

Training and Evaluating Master's-Level Graduate Teaching Assistants

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The Carnegie classification for Emporia State University (ESU, enrollment approximately 5,500 students) is Master's Colleges and Universities I. ESU is in Emporia, Kansas, a town of 25,000 located on I-35 midway between Wichita and Kansas City. The Department of Psychology and Special Education, which has 14 full-time faculty and approximately 200 undergraduate psychology majors, is housed in the Teacher's College.

During the past decade psychology programs have given considerable attention to the status and nature of training graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) (e.g., Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Meyers et al., 1997; Norcross, Hanych, & Terranova, 1997; Prentice-Dunn & Rickard, 1994). Two general themes permeate this literature: (a) concern about the availability and use of teaching opportunities (Meyers et al., 1997; Norcross et al., 1997) and (b) delineation of the procedures for training or supporting GTAs (Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Meyers et al., 1997; Prentice-Dunn & Rickard, 1994).

For the most part, this literature deals with training and support programs for doctoral-level GTAs. Educators have given little, if any, attention to the training of master's-level GTAs. Because many master's programs offer teacher training opportunities (American Psychological Association, 1998), this deficit reflects a relevant and important void. Hence, this paper presents an effective model for training, supporting, and evaluating master's-level GTAs. Because we believe these procedures are appropriate for use at all levels of GTA training, we encourage readers to adapt them to their own situations and needs.

The old saying that "necessity is the mother of invention" applies to the ESU GTA-training model. Until 1979, Introductory Psychology was taught by a single full-time faculty

member who presented a weekly, 1 hr lecture to all students (250+) enrolled in this course. GTAs assisted by administering and grading tests and conducting two weekly, 1 hr small-group discussion sections. For a variety of reasons, faculty, students, and administrators believed this arrangement was unacceptable; hence, we sought an alternate approach. The lack of continuing faculty to teach this course resulted in the GTAs being given complete autonomy for sections of Introductory Psychology. These new responsibilities necessitated the implementation of an organized, effective GTA training program and the assignment of a senior-level faculty member who receives a one-course reduction in teaching load to supervise this program. The ESU administration has supported and endorsed this program. We describe the most successful iteration.

GTA Selection and Responsibilities

During the middle of the spring semester we screen GTA applicants on the following criteria: background coursework in psychology; grade point average; and desire to teach, as reflected in the applicant's personal statement that accompanies the assistantship application. Highly rated candidates go through personal interviews. During this interview, we carefully describe the typical semester assignment: complete responsibility for two, 3 credit hour sections of Introductory Psychology having an enrollment of 30-35 students each. It is important that each applicant understands fully the pending assignment before making a commitment. Approximately half of the departmental complement of 14 GTAs is new each fall.

Initial Activities and Orientation

During the summer prior to their arrival on campus, all GTAs read *Teaching Tips* (McKeachie, 2002). GTAs also receive a copy of the textbook and ancillary materials for their course and an exemplary course syllabus used by a former GTA. Summer requirements also include preparing a tentative syllabus and developing lectures and demonstrations.

Second-year GTAs serve as mentors for new GTAs during the summer and following semester. Some of the second-year GTAs will continue teaching Introductory Psychology.

Other second-year GTAs will teach Developmental Psychology, depending on departmental needs.

All GTAs participate in a minimum of three day-long (6 hr per day) orientation sessions immediately prior to the start of the fall semester. These sessions include:

1. Presentation and discussion of University policies, as contained in the Faculty Handbook.
2. Presentation and discussion of departmental policies.
3. In-depth presentation and discussion of effective teaching opportunities, techniques, policies, and procedures. This discussion includes consideration of the assigned chapters in McKeachie (2002).
4. Viewing of videotape excerpts of actual class sessions previously conducted by returning GTAs. The videotapes are always of returning (second-year) GTAs and are illustrative of both good and less effective practices.
5. Presentation of a lecture (30 to 45 min) by each new GTA. Although the content of this lecture may vary, the assigned topic often is to present the lecture that introduces the students to the field of psychology.
6. Presentation by each returning GTA of an effective demonstration and description of when and how to use this demonstration in the classroom.

GTA Meetings and Activities

During both the fall and spring semesters, all GTAs attend biweekly group meetings with the teaching assistant supervisor. These meetings are led jointly by the supervisor and the GTAs who are making presentations that day. The following activities are included in each 1.5-2.0 hr meeting:

1. An open discussion of problems the GTAs encountered and how they dealt with these problems. Feedback is provided by other GTAs and the supervisor (as deemed necessary—several GTAs have commented that it was empowering to know that they could help each other).

2. An open discussion of what went well in classes and how to implement such effective practices in other classes.
3. The presentation of a discussion on a controversial issue in teaching (e.g., assignment of grades, discussion groups vs. lectures, the use of extra credit) by an assigned GTA.
4. The presentation of an effective class demonstration by an assigned GTA.
5. The presentation and discussion of selected chapters from *Teaching Tips* (McKeachie, 2002) by assigned GTAs.

Professional Development Activities

The supervisor observes the GTAs at least once each semester in the classroom and provides extensive oral and written feedback. In addition, each GTA completes either a self-evaluation form or a specific-focus report on an alternating basis every other week. The self-evaluation form requires ongoing reflection on teaching practices and abilities, as well as relevant professional and personal development. The specific-focus form requires each GTA to report on a specific aspect of teaching that he or she has attempted to modify or improve. Moreover, both the supervisor and each GTA complete a semester evaluation form at the end of each academic term. This form evaluates teaching development and performance as well as personal growth and development that is relevant to teaching.

To encourage professional growth and collegiality, each GTA must attend and critique classes taught by two other GTAs during the course of each semester. In addition, each GTA attends a regional teaching conference (e.g., Southwest Regional Conference for Teachers of Psychology) during the academic year. ESU provides funding for registration and transportation. The supervisor encourages second-year GTAs to be active participants at such conferences via paper and poster presentations and symposium participation. GTAs prepare (or revise, in the case of second-year GTAs) a statement of their philosophy of teaching. This exercise is assigned at the close of the fall semester; the completed statement is due at the first GTA meeting of the spring semester.

As a final requirement, first-year GTAs prepare and second-year GTAs revise a personal teaching portfolio. The completed portfolio contains such items as a teaching philosophy, a delineation of teaching goals, a delineation of teaching strategies, and supportive evidence and documentation. The teaching portfolio is required of both first- and second-year GTAs and is due just prior to the completion of the spring semester.

Program Evaluation

Semester Evaluations

The GTA supervisor maintains an active evaluation portfolio for each GTA and meets individually with each GTA at the end of each semester to review performance, improvement, and development as reflected by the documents contained in this portfolio. The GTA and supervisor are expected to add the following items to the evaluation portfolio on a regular basis:

1. A course syllabus for each course taught.
2. All personal evaluation and specific-focus forms prepared by the GTA.
3. Comments made by the GTA supervisor during the observation(s) of the GTA's classes
4. The peer evaluation forms submitted by the GTA.
5. All testing instruments.
6. Separate semester evaluation forms completed by the GTA and by the GTA supervisor.
7. Any additional materials (e.g., items reflecting professional or personal growth and development) deemed relevant by the GTA or supervisor.

A comparison of the semester evaluation form completed by the GTA with the one completed by the supervisor offers an excellent starting point for discussion at the semester evaluation conference. This meeting provides the ideal opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses and to discuss ways to improve teaching methods for the next semester. The portfolio represents a source of inspiration for many GTAs as they realize how much they

have accomplished during the semester that has just ended. Because these portfolios are archived, they can provide valuable, specific materials on which the GTA supervisor can base future letters of recommendation.

Subjective Comments From a Former GTA

The following commentary from a former GTA reflects the impact this training program can exert; it typifies the reaction of the GTAs to the program.

The GTA training program has proven invaluable in my current position as a doctoral-level teaching assistant. The comprehensive approach helped to boost confidence in my own abilities and form a focused philosophy toward teaching that I continually draw on in each and every class. The program's emphasis on support and evaluation allowed me to learn from mistakes and make positive changes in my teaching style.

Objective Measures

Because students evaluate the GTAs each semester, student evaluations can provide an objective measure of the effectiveness of the GTA program. We obtained student evaluation scores for the previous 10 years and randomly selected evaluations from three spring semesters (to insure that all GTAs had taught a full semester) to make comparisons between GTAs and full-time faculty. Independent samples t tests comparing mean student evaluations for 1993, 1994, and 1999 indicated that GTAs and full-time faculty did not differ reliably, $t(27) = 1.61$, $t(27) = 1.47$, $t(25) = 1.55$, respectively, all $ps > .05$. Clearly, student evaluations placed GTAs on par with full-time faculty.

A second comparison between GTAs and full-time faculty involved the variance in student evaluations of each group for the three selected semesters. F_{\max} tests indicated that the full-time faculty had significantly greater variability for these three evaluation periods, $F_{\max}(2, 14) = 5.11$, $p < .01$, $F_{\max}(2, 14) = 6.03$, $p < .01$, $F_{\max}(2, 13) = 5.38$, $p < .01$, respectively. Although the mean student evaluation ratings did not differ between the GTAs and full-time faculty, the faculty ratings were more variable. One interpretation of this result

is that the GTA training program is successful in producing a uniform, high level of teaching performance.

Conclusions

The GTA training model we have described offers an effective and reliable method to prepare students to teach in both master's and doctoral-level programs. Objective and subjective measures attest to the model's success in developing GTAs who perform uniformly and at the same level as full-time faculty. We encourage readers to adapt these GTA training procedures to their specific needs and situations. The sound development of competent student teachers is a necessary first step toward the long-term goal of a better prepared professoriate.

References

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