostile environment for teachers and professors of color (de la Luz Reyes & Halcon, 1990; Mitchell, 1990;). White students have also been documented as likely to question the credentials of their Black professors. As a result, white students use a more extensive set of criteria when evaluating the credibility of Black professors than is used with white professors (Hendrix, 1993). If teaching in a predominantly white classroom presents challenges to professors of color, it is reasonable to posit the challeges are exacerbated for GTAs of color. Thus, careful consideration of who is functioning as a GTA within one's department and how to properly train

each individual for classroom teaching becomes critical to ensure successful classroom interaction and learning.

## Conclusion

Graduate teaching assistants experience fear and anxiety associated with their role as classroom "teacher" These feelings of insecurity and confusion occur in conjunction with the need to balance teaching responsibilities with their graduate studies and obligations to family and friends. Providing GTAs with information can reduce the uncertainty regarding what is expected of them in their role as "teacher" and, thereby, reduce the fear and anxieties.

Information should be distributed to GTAs in a systematic fashion which incorporates individual, face-to-face interaction rather than simply forwarding information in writing. At the very least, information regarding the rationale undergirding the basic course, strategies on how to teach the course, policies and procedures associated with teaching the course, how to interact with undergraduate students, and the criteria for reappointment should be provided. Ideally, this basic information will be combined with regularly scheduled group meetings (providing a "safety net" to GTAs entering the classroom as teachers for the first time) as well as some form of mentoring, and the opportunity to improve one's teaching skills.

Lastly, it is critical that the basic course director actually see who is teaching the basic course as well as who is enrolling in the basic course. Not only must multiculturalism be addressed in terms of its introduction into the basic course content, the campus and/or department demographics may necessitate considering how to train graduate students of color as well as international students to successfully interact and promote learning in the undergraduate classroom.

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