

Teaching Assistant Development: Research and Impressions¹

Loreto R. Prieto
The University of Akron

(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for January 2002.)

I am honored to have the opportunity to share a few of my ideas on the topic of teaching assistant (TA) development. I will do what I can to forward some points for consideration, gleaned both from the literature and my own experience with training and supervising TAs.

I’ll begin by outlining some current challenges I see in this particular area of research and practice. First, surveys of academic departments and TAs consistently indicate that teaching assistants frequently lack sufficient training for and supervision of their teaching duties (Prieto, 1999; Prieto & Altmaier, 1994)—this finding holds for the discipline of psychology as well (Meyers & Prieto, 2000). This much is clear: We need to do a better job of training and supervising psychology TAs both before and during their teaching assignments.

Second, it is often difficult for TA trainers or supervisors to know what modalities of training or supervision are best to use. Historically, very little research in the area of TA development has been theory-driven or has moved beyond investigating simple methods or techniques for training TAs. Few comprehensive models of TA training or supervision exist. Accordingly, the bulk of the literature offers little understanding as to why certain techniques or interventions actually work in training TAs or which methods are most appropriate for particular training needs or purposes. More recent efforts in the TA literature provide examples of both theoretical models (cf. Nyquist & Wulff, 1996; Prieto, 1995, 1998) and theory-driven hypotheses testing in research on TA development (cf. Prieto, 2001; Prieto & Meyers, 1999; Prieto, Scheel, & Meyers, 2001).

Finally, faculty efforts at training and supervising TAs tend to go unrewarded. Watching TAs become hooked on the science and art of teaching psychology is, without doubt, a highly satisfying experience for faculty supervisors. However, faculty committed to developing the skills of TAs may find requests for institutional support for TA training and supervision less than adequately answered. Realistically, if appropriate TA training and supervision is to occur, in light of the typical pressures on faculty (especially pre-tenure faculty) to carry out research and manage heavy teaching loads, then administrators need to support such efforts at the program, departmental, college, and university levels. Such support could include funding and resources to provide orientation programs for new TAs, pedagogy-based coursework or teaching practica for TAs, on-going training or skill-building workshops for TAs, and the granting of load hours for faculty who train and supervise TAs (see Prieto & Meyers (2001)

¹ Prieto, L. (2003). Teaching assistant development: Research and impressions. In W. Buskist, V. Hevern, & G. W. Hill, IV, (Eds.). *Essays from e-xcellence in teaching, 2002* (Chap. 1). Retrieved [insert date] from the Society for the Teaching of Psychology Web site: <http://teachpsych.lemoyne.edu/teachpsych/eit/index.html>

for a comprehensive text on developing and implementing TA training within college and university settings).

Thus, with respect to the challenges surrounding psychology TA development, psychology educators need to increase the prevalence of TA training and supervision. Educational administrators need to provide better support for the faculty who offer this service for TAs. Using theory-driven research, investigators need to examine the utility of various TA training and supervision methods. Additionally, investigators should examine the outcomes of TA training and supervision with respect to increasing TAs' teaching skills and enhancing undergraduate learning in the classroom.

However, given that psychology faculty and TAs historically have generally managed to take care of teaching obligations despite the presence of these challenges, a logical question to pose might be “why does anything need to be done—why not continue with business as usual?” Let me share a few thoughts on this point that I believe argue against becoming complacent with the current state of affairs.

1. Teaching assistantships are the foundation of faculty development. This point helps to clarify the simple fact that teaching careers do not begin the first day we step foot in a classroom, graduate degree in hand. The skills and sense of efficacy toward teaching acquired by TAs during assistantships can and does prepare them for what they will find in the classroom as future faculty. In fact, graduate students often accept TA positions because they are interested in academic or teaching careers. Because many academic positions prioritize and reward accomplishments in areas such as research or grant productivity, it becomes even more important for TAs to focus on developing their skills as instructors during assistantships as they will likely eventually work professionally within environments that do not value, reward, or foster good teaching skills (Prieto, 1994).

Ironically, however, although we require intense training and supervision surrounding certain aspects of graduate training in psychology (e.g., research projects, clinical practica), we often do not oversee students' development as teachers. A failure to train and supervise TAs adequately may mean that many of them head into academic careers with a less than optimal grasp of pedagogical issues. Conversely, many promising TAs who plan to be teachers and who do great jobs in the classroom, may become demoralized and lose interest in teaching because they do not have sufficient training or guidance to help them through the predictable difficulties that all TAs (and veteran teachers) inevitably face. Either way, we lose an opportunity to strengthen the base of teaching skill within the psychology professoriate. Finally, academic departments that employ psychology TAs cannot overlook the fact that the level of TAs' compensation sends a clear message regarding the importance of their roles. That message currently appears bleak: In a national survey of psychology departments, Meyers & Prieto (2000) found that some psychology TAs may ultimately earn as little as \$1.94 an hour for their work—including both salary and tuition remission!

Offering TAs meaningful, responsive, and rigorous training and supervision is a concrete way of communicating that college teaching is important (Steven A. Meyers, personal communication, November 30, 2001). Furthermore, providing TAs with better financial

compensation and other benefits (e.g., awards, recognition of innovative teaching skills) may help to convey the message that the discipline of psychology values teaching skills as much as research, grant writing, or professional service skills.

2. Teaching assistants are our primary connection with students new to the field of psychology. TAs handle a great deal of the undergraduate teaching at most major academic institutions (Allen & Rueter, 1990): Introductory level psychology classes, labs, and discussion sections are frequently taught by TAs. This fact plays into two critical realities. First, when it comes to attracting and sparking the interest of students new to the field of psychology, TAs embody the welcoming hand our field extends to these newcomers. Second, when it comes to responding to state Boards of Regents or other groups regarding mandates to improve the quality of undergraduate education, it is often our TAs who are in the classroom addressing this matter on behalf of the discipline. Therefore, the better we train our TAs, both in the content of the discipline and in teaching methods, the greater the potential for a favorable outcome in attracting new students to the field and ably educating those new students as they move through the ranks. Notably, it is each new generation of psychology undergraduates who will, in turn, become the new crop of TAs, who will, again in turn, welcome and teach the next generation of psychology undergraduates as the cycle starts anew. The caliber of undergraduates we accept into graduate psychology programs is directly related to the investment we make in them during their undergraduate psychology training. Therefore, the caliber of these undergraduates is directly related to the investment we make in the TAs who are responsible for the laying the foundations of undergraduate training.

3. The training and supervision of TAs is likely best conceptualized as a developmental process. In my research and activities as a TA trainer and supervisor, it has become apparent to me that there are discernible levels of ability and mastery—stages, if you will—that TAs travel through in learning to teach. Across these stages, the pedagogical tasks and concepts they master become increasingly complex, and accordingly, TAs' training and supervision needs vary according to their level of experience.

This idea is far from new in the TA and teacher education literatures, but it is often forgotten in real-life practice (cf. Kagan, 1988; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996; Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). More specifically, novice TAs present faculty supervisors with many challenges. These challenges are not always well articulated by TAs or easily recognized by faculty supervisors. Novice TAs need concrete direction and structure and faculty may presume too much as they guide beginning TAs in their efforts. We must remember to be declarative in our transmission of knowledge regarding teaching rather than presuming that TAs understand what we mean when we relay complex ideas like “use the test as a learning tool,” “use active learning strategies in your classroom,” or “be flexible with students.”

As TAs gain experience and skill over time, faculty supervisors must foster TAs' independence and help them develop a personal identity and style as classroom teachers. Faculty supervisors also must effectively mentor TAs in the vagaries of teaching, the very real differences between teaching and learning, and the uncertainty of predicting precise learning outcomes for students given various teaching interventions. Thus, a developmental approach to TA training and supervision calls for a great deal of energy, a priori and post-hoc trouble-

shooting, and mentoring from faculty supervisors. However, the ultimate payoff rests in providing a graduate teaching experience for TAs that has the potential to instill a sound foundation of pedagogical skills and a strong personal identity as a psychology educator. In turn, this training enhances the probability that our TAs will move into the professoriate with a solid start to their development as faculty, with the ability to teach well and encourage positive learning outcomes, and with the ability to offer their own TAs rigorous training and supervision in the teaching of psychology.

Closing Thoughts

There are certainly many other major issues surrounding TA training and supervision to consider than those I have raised here. The points I have raised seem to me to represent core ideas regarding the rationale for and necessity of TA training and supervision. Thus, these ideas would seem to be a good place to start a broader discussion or consideration of issues in this area.

Like any other teacher and mentor, I am still learning as I go, trying to stay a few steps ahead of those TAs I lead as we travel together down the path that is the teaching of psychology. Through our collective discussion and work on these issues, I look forward to the gains we will make as we investigate the scholarship of teaching and learning in psychology.

References

- Allen, R., & Rueter, T. (1990). *Teaching assistant strategies: An introduction to college teaching*. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co.
- Kagan, D. (1988). Research on the supervision of counselors- and teachers-in-training: Linking two bodies of literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 58, 1-24.
- Meyers, S. A., & Prieto, L. R. (2000). Training in the teaching of psychology: What is done and examining the differences. *Teaching of Psychology*, 27, 258-261.
- Nyquist, J., & Wulff, D. (1996). *Working with graduate assistants*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.
- Prieto, L. R. (1994). Psychology students and graduate teaching: Issues of professional development. *Newsletter of the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students*, 6 (2), 10.
- Prieto, L. R. (1995). Supervising graduate teaching assistants: An adaptation of the Integrated Developmental Model. *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, 2, 93-105.

- Prieto, L. R. (1998). Supervising graduate teaching assistants on the ethics of teaching: A developmental approach. *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, 5, 109-118.
- Prieto, L. R. (1999). Teaching assistants' preferences for supervisory style: Testing a developmental model of GTA supervision. *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, 6, 1-8.
- Prieto, L. R. (2001). The supervision of graduate teaching assistants: Theory, evidence and practice. In L. Prieto & S. Meyers (Eds.) *The teaching assistant training handbook: How to prepare TAs for their responsibilities* (pp. 103-129). Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Prieto, L. R., & Altmaier, E. M. (1994). The relationship of prior training and previous teaching experience to self-efficacy among graduate teaching assistants. *Research In Higher Education*, 35, 481-497.
- Prieto, L. R., & Meyers, S. A. (1999). The effects of training and supervision on the self-efficacy of psychology graduate teaching assistants. *Teaching of Psychology*, 26, 264-266.
- Prieto, L. R., & Meyers, S. A. (Eds.). (2001). *The teaching assistant training handbook: How to prepare TAs for their responsibilities*. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press.
- Prieto, L. R., Scheel, K. R., & Meyers, S. A. (2001). Psychology graduate teaching assistant preferences for supervisory style. *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, 8, 37-40.
- Sprague, J., & Nyquist, J. D. (1989). TA supervision. In J. Nyquist, R., Abbott, & D. Wulff (Eds.), *Teaching assistant training in the 1990's: Number 39. New directions for teaching and learning* (pp. 37-56). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.