Teacher Training for Ph.D. Students: Recommendations for Content and Delivery

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ABSTRACT

The rising cost of education coupled with greater options for education, such as online and community colleges, has resulted in greater emphasis on teaching quality. However, students in Ph.D. business programs receive little formal training in teaching, as the vast majority of their time is focused on learning the craft of research. We expand on this issue of the need for teacher training for business doctoral students and offer three recommendations as specific areas for training: developing rapport with students, teaching in an online environment, and training specifically for international Ph.D. students. Further, we offer a suggestion for a possible cost- and time-effective way to deliver the training, using training offered by one university as a model.

Keywords: Ph.D. programs; doctoral students; teaching; systematic training.

Introduction

The education marketplace has changed significantly in recent years. The cost of education at traditional universities has far outpaced inflation and income growth (Odland 2012). Additionally, many students are now going to school while working and are seeking alternative and cheaper ways of acquiring an equivalent education, either online or through community colleges (Rose 2014, Golod 2014). These factors have combined to place a greater demand from students on teaching quality (Brightman and Nargundkar 2013).

It could be argued that all professors and instructors could benefit from training to raise teaching quality. However, we focus on the teacher training from a Ph.D. student perspective. Brownell and Tanner (2012) report that getting tenured faculty to change their teaching approaches in higher levels of academia is especially tricky. They find that experienced faculty are reluctant to change their teaching methods, despite training and calls for reform. Thus, we believe that increased training for Ph.D. students to increase their teaching quality presents a better opportunity to make a long-term impact in the classroom.

However, the training doctoral students currently receive from a business Ph.D. program focuses primarily not on delivering high quality instruction in the classroom, but on conducting high quality research. For instance, in a paper about current practices in accounting Ph.D. programs in the United States, Brink, Glasscock, and Wier (2012) found that these programs, on average, require about four accounting seminars and nearly five statistical-tools courses. By contrast, Brightman and Nargundkar (2013) polled doctoral program coordinators in 50 schools of business and economics in the U.S. and only 38% indicated that their Ph.D. students were required to attend some form of training in teaching. Since teaching is an important part of a new assistant professor's duties, and since the majority of Ph.D. students do not receive formal training in teaching, it follows that many new graduates may enter their first tenure-track position with little formal preparation for teaching at the university level.

Swain and Stout (2000) surveyed graduates from accounting doctoral programs about their preparation for five characteristics of effective teaching identified by the Accounting Education Change Commission (AECC)[1]. They found that most junior faculty felt inadequately prepared in all AECC-identified teaching characteristics. Furthermore, most of the progress that was made in these five characteristics relied on individual initiative rather than on systematic training received in doctoral programs. Respondents generally indicated that their formal doctoral training was a relatively minor source of teaching preparation when compared to self-training.

The lack of systematic training in Ph.D. programs has many potential negative consequences: frustrated teachers, dissatisfied students, and sub-optimal learning outcomes (AACSB 2014). Newly hired professors often leave their Ph.D. programs and enter employment with a heavier teaching load than was required while in school. These new professors are trying to balance this new load (often without formal training) with research pressures. Since research is the currency of professors and carries the most external capital, professors often correctly focus on their research in order to optimize their marketability.

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[1] In *Position Statement No. Five* (AECC 1993), the AECC identified five characteristics of effective teaching: (1) Effective curriculum design and course development, (2) Use of well-conceived course materials, (3) Effective presentation skills, (4) Well-chosen pedagogical methods and assessment devices, and (5) Effective guidance and advising.

We expand on Brightman and Nargundkar's (2013) work by offering three recommendations as specific areas for training: developing rapport with students, teaching in an online environment, and training specifically for international Ph.D. students. Further, we present a model used by one university implementing a formal program in improving teaching for its faculty. The program has potential value in that it appears to be a low-cost and efficient way to implement a teacher-training program, thus making it a pragmatic alternative.

Literature Review

Training others for success in the workplace, often referred to as mentoring, has been a popular topic in the typical business setting (McDowall-Long 2004). For instance, mentoring has significant positive effects on both the mentor and mentee (Murphy 2011). Academically, a positive mentoring relationship can result in a greater number of publications for new faculty (Ugrin, Odom, and Pearson 2008).
Not only can a positive mentoring experience result in new faculty having greater success in publishing, but it can also result in more teaching success. Johnston, Keller, and Linnhoff (2014) note that marketing students who underwent formal teacher training in their Ph.D. programs felt more prepared to teach and received higher student evaluation ratings at their first institutions. Despite this, less than 15% of marketing Ph.D. students receive formal teacher training.

Similarly, Swain and Stout (2000) report most new professors assume their first faculty position without training from their doctoral institutions. Further, they find that many doctoral students (approximately 50%) do not participate in any type of direct teacher training. Why then do most doctoral programs not offer formal and systematic courses in teaching?

Ph.D.-granting schools are typically research-oriented schools, where the faculty is evaluated on research quality. Teaching ability is a small/insignificant part of the evaluation for tenure (Beyer, Herrmann, Meek, and Rapley 2010). Since Ph.D. programs have a desire for their graduates to place at other research institutions, it follows that the faculty who are largely considered to be among the most successful in their fields (they hold tenured faculty positions at research universities) are going to focus on training the students in a way that they believe will help the students be successful at a research university (Fogarty, Saftner, and Hasselback 2011). Naturally, this would mean an emphasis on scholarship and less emphasis on classroom performance.

However, it is equally obvious that many graduates will end up teaching at non-Ph.D. granting schools. These schools will have a greater emphasis on teaching quality and will weight teaching quality more with regards to tenure and promotion. Thus, Ph.D. students taking faculty positions at these schools will need to deliver quality instruction. This creates a potential disconnect between the training of the typical Ph.D. student and the criteria for being successful at many employing universities (Brightman 2009).

Recommendations

Brightman and Nargundkar (2013) generally advocate formal teacher training for Ph.D. students. However, they stop short of offering specific suggestions. In thinking about the five characteristics of effective teaching per the AECC (1993), we focus on the third: effective presentation skills. While the other areas are important, we believe the effective presentation of content is critical to success in the classroom. We assume that new professors would have the content expertise, but the delivery of that expertise and managing the classroom is key.

Accordingly, we chose three broad areas related to presentation: working with students, delivering the content, and communication. For these three broad areas, we focus on a specific topic within: building rapport with students, delivering online instruction, and communication as an international student.

Building rapport with students

Being able to build rapport with students is one of the ways new teachers can immediately experience success in the classroom. Students who feel they have rapport with the instructor are more likely to be motivated to do well, perceive the course to be of higher quality, and have higher satisfaction with both the course and professor (Granitz, Koernig, and Harich 2009). Rapport is something that many people seem to naturally have in their interactions with others, but how can it be developed?

Some basic ideas for helping to build rapport with students include showing respect for the student and learning process. Simply have concern for students' learning and understanding of the course concepts. Students also want instructors who are approachable (Artino and Jones 2012). When students believe they can approach instructors, both in and outside of class, they are naturally going to feel more comfortable and are more likely to build rapport with the instructor as a result.

New professors can also begin to build rapport by being honest with students and treating them as individuals. Focusing on the students as individuals and listening to their concerns and questions can go far with building a sense of rapport and community. When students see the instructor as someone who cares about them and is willing to listen to them, they are more likely to experience satisfaction with the course and the instructor.

Finally, we believe three very practical and simple tips can help build rapport. First, learn students' names as quickly as possible. Second, use proximity when teaching. Come out from behind the lectern and get physically closer to the students. Third, relay personal experiences from being a student and the difficulties faced. These simple acts will help foster a sense of rapport and approachability.

Teaching in an online environment

Online courses have grown in popularity rapidly over the past several years (Smart and Cappel 2006). While online offerings continue to multiply, the research is inconclusive regarding their effectiveness (Bernard, Abrami, Lou, and Borokhovski 2004). Despite this, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which online education becomes insignificant in the future. Online courses generate revenue for universities (Thomas 2001) and provide flexibility for students. As greater percentages of students work in addition to taking courses (O'Shaughnessy 2013), more students will seek flexibility in their schedules.

Thus, new professors would be well served to have an understanding of how online instruction differs from traditional classroom delivery. Two of the major differences between online and traditional courses lie in student perceptions of the professor and student interaction.

In a traditional classroom students' perceptions of the course are influenced by the regular class meetings where students participate in the class with the professor and other students. It is therefore likely that students do not wonder whether they are part of the class; they perceive (correctly) they are part of it because they meet regularly. In the online setting, however, students usually do not have regular class meeting times. The majority of courses are asynchronous. Students, therefore, do not

see the professor and fellow students in person. Therefore, students may experience feelings of isolation in online courses, which may in turn affect students' feelings of belonging, retention rate, and overall success in the course (Dyrud 2000). Professors teaching online courses must make an extra effort to engage students in this environment. There are numerous ways to accomplish this. Examples used by authors include starting a semester with introductions, usually done in the discussion forums; requiring students to not only post answers to discussion questions but also to respond to other students' discussions; and to provide personal feedback and comments to student work and discussion posts.

Intertwined with the above discussion, student interaction is also different between the traditional and online environments. While students have multiple opportunities to interact with the professor and fellow students in the traditional setting, professors should structure online courses to require students to interact with each other and the professor. While the discussion above provided examples for students to interact with other students, professors should also look for ways to increase student-professor interaction.

One way that professors can specifically encourage more personal interaction with the students is to hold "virtual" office hours. Virtual office hours are those set up by the professor, where the professor will be online and available to answer questions in real time. Professors may choose to allow students to be able to ask questions via a microphone, or they may prefer students to type in the questions so that others can see the question. Another useful strategy is to record office-hour sessions and upload them to the class website, so that students who were unable to attend will still be able to view the questions and answers.

Teaching by international Ph.D. students

There has been an increased presence of international students in doctoral programs in the U.S. Cho, Roberts, and Roberts (2008) report that there has been a noticeable increase in Chinese students at the American Accounting Association (AAA) Doctoral Consortium — an event for doctoral students and faculty to share experiences and exchange thoughts in accounting research and education. Brink et al. (2012), surveying accounting Ph.D. students in the U. S., found that international students constitute over a fourth (27.8%) of their respondents.

Having a significant number of international students graduating from Ph.D. programs may have implications for communicating with students. Rubin (1993) reported that international students often struggle with communicating with students in the classroom due to language barriers. While Rubin's (1993) study focused on teacher assistants, it is logical to extrapolate those students from foreign countries and cultures may struggle with communication.

For example, in the university where two of the co-authors earned their doctoral degree, an English class is offered to international students. The class is designed to help improve students' pronunciation and use of English. Apart from taking this class, international students are asked to teach in front of fellow doctoral students, faculty members, and university staff. The audience usually gives constructive comments pertaining to the strengths and weaknesses of the speaker. A majority of the students felt that participation in the English class and mock class enhanced their confidence in and capability of teaching.

Following this example, practical tips for international professors would include inviting other professors to observe their classes. While it may be intimidating for a new professor who may struggle or be uncomfortable with communication to be observed by a senior colleague, having an objective observation of the professor's language

abilities will help the professor understand where improvements need to be made. Another practical tip would be to be honest with students, letting them know that improving language skills is a priority of the professor, and asking students to alert the professor when they do not understand what is said because the English is unclear.

Model and implementation

We now refer to an online university currently using a method trying to improve teaching quality. While this university is using the training to help instructors who will teach in an asynchronous online environment, we believe the methods could be easily adapted for Ph.D. programs. The upside is that the methods appear to be low-cost, which would theoretically allow Ph.D. students to work on their teaching skills without having to take an extra course and/or seminar.

The training is split into topics such as communicating with students, giving feedback and grading, etc. The modules (topics) are setup online, where trainees begin by accessing online lectures. A module is typically made up of multiple lectures, each about 10-15 minutes. After each lecture, the trainee is required to answer some basic questions about the lecture. Additionally, the trainee is given other references (e.g., journal articles) to look up and answer further questions about. These other references typically extend or otherwise provide greater details/examples about the topic. Finally, the trainee submits the work back to the facilitator of the course, who evaluates the work for completeness and understanding.

The model in Table 1 shows an example of a topic that might be included in a training program for doctoral students. We use building rapport with students as our example since we believe it is an important component to being successful in the classroom. The facilitator of the doctoral teacher training would load an instructional video onto a web site for students to view. We provide sample parts that may be included in the video.

Students would also get links to other readings about the importance of building rapport with students, practical suggestions for how to do so, and other relevant materials. Students would then complete a pre-loaded quiz on the video and readings. Facilitators may also choose to assign discussions, short papers, or other items appropriate to assessing students' understanding of this concept.

While this is only one of many models of training that can be used in an attempt to improve teaching quality, it is an example that shows training does not have to be a separate course and significant investment for the Ph.D. department. And while such training is certainly not guaranteed to make great teachers out of every Ph.D. student, it would provide exposure to some of the qualities and current issues and would increase the chance for success in the classroom.

Table 1.
Model for Doctoral Teaching Training
Example Topic: The Importance of Developing Relationships with Students
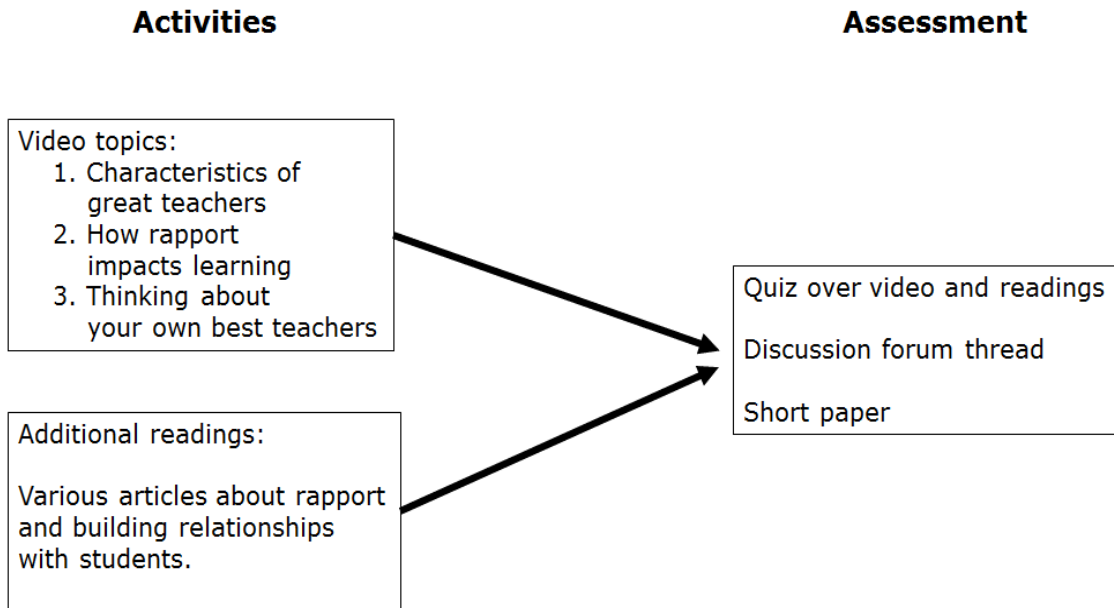
Conclusion

The variety of channels for getting a college degree has increased rapidly over the past several years, and the cost of that education continues to rise. Given these dynamic trends, it is more important than ever that doctoral students be prepared to teach in order to give students true value for their investment in education. Therefore, we believe it is imperative that students receive systematic training during their Ph.D. studies. This training will help them to reduce mistakes and frustrations at their new position.

Systematic training in teaching will produce long-term benefits. Doctoral students will be more effective at teaching, and, in turn, less on-the-job time will be spent in learning the art of teaching, which is especially difficult when factoring in the pressures of research. Having greater success and confidence in the classroom will lead to more teaching efficiencies, which in turn will lead to more time to devote to research. In the end, teacher training for doctoral students can result in more productive and successful faculty members, both in research and teaching.

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