

## How Do Graduate Teaching Assistants Learn To Teach? : Some Empirical Findings

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- ◇ 이 두 편의 글은 대학에서의 효과적인 敎授法을 모색하기 위 ◇
- ◇ 해 개최된 國際會議(Improving University Teaching; the ◇
- ◇ 10th International Conference, July 5~7, 1984, College ◇
- ◇ Park, Maryland, U.S.A.) 가운데 “대학에서의 교수법 : 그 문 ◇
- ◇ 제와 해결책”을 다른 分科에서 발표된 것이다. 敎授法에 대 ◇
- ◇ 한 관심이 점차 높아가고 있는 大學社會의 많은 분들에게 도 ◇
- ◇ 울이 되기를 바란다. 필자들은 Northwestern 大學에 재직중 ◇
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Much recent work (Baldwin & Blackburn, 1981; Cytrynbaum, Lee, & Wadner, 1982) has been done on the stages of development through which teachers pass in the course of their careers, but little research appears to be available on conceptualizations about teaching that graduate students bring with them as they begin their careers as teachers. Many studies note that college teachers receive little or no formal training in teaching. The typical beginning experience, usually as a graduate teaching assistant, is that of being “assigned to a class, handed a textbook, and told, in essence, if not in fact, ‘go jump into that classroom and sink or swim’” (Garland, 1983, p. 428).

This lack of formal training in teaching raises a number of questions: What resources do graduate teaching assistants draw upon as they present themselves in the role of teacher for the first time? How do they determine how well they are doing their jobs as GTAs? How do they settle upon a particular style of teaching?

Traditional answers to questions such as these foci upon the concepts of professionalization and occupational socialization. These explanations assume the presence of “role models” (Bragg, 1976), and attach high importance to such figures. In this view, teachers learn to teach primarily by emulating the teachers they have admired.

### Three Areas for Inquiry

With regard to the influence of previous experience, we offer new evidence that gradu-

ate teaching assistants draw upon sources other than role models in determining their strategies as teachers. We will show that teaching strategies employed by GTAs are in part applications of skills learned in settings related to, but not necessarily identical to, college teaching.

Second, our data illustrate how GTAs modify their teaching strategies by attending to student feedback. By "student feedback" we refer to such things as in-class student participation, attentiveness, and comments to the instructor, rather than to formal end-of-term student evaluations of the instructor.

Finally, we ask what factors enter into the development of a teaching "style"? Granrose (1980) elucidates a set of basic skills (choosing, preparing, speaking, listening, responding, testing, grading) which form the basis of teaching and which "help create a teacher's style." But, according to Granrose, "they do not define style nor do they play the crucial part in developing a style" (1980, p 27-28). In other words, style is not piecing together a few techniques from here and some helpful hints from there; instead style results from the development of a certain "wholeness of character" which is reflected in an attitude of "love and respect" for one's students. This "wholeness of character," Granrose goes on, is manifested in being "comfortable" as one teaches, and in spreading this sense of comfort among students. Our GTAs, in describing their styles, emphasize traits which contribute to the cultivation of a positive classroom atmosphere.

## **An Interview Study**

Our data come from a study, conducted in the Spring of 1983, in which 26 graduate teaching assistants in seven departments at a large midwestern research university talked at length about their views on teaching and learning. GTAs from departments of Mathematics, Chemistry, Political Science, English, Sociology, Philosophy, and Economics were asked open-ended questions about (1) their experiences prior to becoming a GTA, (2) how they evaluate the success of particular class sessions, and (3) their teaching styles.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Prior Experiences**

Experiences that GTAs felt could be brought to bear upon teaching show considerable diversity. Not surprisingly, many GTAs (about a third) drew upon previous undergraduate TA experiences or previous tutoring experiences. Some GTAs mentioned having previously taught in college or at another level of education.

Previous opportunities to perform or talk to groups helped another quarter deal with teaching for the first time. One person led small groups in seminary; another mentioned performing on stage in a band and in plays; a third was a member of a debate society. According to the GTAs, these activities helped them develop such transferable skills as "self-expression," "public speaking," and "learning to listen." For example, one GTA pointed out that performing in a band or a play gradually helped him overcome his shyness; the confidence he gained as a performer was useful to him as a teacher.

Previous job-related experiences, such as retail management, customer service, and editing were mentioned nearly as often. Jobs like these are similar to teaching in certain respects. Both retail management and teaching require effective interpersonal relations

skills. In customer service, it is often necessary to “reshape the way the customer thinks about the kind of service he’s looking for,” and editors must cultivate the art of “tactfully” commenting on another’s work.

Two GTAs simply reported they had “grown up in an academic environment,” since their parents were teachers at one level or another. One GTA said that counseling courses helped prepare him to deal with teaching. Considering the thrust of the socialization literature cited above, it is rather surprising that only two GTAs mentioned that their experiences as students under different teachers and GTAs influenced how they tackled the job of teaching.

Finally, both Army and coaching experiences assisted several GTAs in their first time teaching. Army veterans said they picked up skills from instructing subordinates in both classroom and non-classroom settings (drilling troops, and the like). One of the coaches, a tennis coach, stated that helping people “image” successful performances was a technique he brought from the tennis court to teaching.

### Indicators of Success

We asked GTAs to discuss how they determine whether a particular class has been successful or unsuccessful. We imagined responses such as getting all of the material covered that I had planned to cover, delivering the material without getting stumped along the way, quality of classroom discussion, and so on. What we found was an overwhelming consensus that classroom success or failure was based upon student participation and enthusiasm in class. This result held true even across disciplines; it was just as germane to Math and Chemistry GTAs as to English and Political Science GTAs.

Some examples: three of four Math GTAs referred to student feedback as most important in evaluating success: “student response is the most important thing,” “the way they are looking at you,” “whether I see long faces, or baffled looks.” Among Chemistry GTAs, three of five emphasized feedback: “student participation,” “whether students rush to get out when class is over,” “whether the questions they ask have been intelligent, and show they have synthesized the material.”

English and Political Science GTAs answered this question more elaborately, but drew the same conclusions: eight of nine in these two departments gave primacy to student feedback in assessing the success of a particular class. “I would say that the blank look, the blank stare, is a pretty good gauge, an indication that the class has not been successful. Now if students are nodding vigorously or shaking their heads furiously, either of those reactions, I don’t mind at all, because it means they will go and think about [the issues raised in class].” “You could almost statistically show that the greater proportion of student participation and the less lecturing I’ve done, the more successful I thought the section was.” “The most important criterion is the enthusiasm that the students leave with, because a really successful class is the kind where I have to stop them talking [five minutes after the section is over] because I’ve got to go to my next section.”

### Teaching Style

For many GTAs, our interview was the first time they had ever been asked to describe their teaching “style.” We found that after a bit of coaxing (e.g., prompts such as “can you think of any adjectives that might describe the way you teach?”), most GTAs were able to settle on at least a two or three word description of their teaching.

GTAs appear to be aware of the potential impact of "style" upon classroom atmosphere. In particular, they seem to be concerned with creating a "comfortable" climate in which to interact with students. Half of the GTAs characterized their style, in part at least, as either "humorous" or "relaxed," certainly two strategies conducive to the development of a sense of "comfort" in the classroom. About a quarter of the GTAs characterized their styles in non-"comfort-making" terms. Two of them, however, described their style as "cajoling students to engage in discussion," which, if not exactly comfort making, could arguably be considered student-centered. The other quarter were unable to describe themselves in terms of a teaching style; most of them remarked that they really "hadn't ever thought about it."

## Conclusions and Implications

Our interviews were exploratory and few in number, so the findings are not conclusive. However, some tentative implications for intervention and guidance strategies emerge from this study.

First, to the extent that GTAs draw upon past experiences in coming to grips with teaching for the first time, it is important that supervisors, counselors, and others interested in the development of GTAs recognize connections that exist between teaching and previous experiences. A formal analysis of "transferability," in the sense that this term is used in research on learning (Gagne, 1975), may be a useful exercise. If aspects of previous experience most likely to transfer to teaching are made explicit, GTAs can approach their new responsibilities with some assurance that they already possess skills needed to do an effective job.

Second, it is important to recognize that learning is contingent upon feedback from "role clarifiers," which for beginning teachers include not only role models, but other faculty, peers, and, as we have found, student subordinates (Leslie, Swiren, and Flexner, 1977). Additionally, learning any new skill depends upon perception of the consequences of one's performance (Rotem, 1978). For new teachers, the clearest and most immediate consequences of performance are the expressions on the faces of students during class. Those who provide guidance to GTAs, however, may wish also to emphasize other indicators of classroom success, some of which are less immediate (e.g., test scores, end-of-term evaluations, and so on).

Third, GTAs can be made aware of the potential impact of particular styles upon classroom atmosphere. Jeremy Bentham is quoted by Granrose (1980) as stating that "the way to be comfortable is to make others comfortable, the way to make others comfortable is to appear to love them, and the way to appear to love them is to love them in reality. Something like this," Granrose continues, "is a necessary part of the best teaching" (1980, p. 29). If this is true, then the cultivation of styles which further this aim is crucial.

Fourth, the GTA experience appears to be a time in which one's philosophy and approach to teaching are highly tentative. The potential for successful intervention is great. Given the present lack of formal training of GTAs during this time of uncertainty about values, assumptions, and techniques, it appears that significant opportunities for guidance are being lost.

For GTAs, learning to teach is a dynamic process involving transferable prior learnings, in-class feedback from students, and the creation of classroom "comfort." We do not imply

that this is all that goes into the development of teaching strategies. Others have commented, in particular, upon the importance of role models, colleagues, and the structure of the academic reward system (see, for example, Eble, 1971, 1983). Our findings supplement these other understandings of the process by which GTAs learn to teach. \*

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