BEST PRACTICES

Best Practices for Training New Communication Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Abstract: Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) are often the first college instructors that new students meet when they arrive for their first day of class, and as instructors and as students, GTAs are the future of the discipline. As such, GTAs need to receive comprehensive training in a variety of pedagogical, procedural, and professional areas to help graduate students continue to develop as instructors and, eventually, into full-time faculty. To assist basic course directors, department chairs, and faculty in creating and supporting a comprehensive and ongoing GTA training program, this article provides 10 best practices for training new GTAs who will be teaching introductory communication courses.

Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTA) training not only serves to prepare future faculty in the Communication Studies discipline, but also to ensure that undergraduate students receive a quality classroom experiences. GTAs and other first-year course instructors often are some of the most influential campus members in regard to student choice of major and retention in a particular major (Chambliss & Takacs, 2014); those GTAs who complete quality training programs have higher levels of self-efficacy in classroom management, student engagement, and instructional strategies (Young & Bippus, 2008). High quality GTA training is a solid investment in the quality of undergraduate education, in the quality of faculty teaching done, and in the future sustainability of the discipline.

Communication departments should provide substantial training for new graduate student instructors before they begin teaching for the first time as well as ongoing training and feedback to help these students continue to develop as instructors and, eventually into, full-time faculty. This article will provide 10 best practices for training new GTAs who will be teaching introductory communication courses.

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Best Practice #1: Provide a Strong Foundation in Pedagogy Before and During the First Semester of Teaching

GTA training should include a strong foundation in communication pedagogy, both before teaching for the first time (i.e., pre-semester) and throughout the first semester of teaching. As GTAs grow developmentally from senior learners to colleagues in training to junior colleagues (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991), they will have different teaching concerns. Pedagogical training must reflect this developmental process by addressing basic survival and teaching skills in the earliest stages of training, and then move on to deeper theoretical training and reflective practice as GTAs gain experience.

By the end of the pre-semester training, instructors should have a basic understanding of theories and research about how students learn, be able to apply Bloom's taxonomy to develop scaffolded learning experiences, and use in-class activities and assignments as formative assessment practices. Pre-semester training also should include training on deciding which type of instructional strategy (e.g., presenting content, leading discussion, facilitating activities) will be most effective at a particular moment, as well as how to successfully implement multiple instructional strategies in each class session. After this introduction to pedagogy in the pre-semester training, new GTAs should gain a deeper understanding of communication pedagogy, assessment, and instructional practice through a graduate seminar course in communication education and instructional communication.

Such a course can provide much-needed ongoing instructional training by helping GTAs develop a deeper understanding of pedagogical theory, assisting GTAs in developing the knowledge and skills needed to independently design a course, allowing GTAs to create a teaching philosophy and portfolio of teaching materials, and preparing GTAs to teach upper-division communication courses when the opportunity arises. GTAs should continue to receive ongoing training, mentoring, and developmental opportunities throughout their graduate school experience.

Best Practice #2: Create a Strong Peer Mentoring Program for Instructors

Most graduate student instructor teams will include a blend of returning instructors who have been teaching for at least one year and several new instructors who will be teaching for the first time. Involving returning graduate instructors in a training and mentoring program can help to build relationships among team members, create opportunities for experienced instructors to take on leadership roles and share teaching ideas and resources with new instructors, and provide an initial go-to person for new instructors to ask questions in situations when they might not yet be comfortable asking the course director or other faculty. This mentoring network also can create a context that allows instructors to seek advice and share recommendations about coursework, campus resources, matriculating through the degree program, preparing for conferences, and a range of other topics that are important elements of informal professional development (Hendrix, 2000). A strong mentoring network can also open opportunities for conversations about the instructor classroom experience and challenges that might arise related to the social identities of the individual instructors in relationship with their peer instructors, and with the student demographics at the type of institution in which they are teaching. To support mentoring relationships and encourage dialogue within the GTA team, resources about diverse teacher and teaching experiences in the classroom should be provided.

Mentoring programs can be developed in a variety of ways and should include both formal training elements and informal partnered elements. During the pre-semester training, returning instructors can lead training sessions and model teaching practices for the entire team. For the informal partnered element, a basic course director might select a small group of returning instructors who have demonstrated strong teaching and leadership skills to serve as mentors and then pair several new instructors with each selected mentor. Another option is to pair each returning instructor with a new instructor so that all members of a teaching team are involved in the mentoring network. A third option is to allow mentoring relationships to emerge naturally among instructors.

Above all else, mentoring programs should be flexible and be adapted to meet the needs of each instructor and program. It can be helpful to provide some guidelines and opportunities for initial interactions, such as asking mentors to send welcome e-mail messages to their mentees, setting aside time for conversations during instructor training, and providing specific tasks for mentors to assist with during training sessions (e.g., setting up the Learning Management System, leading campus tours to learn about helpful resources, and sharing ideas for classroom activities during lesson planning sessions).

Best Practice #3: Role-Play Difficult Classroom Situations Before Instructors Encounter Them

All instructors will face some classroom management challenges, and these challenges can be somewhat intimidating and sometimes more frequent for novice instructors. While it is natural for individuals to respond to classroom challenges, conflict, or disruptive behavior with a flight, fight, or freeze response, instructors need to be prepared to take on a leadership role and respond immediately and appropriately when difficult classroom situations arise. Including a session on classroom management in the pre-semester GTA training can reduce the occurrence of student misbehaviors and can help instructors to feel more confident in their ability to handle student misbehaviors (Meyer et al., 2008).

Classroom management training should include discussion about strategies for creating a supportive classroom environment, techniques for keeping students on-task so that they are engaged without being disruptive, and methods for handling common classroom challenges. Asking instructors to role-play student scenarios that they have observed or experienced in the classroom while other instructors practice managing difficult classroom situations can help instructors think through potential responses and manage their anxiety about confronting classroom challenges before they face such challenges in their own classroom (Young & Bippus, 2008). These role-play scenarios also allow course directors to gently guide instructor responses so that GTAs adhere to campus policies (e.g., Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, or FERPA; and Title IX) and work toward maintaining a supportive, inclusive classroom environment. Additionally, classroom management training should include information about available campus resources that can be used to respond to some of the most serious types of misbehavior. While these resources vary by campus, some of these resources might include the academic integrity office, the Title IX office, university judiciaries, the dean of students, and campus police.

Best Practice #4: Take Time for Grade Norming and Feedback Training

In multi-section courses where student performance is one type of course assessment used to measure general education outcomes, course directors must develop evaluation processes that can be used consistently across all sections and must include grading and feedback training in GTA training (Frey, Hooker, & Simonds, 2015). To establish clear evaluation processes, course directors need to develop rubrics that measure the skills that the course is designed to build and assess and contain clear behavioral indicators for each level of quality. During GTA training, course directors need to explain the rubric design, the underlying assumptions and frameworks for evaluation, and describe in detail the behaviors associated with each level of quality on the rubric criteria. They then should practice grading several sample speeches or other assignments together, taking time between speeches to talk about how the speech should have been graded using those criteria, until the entire instructor team is grading each speech with an acceptable level of consistency.

While there is no existing standard for how consistent instructor grading should be by the end of a grade-norming session, we recommend that all instructor grades for the same performance should fall within a 5–10% range. This guideline ensures that the same speech would be given a score within a band that is the equivalent of half to one letter grade, which is consistent with the most rigorous expectation that intercoder reliability for content analysis be .90 or greater (Neuendorf, 2002) so that speech grades can be used as a type of assessment and research data.

In addition to ensuring that the grading is consistent, instructors need to learn how to provide high-quality feedback comments on student performances. The most effective forms of feedback are positive descriptive comments—which describe in detail what the student did well and why it was effective—and constructive comments—which identify areas for improvement and provide specific recommendations for how to improve (Simonds, Meyer, Hunt, & Simonds, 2009). Instructors should practice providing feedback comments on sample assignments during training and should receive feedback on those comments.

Best Practice #5: Balance Consistency Across Sections With Instructor Freedom

GTAs in Communication Studies typically are teaching multi-section introductory courses that meet general education requirements. Because all sections of these courses must meet the same outcomes, course directors must ensure that there is consistency across all sections. Having consistency across sections has been cited as a leading problem and concern for basic communication course directors (Morreale, Worley, & Hugenberg, 2010). The syllabus, assignments, grading rubrics and procedures, exams, and other elements of the course infrastructure should be the same in every section of the course. Additionally, course policies should be clearly communicated in the syllabus and should be the same from one section to the next section, including late work policies, attendance policies, and appeals procedures (Fassett & Warren, 2012). However, this consistency needs to be balanced with giving instructors the freedom to develop their own lesson plans, try new activities in the classroom, adapt to

the needs of a particular community of students in the classroom, and build the skills that will be needed to independently develop future courses (Fassett & Warren, 2008).

Best Practice #6: Establish and Communicate Clear Procedures and Policies

Every campus has several mandated training sessions for all instructors, along with several other types of strongly recommended training sessions, such as FERPA, Sexual Harassment Prevention/Title IX Training, and Active Shooter, among others. Incorporating these campus policy training sessions into instructor training can help to ensure that not only are all instructors aware of their obligations and responsibilities, but also they are prepared in case of a classroom emergency. Additionally, training should include information about expectations for working with the Office of Accessibility Services to make appropriate accommodations, institutional expectations for submitting grades (e.g., midterm grades, final grades, athletic grade reporting), and any other campus reporting procedures for students. Course directors also should establish and communicate clear procedures and policies within the course (Fassett & Warren, 2012) about department-specific expectations, some of which might include finding a substitute should instructors need to miss class to attend a conference, identifying the procedures that must be followed when reporting student problems to offices outside of the department (e.g., plagiarism cases, student threats), or making a decision about whether class will be held online if campus is closed.

Best Practice #7: Share Information About Support Services and Resources

Instructor teams and student populations are more diverse than ever, which means that most college campuses have a range of services and resources available to help meet student needs. Some of these services include disability support services, writing and communication centers, tutoring services, and mental health services; some of these resources include food pantries, offices of diversity and inclusion, advising offices, and campus care teams. Training should include information about these services and resources, details about how to access or refer students to these services or resources, and opportunities to practice having sensitive and empathetic conversations about these resources.

Many new instructors teach introductory courses where the majority of students are in their first year of college and these students are sometimes struggling with being away from home and on their own for the first time. Because communication courses often have a lot of opportunities for self-disclosure and relationship building, it is especially important that instructors be trained to watch for symptoms that students might be struggling as well as to gently refer students to campus mental health resources when needed. At the same time, graduate students are one of the most vulnerable populations for mental health struggles (Evans, Bira, Beltran-Gastelum, Weiss & Vanderford, 2017). Including a unit on Mental Health First Aid in the pre-semester GTA training is an important step in helping to ensure that new instructors are prepared for the mental health conversations that they likely will have with some of their students.

Best Practice #8: Provide Feedback to Instructors About Their Teaching

GTAs should receive feedback about their teaching throughout their development as faculty. Although this feedback can take many forms, it should be done early and often and include multiple types of both formative and summative assessment such as classroom observations, student evaluations, discussions, and small group instructional diagnoses (Fassett & Warren, 2012) as well as some type of annual review process in which GTAs' teaching observations, teaching philosophy, student evaluations, and a short reflective statement are reviewed by the course director.

It is recommended that all instructors participate in a teaching demonstration and receive feedback during pre-semester GTA training, which provides an added benefit of allowing all instructors to see most of the semester's content taught at once. Course directors or department teaching effectiveness committees should observe all instructors teaching one of their courses at least once per year; course directors also might want to consider having graduate student instructors observe and provide peer feedback to one another. Programs may want to develop a rubric to help ensure that instructors are given feedback on a variety of important teaching skills, particularly when several faculty are helping to conduct the classroom observations. Each classroom observation should be followed by written feedback as well as an in-person conversation with GTA about their classroom performance.

Course directors should publicly praise instructors when they see instructors doing something well and should advocate for, and broadly share, instructor successes within the department and with campus stakeholders such as deans, provosts, and general education committees. However, these critiques are best delivered privately and always should be accompanied by discussions that center on identifying and implementing strategies for improvement.

Best Practice #9: Openly Discuss and Model Boundary-Setting and Time Management Techniques

The habits that GTAs learn as new instructors tend to become patterns that persist through their entire careers as faculty. Emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout are high for faculty as a whole and even more so for young instructors (Watts & Robertson, 2011), so concerns and preventative strategies for addressing exhaustion, stress, and burnout should be discussed in GTA training. To make the GTA experience sustainable and fulfilling, along with the full-time faculty experiences that will follow for many of them, GTA training needs to include discussions about time management and self-care that take Boice's (2000) advice about working with constancy, moderation, and mindfulness into account. These discussions should include honest conversations about workload and expectations regarding outside employment, the importance of taking breaks and engaging in self-care activities, and tools GTAs can use to help manage task lists and calendars (including planners and digital applications that others have found useful). Clear guidelines also should be provided for how frequently instructors are expected to check e-mail messages as well as how instructors should (or more accurately, should not) engage with their students via personal social media channels and off-campus social activities.

Simply talking about boundary setting and managing time, however, is not enough. Course directors need to be especially intentional about modeling these practices so that GTAs do not receive mixed signals about these techniques.

Best Practice # 10: Be Transparent About—and Involve GTAs in—Curriculum Design Decisions

Course directors must be transparent about why the curriculum is designed the way that it is. The course curriculum should have strong learning outcomes and use integrated backward course design. Assignments should assess whether students have achieved the learning outcomes, and the content should support learning throughout the course (Fink, 2013). Once instructors understand the underlying goals, the teaching team can be invited to provide feedback and collaborate on ongoing course revisions as the curriculum is adapted to meet the needs of students and institutions. One way to involved instructors is to work with them to turn revision ideas into pilot studies to evaluate the effectiveness of curriculum innovations. Another option is to invite instructors to work on course assessments and co-author research studies about these assessments. Working with instructors allows course directors to gain input from their entire teaching team and develop a course design that is inclusive of more perspectives. It also allows the instructor team to have a greater investment in, and ownership, of the course by providing them with opportunities to conduct pedagogical research and gain experience using assessment results to conduct evidence-based revision of courses.

Conclusion

As both instructors and graduate students, GTAs are the future of the Communication Studies discipline. The 10 best practices included in this article provide a guide to assist basic course directors, faculty mentors, and department chairs in facilitating the development of GTAs. Comprehensive GTA training must include training in a variety of pedagogical, procedural, and professional development areas that prepare GTAs for all aspects of the graduate student and faculty experience. By providing comprehensive training, course directors can facilitate a positive first teaching experience for new GTAs, ensure a quality educational experience for undergraduate students, and guarantee the future of the discipline by preparing the next generation of communication faculty.

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