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Effective Programming for TA Development

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Developing programs that prepare teaching assistants (TAs) to be competent classroom instructors is a challenging process. An effective training program must address a variety of dimensions in the daily lives of TAs as well as each TA's development during the TA experience. This article describes a program that attempts to meet these challenges by appointing experienced TAs as teaching associates to give instructional direction to less experienced TAs in a process that enhances the associates' own professional development and results in an effective training program for all TAs.

Colleges and universities are under pressure from lawmakers, students, and parents to provide quality undergraduate education. Central to efforts to enhance undergraduate instruction are teaching assistants (TAs), who not only are responsible for a major portion of lower division instruction at many research universities but are the faculty members of tomorrow (Gappa, 1991; Keller, 1986; Nyquist & Wulff, 1987; Smock & Menges, 1985). Mangan (1992) reports that institutions nationwide are responding to the increasingly important role that TAs assume in undergraduate instruction by creating university-wide TA training programs, strengthening departmentally-based TA training programs, and expanding faculty development programs to include training for TAs.

Developing programs that prepare teaching assistants to be competent classroom instructors, however, is a challenging process. It requires a focus on the various dimensions of the TA experience, including the "needs and characteristics of TAs themselves, the relationships that TAs have with other TAs, the demands of the students they teach, [and] the expectations of supervisors and administrators . . . . " (Nyquist, Abbott, and Wulff, 1989, p.

11). In addition to the dimensions that affect TAs as beginning teachers, the TA program must also address the characteristic changes that occur in TAs' development. Sprague and Nyquist (1989, p. 44) label the developmental phases through which TAs pass during their TA years as "senior learner," "colleague in training," and "junior colleague." The senior learner is a beginning TA who is the expert student undergoing the confusing transition from learner to instructor; his/her immediate concern is how to fit into the role of teacher. At the level of colleague in training, the TA, becoming more confident in the instructional role, seeks to explore and develop alternative instructional approaches. In the final phase of development, junior colleagues are "able to transcend, combine, and create systems of instruction and to express their academic knowledge in a variety of vocabularies" and are looking for "opportunities to make professional judgments and try out creative educational approaches" (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989, p. 45). In an ideal training program junior colleagues are "essential to the development of new TAs" (Sprague and Nyquist, 1989, p. 51).

How, then, can we provide effective TA training while addressing the developmental phases of TAs? One way to respond to this challenge is to develop a program that uses teaching associates, junior colleagues who assist in preparing less experienced TAs (senior learners and colleagues in training) for their instructional roles. This article describes the role and training of teaching associates at Florida State University, where the use of teaching associates results in an effective training program for all TAs while simultaneously contributing to the associates' development as future academicians.

The Teaching Associate Appointment

Teaching associates are experienced TAs who are nominated by their departments, selected by a university-wide committee of faculty, and trained through the Program for Instructional Excellence at Florida State University to conduct TA training activities for less experienced TAs. The associates receive a stipend provided by the university-wide TA program for appointments during fall and spring semesters. They are compensated for five hours per week (12% FTE) each semester, in addition to the regular TA stipends provided by their departments.[1]

[1] For more information regarding the structure of the Teaching Associate Program at Florida State University, see "The Teaching Associate Program: A Collaborative Approach" in *Selected readings In TA training*, 3rd National Conference, University of Texas, Austin, Texas. Forthcoming.

Initially, the teaching associates attend a required informational meeting where the responsibilities of their roles are described. Because the associates serve as liaisons between their individual departments and the university-wide program, the appointments carry responsibilities to both the departmental and the university-wide TA training programs. Exactly how the time is spent, however, is unique for each associate. In departments where established TA training is in place, the associate's responsibilities are supplementary and/or complementary, and the commitment of time is not as great; however, in departments where little or no TA training exists, the responsibilities and time commitment are greater. Participation in university-wide TA training activities is balanced with departmental responsibilities; for instance, associates with fewer department commitments are assigned greater responsibilities in the university-wide TA programs. Because previous associates have provided feedback to suggest that the time commitment can be a problem, the initial meeting includes discussion of ways the associates can make the best use of time in meeting their responsibilities for both the departmental and the university-wide TA training programs.

Departmental Programs

Knowing that the associates will be an important resource to them, departments nominate their best TAs for these roles. Although the associates work primarily within their own disciplines for departmental training, occasionally the training program is at the level of a college rather than a specific department (for example, in the College of Business). Regardless of the level of the training program, however, the associates use the knowledge of their specific disciplines to design and develop TA training activities.

To facilitate their ability to develop TA training programs in their departments, the associates attend a Program Design Workshop conducted by staff in the university-wide program. The components of program design that are presented and applied in the workshop include assessment of department TA needs, formulation of broad goals, identification of program objectives, selection of a medium to implement objectives, evaluation of the program, revision and redesign. During the workshop, the associates make professional design decisions and try creative discipline-specific approaches in the development of TA training activities. To supplement the workshop instruction and to support ongoing design decisions, the associates receive *The Teaching Associate Handbook*, which provides detailed information on departmental training options and activities such as:

- organizing department orientations and workshops including sample department programs;

- making a peer observation program work including useful evaluation checklists and suggestions on giving effective feedback;
- arranging for videotaping and providing feedback to improve classroom instructional skills. This is done either by the associate or by the university-wide TA training program;
- consulting as a one-on-one training option for associates in departments with small numbers of TAs. The associates are provided with guidelines on how to give feedback, support, and guidance for improved teaching;
- facilitating midterm evaluation that assesses TAs' teaching performance and improves their instructional skills.

Once they begin to design the departmental programs, the teaching associates take a problem solving approach in which they consider a variety of important factors. First, they consider the specific needs of TAs in their disciplines. The associates then customize what they have learned about good teaching to the specific needs of the TAs in their departments. As a result, the departmental programs are closely aligned with the issues and ways of thinking in the specific disciplines. The associates also consider the literature that suggests that "communication during TA socialization serves four distinct functions: to develop a social support system, obtain information, adjust to rules and policies, and generate new ideas about teaching and research" (Staton and Darling, 1990, p. 20). Thus, they design activities to fulfill these functions for the new TAs. The associates also attempt to address the needs and characteristics of TAs at various levels of development: orientations for senior learners, instructional skills workshops for colleagues in training, and collegial discussions for junior colleagues. Additional factors that have an impact on the design of the associates' TA training activities are the departmental responsibilities of TAs, administrative and faculty support for TAs, the department and university resources (instructional and clerical) available to TAs, and the relationships TAs have with other TAs. After completing the initial program design, the associates meet with university-wide consultants (and each other) to discuss the match between their designs and the needs of departmental TAs, the implementation of the program, and the time commitment required. Each associate's program design is then submitted as a proposal to his/her department chair, who meets with the associate and the director of the university-wide program to discuss, adjust, and ultimately approve and support the implementation of the departmental TA training design. (Appendix A provides a description of two such programs designed and developed by associates.)

Using teaching associates to design departmental programs provides a

number of distinct advantages. First, the approach provides TA training that meets the discipline-specific needs of less experienced TAs. Simultaneously, it provides a way for the associates to enhance their understanding of their disciplines as they function as colleagues in training and junior colleagues. Because they are committed to teaching and eager to share their TA experience, the associates are highly motivated by the opportunity to assist department TAs in assessing needs and balancing the many dimensions that affect their performance as teaching assistants. In the process, the associates learn much about their disciplines. Finally, because of their knowledge and experience in the specific disciplines and the training for their roles, the associates are able to establish credibility among the TAs, providing a sense of satisfaction and successful working relationships for implementing TA training activities. As a result of the experience in designing a departmental program, one associate reported:

> Learning about other programs and differences in TA responsibilities and techniques broadened my framework for understanding teaching and its various responsibilities and rewards. I gained a greater appreciation for the strengths of my own departmental and college system, as well as insights into new and better ways to do some of the things that need to be improved upon.

University-Wide Programs

In addition to assuming major roles in designing and implementing departmental TA training programs, the associates also design and lead activities in the university-wide training programs. These university-wide responsibilities involve roles in both orientation sessions and ongoing workshops.

Designing and Conducting University-Wide Orientation Sessions

Twice each year, during the week preceding the fall and spring semesters, new and experienced TAs participate in three-day and two-day university-wide orientations. To prepare the associates for their roles as presenters and/or small group leaders during the orientation, planning sessions are held the week preceding the orientations. As part of the planning, associates brainstorm to identify immediate issues that affect TAs' performance in the classroom and that need to be addressed in the orientation. Following the identification of the essential content, the associates write goals for the sessions. The final components of the planning involve the development of

appropriate strategies and the selection of instructional materials. In the past, a variety of sessions have resulted from this pre-orientation planning:

What I Wish I Had Known, a Phil Donahue Show format, allows the associates to share their experiences with other TAs and respond to questions and concerns about undergraduates, university policies, and classroom instructional effectiveness.

Meeting the First Class is a session in which the associates provide participants with a plan for getting the course moving in a positive direction. A class syllabus is constructed within a general discussion of course planning.

Cheating and Other Problems is a lively session in which the associates discuss ways of preventing and dealing with problems that TAs may have to face in and out of the classroom.

One-on-One Teaching is centered on discussion of ways to explain effectively and listen attentively during office hours, in the laboratory, and in other circumstances when TAs teach students individually.

Writing and Learning sessions provide instruction by associates from the Department of English on how to improve students' writing skills. The sessions cover such issues as making writing assignments, evaluating student writing, and providing useful feedback without hours of grading.

Practice Teaching and Videotaping sessions give TAs a chance to teach a brief segment of a mock class. The "class" is videotaped and feedback is provided by the associates and fellow TAs.

Teaching associates clearly enjoy their roles in the orientation. Although they are required to attend only those training sessions conducted by the university-wide program, they personally initiate and schedule additional sessions to prepare for the orientation because of their interest and professionalism. In providing feedback about their roles in the university orientations, associates have made a variety of positive comments: "It's an opportunity to engage as and with valued professionals"; "It was refreshing to be treated as a professional with skills to offer"; and "It is good for TAs to see that people [the associates] from fields other than education have concerns about teaching and can contribute valuable ideas."

Designing and Participating in University-Wide Workshops

In addition to their roles in the university orientations, the associates also play an active part in two sets of workshops that are conducted through the university-wide program: the TA Workshop Series and the Teaching Associate Professional Development Workshop Series.

The TA Workshop Series provides sessions that focus on immediate

classroom instructional skills and issues specifically relevant to senior learners and colleagues in training who teach in undergraduate classrooms. Shortly after being appointed, the associates are asked to prioritize topics (instructional skills and academic issues and concerns) that should be presented in the workshops. Then, as facilitators and small group leaders during the workshops, the associates assist less experienced TAs in dealing with such topics as: *Lecturing for Learning, Active Learning, Critical Thinking,* and *Motivating Students to Learn.* Panels discussing issues that affect TAs include: *Ethics in Higher Education, Diversity in the Classroom,* and *Interpreting Student Evaluations.*

The associates plan and develop The Teaching Associate Professional Development Workshop Series. The goal of this series is to provide a transition and transformation (for junior colleagues and colleagues in training) from graduate students to college professors. Past workshops have included a varaiety of sessions:

Advancement of Women in Academe is a panel discussion of the particular issues women need to address in getting an academic position. What is a desirable position? What is the wrong position? How does one ask the right questions? This session brings out the issues and norms involved in getting a promotion and achieving tenure including adopting a five-year career plan, and networking.

Getting a Job in Academe provides participants with tactics for locating an opening, submitting an application, surviving an interview, and negotiating an offer. The panel consists of chairpersons and faculty who share their experiences of successfully competing for positions and serving on search committees. Many of the associates and junior colleagues are in the process of applying for positions and are also able to provide firsthand accounts of their experiences.

The workshops during university-wide training provide opportunities for the teaching associates and the other TAs to work together and share ideas. As a geology associate commented, "I appreciated the opportunity to 'network' with others. . . . I got many new ideas and references for the future from the workshops." Another reported that "It is stimulating to interact with TAs from other departments who are also interested in teaching as a profession, and not just as a way to get through grad school."

Ongoing Instructional Support as Models and Mentors

In addition to their formal instructional roles in departmental and university-wide training activities, teaching associates provide ongoing instructional support to TAs as models and mentors. Throughout the departmental and university-wide training sessions, associates model the skills of effective teaching in various disciplines. During one-on-one encounters or small-group activities, associates demonstrate that they have thought carefully about the approaches to the training and the ideas being discussed as they mentor inexperienced TAs in obtaining instructional information and skills. Often, rapport is greatly enhanced when participants realize the associates are, themselves, TAs and colleagues. At social events, additional opportunities for mentoring are provided when TAs ask the associates questions—sometimes high-risk questions they would not ask professors—about policies and procedures. Finally, the associates, representing different disciplines and variety in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural background, provide a multicultural dimension that models the importance of diversity in all parts of the university community.

Conclusion

Providing training that prepares TAs to be effective teachers at various developmental stages is a challenge. The use of teaching associates, however, is one approach that seems to be responsive to that challenge. By offering a comprehensive training program that involves all TAs, as teachers as well as learners, we enhance the quality of undergraduate education at our institution and also provide TAs with opportunities for professional growth and a bridge to careers as university professors.

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Appendix A

Department Programs

The Department of Communication had semi-formal TA training in place when the associate was appointed. The training activities consisted of faculty mentoring, informal orientations preceding the fall and spring semesters and occasional "brown bags" held during the academic year. A credit seminar, "Teaching Communication in College," is offered by the department, but not required of teaching assistants. The associate:

- planned a department orientation to coincide with the university-wide TA orientation.
- consulted with individual TAs to discuss teaching concerns.
- recruited faculty to observe TA sections for feedback and evaluation of teaching skills.
- publicized university-wide TA workshops. These workshops are now mandatory for all department TAs.
- conducted "brown bag" series to discuss instructional models with faculty invited.
- developed a resource center for TAs that is known as "The Toolbox."
- argued for more office space for TAs.
- disseminated information regarding university-wide TA program resources available for increasing TA effectiveness in the classroom.

- published an "important dates" newsletter at the beginning of the semester.

Departments in the College of Business provided a variety of TA training activities prior to the appointment of three associates. Training activities included faculty mentoring, short orientations covering policy information, and occasional informal TA meetings. The associates in the Management, Marketing and Accounting departments:

- gathered syllabi for all College of Business classes and established a resource center.
- provided TAs with an inventory of College of Business resources available to all instructors including methods of instruction and media resources.
- organized a colloquium at which the associate dean discussed the role and responsibility of TAs in the College of Business.
- Arranged a session on "Trends in Business Education" conducted by the associate dean.
- organized a session discussing the organizational structure of the College of Business and an explanation of undergraduate services.
- encouraged faculty and experienced TAs to allow new TAs to observe their lectures.
- arranged "brown bags" which included a discussion on teaching philosophies and teaching quantitative methods.
- solicited interest in the workshops provided by the university-wide TA training program.
- set up office hours to allow TAs to ask questions and "bounce ideas off" experienced TAs.
- acted as liaisons between TAs and their individual department supervisors.