ABSTRACT
        This paper examines the role of international
teaching assistant (ITA) trainers within American universities,
focusing on their interaction with university administrators,
faculty, and students. Through the presentation of research findings
and scenarios, it argues that administrators often blame ITA trainers
when a problem arises between an ITA and a faculty member or student,
and that faculty use ITA trainers as stopgaps for unqualified ITAs.
Faculty also criticize ITA trainers when they are frustrated by
unfavorable ITA screening results. Students rail at ITA trainers for
allowing certain ITAs into the classroom, especially those with
less-than-fluent English language skills, while the ITAs themselves
sometimes view the trainers as impediments to their careers or
livelihoods. The paper concludes that the successful ITA trainer
needs to be an effective fundraiser, reference writer, ITA advocate,
and department head adversary. (Contains 14 references.) (MDM)

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ABSTRACT

THE ITA TRAINER: ADVOCATE OR ADVERSARY

Much time and publication space has been devoted to the role of the ITA in a
university setting. The roles of teacher, student, spouse, parent, scholarship recipient have
been frequently discussed in ITA classrooms and at ITA trainer workshops. This paper
will deal with the ITA trainer and the predicament which the trainer can be placed in by the
university administration, the faculty and the students.

Administrators often 'use' the ITA trainer as interference for them when a difficult
situation arises regarding an ITA. Faculty also use ITA trainers as either stopgaps for
unqualified TA's or dart boards when frustrated by unfavorable ITA screening results.
Lastly, students in the role of dissatisfied customers, rail at ITA trainers for allowing
certain ITA's into the classrooms while ITA's sometimes view the trainers as impediments
to their careers or livelihoods.

This presentation will address these issues by presenting some scenarios and
including suggestions as to how an ITA trainer can best handle the at times 'political' nature
of the position.

The successful ITA trainer has a multiplicity of roles, among them: fundraiser;
reference writer ; ITA advocate ; department head adversary. The ITA trainer must elicit
support from all university fronts: the administration, the faculty and the students. This can
only be done with charm, negotiation, patience and above all persistence.

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THE ITA TRAINER: ADVOCATE OR ADVERSARY

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New Mexico State University
March 29, 1995

TESOL '95

LONG BEACH, CALIFORNIA

The ITA Trainer: Advocate or Adversary

Introduction:

This paper will consider the role of the international teaching assistant (ITA) trainer within the university. As the title suggests, many ITA trainers find themselves in a dichotomous situation. On the one hand, the TA educators design courses to help ITAs selected by academic departments, prepare for their duties and responsibilities. On the other, program integrity must be maintained by adhering to quantifiable criteria which aids in the determination of a candidate's 'fitness' for the position.

Administrators often 'use' the ITA trainer as interference when a difficult situation arises regarding an ITA. Faculty also use ITA trainers as stopgaps for unqualified TAs or targets when frustrated by unfavorable ITA screening results. Students (and their parents) dissatisfied with TA methods complain to university administrators about 'cheap' teaching.

The ITA trainers must elicit support from all university factions (the administration, the faculty and the students) while undertaking multiple roles, among them: fund-raiser, reference writer, advocate, and adversary. In this discussion, the latter two will be the main focus.

The ITA trainer as an advocate:

The need that graduate students have for assistantships has been explained by Syverson and Tice (1993: 1-11). Many graduate students could not complete further education without the financial support afforded by a TAship. For those foreign students who originate from countries with weak economies, an assistantship is the only mechanism by which graduate work can be pursued. The researchers found that nearly half of all doctoral recipients in 1990 cited assistantships as the principal source of support (ibid: 2). Teaching assistantships are generally funded through university budgets whereas research assistantships are often based upon federal grants. Therefore, in the humanities (notoriously weak in federal support) teaching assistantships dominate as a financial resource whereas in the physical sciences, research assistantships (RAs) are more likely.

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(ibid: 3) Ironically, as more funding is awarded to the physical sciences, the principal investigators (PI's) need to be released from teaching duties in order to complete the research thereby opening up TAships. The majority of graduate foreign students are to be found in the physical and computational disciplines, "the so-called hard sciences" (Althen, 1991: 352).

Universities, in turn, normally assign TAs to large undergraduate courses as lab assistants (recitation leaders) but are of late ' sensitive' to criticism as to the quality of the teaching and have, therefore, initiated TA training programs (Syverson and Tice:1993: 10). The level of preparedness of a TA varies substantially and is entirely dependent upon the depth of the orientation provided by the institution. (Constantinides, 1989; Bauer and Tanner,1994)

Problems are inherent in a TAs self-perception. *"TAs live in a world of ambiguity. They come to the classroom with a sense of being 'the other,' neither teacher nor student, expert or neophyte, professional or peer"* (Galvin, 1992: 89). This ambiguity is compounded for the foreign TA as not only is the educational system alien but the matter of language and all that is subsequently encompassed by cultural differences adds to the confusion.

Even if a foreign student is fortunate to have a native or near-native command of English, institutional culture can still be a barrier to a successful assistantship. The ITA trainer must then incorporate into the program institutional expectations and procedures to enable the TA to function. Wulff et al (1993: 113-122) argue that an understanding (by the TA trainer) of the basic assumptions of the institution , that is, what is valued by the university will give the TA training program and, by inference, its participants a better understanding of what is required . *"...culture provides meaning and context for a specific group of people. The culture holds the people together and instills in them an individual and collective sense of purpose and continuity"* ((Bergquist, 1992:2).

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Values such as research, teaching and service are evident in research institutions and it is in those organizations among others that assistantships are to be found. Liberal arts colleges value teaching and as such their faculties are primarily responsible for pedagogy. In a research institution, pedagogy may be less 'valued' when faculty undergo evaluation for promotion and/or tenure and, therefore, TAs are assigned the less 'valued' tasks.

For many foreign graduate students, the ITA trainer is seen as a neutral individual whose sole interest is preparing the student for the assistantship. The ITA trainer acts as an 'institutional interpreter' explaining procedures and regulations introducing TAs to services and entitlements provided by the university for its constituents. Many ITA trainers are from ESL/EFL (English as a second or foreign language) backgrounds and have experienced the intercultural difficulties encountered by foreign students. These difficulties are compounded when graduate students matriculate into departments with heavy research and teaching loads. If faculty in the academic department are overloaded, then little mentoring is possible for TAs. Many ITAs have to fend for themselves through an investigative maze hampered by the newness of the environment. The foreigner may not know how to 'network' with other TAs and/or be hesitant to seek assistance from faculty. Faculty may be unaware of the tremendous obstacles that a foreign student must hurdle upon initial contact with the host institution and country.

The ITA trainer can then, indeed, become a necessary advocate for the graduate assistants literally paving the way through the institutional hoops that any new student must jump. Protecting the ITA from departmental or professorial exploitation is certainly an additional burden that many trainers undertake in a rather 'mothering' sense. Some of this protectionism may be based upon the backgrounds of many ESL professionals (turned ITA trainers) who have incorporated cultural awareness into their methodology. For many of these educators, the nature of language teaching itself necessitates some inherent comprehension of the language, and by implication, the culture from which these students

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originate. This understanding and 'insight' allows ITA trainers to develop quite open forums for discussion and disclosure between trainers and trainees.

Robert Solomon (1993: 53) sees the academic community as a feudal system:

"One does not have to look very far beneath the exploitative relationship between tenured professors, untenured professors, and their graduate student assistants to see the old apprenticeship system at work. Graduate students and untenured professors are the serfs in his or her lordship's realm. Seniority defines the pecking order in the university. Not surprisingly, the serfs do most of the work, and the lord gets most of the credit. Bordering on the obscene, we might also suggest that the feudal ritual of the jus primae noctis - wherein the feudal lord has first rights to the bride - applies all too well to coauthored research and sometimes elsewhere as well."

Rather strong statements but unfortunately such findings have some anecdotal grounding. What ITA trainer has not had a student approach with a complaint regarding the activities of the student's academic department? This writer once had an Asian student state that in his department, the graduate student advisor responsible for the awarding of all assistantships favored only those foreign students from a particular Spanish speaking country (his native land) and did not award support to students from other countries. In disbelief, I contacted the department head as to the 'rumor', and was informed that the matter was being taken care of 'in-house'.

More and more ITA training programs include discussions of ethics with topics such as sexual harassment and academic dishonesty. Parameters are provided often through the use of case studies by which the ITAs can determine through discussion and consultation what are acceptable boundaries of behavior in an academic setting. ITA trainers can do much to facilitate the choices these TAs make as to tolerable levels of exploitation or calculated long term decisions . The use of case studies as a pedagogical strategy is quite effective as a means of introducing hypothetical third parties and distant circumstances (see The Ethics of Teaching 1993 , Spiegel et al, Ball State University) .

ITA Trainer as an adversary:

A university can place the ITA trainer in an adversarial position when the ITA trainer has exclusive power to certify a foreign student as competent. The ITA trainer can

then become a nemesis for the academic head or faculty member responsible for assistantships within a department. Often, these faculty members are annoyed at the interference from a non-departmental source. Autonomy is greatly valued in American institutions.

> "Allegiance to this concept accounts for and increases the alienation many academicians feel; it also prevents the collaboration and problem solving that might reduce this alienation. Many faculty and administrators enter American colleges and universities because they wish to be left alone to pursue their own teaching, research, writing or ideas." (Bergquist: 1992:170)

Thus, many academics feel that the imposition of pedagogical standards from without the department, in essence, violates the notion of one aspect of academic freedom. Resistance is heavy. Departments declare that their one day (three hour) orientation is sufficient to acquaint incoming TAs with the information necessary to undertake departmental duties. Advisors contact ITA trainers and inform them that as a result of a telephone conversation with the TA candidate, the applicant has been found suitably proficient in English **AND** teaching so as to assume course instructorship upon arrival. The persistent assumption that there is a correlation between oral proficiency and pedagogical abilities is not supported by research.

The value placed upon teaching is in dispute at many research institutions that proclaim emphasis on quality teaching.

> "research institutions also must aggressively support teaching. After all, a significant percentage of their students are undergraduates, and such institutions are clearly obligated to provide them with a quality education. Is it ethical to enroll students and not give them the attention they deserve? " (Boyer, 1990: 57-8)

Accountability is a major concern at public institutions tied to taxpayer support. But it is not restricted to publicly funded institutions, parents who pay tuition fees at private universities in the range of $15,000 - $25,000 are extremely concerned about the quality of their children's education. Herein lies the principle of 'value for money'. If departments are concerned about this issue, then it must surely be reflected in the emphasis placed upon TA preparation.

" an effective TA socialization program is an oxymoron if conducted within a department that denigrates teaching...Is a research assistantship given to the best students as a reward so they do not have to be bothered with teaching? Are all department resources, convention travel funds, or awards given for research accomplishment?...Would an excellent graduate student who is publishing cutting edge scholarship be in danger of losing a teaching assistantship if he/she routinely missed office hours, canceled some classes and was observed to teach classes in a haphazard fashion?...Academic cultures value teaching in the absolute; it is only in the more pragmatic trade-offs that the subtle messages of teaching inferiority get relayed." (Andersen, 1992: 29-30)

Any organization's response to its members is evident in the way that problems are voiced and subsequently addressed. Policies, once established, must be consistently followed if legitimacy is to be secured. Therefore, if a TA trainer is given the ultimate authority to say 'nay' or 'yea' to a candidate's fitness, then that trainer must be extremely careful in the decision making process. Wherever possible consultation is wise. Assistantships involve a number of varied tasks which range from marking to responsibility for an entire course. Establishing degrees of adeptness perhaps along the lines of developmental stages of TA training is suggested by Nyquist and Sprague (1991:295-312; 1992:100-113). Their work is a synthesis of concepts in the area of communicative competence. The stages of Senior Learner, Colleague in Training and Junior Colleague were identified by the researchers as descriptive of the experience. Such labeling is reflective of how TAs develop their skills and yet many universities do not 'allow' for this metamorphosis. In many cases, TAs are expected to assume primary responsibilities for courseloads without the time to acquire the expertise and institutional familiarity that would facilitate the process. In short, many TAs arrive on a campus, are handed their assignments, given copies of a syllabus and textbook and simply left to their own 'sink or swim' devices, hardly, a reasonable or humane convention yet commonplace.

It is often the case that the ITA trainer is put in a 'gatekeeper' position. TA trainers are gaining in professional recognition and stature (to wit the increased number of publications in the area of TA and ITA training and the national interest as reflected in conferences and interest sections in professional organizations). As these trainers gain

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administrative support and faculty respect, it is to be expected that there might enter a confrontational aspect to a TA trainer's decision not to certify a TA candidate. Institutions that have made contractual offers to graduate students abroad must provide support if that is part of the agreement. However, the nature of that support must be subject to scrutiny once the student has arrived upon American soil. That is, a graduate student whose paper qualifications were such that an unequivocal offer was made and accepted must, nevertheless, undergo screening to confirm the a priori determination of competency.

Conclusion:

There is a delicate area regarding ITA training and that is that many institutions have mandated TA training for foreigners (Thomas and Monoson, 1991:382-92) whilst ignoring TA training for American graduate students, thereby, fueling the mistaken belief that if one can speak the language (in this case English), then one is able to teach. Most of us have been faced with ample evidence to the contrary in American college classrooms taught by American professors.

Collaboration amongst faculty, ITAs, TAs, and undergraduates is advocated by Civikly and Muchinsky (1991:356) They argue that an individual trainer's perspective may be too limited and that input from various sources should be encouraged not only in the training component but in evaluation as well. This requires administrative and faculty involvement. If institutional commitment to TA training is widespread, then there would be no need to place the trainer in the adversarial role rather the trainer would be a member of a jury . The jurors should be appointed in such a manner so as to represent the various interests: students, faculty and administrators.

Established funding as line item budgets must be forthcoming for ITA courses, if they are to maintain a firm basis. ITA trainers must not be appointed on an ad hoc basis but be given the legitimacy of a faculty position. This would eliminate the possible accusation of course 'padding'. That is, a faculty member miffed at a TA's failure to be certified suggesting that the TA trainer had not passed the student because numbers for the course

were low and would not 'make' unless a quorum of participants were enrolled. The ITA trainer should not be perceived as a hurdle to filling lab sessions slots but as one whose sole purpose is improve the quality of the institutional output. This not only means teaching but all that is encompassed in the learning process which includes both theory and application.

Nevertheless, the ITA trainer's position can be at times precarious as the individual attempts to balance the external and internal institutional forces at work: For a 'rejected' ITA, unemployment is a grim possibility; for a department head, ITA rejection is an unfilled instructor vacancy; for a dissatisfied-tuition-paying-parent, ITA rejection is logical. For an 'accepted' ITA, financial support is a welcome relief; for a department head, TA allocations enable more undergraduate sections; for a university-president-phoning-parent-paying tuition, a TA is 'cheap teaching' and an ITA is an outrage. For the exploited TA, the ITA trainer is counsel and a possible source of refuge; for the uncertified ITA, the ITA trainer is the enemy to be subdued (preferably eliminated).

How then can the ITA trainer make 'everybody' happy? A difficult but achievable endeavor. The ITA trainer must elicit support from all university fronts: the administration, the faculty, the students and the ITAs. This is done with charm, negotiation, patience and above all persistence. The willingness to 'work with' department heads and TA advisors who find themselves in a problematic situation when ITAs are not exempted from ITA training must be evident. Detailed recommendations explaining precisely why an ITA is suited or unsuited for particular assignments are extremely helpful particularly when supported with video taped evidence. The ITA trainer should seek to improve relations with departments through presentations to faculty which will serve to inform interested parties of *just what is going on over there in that ITA training program.* By establishing personal contacts with colleagues and sending copies of memos to relevant faculty and administrators, the ITA program will not be seen as some fire extinguishing mechanism that the university has created to abate political issues, but as a sincere effort on the part of

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the institution to improve teaching and the ITA experience on campus. How better to truly internationalize the curriculum, than through a foreign national's viewpoint? This is not to say that the curriculum would be surrendered to ITAs but rather it would allow for inclusion of new approaches and acculturation for both American undergraduates and ITAs.

The TAship is an apprenticeship period for the majority of our academicians. If that experience is lessened through derisory attitudes towards the 'art of teaching', then none of us will benefit, for it is through good teaching that clear and skillful explanations bear fruit in the enthusiasm of the learners who may be inspired to further exploration. If teaching at universities continues to be treated as a second-class occupation, downgraded by careless TAs and an even more uncaring professoriate, we will not exceed our expectations, we will merely lower our aspirations.

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