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The Value of Teaching Preparation During Doctoral Studies: An Example of a Teaching Practicum

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Abstract

For doctoral students who seek faculty appointments in academic settings upon graduation, it is imperative those students have access to quality mentoring, direct instruction, and experiential opportunities to apply effective teaching methods during their training. Currently, some doctoral programs are beginning to develop teaching practicums which provide essential skills and experiences for doctoral students. The purpose of this paper is to describe best practices in the

field of education and provide examples of post-graduate programs that are providing training and teaching opportunities to graduate assistants. One existing teaching practicum course offered at a public university in the southeast is described in detail. In addition, to support the value of a teaching practicum during doctoral training, narrative accounts from two doctoral students and a faculty mentor who participated in a teaching practicum is provided.

Keywords: graduate education, teaching practicum, academia, doctoral training, teaching mentor

Literature Review

Doctoral training programs are designed to produce graduates with core competencies in research, scholarship, and teaching as most pursue careers in policy, research, and academia (Mitrany & Stokol, 2005). For graduates seeking faculty appointments in academic settings, many are expected to maintain active research agendas, to produce scholarly writing, and to engage in high quality educational training (Austin, 2002; Holden, Rosenberg, & Parker, 2005). Therefore, to truly prepare the next generation of professors, institutions need to train doctoral students to perform well in all of these skills.

Assisting doctoral students to become effective educators is critical for their future careers. Academic faculty are hired and promoted based on evidence of research and scholarship, service to the community, and their teaching ability. In a review of promotion decisions, Ambrose and Cropanzano (2010) found that most institutions of higher education informed tenure decisions by weighing scholarship and publishing followed by teaching and service. Among the primary aims of a doctoral training program is to prepare applicants to become independent scientists, scholars, and teachers (Mitrany & Stokol, 2005); therefore, it is no surprise that most of the required coursework for students in doctoral training programs are focused on scholarly research, methodology, and data analysis (Neumann, 2005), and developing skills in research (Wulff & Austin, 2004). However, to truly prepare the next generation of professors for the world of academia, institutions also need to cultivate skills in doctoral students that address all areas necessary for success—including teaching (Wulff & Austin, 2004).

The existing literature on best practices in education is broad (O'Toole, 2008). For example, Bloom and colleagues have summarized a useful typology that describes how people learn. The typology is also an important to those seeking to provide efficient and effective instruction. Bloom focused this body of work on the degree of difficulty required by a person accomplish a task, retain new information, and organize simple and lower order concepts into more complex, interconnected, and higher order ideas (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1984). In this work, Bloom suggested skills were only developed by (a) having relevant knowledge and (b) coupling skills with opportunities to practice applying that knowledge. During this process of learning and application, learners are provided with constructive and supportive feedback that serves to develop a deeper understanding and broader application of that knowledge. Such basic pedagogical principles are central to facilitate learning at all levels (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1984). Gardner's research highlighted the multiple learning styles essential to address in a classroom setting in order to educate all students (Gardner, 1993). Finally, Marzano focused specifically on classroom dynamics and how instructors could teach students by combining both Bloom and Gardner's ideas and creating a truly student-centered classroom (Marzano, 2003).

Traditional K-12 teacher preparation programs emphasize the importance of effective and engaging teaching styles and routinely provide teaching practicums that allow students to practice those skills. However, in academia, doctoral training programs rarely provide this valuable information and experience to their students. Such training and opportunity to practice is an educational experience that is vital for a doctoral student who aims to become a professor in an academic setting upon graduation (Austin, 2002; O'Toole, 2008). Generally, teaching assistantship roles in higher education institutions focus on serving an institution's immediate needs of filling instructor positions rather than training the future generation of professors (Austin, 2002). The past two decades, however, have revealed a gradual shift towards ensuring teaching assistants are provided with guidance, mentoring, and supervised practice in applying instructional strategies in undergraduate classrooms (Wulff & Austin, 2004). Wulff and Austin stated, "Employers, leaders of foundations and government agencies, graduate deans, and doctoral students have added their voices to a call for examining the quality of the graduate experience and its success in preparing students for their future roles as professionals" (2004). Therefore, numerous departments utilizing graduate students as teaching assistants should provide course work and teaching practicums that unpack educational theory and offer opportunities for students to learn the best instructional practices (Pentecost, Langdon, Asirvatham, Robus, & Parson, 2012). Although trainings vary dramatically depending on the department or field of study, the common theme would be to ensure teaching assistants learn how to effectively engage students. The training and opportunity to practice instructional strategies are imperative for developing skills necessary for emerging scholars to lead successful careers in academia.

Graduate and doctoral programs across the United States have begun to recognize the importance of providing doctoral students with training in effective classroom instructional strategies (Pentecost *et al.*, 2012; Walstad & Becker, 2010). For example, one teaching assistant (TA) training program in a chemistry department restructured their professional development offerings to ensure TAs learned to better foster engagement through student-centered learning strategies (Pentecost *et al.*, 2012). *The TAs reviewed general knowledge in their field to ensure clear communication of content, and those students learned strategies to communicate that content effectively (Pentecost et al., 2012). TAs were then provided with opportunities to practice the strategies in the classroom under the mentoring and guidance of an experienced faculty member (Pentecost et al., 2012). In addition, several institutions training PhD students to be economists require students to enroll in specific courses to support their knowledge of effective teaching methods (Walstad & Becker, 2010). Indeed, in a review of econometric training programs Walstad and Becker suggested many PhD students in economics do not teach for their first two years so that those students develop a mastery of their content and learn to apply that content in the classroom using effective teaching methods (Walstad & Becker, 2010). Lastly, Counseling Education programs routinely utilize direct instruction and mentorship for PhD students—and even extend this logic to support junior faculty—to ensure that emerging scholars have access to the tools and supports which maintain the rigor of their profession (Borders, Young, Wester, Murray, Villalba, Lewis & Mobley, 2011). The Counseling Education mentorship programs, generally speaking, assist PhD students and new faculty to learn how to design syllabi, provide continuous performance feedback, and attend programs and workshops that expand their knowledge of teaching methods (Borders et al., 2011). The three programs or examples provided here demonstrate the basic elements highlighted by Bloom as essential for preparing graduate students to become effective college classroom instructors.*

A Detailed Example of a Graduate Student Teaching Practicum

An example of an existing teacher training component of a social work doctoral program is described below. The teaching practicum is offered at a public university in the southeast and is designed to equip students with knowledge of best practices and strategies to become successful classroom instructors. The practicum course has two components; a seminar and a supervised teaching experience. A brief overview of the practicum and summary of the accounts of two doctoral students and one faculty mentor who participated in the practicum are provided.

Teaching Practicum Component #1: The Seminar

The first component of the teaching practicum includes a short 90 minute weekly seminar led by a faculty member with a history of quality teaching, as defined by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003). The purpose of seminar meetings is to prepare doctoral students with the requisite strategies to design, facilitate, manage, and engage their future students in high quality classroom experiences. Seminar readings are used to expose doctoral students to instructional strategies that address a variety of topics such as diverse learning styles, evaluation of course objectives, ethical issues of power and privilege in the classroom, and effective classroom management methods.

Seminar meetings also include assignments that assist doctoral students in preparing portfolio products for future job applications. The cornerstone of these assignments is to develop a written teaching statement. The teaching statement is a pedagogical and philosophical mantra commonly requested by departments seeking applicants for open faculty positions (Schonwetter, Sokal, Friesen, & Taylor, 2002). The teaching statement describes an applicant's vision of their role and responsibilities to the university, demonstrates an understanding of how to facilitate learning in the classroom, and serves to express a doctoral student's understanding of the role of education in the growth of the academic profession (Schonwetter *et al.*, 2002). The completed teaching statement, combined with lesson plans, course evaluations, and other relevant items commonly requested in an application packet, constitute the portfolio for students and recent graduates entering the job market.

Teaching Practicum Component #2: Classroom Experience

The classroom practicum experience pairs the quality faculty member with the doctoral candidate to co-teach a masters-level course. The practicum is designed to expose doctoral students to an effective and successful mentor's teaching strategies and tools, such as classroom management, student engagement, and appropriate dissemination of information to students (Davis, 2009). Furthermore, the practicum requires the doctoral students to teach two separate 3-hour class sessions. The sessions allow the students opportunities to practice the strategies they learned during seminar. Co-teaching a course with an established and respected professor provides an invaluable opportunity for mentorship while participating in graduate training (Pomeroy & Steiker, 2011). Eby (1997) describes the mentor-mentee relationship as ideally offering two forms of support for doctoral students: career support and formal social support. Successful mentors likely possess character traits, knowledge, or behaviors that a mentee can emulate (Pomeroy & Steiker,

2011), and the mentee is provided with a learning experience that may ease their adjustment to the demands of a new faculty position (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011).

Co-teaching requires a doctoral student participate in the design and delivery of a high quality course (Bouck, 2007). As such, co-teaching involves a more active role in the classroom than is generally required from a teaching assistant. For example, in the teaching practicum doctoral students collaborate with mentors to select and design educational materials to meet course objectives e.g. develop a syllabus and select scholarly course readings and textbooks. The doctoral students also have a minimum number of instructional hours in which they are fully responsible for planning and delivering. Lastly, the doctoral students collaborate with the mentor teacher to utilize formative and summative assessments to gauge students' understanding of course objectives e.g. grading exams and papers followed by assessing their performance to establish their readiness for new material.

Throughout the practicum experience, doctoral students are provided with four forms of feedback from multiple sources. The first form of feedback originates from regularly scheduled meetings between the doctoral student and the teaching mentor. The meetings provide opportunities for reflection, feedback, and discussion about the effectiveness of recent instructional activities. The information is especially useful as the student sets objectives and prepares activities for the next lesson that he or she is responsible for teaching. The second form of feedback comes from direct observations of the doctoral student's performance made by the faculty mentor and the seminar instructor. After the session, constructive feedback is provided through discussion or in a more formal written report that addresses content, style, methodology, and classroom management. The purpose of the feedback is to highlight positive aspects of the lesson and to provide constructive feedback and suggestions for growth. In addition to the meetings with the teaching mentor and the valuable faculty feedback on the lessons taught, bachelor's or master's students in the course are asked to provide the doctoral student with written evaluations. The final form of evaluation is videotaping the direct instruction. The doctoral student now examines his/her own classroom presence, generates self-appraisals, and constructs goals for improvement for future sessions.

Two Doctoral Student Perspectives on the Teaching Practicum Experience

During the practicum seminars, we were exposed to the most current education research and technological advances that created an engaging environment for masters level social work students. Our profession addresses many tenuous social and individual issues and the teaching practicum allowed us experience in approaching and discussing sensitive issues with social work students. We learned to shape classroom discussions in a manner that is open and receptive to individual values and perspectives, while emphasizing the relevance of research and the evidence-based practice—concepts central to social work education (National Association of Social Workers, 2011). The seminar also offered strategies to develop classroom contexts in a manner conducive to learning, but the strategies did not become skills until we were provided with opportunities to practice applying the knowledge during real classroom experiences.

Working with a mentor for a semester provided us with opportunities to receive ongoing and supportive feedback—an important element that instilled confidence in our classroom presence. Having access to mentorship encouraged us to find our own teaching styles, use our practice

experiences as teaching tools, and manage unexpected classroom events with support. By observing how our mentor managed common challenges in real time, we gained a sense of our own abilities to manage similar situations. We also learned the importance of self-assessment in education to continuously offer the best sessions for students.

For other doctoral students who may have access to a teaching practicum, there are a few important characteristics that should be considered before approaching a potential mentor for the practicum. First, review the course offerings and identify classes you may like to teach in the future. Second, ask your Dean or another administrator to help you select a faculty member who is consistently regarded as being effective in the classroom. If your school or department provides annual recognition of high quality teaching through awards, seek out professors who have earned such distinctions. It may also be helpful to consider speaking to bachelor's or master's students who have had a faculty member you are considering as a mentor; this will provide a student's insight into the instructor's style and effectiveness. Lastly, meet with your proposed list of mentors. Learn about their teaching philosophy and explore how you might fit into their current teaching plan. Inquire about their availability and willingness to serve in such a role. In our experience, we have found that faculty members who are genuinely devoted to facilitating quality doctoral experiences also shape well-rounded classroom experiences. A high quality teaching experience was accomplished through being in the classroom, having a role model to observe, being provided with opportunities to teach, and obtaining feedback throughout the semester. We feel this teaching experience was central to generating the confidence needed to develop our own courses and to manage the rigors of the classroom setting.

Mentor Teacher Perspective on the Teaching Practicum Experience

The teaching practicum course is designed to benefit students and further develop instructional skills needed for new academic positions upon graduation. I assumed it would be a natural reward to see doctoral students grow in their ability and confidence in the classroom over the course of a semester (which it is), but it was quite surprising how much I personally benefited and further developed my own skills from serving as the mentor teacher for two doctoral students enrolled in this course. Two of the greatest personal advantages to supervising students included my own reflection on teaching and developing a more planful approach for each class session.

After each class, I met with the doctoral students who were co-teaching with me to discuss the events of that session. This gave the student time to ask questions about why I did or said certain things while facilitating the class. Conversations focused on pedagogy, teaching methods, and specific in-class events, classroom management, and student engagement. In addition, we conferred about session elements that were most and least effective. This formal deep reflection after every class session was certainly more systematic and consistent because I was supervising doctoral students. Further, it is highly unlikely that I would have been as keenly aware of the ongoing strengths and weaknesses of my teaching each week without this commitment. I truly believe that my classroom teaching and management was of a higher quality throughout the semester because of the regular time spent analyzing the effectiveness of my efforts.

The next logical step after the weekly post-class reflection with the doctoral students was to strategically plan for the next class session. We considered alternative methods and ideas for

those strategies identified as less successful that day and then discussed how and when we would use the new options during the remainder of the semester. The collaborative planning that took place each week was above and beyond my typical class preparation and allowed for even the smallest gaps from the current week to be more effectively addressed and reviewed in subsequent class sessions. The detail-oriented planning that resulted from serving as a mentor teacher clearly increased my utility as an instructor. The master's students enrolled in these classes benefited as well because they had the advantage of two people, rather than the usual one, working to create a successful learning experience for them.

Though there were many benefits to supervising the teaching practicum, there were some costs that should be considered. Serving as a mentor teacher is a time commitment. Like most acts of service, this requires time that often seems to be the most precious commodity. Regular meetings after each class session to debrief with the doctoral students are encouraged, and often additional communication is required to assist the student with preparing sessions they would be directly responsible for teaching. This ongoing dialogue about class and performance takes a substantial amount of time each week in addition to other required duties and should be carefully considered by a faculty member who has been asked to serve as a mentor teacher. However, in my experience, the benefits to serving as a mentor teacher clearly exceeded any consequence of time and effort, and the role functioned more as a privilege than a burden.

Conclusion

High quality teaching is a hallmark and requirement of most academic positions (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2004). As suggested by Bloom and colleagues (1984), doctoral students can learn knowledge and strategies associated with being effective classroom instructors—but providing those students with quality opportunities amidst supportive mentors is key for transfer of that knowledge into a competency or a skill. As such, it behooves educational programs that prepare future scholars to provide instruction and opportunities that assist those students to develop the skills necessary to become an effective instructor. Indeed, focusing on the development and training of doctoral students during their formative training will likely promote stronger teaching skills and future career success for new and forthcoming faculty members. Doctoral training programs that teach students how to be successful and effective instructors in the classroom not only better prepares graduates for a career in teaching but helps to elevate the future of their profession and extend the reputation of those institutions as proficient in preparing well-rounded scholars. The teaching practicum course described here offers one such framework for developing doctoral students into more effective classroom instructors. The combination of unique learning experiences and mentorship included in such a practicum will likely assist those students as they transition into a faculty member upon graduation.

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