

***Reflections on the First Month: Struggles of a Brand New Faculty Member***

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About six weeks ago, I began my first tenure-track position. About seven weeks ago, I was a graduate student. The transition has been a much-anticipated one, but it has not come without some level of distress.

If a graduate program does its job correctly, graduate students should acquire a set of skills that prepares them for the career they choose. For academicians, these skills may include the ability to think critically, to conduct research soundly, to publish in peer-reviewed journals, to teach effectively, to be collegial and supportive of other faculty, to manage time effectively, and so forth.

A great deal of incidental learning occurs during graduate school as well. For example, one thing that graduate students often learn is that, in comparison to research, teaching is of low priority. It becomes painfully clear to graduate students that the many courses that are offered to train them in the conduct of psychological research are not commensurate in number to those designed for developing and refining teaching skills, although most research-oriented academicians report that teaching encompasses about one-half of their academic workloads (Rasmussen, Lawyer, & Buskist, in press). Indeed, as few as two-thirds of graduate programs in psychology offer any kind of formal training by way of a course in the teaching of psychology (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, in press; Myers & Prieto, 2000).

Graduate students also learn the place of teaching within academia through seemingly innocent interactions with their advisors. As a student, I recall some of my professors suggesting that I spend less time teaching. I never had a professor tell me I spent too much time conducting research, although I spent far more time collecting and analyzing data than I did teaching. Many first-time faculty members feel less prepared for classroom management and teaching than they do for independently conducting research (Myers, Reid, & Quina, 1998), and this may be due to the heavy emphasis on research in graduate school.

<sup>1</sup> Rasmussen, E. B. (2002). Reflections on the first month: Struggles of a brand new faculty member. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2000-2001* (chap. 18). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.org/resources/e-books/eit2000.php>

Even a graduate student with substantial teaching experience may feel a little uncomfortable. At Auburn University, I had a relative wealth of teaching experience—I served as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) for six different courses, some lower-level and some upper-level, over the course of six years. I soon learned, though, that even a sizable amount of GTA experience did not completely prepare me for full-time college teaching. In many cases, the graduate teaching assistant's tasks are to lecture one to three times a week, grade papers, and enter scores in a spreadsheet. However, there are many things that may be absent from the repertoire of a new professor, such as knowing how to write a syllabus, choose a textbook, make decisions about unique student problems, and essentially being completely responsible for students' learning of the subject matter.

As a new assistant professor, I was (and still am) overwhelmed with thoughts like, "I, and I alone, am responsible for all of these students learning!" From my first day of class as a member of the academy, I could no longer deflect blame toward my GTA supervisor—the professor-in-charge—when my students failed to learn all that was stated in the course objectives. Now I am the professor-in-charge! It was a compelling feeling, and it changed my complete outlook on my responsibilities as a teacher. It was like the first time that I drove a car as a teenager. I remember feeling the power of that 1979 Toyota LandCruiser with its souped-up V-6 engine—a power that could take me places or destroy almost anything in its path. The power that a professor holds in a classroom holds a similar force—it can take the student places intellectually, or it can abruptly halt the learning process dead in its path.

It is my contention that there are too few didactic systems in place to teach graduate students how to teach (e.g., courses on teaching, teaching experiences), although this is not a new sentiment. It is also my contention that those teaching systems that exist have some room for improvement. I believe that an ideal program would be one in which teaching responsibilities are slowly faded into graduate student life. Perhaps the first semester of teaching should include grading papers and delivering one lecture a week with a substantial amount of feedback from a faculty mentor or senior graduate student. More responsibility should follow a second-year student, such as more lecturing, and perhaps some experience in test-writing. A senior graduate student should be able to teach a class independently and confidently, but with the backup of a faculty member for periodic advisement, much like a driver's education instructor. Someone needs to be present to press gently (or not so gently) on the brakes, just in case a problem develops.

Although GTA training should include systematic training in effective teaching, it also might benefit graduate students in the long run if they were to receive information and training in other aspects of academic life. Aside from feeling a bit overwhelmed as a professor, I feel that new faculty, if they are anything like me, feel disoriented by the transition from student to professor because they have little understanding of the unwritten rules of academia. For example, some new faculty might experience what I like to call "learned silence"—a spin-off from "learned helplessness." Graduate students are accustomed to having very little in terms of resources. In general, they gladly accept what

is offered them. They also generally learn not to ask for resources, such as money, teaching opportunities, and space, because the request is usually rejected. First-year faculty members may not be aware of what they deserve. They may accept the salary and startup-costs they are offered with little, if any, thought of negotiating for more (Caplan, 1995; Caplan argues that this is especially true for women, though I am unsure of this.) After all, when the salary is three to four times the amount they made as graduate students, they may feel very fortunate. New faculty members also may accept gladly the teaching load, office space, and research space that are offered, although these resources may not be adequate for what they hope to accomplish in their work as college professors. New faculty members do not want to be perceived as being demanding or pushy, so they may not request additional resources that may help them to become better academics.

In some institutions, like the College of Charleston, senior faculty serve as faculty mentors and help new assistant professors adjust to the rigors of academic life. I am fortunate that this system is in place, for I have been told that not all institutions assist new assistant professors in this way. Nonetheless, I believe that the skills needed to recognize and request resources are not taught in graduate school, but should be. I recommend that major professors sit down with their senior graduate students and explain to them what academic life is all about. Perhaps an “Academic Seminar” might be given that would include topics such as the unwritten rules about professional distance with colleagues, making contributions to faculty meetings (learning to speak with diplomacy), what comprises committee work, how to request money, advising students, negotiating teaching loads, and negotiating space. I also believe that graduate students would benefit if they and their mentors engaged in role-play exercises, in which the student could practice negotiating skills in a safe environment in which constructive feedback may be given.

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