

*When Students Teach Students: A Graduate Student's Perspective*

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"Put your feet on your desk and your hands on the floor!" was the cry of a first-grade teacher to her students on her first day of class in her first year of teaching. Her face turned red with embarrassment as she realized what she had just said. The nervous parents observing from the back of the room did not make things any easier, either. This example represents why obtaining teaching experience as a graduate student is helpful—if only to help relieve the anxiety of facing a large group of students on your own for the first time.

My first teaching assignment, other than teaching SPSS and Statistica to our new graduate students in their Quantitative Methods lab, was for a summer session of Psychology of Adjustment. I received my assignment thirty minutes before the class was to begin for the session. Fortunately, I had just completed a semester-long course on the "Teaching of Psychology." I had learned the basics of sound teaching such as preparing a syllabus and writing exams. I was also assigned a mentor to help me through my own teaching. Although this type of training and support is invaluable, nothing can truly prepare you for what is to come.

Most of the issues that are faced by graduate student teachers are the same as those faced by the faculty. However, graduate student teachers face some special issues due to their limited academic backgrounds and inexperience as teachers. This and past semesters have brought some of these issues to the forefront for me.

Short Lead Time on a New Prep

Since faculty are given first priority in assignment of courses, graduate students may not know that they will be teaching a course until a week or even a few hours before the class begins. Not only are we struggling to prepare new lectures (which, for novices, takes much longer to prepare), but we are also struggling to keep up with our own coursework and research. To lighten this task, I have designed a Teaching Resource Library in

<sup>1</sup> Price, P. (2002). When students teach students: A graduate student's perspective. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001 (chap. 4). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

WebCT. The library includes an icon for each undergraduate course taught with links to helpful resources as well as links to the psychology portion of the publisher's sites and links to other teaching of psychology materials. The library reduces time spent hunting down ideas for class lectures, films, and so on. For those who do not have this type of resource readily available, teaming up with an experienced faculty member who has previously taught the course is a useful idea. Each course has a little different flavor to the type of students with whom you will be dealing (e.g., majors versus non-majors) and expert guidance is helpful to learn the level at which the material should be presented, as well as how much time it will likely take to teach one concept versus another.

### Pre-selected Course Textbook

Because many graduate students are given their teaching assignment at the last minute, they may be unable to select the textbook for the course. Often, the text has been selected for them by the faculty member who was originally supposed to teach the course. Faculty members often select texts that reflect their own personal preferences and theoretical positions. For example, in teaching a course on development, the course may be taught topically or chronologically and the text usually follows one of these two approaches. Or, in an experimental course, the faculty member and text may place more or less focus on animal research or statistical calculations. It is difficult to teach from a text that differs from your own personal style. Thus, it is important to identify those graduate students who may be teaching a course in the future to obtain their views on the adoption of a particular text. If this is not possible, the graduate student teacher may either adapt to the style of the book and teach in a different manner than they might prefer, or do what I have done: assign readings from the text that follow my preferences of order and focus more closely. I have seen other graduate student teachers simply following the book exactly from Chapter One through the end with no additional information than that which is presented in the book. This is a fairly mundane and unchallenging approach both for the instructor and the students.

### Boundaries Among Students

Most graduate students are going to be closer in age to the undergraduates than are the faculty. Although this may be advantageous in that we are facing some of the same general issues (e. g., working and studying) as are undergraduates, there is also a boundary to the camaraderie that may be felt. For example, it is possible that graduate students may be teaching an advanced student in a class only to find that they are fellow students in another class. This can be uncomfortable for both parties unless there are some very clear professional boundaries that are discussed right from the start of the semester. You may become friends in the class you share together and then have to turn around and assign him or her a grade in the class that you are teaching. It is of paramount importance that graduate student teachers are trained in such boundary issues.

### Having to Say "I Don't Know"

One of the most common fears faced by graduate student teachers is being posed a question that they cannot answer. It is very difficult to say "I don't know." Although as a graduate student teacher you are in charge of the class, you are still a student yourself. You want your students to see you as a knowledgeable instructor and not the uninformed student you may sometimes feel like. What has worked very well for me is to tell students that they have raised a very interesting question and that I will be happy to find out the answer and share it with them at the next class meeting. Of course, you must know the material well enough to keep this to a minimum in order not to lose credibility.

### Difficult Students

Probably one of the most arduous problems that graduate student teachers face is the difficult student, whether it be talking in class, plagiarism, or as one of my students this semester said on an exam day, "Did you ever have the experience of walking in to an exam and not know that there was an exam that day?" Of course, he also walked into the exam twenty minutes late. It is difficult to know what to do in these types of situations. As graduate students, our teaching evaluations are important to being given graduate teaching assignments in the future and to obtaining a faculty position, but this point must not get in the way of being an effective teacher. It is all too easy to give the student what he or she is demanding (e.g., a make-up exam) in hope that he or she will then rate you highly at the end of the semester. However, the graduate student teacher should not let this type of student intimidate him or her. It is imperative for graduate student teachers to have a mentor to guide them through these difficult issues and to support them when they have to make difficult decisions.

For me, teaching has been challenging in large part because it is tricky balancing teaching, research, taking courses, other leadership roles, and having a home life. Nonetheless, I recently told my Chair that I am having so much fun teaching I would do it for free, as the rewards for overcoming such obstacles and becoming an effective teacher are great. For example, having that student who has put off taking Experimental Methods to the very last possible semester get excited about research or the student who had no plans to get involved in research and is now a McNair scholar completing her own research project or the students who come to "Brown Bag" lectures outside of class time just because they are excited about psychology. This is what teaching is all about and is what makes all those trying times worth overcoming. I highly recommend that those of you who are graduate students take advantage of the opportunity to become involved in teaching your own classes. It provides an excellent training ground for you as future faculty in working through some of these issues.