

The Evolution of a Teaching Seminar at a Research University

Richard A. Griggs, University of Florida

I am a professor of psychology at the University of Florida (UF), where I started my academic career in 1974. With about 48,000 students, UF has the fourth largest student enrollment of all universities in the United States. It is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as an Extensive Research university, is a member of the prestigious Association of American Universities, and presently has about \$500 million in research and training grants. In brief, UF is a very large, research-oriented public university.

At present, the UF Psychology Department has 47 faculty members and 140 graduate students. With respect to graduate student training in teaching, no formal program exists within the Psychology Department. A graduate student's faculty supervisor supervises the student's research and teaching, often resulting in minimal supervision of the latter. As at most research universities there has been much recent talk about the importance of teaching but little evidence that this is truly the case.

In this publish-or-perish environment, I did not consider offering a teaching seminar until I was promoted to full professor. I initially offered the teaching seminar in response to the request of graduate student teachers and teaching assistants who said that they wanted such a course. I structured the seminar along the lines of the prototypical teaching of psychology course—focusing mainly on teaching mechanics and techniques, lecture observation-evaluation, and test construction. Students read about and discussed various teaching issues, using the typical books—McKeachie's (2002) *Teaching Tips*, Davis's (1993) *Tools for Teaching*, and Lowman's (1995) *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*. During one term, I videotaped microlectures that each student prepared for the seminar, then discussed and critiqued each taped presentation with that student.

Whereas students liked this version of the seminar, I came to realize that this was probably not the best use of the brief time that I had with them. As you might suspect, there was a selection factor operating—only students who were very enthusiastic and truly interested in teaching took the class. These students were already well on their way to becoming good teachers. Thus, the seminar didn't really help them that much except for reinforcing their enthusiasm for teaching, allowing them to develop a camaraderie with similar-thinking students, and broadening their appreciation of diverse approaches to teaching. One day in reading the student evaluations of the course, I had an epiphany. It occurred to me that I could do much more for such students by transforming the course on teaching into a microcosm of a graduate teacher-training program.

With this overarching goal in mind, the seminar has evolved to include three main objectives: (a) preparation of course materials for the first third of the introductory psychology course, (b) familiarity with the broader teaching community and the diversity of academic job environments, and (c) preparation of teaching portfolio materials, especially those necessary for job applications. I will briefly discuss how I have attempted to accomplish each goal.

Some of our graduate students teach the introductory course, and it is probably the most difficult psychology course for them (or anyone) to teach. As such, I think that it is beneficial to have the seminar help students prepare actual lectures and exams for this course. My role is to cover important teaching issues within the context of this preparation. Students first learn about the text selection process and syllabus preparation, then develop actual lecture materials (lecture outlines, transparencies, and demonstration and activity materials) for research methods, neuroscience, sensation/perception, and learning), and finally construct an exam covering these topics. I chose these particular topics because they usually appear toward the beginning of the course and are among the most difficult to prepare. All of the students use the same textbook and ancillaries, and distribute their prepared materials to each other and me via computer files before each seminar meeting. During class meetings, each

student presents his or her objectives and materials for a topic, and the other students and I provide constructive feedback. Thus, students benefit both by receiving constructive feedback on their own materials and by providing such feedback on the other students' materials. When students finish this section of the seminar, they are well prepared to teach the first third or so of the introductory course.

I think that helping graduate students to become more familiar with the broader teaching community is a critical objective not just for my seminar but any teaching course. Emphasis on research is so heavy-handed in graduate students' doctoral training that they have no idea that such a community even exists, much less that there are regional and national meetings on the teaching of psychology. Fortunately, the National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology meets in St. Pete Beach, FL, only a couple hours from UF. Thus, many of my seminar students have attended this conference and the Southeastern Conference on the Teaching of Psychology Conference in Atlanta, which is also not far from UF. The enthusiasm for good teaching at these conferences not only reinforces students' interest in teaching, but these conferences also allow the students to interact with teachers from a variety of academic environments and to begin networking within the teaching community. Most importantly, the students learn about the many varied types of academic positions that exist and become aware that there is academic life outside of large research universities. This experience is critical for the job application process, which I incorporate into the development of teaching portfolio materials in the last section of the seminar.

Like most psychology teachers, my seminar students have never thought about, much less defined, their philosophy of teaching so I make this the first step in portfolio development, and I stress its importance to good teaching. I also have students revisit their introductory course lecture materials, this time in terms of congruency with their teaching philosophies. As with the lecture materials, all portfolio materials are shared with classmates as they are developed and then critiqued in seminar meetings. Like the discussions of lecture materials, the portfolio discussions provide a safe environment for serious consideration of

important teaching issues and thus enhance the probability that such interactions will continue outside the seminar setting.

I focus the portfolio development assignments on the job application process and have students prepare the teaching parts of the job application packet for an actual job advertisement. I have them do the necessary background work on the school (who is there, what the teaching load is, what courses are offered, and so on) to help them learn how to tailor their materials to individual schools. I also discuss the entire job process from application to contract negotiations, with special emphasis on interviewing. To concretize this material, I bring in former seminar students who are currently applying for jobs to share their application materials and job search experiences. I think that this job application seminar experience has positively impacted the actual job search process for the students. Recent seminar students have obtained faculty positions at excellent schools such as Furman University, College of St. Mary's in Maryland, and Randolph-Macon College. They also leave graduate school with a good start on a teaching portfolio that will help them in future yearly evaluations and the tenure-promotion process.

Feedback from former seminar members indicates that the seminar not only was valuable to them but also continues to be of value to them. They leave the course with an awareness of the extensive resources on teaching and the broader teaching community and its activities, a good initiation to teaching the introductory course, preparation of job application materials and a teaching portfolio, and a more informed perception of job possibilities and the job market. I have also found it to be valuable both to the students and to the success of the seminar to allow students to retake the seminar. This affords these students the opportunity to fine-tune their course and portfolio materials and more importantly, to serve as models and mentors for the less experienced students in the seminar.

Conclusion

With respect to my own thoughts about the seminar's success, I think that the seminar that has evolved both reinforces and develops the students' knowledge about and enthusiasm

for teaching. It also provides the students with vital pragmatic information about the diversity of academic jobs and securing positions that best fit their individual goals. Although the latter is not typically part of a teaching seminar, I highly recommend its inclusion at strong research-oriented universities. It in no way counterbalances such universities' emphasis on research and obtaining research positions, but it does make students aware of the choice of being teacher scholars versus just scholars.

References

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