

GTA Training at Appalachian State University

Paul A. Fox, Appalachian State University

Appalachian State University is a comprehensive university located in the northwestern mountains of North Carolina. It is part of the 16-member University of North Carolina system and consists of approximately 12,750 undergraduates and 1,350 graduate students. The Department of Psychology has 29 full-time doctoral level faculty and five MA level graduate programs (Clinical, Health, General-Experimental, Industrial-Organizational/Human Resource Management, and School Psychology), which matriculate between 33 and 40 new students each year. Students typically complete their MA degrees in two and one-half to three years.

Several years ago, as Director of our graduate programs in psychology, I noticed that our graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) seemed either to teach pretty well or do well in their personal coursework—but seldom both. Faculty frequently expressed concern about the quality of instruction in our General Psychology course, the gateway course for the infusion of majors into the Psychology Department. Undergraduate respondents to our teacher evaluation instrument often expressed concern with lack of organization, preparation, and confidence on the part of their GTAs.

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 student trainees before they can apply to teach and for GTAs during subsequent teaching assignments. Each of 10 to 17 GTAs assume complete responsibility to teach a section of General Psychology class of 40 to 50 undergraduates each semester.

The First Semester

During the spring semester of their first year, graduate students who would like to teach during the following fall semester enroll in the TOP course, which meets for approximately two and one-half evening hours every other week. Each class session consists of three parts with separate goals for each. First, four of the current GTAs attend each class and serve as models, mentors, and resources for the trainees. Each class begins with a presentation by current GTAs on activities they use to bring to life topics from two chapters in the textbook being used in General Psychology. The chapters are covered in the order they appear in the text (and listed on the class syllabus) and 16 chapters are presented over the semester. GTAs conduct demonstrations (often of their own design) and provide handouts relative to each topic. They describe what works for them and what does not. The GTAs model enthusiasm for teaching, organization, and confidence.

The second major part of each class meeting is designed to shape the confidence of the future GTAs. This segment also provides the instructor with an opportunity to evaluate the teaching potential of each trainee and to provide helpful feedback. Each trainee makes a presentation (usually two students present each evening) over a chapter from major textbooks on the teaching of psychology (e.g., Davis & Buskist, 2002; McKeachie, 2002; Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1999). The topics include facilitating discussion, teaching large classes, lecturing, using humor, fostering diversity, handling difficult students, creating written assignments, grading, developing tests, and so on. The GTAs contribute relevant insights drawn from their personal experiences.

The third portion of each class session is devoted to pedagogical issues not covered by the formal presentations of the trainees. Conversations focus on such issues as test anxiety (sources and reduction strategies), organization of lectures, academic integrity (reducing the likelihood of dishonesty, creative cheating techniques, and appropriate ways to expose and prosecute instances of cheating), ethics and legal issues (including relationships with students,

access to student records, confidentiality, copyright law, and so on), respect for diversity and exceptionalities, use of technology, and handling of classroom medical emergencies.

I provide trainees with a model for syllabus development and copies of syllabi from previous semesters. Each week the trainees submit a section of their syllabi and receive feedback about strengths and weaknesses of the developing document. During this portion of the class session, current GTAs take advantage of the “teachable moment” to discuss issues as they occur in their classes. Together we brainstorm solutions to those specific problems and discuss proactive approaches to avoid them in the future. The GTAs expound on such issues as the experience of their first day of teaching, pet peeves, student evaluations, and changes they found prudent to make in their syllabi for their second semester of teaching.

To shape the confidence of the trainees, a gradual, supportive introduction (which Vygotsky [1997] described as scaffolding) to the teaching experience is offered. In addition to making a relatively safe presentation to their peers in the TOP class, the trainees observe and complete an evaluation of two GTA classes. Toward the semester’s end, each trainee teaches one class for a GTA. After the GTA provides written and oral feedback and undergraduates attending that class complete an assessment of strengths and areas in need of improvement, the trainee submits a written summary of the experience along with his or her teaching materials. The current GTA, the trainee, and I then meet to discuss the strengths and areas in need of attention. Subsequently, the TOP class engages in a general discussion of ways to take personal advantage of the summarized strengths and weaknesses.

The First Semester of Teaching

During the fall semester, the GTAs meet to discuss additional pedagogical issues and to share classroom experiences and tribulations as they are encountered. The Graduate School also offers a series of workshops to which all GTAs are invited. A major effort during the first semester of teaching is devoted to the issue of formative evaluation and constructive feedback. After four weeks of teaching, GTAs ask their students to complete an informal evaluation of their classes. This evaluation usually takes the form of a paragraph indicating

what the undergraduates like best about the course and the instructor, and what they would prefer to see changed about either. At midterm, the undergraduate students complete a much more formal and detailed evaluation instrument that contains both Likert-type and open-ended items. I also visit each class midway through the semester. The GTAs then schedule individual sessions with me to review their progress, to set semester goals, and to discuss strategies for improvement. At the semester's end, all GTAs have their undergraduate students complete the Psychology Department evaluation instrument.

A source that I find helpful throughout the course is the PSYCHTEACHER electronic discussion list. I forward (or sometimes save for a teachable moment) portions of strings about such topics as problem students, self-disclosure, demonstrations, plagiarism, attendance policies, student complaints, grading, etc. These communiqués, along with the PSYTEACHER series "E-xcellence in Teaching" provide titillating starting points for classroom discussion.

Evaluation of the Program

The efficacy of the TOP course has been addressed through several informal measures. The mean and variability of the GTA scores on the Psychology Department faculty evaluation instrument consistently fall at the mean and within the range of the faculty scores. At the end of the recent fall semester, the mean ratings on the 5-point Likert-style items were 4.32 and 4.29 for the faculty and the GTAs, respectively. At least one, and frequently two, of the Psychology GTAs win the University GTA award every year (three are presented annually). Several GTAs present posters at the annual meetings of the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology and several conduct theses on pedagogical issues. Both an internal and external review of the Department's graduate programs indicated that the alumni who have served as GTAs rated that experience as one of the highlights of their graduate careers. Many have gone on to pursue doctoral degrees because of the experience and many teach part-time at community colleges. Finally, in 1987, the North Carolina Bureau for Public Policy Research named this TOP course one of two outstanding programs in the state for the

training of GTAs. It became a template for the development of a legislative mandate governing the training of GTAs in the state of North Carolina.

References

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