Abstract

Graduate students interested in pursuing a career in teaching can benefit tremendously from serving as a teaching assistant. For this article, graduate students with experience teaching one or more psychology courses were interviewed. Their specific successes and challenges are discussed in broader terms of professional development. Additional perspectives on effective teaching strategies are provided.
The development and improvement of effective teaching methodologies has long been a mainstay of postsecondary education (e.g., MacLeod, 1971; Shannon, Twale, & Moore, 1998). Although for many graduate school is a period of intense research, it is also the prime time that future faculty members begin to gain teaching experience. Given the myriad roles that graduate students are often required to tackle as part of their master’s and doctoral programs, it is not surprising that the emphasis on how to be an effective instructor takes second seat to the demands and pressures to conduct and publish scholarly research. As a result, for graduate students who are interested in pursuing teaching careers, seeking out and gaining teaching experience often receives less emphasis (Gray & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1991; Sykes, 1988). Boyer (1991), for example, noted that graduate students entering into their first year of a teaching profession are often ill-prepared for their instructional responsibilities (see also Anderson, 1992). For teaching assistants (TAs) in particular, it thus becomes even more important to be cognizant of the ways to become an effective instructor (Ottesen, 2007; Simpson & Smith, 1993).

The role of a teaching assistant can take many forms (e.g., Prieto & Meyers, 2001). There is much diversity across disciplines and across institutions in the forms that a TA will take. This range of responsibilities can range from grading papers and preparing lecture materials for the instructor, assisting the instructor in delivering lectures or proctoring exams, teaching the lab component of a larger course, to taking on full responsibility for a course (Goodlad, 1997; Park, 2004).

Within this context, much research has investigated the manner in which teaching assistants can be effective in the classroom, with particular emphasis on the necessity of assessing the outcomes of effective teaching (Edwards & Protheroe, 2007; Johnson & Reiman, 2007; Murray & Stotko, 2005). However, the majority of this research is from the perspective of faculty members or administrators (e.g., Espinoza-Herold & Gonzalez, 2007; Meyers & Prieto, 2000). Although many of these same principles can be applied to graduate student teaching assistants, there is still a noticeable lack of perspective from TAs regarding these very issues.

The present essay and illustrative cases reflect on the role of a TA in a traditional setting to explore how TAs can be the most effective in the classroom while properly balancing other responsibilities. It is also discipline-specific in that only psychology TAs are discussed, although many of these principles can be easily applied to virtually any other discipline.

Interview Protocol and Description

In preparation for this article, ten graduate students who had served as a teaching assistant for one or more courses in psychology at a large, public university in the Southeast were approached by the author about participating in this study. Of these, seven agreed to participate. (The reasons provided by non-participants were unrelated to the study). Approximately half were female, three were non-Caucasian, and the number of courses taught as a TA ranged from one to six courses, thus offering a good representation of graduate student teaching assistants. Participants were initially provided with a consent form and a list of interview questions for them to reflect on in advance. Approximately one week later, all participants were again contacted to schedule a one-on-one interview session.

At the beginning of the interview session, all participants completed a brief demographic form which inquired about their race, gender, current student status, and current or past TA assignments, and were again provided with the interview questions. The interview prompts contained ten questions developed for this study, including, for example, their past and current responsibilities as a TA, how they interacted with students and their mentors, their likes/dislikes about teaching, their teaching philosophy, examples of positive and negative teaching-related
situations, and what advice they would provide for future TAs. Using this list as prompts, the author interviewed each TA in individual sessions for approximately 60 minutes. These conversations were tape-recorded and later transcribed for qualitative analysis. All materials and study procedures were approved by the host university’s internal review board.

The Roles of the TA

Given the varying levels of responsibilities and duties that are given to TAs for different courses and at various institutions, it is not surprising that it is becoming ever more difficult to define a “typical” TA experience. Consistent with past research (e.g., Prieto & Meyers, 2001), a wide range of responsibility was given to the TAs interviewed for this study. Most included the administrative responsibilities involved with teaching a course, such as keeping a grade book and making copies for the professor. Some were more involved with assessing student performance, such as grading exams or papers for the professor. Some were also given more responsibility for establishing the context for the course, as in coming up with a syllabus and lesson plans, developing problem sets for homework, developing grading rubrics for assignments, as well as guest lecturing. In general, teaching assistants supplement the course material and are there to interact with students on more of a one-on-one basis than what the professor is capable of doing in larger classes. As described by one of the advanced TAs,

*I was there to make sure the students had a solid foundation. I was responsible for the students being familiar with the practical side of the information, methods, and techniques that they were learning. I served to facilitate the students so that they could apply their knowledge.*

(3rd year Asian-American female who had served as a TA for three courses.)

Factors That Can Influence TA Teaching Effectiveness

Although one participant had majored in secondary education as an undergraduate and received specific teaching instruction, most TAs had received little or no formal training on how to be an effective teacher. Consistent with the TA experiences reported by Bomotti (1994), many students felt that they were simply “thrown” into the classroom without the proper amount of preparation. Meyers, Reid, and Quina (1998) similarly reported that first-time teaching assistants at other institutions felt they had received only minimal training in the duties they were assigned. Even though all the TAs for this study had gone through a teacher orientation program at the beginning of the year, many felt that this information was too abstract to properly digest due to their lack of prior teaching experience. For example,

*Sometimes I wish that I would have had more clarification going in at the beginning, as far as teacher expectations. I sort of had to find out as I went along as situations came up. But, that’s part of the learning process.*

(first year Caucasian female who had served as a TA for two courses).

However, many students felt that their own personal experiences had given them some idea of what might work well in the classroom. For example, many were able to draw on their own experiences as being undergraduates and take from that experience what seemed to work well for them in terms of classroom management and knowledge transmission. Relying on colleagues is also another informal manner of obtaining teaching instruction:
We don’t specifically get training in teaching but we do have a lot of experience being students. So, it’s not explicit instruction, but you can get it from the people around you, from people who have taught the courses before; you can learn from their experiences (3rd year Asian-American female TA).

A topic of great importance to many of the TAs concerned the interaction between the TAs and the professors or teaching mentors. Several studies have demonstrated that constant and open communication between well-established educators and their mentees serves to augment the learning of specific skills and techniques necessary for proper teaching (e.g., Darling & Staton, 1989; Myers, 1998; Prentice-Dunn, 2006). However, not all TAs have the fortune of frequent collaboration with a professor or advisor. As stated by an advanced graduate student who had served as a TA for several courses, including both undergraduate and graduate courses:

One of the things that I felt I was lacking and would have liked to have had more of was a consistent schedule where I met with my professor for whom I was teaching so that we could discuss not only the topics that needed to be covered, but also the more logistic side of teaching, such as how to deal with problem students, issues with grading, and establishing boundaries between me and the students (who were very close to my age and background). I think more contact with the professor would have alleviated a lot of the stress that I was feeling at the time (3rd year Caucasian male who had served as a TA for four courses).

Several interviewees, though, even those who did not meet regularly with their professors, pointed out that teaching resources are available. For example, the host university regularly provides workshops and roundtables where teaching issues are discussed, graduate seminars in college teaching and learning, as well as a teaching certificate program in which students can enroll. Taking advantage of these resources is still the responsibility of the TA, however. Although they are available, participation in them is not (yet) mandatory. Arguably, making these types of teaching improvement activities mandatory could serve to strengthen the overall quality of instruction provided by TAs to students (Prieto & Altmaier, 1994).

In terms of intrapersonal affect, many TAs reported being nervous on the first day in front of the classroom. TAs were intimidated by how their students might perceive them, unsure how to set up and enforce boundaries between the students and the TA, concerned with being able to communicate well with the students, and making sure that they were teaching correct information that did not contradict with the professor.

I was concerned because I wasn’t sure what the classes [here] were like. I come from a liberal arts college where everyone already knows each other. How would the students here act? Would they be respectful? Would they show up on time? I didn’t really know how to gauge what sort of performance I should expect out of them. I was also nervous that I wouldn’t be prepared or that they wouldn’t understand me. I have a tendency to stammer when I’m nervous, and I was worried that I would get stuck and not be able to get my thoughts out (first year Caucasian female who had served as a TA for one course).

Many students brought up the issue of how the students would respond to them:
A lot of the anxiety I used to have in the classroom was based on that I was thinking too much of what my students thought of me. I hear this a lot—TAs will come back to their office and say, ‘they hate me.’ It’s part of the process. People want to be liked, but I think it would be easier not to think about that. One of the things that I do in class now is that I don’t worry too much about getting the students to like me. I focus on whether or not I teach well. I teach them concepts in a way that they can understand. Whether they like me or not is tangential. I think they can not like a course but like the way it’s taught (4th year Hispanic male TA who had taught six courses).

These concerns parallel what Eble (1983) described as the “dullness” which accompanies uncertainty. Often, the desire to be well-liked can overshadow teaching effectiveness, thereby diminishing both qualities in the classroom. Although not discussed specifically by the participants interviewed for this study, another relevant concern for many TAs is the extent to which their race, gender, or cultural background might be perceived negatively by the students they are instructing (e.g., Barnes, 2006; Lal, 2000), particularly if the students themselves are largely homogenous in terms of demographics.

Scholarly Instruction

Present and future TAs can benefit from the experiences faced by these individuals interviewed for this article. Their expectations, failures, and successes are quite common. For the last section of this article, I would like to put forth my own recommendations, based on my own experiences, as to how to be an effective teaching assistant. In essence, there are four pieces of advice: inform, don’t impress; start with what the students know, not what you know; be willing to say “I don’t know”; and recognize the TA assignment for what it is—a learning experience—and enjoy it. These are discussed in detail below and serve to complement the wisdom and experience already shared by the above-mentioned individuals.

To begin, the goal of a teaching assistant should be to inform the students, not to impress them. The main purpose why students are in the classroom is to learn concepts and materials that the professor thinks will supplement the overall course. From this perspective, the role of the TA is to assist with the dissemination of knowledge, or as discussed by one of the participants, to be there for the “practical side of the information, methods, and techniques that [the students] were learning”.

Often, however, the topics that the TA will be asked to cover, particularly in introductory courses, do not receive the same breadth and attention that the graduate student will likely have covered. As such, there may be a natural tendency to try to transmit as much information as possible, and to make it clear to the students that the TA knows more information than is necessary to be taught. However, this approach serves neither to inform the students nor create a favorable impression of the TA (see Eble, 1983).

Second, in lectures or class discussions start with what the students know, not what you know, to introduce new material. Buskist (2000), for example, describes how TAs often begin lectures quite abruptly with highly technical information garnered from their own advanced training. What this approach fails to take into account, however, is the differential starting points of the teacher and student.

Consider the following scenario: for the next class you are supposed to cover Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Given the fact that you have probably covered this topic in some detail as
part of your own studies, you set up the context of the topic and start your lecture with the “big
picture”. You discuss the phenomenological approach and how it ties into humanistic
psychology. You discuss its hierarchical structure and define each element (e.g., physiological,
social, self-actualization), and so forth. In other words, you have adequately placed this topic
into context, defined its components, and perhaps thrown in a few examples. Although this
approach is a good review for students who have already covered this material, for the novice
student it is likely to be overwhelming.

A better strategy to adopt would be to start with knowledge that the students already
possess, and to build from that common denominator up to the specific topic at hand. For
example, because Maslow’s hierarchy forms a pyramid, you could begin your discussion of how
the ancient Egyptians went about constructing their great pyramids, pointing out the very
practical issue of starting with the largest base at the bottom, and then building the next higher
step only after the first one is complete. Should any of the lower building blocks crumble or fall
into disrepair, the above layers are likely to crash down. You can then apply this same principle
to how individuals go about fulfilling their basic needs. They start with physiological (food,
water, safety, etc), and after those needs have been met, they can then progress to fulfilling the
next higher order of needs (safety). This goes all the way to the top. At any point should any of
the lower needs not be met, then the above ones will be affected. You can then end your lecture
stating how theory was developed by Maslow, discuss him somewhat, and illustrate how this
concept fits into the phenomenological approach.

Using this approach it is less likely that the students will be overwhelmed with unfamiliar
concepts and are unable to understand how these principles are relatively straightforward. In
other words, by starting with general knowledge that the students possess, it reassures them
before expanding their knowledge base. This approach also is helpful in promoting and
encouraging student participation, as it allows students to discuss information which they al
ready know (Buskist, 2000).

Third, a successful instructor should be willing to say “I don’t know” when the
occasion arises. Teaching assistants, and especially beginning TAs, are often under pressure to
regulate their performance in the classroom to promote themselves as best as possible. This can
include projecting an image of wisdom and of sound knowledge. However, the stresses
associated with being in front of a classroom and the “spotlight effect” can often impel the
beginning teacher to over-extend his or her true knowledge. In other words, the fear of not
knowing an answer can lead a TA to want to compensate for it by either redirecting the question
or coming up with an answer on the spot that may or may not be correct.

Whereas the stress associated with being in front of the classroom for the first time will
obviously dissipate with time and greater familiarity (Slevin, 1992), the pressure to appear
knowledgeable will likely always remain present. Again, in these cases it is important to
consider what is in the best interests of the students. Although it may be uncomfortable, students
are best served when they are told the truth. In other words, TAs (and professors alike) should
be willing and able to admit the limitations of their knowledge in lieu of trying to project an
image of infallibility. Telling the students that you will follow up on their question and revisit it
later can actually increase student confidence and respect as opposed to diminish it (e.g., Davis,
1991). The only difference is the perspective taken.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the best approach towards serving as a TA is to
recognize the experience for what it truly is—a learning experience, and to enjoy it. Serving as a
TA can be thought of as a double-edged sword: you are above the level of the students you are
teaching but are still not quite the professor (Park, 2002). This means that your position is much
more flexible and not quite as rigid as would be expected of the full instructor. Although we
may not like to admit it, our students are certainly aware of our status and as such are much more
dependent on us to establish for them what the norms and atmosphere of the class should be.
This fluid status can be beneficial if used appropriately. In other words, the students will
appreciate an ongoing conversation about why you are teaching in a certain style as well as to
hear your feedback regarding the effectiveness of each approach. The learning process does not
have to be totally one-sided, and it would be a shame to miss out on the opportunity now to
experiment with various teaching techniques and skills before being hired as a full instructor or
assistant professor where the pressure to have a solidified teaching style is immense.

Conclusion

Although the demands of graduate training are immediate and extensive, it behooves
graduate students who are interested in pursuing teaching careers to seek out and receive as
much teaching experience as possible before going on the job market. As Perlmutter (2008)
discusses, such experiences serve to introduce future faculty members to the demands and
expectations of working in an academic culture. As evidenced even by the TAs interviewed for
this study, both good and bad experiences serve a useful function in preparing individuals for
their future careers (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991; Staton & Darling, 1989).

Specifically, it is important for teaching assistants to take an active approach towards
learning and developing the skills that are necessary to be an effective instructor. Several self-
assessments are available to TAs to track their progress as a beginning instructor. Angelo and
Cross (1993), for example, developed the Teaching Goals Inventory to assist TAs in forming a
teaching philosophy to help guide them in their instruction. Similarly, the Self-Efficacy Towards
Teaching Inventory-Adapted (Prieto & Altmaier, 1994) covers 32 specific teaching-related
activities which TAs can use to chart their progress in developing the confidence necessary to be
an effective instructor. Ideally, these self-assessments could be shared with a teaching mentor to
receive additional feedback or constructive criticism. Conversely, for TAs who do not receive
much interaction with their mentor, these self-assessments could serve as a useful substitute for
instructional feedback. Regardless the context in which they are used, however, such self-
assessments have been demonstrated to be highly effective in improving efficacy towards
professional development activities (de la Torre Cruz & Arias, 2007).

As discussed in this essay, although teaching may “come naturally” for a select few,
teaching well requires specific skills that for many simply have to be learned, practiced, revised,
and continually revisited.

*Being a TA is not enough. It helped me learn what is effective in small groups, but it’s not going to help me get a job and it’s not necessarily going to help me teach a course. You have to teach your own course to really understand and learn what it takes to be an effective professor* (2nd year Caucasian female who had served as a TA for four courses).

Even with some of the minor difficulties and jitteriness associated with being in front of
the classroom for the first time as an authority figure (e.g., Feezel & Meyers, 1991), the TA
experience does provide an excellent opportunity to have an impact on the lives of others:

*I like teaching. I like light bulb moments when something that you say actually makes sense and clarifies some difficult point that they were having trouble with* (3rd year African-American male who had served as a TA for three courses).
I really like the interactions with students. It’s nice to be a part of a person’s life for a while (2nd year Caucasian female who had served as a TA for four courses).

Perhaps the overall teaching experience is best summarized by the following anonymous student:

It’s one of those things where there’s only so much you can do to prepare yourself for something if you’ve never done it before. It’s like jumping out of an airplane—there’s only so many things you can do on the ground.
References


