

An Evaluation of the International Graduate Teaching Assistants Training Program

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Many universities rely on graduate students for teaching and/or research activities. Among the teaching assistants are international students who lack the pedagogical background and cultural exposure to succeed as teaching assistants. This study evaluated a graduate teaching assistants training program for international students. Data were collected through interviews of graduate assistants, instructors, and from training documents. Overall, the training program was considered relevant; although additional topics and changes to the program scheduling were suggested.

Key words: Training, Challenges, Graduate Assistants

The increase in both diversity and globalization in institutions requires the development of instructors' cross-cultural competencies to effectively work in international assignments and on cross cultural teams. Effective training and exposure to cultural differences around the world helps instructors learn to be more successful in a variety of class settings. To work effectively with diverse people, managers need to know about the culture of the person with whom they are interacting, in addition to information about their personality, behavior patterns in conflict situations, demographics, and life experiences (Triandis & Singelis, 1998). In class settings, trainers and instructors are managers and therefore need such skills and knowledge of their students. These skills improve the decision-making and problem-solving abilities. Cross-cultural training has long been proposed as an anticipatory mechanism to increase cultural adjustments to foreign cultures (Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985; Tsung, 1981). These days, many institutions provide cultural awareness training and pedagogical skills to instructors, teaching assistants included, to assist them to better deal with the diversity in classrooms.

Problem Statement

The plight of teaching assistants is taking center stage as more universities rely on international students as teaching assistants to assist faculty in providing instruction. Graduate teaching assistants' (GTAs) roles are enormous, ranging from conducting research, teaching, problem solving, moderating discussions and laboratory supervision. However, teaching in a multicultural classroom is one challenge the graduate teaching assistants face. Problems relating to cross-cultural communication and cultural differences often arise in a multicultural classroom due to different cultural myths and beliefs. Particularly for international students whose native languages are not English, teaching in a foreign environment and using a foreign language can be very difficult unless one has the necessary preparation. International GTAs are primarily students; they have research papers and assignments to write, and some are parents, essentially, citizen-students. This situation brings in the challenge of juggling between different roles. Being a teaching assistant can at times be demanding and stressful, especially if one lacks classroom management skills and knowledge of the cultural differences and must handle large classes. Therefore there is a need to train the international graduate teaching assistants. Such training programs, if properly conducted, reduce anxiety or confusion that is often common when teaching without necessary preparation. Furthermore, an evaluation of the program is needed to determine success of training programs for international graduate teaching assistants in accomplishing program objectives, and to identify strengths and weaknesses in the HRD process (Philips, 1997).

Theoretical Framework

As demands for higher education increase and the size of undergraduate student bodies grow, so is the need for graduate student instructors to manage discussion and laboratory sections of lecture courses (Hiimae, Lambert & Hayes, 1991). According to Jackson (1983), a world in which graduate students do not teach is a world in which learning curve costs are simply relocated among the same group as entry level professors rather than as graduate students.

Many universities invest in the training of graduate teaching assistants to cut their operational costs. Apart from financial benefits gained by using graduate students as instructors, enrolling and employing international graduate

students by most American institutions diversifies student communities. Unlike in the past, today's students need education that will serve them in a wider world. This education can be achieved if their cultural reference points are expansive (Pettersen, 2002).

Furthermore, in today's world, people spend an enormous amount of time communicating across cultures with people and organizations around the world. Intercultural communication shapes the way people deal with change, deliver messages across borders and cultures, and revisit the fundamental properties of time and space (Monge, 1998). In his review of training for global operations, Rhinesmith (1996), describes the target population for global training, the types of training needed in the global context, the cultural influences on the training design and the key steps in developing a global strategy. He notes that, expatriates, people living internationally, headquarters personnel and people involved in technology transfer need cross-cultural training (Rhinesmith, 1996). Apart from technology transfer training, multicultural training is becoming one of the world's corner stone of global training. The skills that were identified as necessary for effective intercultural communication included: knowledge of subject matter, language, communication skills, positive orientation to opportunities, the ability to use traits in a given culture, and the ability to complete tasks (Brislin, 1981). Traditional training is characterized by a focus on the "acquisition of information, rather than on change in attitudes" (Bhagat & Prien, 1996). By way of comparison, Bhagat and Prien (1996) observed that cross cultural training addresses the acceptance of differences between cultures. Therefore, the core development of international graduate teaching assistants involves sound training in cultural issues, communication, and pedagogical skills. This training will assist in socializing the graduate students into the academic culture (Brown-right, Dubick and Newman, 1997). Furthermore, the training is essential to increase productivity by giving them some information that they need to perform as teaching assistants, and to motivate and inspire the teaching assistants by letting them know how important their jobs are (Anonymous, 1998). Without the right training, employees can be an organization's biggest liability and conversely, if trained effectively, employees can become the biggest asset (Bartram and Gibson, 2000). With so much money spent on training by organizations, evaluating such training programs is very critical for a number of reasons: 1) without evaluation, organizations have no reliable way of knowing whether money spent on training is being put to good use (Ostroff, 1991); and 2) whether the training program is meeting its objectives (Philips, 1997). This evaluation was conducted for this purpose.

Research Questions/Objectives

The Summer Institute for International Graduate Teaching Assistants program provides the international graduate teaching assistants with an opportunity to learn the different classroom delivery skills. The primary goal of this paper is to evaluate aspects of the Summer Institute for International Graduate Teaching Assistants for the purposes of improving the training program. The focus of this evaluation is on the process and product, i.e., an evaluation on all aspects of the summer institute, namely organization of training, program structure, content, selection of participants, training facilities, and program facilitators. The following research questions guided the inquiry:

1. What content is covered in the training program?
2. What is the relevance of the topics covered in the training program?
3. What additional topics should be included in the training program?
4. What are the participants and instructors' views on the organization (schedule, duration), participation selection, and training program's facilities?
5. What suggestions do the participants and trainers have for improving the training program?

Methodology

This was a qualitative study from which data were collected through a case study of a Summer Institute for International Graduate Assistants (SIIGA) held in June 2006 at a Midwestern university. The training program is offered every summer, and participants in the program are either current or prospective teaching assistants. Participation is open to all graduate teaching assistants on campus. The training is not mandatory for all international teaching assistants; participation is based on the recommendations of department chairpersons or faculty. The duration of the training program is one month. This institution was selected because of its diversified student population and it was in the understanding that if there were any shortfalls then other institutions would be in a similar situation.

The case study approach was considered appropriate since it allows the program evaluators to focus on "insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing" (Merriam, 1988 p.10); and has proved useful for evaluating training programs. The use of multiple qualitative and/or quantitative methods to study the same

phenomenon, methodological triangulation (Guinon, 2002), was used to ensure accuracy of the data (Denzin, 1984). Data were collected from seven international graduate students who attended the summer institute, the program instructor, and supervisor for the GTA, and a review of training documents. The GTAs, program instructor and supervisors responded to three questions evaluating the training program: (1) How effective was the training program content, in terms of relevance, level and adequacy; (2) what additional topics should be covered in the training program; and, (3) what aspects of the training program need improvement? The GTAs first responded to the questions via e-mail before follow up interviews.

Findings

What Is The Content of The Training Program?

Based on the responses from those interviewed, the SIIGA is vital to the international graduate assistants though some topics need to be reviewed and other topics specific to sciences introduced. This formal training has a positive and a significant effect on the GTAs' self efficacy toward teaching and expected learning outcomes. For this particular training program, a number of topics pertaining to classroom management skills were scheduled, and these included: developing course syllabus; student assessment; learning styles; integrating technology into the classroom; web-based instruction (Web CT and Blackboard) and evaluation. However, the topic on web-based instruction, specifically Web CT and Blackboard course management platforms, was not fully covered. As part of the training program, the participants were engaged in 15-20 minute micro-teaching activities. In addition, a communication session was devoted to "American" English. There were no specific topics on cultural issues that were formally covered, although the instructor incorporated cultural issues during informal discussions. On cultural awareness, participants and their supervisors were invited to luncheon etiquette where the international students were exposed to correct table etiquette at the end of the training program.

What Is The Relevance of The Topics Covered in The Training Program?

Based on the teaching assistants' responses, all the topics covered during the summer institute were relevant. However, the depth to which some of the topics were covered was too general. For instance, one student said, "part of the content was so general that I did not know how to apply it to my laboratory experiments." Two participants, felt that part of the content was a little bit complex for them to understand considering that they are not education majors. Two other participants felt that certain aspects of the training did not pertain to their areas of study, especially those that are not going to have teaching responsibilities. Participation in the training program was not limited to those international students with teaching responsibilities only. Perhaps, the instructor for the training program was not aware of this other category of students. Overall, all the students felt the course prepared them for their teaching assignments.

What Additional Topics Should Be Covered In The Training Program?

One student felt that there was need to explore more the topic of behavior management, i.e., dealing with difficult students. The graduate teaching assistant teaches large freshman classes and a majority of the students, she said, "don't want to do their assignments, come to class late, and use cell phones in class." The situations become difficult to deal with, especially in large classes and when one lacks the experience. Some graduate teaching assistants, especially those from non-English speaking countries, expressed the need for language development skills and more on classroom management techniques. One student who handles online classes, wanted topics on course management system (Blackboard and WebCT) and using new technologies in instruction delivery to be added to the content. Another felt that it may be necessary at times to be specific of issues relating to sciences and laboratory experiments or devote a section on teaching laboratory environments.

Participants, Instructor and Supervisors' Overall Views on the Program

Several components of the training program, namely, timing of the training program, duration, assignments and activities were evaluated by the participants and instructor. The program is offered in summer only; however, this is before assistantships are offered and it means that the students who have assistantships starting in the fall semester of the new academic year would have to work for one year before attending this course. There are cases where teaching assistants can attend short courses related to classroom management skills after they are appointed. One student said, "I went through the spring semester gaining my skills by trial and error; I wish we had such training in January when I came on board." In addition, "there is also a need to have the program at the beginning of fall, once all the assistantships have been allocated", she said. The rest of the students had no problem with the timing, simply because they had been appointed teaching assistants to start in the fall semester.

The training took 36 hours: four weeks, at three days a week and covering three hours a day. Most students felt the time was not adequate to cover the training content. One student would have liked to spend more time covering

basic psychology theories as part of the training content. “I personally felt the micro teaching activities ate up the required time for covering training content, if only it could be increased to 6 to 8 weeks,” he said.

The assignments for the training program were relevant, challenging and demanding; but there was not enough time to review the class activities. Reference was made to the lack of time to review the micro teaching videos. The program activities helped a lot in personal development; development of teaching portfolios, résumé and statement of teaching philosophy. Other students called for the involvement of the GTA’s supervisors in designing and evaluation of the training program (see comments from supervisors). The training program’s last activity was a luncheon in which the participants were taught proper dining table etiquette behavior. Faculty/supervisors and the teaching assistants felt this was a useful activity. Commenting on positives of the luncheon etiquette, one GTA said, “at least now I can go out to the restaurant and eat using a fork, spoon and knife in the right way.” Table 1 presents a summary of the comments on the training program by the teaching assistants, trainer and GTA supervisors.

Table 1. *Summary of Comments by the Teaching Assistants, Instructor and Supervisors.*

Students’ areas of evaluation	Comments
i) Timing and Duration of Program	<p>“Timing of the training was right especially for those teaching in fall.”</p> <p>“The starting time of the program [8:30 am] was too early.”</p> <p>“This training needs to be offered in spring for GTAs appointed in spring.”</p> <p>“Course needs more time to cover content adequately and review class activities.”</p>
ii) Content, Assignments & Activities	<p>“The assignments and activities were good and they are a must for this type of training program.”</p> <p>“I really enjoyed doing all the assignments but some activities like micro teaching were challenging.”</p> <p>“The content was adequate, relevant but sometimes too complex.”</p> <p>“Some parts of the course content were irrelevant to those teaching science courses that require labs.”</p> <p>“Assignments helped me learn how to prepare a teaching portfolio and CV.”</p> <p>“At least now I can go out to the restaurant and eat using a fork, spoon and knife in the right way.”</p> <p>“Too many activities for the allocated time.”</p> <p>“The micro-teaching sessions enabled me to self critique my presentation skills.”</p>
iii) Suggestions for Improvement	<p><i>Additional topics suggested:</i></p> <p>“Course Management System (Blackboard & Web CT)”</p> <p>“Incorporating technology into teaching”</p> <p>“Language development”</p> <p>“Classroom management techniques”</p> <p>“How to handle difficult students”</p> <p>“Topics directly related to sciences [e.g. managing laboratories]”</p> <p><i>Other areas suggested for improvement:</i></p> <p>“Working together with the supervisors during the course [training] to prepare teaching material for next semester.”</p> <p>“Have a contract with supervisors specifying the assignment to be completed by the end of the training.”</p> <p>“Shorter and more frequent sessions.”</p> <p>“More time to review micro-teaching lessons.”</p>
GTA Supervisors Comments	<p>“The training program is not mandatory for all graduate teaching assistants... you may be assigned a GTA that has not attended the training program.”</p> <p>“There is no mechanism to provide feedback from the [GTA] supervisors to the trainers on areas that the GTA’s need improvement.”</p> <p>“I don’t understand what the program [SIIGA] covers and so I cannot help with evaluating the product.”</p>
Instructor’s Comments	<p>“It was a good experience. There is need to spend more time on classroom management. More questions came up in this area but because of lack of time most were left unanswered.”</p>

Suggestions to Improve the Training Program

While students and instructors felt the training program was useful, relevant and well organized, there were some areas that needed improvement. The students suggested the following to improve the training program: 1) allocate more time for training so as to have more time to go through class activities and review them; 2) there is

need to show an example of good teaching practice, this may be through a recorded video; 3) the course needs to be offered at the beginning of the semester to cater for all the graduate students appointed that semester; 4) allocate more time to cross-cultural issues and dealing or surviving in multicultural classrooms; 5) develop content specific to certain disciplines like science and humanities since the needs and challenges for the teaching areas are not the same; 6) contact the supervisors to get their expectations of the teaching assistants and work on these during the training program; and separate activity sessions from theory sessions.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusion can be made about this program: The training program is vital, the content covered is relevant but the current timing is not ideal for all graduate students. Besides these, there is need to spend more time on behavior management skills, online instruction, and cross-cultural issues. The participants' reactions to the training program were positive; and the program is assisting in socializing the international teaching assistants to the academic culture. Based on the satisfaction levels of the participants, the training program is beneficial to the participants. However, to get a better feel on the product, quality of work produced by the teaching assistants, there is need to go beyond the 15-20 minute micro teaching sessions. An evaluation of the teaching assistants' behavior in the classroom is needed. The GTA's supervisors or designated faculty could evaluate the teaching assistants in the classroom and provide feedback to the GTAs and trainers.

Recommendations

To improve the training program, several recommendations are made. Besides the general teaching methodologies and spreading the training program over a longer period, there is need to spend more time on the following areas:

1. Teaching in a multicultural classroom. This should explore adapting to an American classroom, challenges faced by international instructors and strategies on teaching the classes effectively. In addition, this will look at issues relating to cross cultural communication and cultural differences in multicultural classrooms. It should also explore the myths and misunderstandings that may develop in multicultural classrooms especially when students and instructors interpret different cultures through the lens of their own culture.
2. Language development skills. This will enable the international graduate teaching assistants, especially those from non-English speaking countries, to develop their English skills and improve their communication skills.
3. Online course management skills/technologies. This will familiarize the teaching assistants with instructional delivery technologies that are becoming very common.

Contributions to Human Resource Development

Although this was a case study of a training program at one university and therefore, the generalizability of the findings is limited, the results will assist in developing effective training programs for international teaching assistants. Almost every university employs international teaching assistants and would benefit from an evaluation of a training program that seeks to equip international teaching assistants with skills to become effective instructors. The study also contributes knowledge to the area of international training, and HRD in general.

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