

What I Have Learned Teaching Teaching of Psychology

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Several years ago I served as coordinator of our five MA level programs in psychology. During that time I noticed that our graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), who served as “instructors of record” for many of our General Psychology sections, seemed either to teach pretty well or do well in their own coursework—but seldom both. Our faculty often expressed concern about the quality of instruction in General Psychology, a gateway for the infusion of majors into the Department of Psychology. To address these concerns and to provide GTAs support for their teaching responsibilities, I developed our Teaching of Psychology (TOP) course. The one credit TOP course is now required of first-year graduate students before they can apply to teach and is repeated by GTAs during subsequent teaching assignments. Although I could answer the question “What have you learned from teaching TOP?” in a variety of ways, I have chosen to emphasize what I have found to be most beneficial in helping GTAs succeed with their teaching. These insights include:

Organization

Early on I developed a detailed questionnaire for undergraduates to evaluate their GTAs who taught General Psychology. These undergraduate respondents most frequently indicated concern with lack of organization, preparation, and confidence on the part of their GTAs. As a result of the evaluation, the spring semester TOP class requires future GTAs to utilize organizational strategies as they practice teaching in a relatively safe environment. Subsequently, when GTAs become “instructors of record,” I provide an outline of issues (including organization) that they should address as they teach and over which they will be evaluated. GTAs are asked to begin each class by summarizing the main points from their last class and to relate these concepts to what will be covered that day [what Ausubel (1968) referred to as “comparative organizers”]. Expository (graphic) organizers are also used at the start of class to illustrate the relationships among the day’s concepts. Each class ends with a summary of the main points by the GTA and a glimpse at the next topic. The end of class may also include a “minute paper” that allows undergraduates to summarize what they believe to be the highlights of the lesson or to

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request clarification or further elaboration of the presentation. I caution the GTAs to use transparencies and power point presentations judiciously. Undergraduates tend to copy down everything they see, even material redundant with the text. With transparencies, I ask that GTAs uncover only what is being presented at the moment. These precautions seem to facilitate a smoothly flowing presentation. As a result of the use of these strategies, GTA ratings on organization, confidence, and preparedness by their General Psychology students have risen dramatically.

Shaping and Scaffolding GTA Behavior

Related to the issue of building confidence, GTAs tend to value a gradual and supportive [which Vygotsky (1997) described as "scaffolding"] introduction to the teaching experience. Before being selected to teach, first-year graduate students make presentations in the spring semester TOP class based on chapters from McKeachie's (1999) text. They are asked to visit and provide written evaluations of two current GTA classes and discuss their observations in the TOP class. Toward the end of the semester, TOP students are asked to teach one class for a current GTA. They provide a written description of the experience (including their lesson plans), discuss their performance with the GTAs (who provide a written evaluation), and discuss the experience in the TOP class. By semester's end, each potential GTA has developed a syllabus for the following semester. In the fall semester, GTA "instructors of record" meet to discuss pedagogical issues and share classroom experiences and tribulations as they are encountered in their classrooms. A process of formative evaluation and constructive feedback for the GTAs begins after four weeks of teaching. At that time, undergraduates complete an informal evaluation of their GTAs, which is followed at midterm with the completion of the more formal undergraduate questionnaire as well as my classroom visitations. The GTAs then meet with me individually to review their progress, to set semester goals, and to discuss strategies for improvement.

GTAs as Mentors

I am confident that the most valuable contribution to the TOP class derives from the requirement that current GTAs attend each spring semester TOP class. Each class begins with a presentation by the GTAs on activities they use to bring the subject matter of two text chapters to life. They conduct demonstrations (often of their own design) and provide handouts relative to the topics. GTAs describe what works for them and what does not. As the TOP students present McKeachie chapters, the GTAs contribute relevant insights drawn from their own experiences. Taking advantage of the "teachable moment," the GTAs discuss issues of academic integrity, test anxiety, disruptive students, and other issues as they are encountered in their classes. Together we brainstorm solutions to those specific problems, and GTAs subsequently provide feedback relative to the outcome. Additionally, the GTAs expound on such issues as the experience of their first day of teaching, their student evaluations, and changes they found prudent to make in their syllabi for their second semester of teaching.

Varying Instructional Strategies

The TOP class meets for two hours on alternate weeks. Both the instructor and the students feel that the time just flies by. I believe that breaking each TOP class meeting into several segments (e.g., GTA presentations relative to the text, TOP student presentations, syllabus development, discussion of critical issues, etc.) helps create the experience of “flying time.” I urge TOP students to develop lesson plans that include a variety of strategies as well. I encourage modest use of lecture, as well as demonstrations, discussion, role-playing, and writing experiences within each class.

I have learned that several precautions need to be addressed regarding alternatives to lecturing. For example, classroom demonstrations and discussion groups must be more than fun and merely breaks from lecture. Perhaps due to the excitement of the moment, GTAs occasionally neglect to reiterate and emphasize the point that they were demonstrating or discussing. I also suggest that discussion groups be brief. GTAs are encouraged to allow sufficient time for students to get involved with an issue and then initiate inter-group sharing. Undergraduates seem to become bored or get off track if groups meet for too long. I suggest that GTAs convene groups to discuss a question when the GTA becomes uncomfortable with pregnant pauses and blank looks on the faces of their undergraduates. These groups also encourage active class participation. Finally, I advocate the use of brief discussion groups that allow the undergraduates to explore experimental strategies requisite for answering perplexing questions they ask of GTAs in class. This procedure helps undergraduates appreciate the empirical underpinnings of psychology.

Overall, the GTAs are doing quite well. While our energetic young faculty ($N = 28$) earned a mean rating of 4.4 from their students on our departmental 5-point faculty evaluation instrument last semester, our GTAs ($N = 12$) earned an equally impressive mean rating of 4.5 (ranging from 4.0 to 4.9).

As twelve hundred words have silently slipped beneath my fingers, I close by wishing I had addressed so many other issues. For example, with so much emphasis on organization, am I violating a legitimate warning by Bjork (2000) that students retain and apply information more effectively when they must actively organize material within a lecture themselves? Also, relative to the theme of this essay, I find it difficult to distinguish what I have learned through teaching the TOP course from what I have learned through observation of, and discourse with, my colleagues.

References

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