Basic Communication Course Annual

Volume 12 Article 10

2000

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Katherine G. Hendrix
University of Memphis

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Recommended Citation
Hendrix, Katherine G. (2000) "Peer Mentoring for Graduate Teaching Assistants: Training and Utilizing a Valuable Resource," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 12 , Article 10.
Available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol12/iss1/10

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Peer Mentoring for Graduate Teaching Assistants: Training and Utilizing a Valuable Resource

Katherine G. Hendrix

It is well-documented that the transition from undergraduate to graduate student is filled with high levels of stress and anxiety (Caple, 1995; Jones, 1974; Malaney, 1987; Stewart, 1995). This is particularly true for students who must learn the responsibilities associated with becoming an advanced learner in conjunction with their first experience in the classroom in the role of teacher. A review of some of the literature on graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) indicates that GTAs are typically faced with a lack of training, insecurity regarding their teaching capability, time/role conflicts, and uncertainty regarding their department status (Allen & Rueter, 1990; Darling, 1987; Epstein, 1974; Haggerty, 1927; Koen & Ericksen, 1967).

In a survey of second semester GTAs at a large Midwestern university, the GTAs indicated that the questions they asked most frequently pertained to academia and teaching and that they primarily sought out professors and peers to serve as mentors (Myers, 1995-1996). Whether the graduate students are interested in a career in teaching or simply view the GTA assignment as a means to meet their financial obligations while pursuing their graduate studies, departments should provide training in order to:

(a) protect the quality of education received by undergraduates,

(b) enhance the teaching ability of the GTAs,

(c) reduce the anxiety associated with the first teaching experiences, and

(d) assist GTAs in balancing their dual roles as advanced learner and novice teacher.

Wulff (1992) discussed two basic categories of GTA training: group-based and individual-based interaction. Training which promotes group-based interaction is exemplified by activities such as workshops, micro-teaching, seminars, and coursework. Individual-based interaction includes activities such as dyadic counseling with a basic course director, instructional observation, and videotape critiques. Wulff noted advantages and disadvantages associated with each of the training methods and, ultimately, advocates that basic course directors combine several methods when creating training programs.

Another training option is mentoring. Bas-Isaac (1989) describes mentoring as "a professional life-preserver for the beginning teacher" (p. 5). Mentoring in academia can serve several different functions:

(a) initial orientation to campus and community;

(b) social introductions to faculty, staff, and other graduate students and GTAs;

(c) graduate academic advising;

(d) training for classroom teaching; and/or

(e) providing expertise in one's specialized area of study (Gray & Murray, 1994).

The benefits of mentoring include promoting professional development, increasing retention, receiving support and information, and familiarity with policies, procedures, and resources (Christensen & Conway, 1991; Myers, 1995-1996; Odell, 1986, 1990). And, consistent with Darling (1987), Avery and Gray (1995-1996) believed that, "GTAs might find useful mentor relationships with superiors (basic course directors, department chairs, advisors), with experienced people (faculty, returning GTAs) and with peers (GTAs in their immediate group)" (p. 11).

Unfortunately, not all campuses can afford to provide extensive faculty and GTA training resources. In such instances, basic communication course directors must draw upon their own resources to develop a training program suitable for meeting department teaching needs while maintaining the integrity of the basic course. This task can be a particular challenge in departments conferring a terminal M.A., due to the continuous change in graduate students. This paper describes the creation of a peer mentoring program in a two-year M.A. program offering multiple sections of the basic course (approximately 45 each semester) at a mid-sized Southern university. The major topics are:

(a) the roles of peer versus traditional mentors,

(b) peer mentoring as the first of three GTA training stages,

(c) benefits for the mentor and mentee, and

(d) a retrospective view of the program's development.

The author's goal is to remind the readers that every campus does not have extensive training resources and

to offer peer mentoring as one viable part of a comprehensive GTA training program.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Campus GTA Training

This Southern university is an urban, commuter college with an enrollment approximating 20,000. Graduate students at this university are not allowed to teach independently in the classroom until they have completed a minimum of 18 graduate credits.[1] In the past, the Center for Instructional Service and Research (CISR) provided audiovisual programs and equipment, graphic design and production services, and summarized students' evaluations of their professors.[2] The Center conducts a one-day campus workshop for GTAs at the beginning of each semester and several half-day workshops periodically throughout the academic year. Lambert and Tice (1993) described these centralized services available to classroom faculty (including GTAs) as limited. During the past two years, these functions have been shifted to the Center for Academic Excellence with more emphasis being placed on formally addressing the needs of faculty and promoting the scholarship of teaching. However, despite the initiation of the Center for Academic Excellence, at this point, the primary responsibility for training graduate students to teach rests with each department.

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[1] The department now offers a Ph.D. Thus, the mentoring program includes second semester doctoral students serving as mentors as well as second year M.A. students.

[2] During the past two years, the campus has begun to offer counseling to faculty and other instructors, such as GTAs, in the Center for Academic Excellence.

Department of Communication Training

The department awards eight to ten assistantships to M.A. students each year. First year recipients are employed as research assistants (RAs) and normally assigned to one faculty member. During the second semester of their M.A. studies (spring term), these graduate assistants continue to execute their RA tasks while simultaneously being trained to teach two sections of the basic course each term the following academic year.

The basic communication course is a hybrid course required of every undergraduate student. The course uses the concept of ethical responsibility as its underlying theme and students are guided by the precepts of Plato's *Gorgias*. The notion of civic responsibility (speaker and listener) is explored through public speaking and media criticism assignments. In view of its eclectic content, the course is difficult to teach and numerous issues arise regarding how best to train the "interns" to enter the classroom the following academic year. As a result, a three-stage training program has been developed.

The peer mentoring stage occurs during the second semester of a graduate student's first year. During the second year of the students' program, when they have actually been assigned to teach two independent sections of the basic course, they are required to attend a weekly teaching seminar taught by the basic course director in the fall. This seminar is the second stage of their GTA training and it provides an opportunity to discuss course content, appropriate class exercises, grading, discipline issues, etc.

During the spring semester of their second year, GTAs continue their communication education regard-

ing how to teach this particular course, however, the director broadens the discussion to discuss teaching issues in general (e.g., the development of a personal teaching philosophy, attitudes towards multiculturalism, teaching strategies for assisting students with English as a Second Language, increasing one's repertoire of teaching strategies). The teaching seminars represent the second and third stages of GTA training, however, the purpose of this paper is to describe the first stage of training – peer mentoring.

The three-stage training process can be readily adopted by course directors who do not allow first year graduate students to teach independently in the classroom. In the case of departments which immediately place M.A. (and Ph.D. students) into the classroom, this peer mentoring process can be modified to meet your needs. For instance, the peer mentoring dyads and small group meetings with the course director can be implemented as a support system which occurs simultaneously while their novice GTAs are in the classroom teaching.

TRADITIONAL VERSUS PEER MENTORING

Given that the course is required for graduation and that the student population exceeds 20,000 at this university, we offer 45 sections of the course each fall and spring term. Although a few full-time faculty teach the basic course, the sections are primarily taught by part-time faculty and GTAs.

Prior to 1994-1995, RAs were mainly placed with part-time faculty for their teaching internship. Part-time faculty agreed to serve as mentors on a volunteer basis even though they received no additional compensation. Research assistants had never been assigned to

intern with a peer as the former director was concerned about difficulties associated with a clear role delineation between the two partners and the limited classroom experience of the GTA who would serve as mentor. These concerns are understandable and are documented in overviews of other mentoring programs. For instance, Buerkel-Rothfuss, Fink, and Amaro (1994) noted that some GTAs are not:

(a) qualified to help others,

(b) effective teachers,

(c) willing to follow rules associated with teaching, and

(d) able to handle the dual role of GTA and graduate student.

And, as a result, GTAs with these characteristics are not ideal candidates for mentoring.

According to Kram and Isabella (1985), mentors in the business world provide young adults with career-enhancing functions and psycho-social support. Career enhancement entails coaching, facilitating exposure and visibility, offering challenging work, and even protection in order to "learn the ropes, and prepare for advancement" (p. 111). Psycho-social support entails counseling, confirmation, role modeling, and friendship directed toward "develop[ing] a sense of professional identity and competence" (p. 111). In education, faculty members are known to provide graduate students with professional socialization, emotional support, advocacy, and role modeling (Aguilar-Gaxiola, 1984 as cited in Valadez & Duran, 1991). And Boyer (1997) stated, “a close and continuing relationship between a graduate teaching assistant and a gifted teacher can be an enriching experience for both” (1997, p. 72).

However, Kram and Isabella (1985) suggested that peer relationships offer an "important alternative" to traditional senior/junior mentoring patterns. These scholars noted that individuals may have a limited number of superiors with whom to form mentoring relationships and there is a greater likelihood of establishing some type of relationship with peers on the job. According to Kram and Isabella, although peers may not have the status of a supervisor or manager, peer relationships (also referred to as “peer pals” by Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978) can function in a similar fashion. Peer mentors share information and strategies, give advice, and serve as helpful listeners to their less experienced colleagues. The primary distinction between the two being the presence of mutuality within the peer relationship where both parties are givers and receivers of information rather than one person specializing in the role of "guide or sponsor." “Mutability” is another term used to describe the relationship where both parties give and receive helpful information and provide emotional support (Chitgopekar, 1995; Kram & Isabella, 1985). Chitgopekar (1995) also noted that “peer relationships may be far more enduring mentoring relationships” (p. 11).

A variation of traditional mentoring (subordinate/superior) and peer relationships — peer mentoring — was selected as a viable part of the first stage of training instead of peer relationships. Peer mentoring, in essence, acknowledges the advanced expertise (albeit limited) of the GTA who is already in the classroom and strives to reduce the "friend" or "buddy" aspect of the teaching team in order to acknowledge the formal responsibilities of the experienced GTA. According to Bas-Isaac (1989):

> Mentoring, as an interactive relationship, could be defined by the arena of activities in which it is placed. It could be perceived as a structure in terms of the rite of induction or initiation--the transfer of knowledge. In the educational milieu, a mentor is the transmitter of the culture of the community as called 'school'. (p. 7)

Given the second year M.A. student's familiarity with the culture of the campus, department, and basic course class, they are an excellent source of information. In the case of the author's department, the peer mentor has successfully completed a one semester internship, one semester of independent classroom teaching, the first semester of a weekly teaching techniques seminar, and is currently teaching his/her second semester while being concurrently enrolled in a monthly teaching techniques seminar. As noted earlier, course directors who immediately place GTAs into the classroom can modify this system. Adaptations could include designing a week long orientation which engages mentors and their mentees in course lesson planning, encouraging mentors and mentees to observe each other's teaching throughout the term, suggesting team-teaching for some lessons, and increasing the frequency of the small group meetings with the novice GTAs.

The young peer mentor (an experienced GTA) can draw upon similarities (age, limited teaching experience, similar departmental obligations, etc.) between himself or herself and the mentee and can speak of recent experiences in the classroom. Experienced GTAs can be effective as "interpretive guides" (Myers, 1995-1996, p. 28) and resources regarding appropriate behavior and skills for new GTAs (Darling, 1987; Darling & Staton, 1989). Gray and Murray (1994) also noted the emotional support and less threatening environment for

discussion and questions in the peer mentoring relationship. When describing her peer mentoring experience, Bollis-Pecci (1995) noted:

> Though there are potential problems with peer mentoring programs, with careful planning and consideration of the possible roadblocks, the benefits far outweigh the costs. The mentee [has] the opportunity to learn from someone who is not far removed from their realm of experience. In some ways, both are experiencing the same things simultaneously. Who better to mentor a teaching assistant than a colleague who has effectively learned how to balance graduate studies, research, personal life, and teaching? (p. 27)

Yet a key question is whether to allow mentees a choice in selecting their mentors.

The Matter of Choice

Blackburn, Chapman, and Cameron (1981) described the mentor-protegee relationship as a symbiotic partnership. Liebert (1989) mentioned the need for a "chemistry" to develop between the mentor and mentee. It would appear then that mentors who are asked to serve in that capacity by a potential mentee would be more likely to develop a natural chemistry with their mentee. Another viable possibility leading to "chemistry" would be assigning dyads based on what mentees have designated as desirable mentor traits. The GTAs in Myers' (1995-1996) study, selected mentors based on:

(a) similarities in interests, background, and demographics;

(b) knowledge of the mentor (e.g., former teacher, reputation, friend);

(c) matches created by other people; and

(d) mentor communication skills (e.g., ability to communicate approachability).

Avery and Gray (1995-1996) recommended that participants be given a choice in the mentoring process. These scholars say informed choices can be made when opportunities are provided for interaction before the selection process occurs. Another means of contributing to informed choice is by providing information about the mentors and sample criteria for the selection of a mentor. For instance, based on Bandura and Walter's (1963) social learning theory regarding how children begin to pattern themselves after adults, Avery and Gray (1995-1996) identified two conditions for modeling and six corresponding behaviors/characteristics. Ideally, mentors are highly regarded and share similar world views with their mentees. Behaviorally, mentors should command a level of respect, demonstrate competence, availability, empathy, a positive approach, and willingly and actively work on behalf of their mentees.

Yet, realistically, given the limited number of viable peer mentor candidates among a pool of experienced GTAs, allowing the mentees to express the traits they desired in a mentor was not viewed as feasible for this department's one semester internship. In addition, one question which can be posed is whether mentees can reasonably be expected to designate what traits they would desire in mentors. Having never taught before, how do they know what they need in mentors? Thus, choice is minimized in the program as it is currently

structured. Students who will be teaching the basic course are required to participate in the one semester mentoring internship. They also have no choice (unless a problem arises) in the selection of their mentor. However, in recognition of the resentment which can be expressed by individuals who are forced to serve as mentors (Kram, 1985), GTAs are given the choice of whether to volunteer for consideration as a mentor. After the list of potential mentors has been compiled, the course director matches peer mentors with mentees based on a combination of professional knowledge and subjective judgment.

During each spring term, GTAs in their second semester of teaching the basic course receive a memo which asks if they are interested in serving as a mentor. The students are familiar with the responsibilities associated with being a mentor having been a mentee themselves during the previous spring. However, a formal list of expectations is outlined in the memo which queries their interest. The memo emphasizes that the expectations have been designed to benefit mentees while simultaneously minimizing the time involved for all mentors – particularly, the graduate students, given their busy schedules.[3] From the group of willing volunteers, GTAs are invited to serve as peer mentors based on their:

[3] Participation is requested from full- and part-time faculty in case there are not enough interested or able GTAs to serve as mentors. However, GTAs are given priority for mentor assignments as the empathetic and reciprocal nature of the relationship is viewed as highly beneficial for both the experienced GTA mentor and his or her mentee.

(a) enthusiasm for teaching,
(b) willingness to acknowledge that they are novice teachers who themselves need supervision and support,
(c) history of preparedness for classroom teaching,
(d) level of participation in a weekly teaching techniques seminar, and
(e) demonstrated use of good judgment in addressing problematic student interactions in and outside of class.

Two final criteria involve the director's perception that the GTA can successfully negotiate her or his authority status with her or his mentee while in their role of mentor and how they manage graduate studies, teaching, mentoring, and life in general. Thus, mentees are matched with experienced GTAs who possess a stronger sense of authority and confidence than their assigned mentees. The author's overall goal in making the match is to avoid negative linkages where the mentee would be inclined to "tell" his or her peer mentor what to do, or reduce the “peer mentor” dyad to a “peer relationship.”

The possibility of mismatched dyads was reduced by selecting GTAs who had a history of open and frequent communication with the course director. Graduate Teaching Assistants, possessing the five characteristics mentioned earlier, typically were individuals who also interacted with the director often. Being mindful of Kram’s (1985) concern that mentors who are not selected can harbor negative feelings (and to reduce the likelihood of hurt feelings), an alternate list is created and GTAs are informed that some viable candidates are not selected as mentors due to schedule conflicts and/or the presence of more volunteers than necessary. Creating an alternate list is not simply a ploy to abate hurt feelings. It is possible that a dyad may require rear-

rangement or an unexpected assistantship position may be awarded.

Cross-Sex and Cross-Race Dyads

The aforementioned criteria simultaneously take into consideration the race and gender of the GTAs being linked as mentor and mentee. Some mentoring research indicated that most senior level executives are white males who are reluctant to serve as mentors to women and people of color (Matczynski & Comer, 1991; Ragins & Cotton, 1991). This mentoring literature suggested that cross-sex and cross-race matches are harder to manage and typically avoided within corporate settings (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). For example, cross gender mentees are not likely to participate in after-work social activities in order to avoid angry spouses, sexual concerns, innuendoes, and/or gossip (Fitt & Newton, 1981). Yet some researchers and members of cross-race mentoring dyads (Matczynski & Comer, 1991; Ragins, 1989; Valadez & Duran, 1991; Zey 1985) believed formal mentoring programs are of critical importance to minorities because they have more trouble finding mentors under informal (or nonexistent) systems. However, it is not atypical for graduate students to form study groups which are cross-sexual and/or cross-racial as a means for successfully completing their graduate studies.[4] After four years, there have been no complaints or negative incidents. One must

[4] Cross-racial and cross-gender linkages do, however, require careful consideration of the students to be matched – in particular, personality and attitudes. While all linkages should be monitored these may require additional time to ensure both parties find the match gratifying.

define the nature of the mentor by considering the context. In the context of GTAs in graduate schools, the author has found that gender (and, to a lesser degree, race) is of less concern to GTAs who are accustomed to working together on assignments as part of their survival as graduate students.

To reduce the presence of innuendoes, group activities are informally encouraged yet no formal activities are created by the director. As noted earlier, a key aspect of the matching process is selecting mentors who have a history of open communication with the director. The freedom to discuss areas of disagreement and levels of discomfort is also reviewed with both the mentors and mentees in their separate orientation meetings. The orientation meetings provide an opportunity to review the relative responsibilities of each member of the dyad.

PEER MENTORING AS THE FIRST STAGE IN A THREE-STAGE TRAINING PROGRAM

The peer status of the GTA serving as mentor also requires the acknowledgement that guidelines are necessary to facilitate the "senior" status of the mentor especially considering that the mentor and mentee might be enrolled in the same master's coursework.

Mentor Expectations

All mentors are expected to:

(1) attend an orientation meeting for mentors before the beginning of the spring semester,

(2) allow the graduate mentee to observe them teaching two class periods per week,

(3) discuss how lessons plans are prepared, speeches are graded, exams are graded, etc. with the mentee at least once monthly,

(4) allow the mentee to grade some student speeches, essays, and exams and discuss the grades which were assigned by the mentee and the mentor,

(5) allow the mentee to teach 1-2 class periods during the semester,

(6) provide the basic course director with a monthly assessment of the mentee and a brief summary of the nature of their interactions in their teaching journals, and

(7) at the end of the semester, provide the basic course director with a recommendation regarding the appropriateness of moving the mentee to graduate teaching assistant status.

Considering the GTAs' other course studies and family obligations, the commitment is not to exceed five hours per week unless both parties agree to devote more time.

Mentee Expectations

The one-semester internship for mentees has the following set of expectations:

(1) understand and comply with the five aforenoted expectations their mentors would have of them teaching 1-2 classes, etc.,

(2) be prepared for the class,

(3) be on time to their assigned section of the class,

(4) complete classroom observation sheets (see Appendix 1) and submit to the basic course director,

(5) attend monthly meetings with their assigned mentor prepared to ask questions and make comments regarding their classroom observations in order to maximize the meeting time,

(6) respect the fact that the "peer mentors" are not "chums" but, rather, mentors with knowledge and authority, and

(7) attend and participate in monthly mentee meetings with the basic course director.

Mentees also are informed that graduate assistants are evaluated on an annual basis. Thus, movement from RA/Mentee to GTA is dependent upon both the quality of their academic performance and their level of involvement and commitment to the first stage of their preparation for classroom teaching.

Evaluation

Liebert (1989) and Smith (1993) believed that experienced teacher mentors should not be placed in the role of supervision and evaluation of new teachers. Both educators believe that evaluation "stands in opposition" to the support and advocacy characteristics inherent within the term "mentor." Although this position is understandable, is it realistic? For instance, Smith (1993) and Liebert (1989) do not articulate who then should be responsible for the evaluation of new teachers.

To reduce the potential relational strain associated with the assessment of a peer, several mechanisms are built into the mentoring program to assist all mentors and mentees. The mechanisms include: weekly classroom observation sheets completed by each mentee (see Appendix 1), monthly assessments of each mentee by her or his respective mentor, and a combination of mentor's assessments with each mentee's academic performance, responsiveness when working with the course director, and participation in the monthly group meeting for interns. This system of frequent contact between the course director and mentor allows the director to remove a good deal of the onus of not recommending a mentee from the mentor.

Early information from mentors allows the director to intervene to assist the mentee in properly preparing themselves for teaching the basic course and for viewing the course director, not the mentor, as the primary source of any negative recommendation against a teaching assignment.

ANTICIPATED BENEFITS FOR MENTORS AND MENTEES

Benefits for the Mentors

There are benefits associated with mentoring for both the mentee as well as the mentor. Turkel and Abramson (1986) found that being placed in the role of peer tutor (for high-risk high school students) communicated three encouraging messages to the peer tutors:

(1) you are knowledgeable,

(2) you can help someone, and

(3) you can be trusted in a responsible position. Zey (1985) indicated "by selecting a woman as a protegee, a senior manager bestows de facto legitimacy of her" presence within the organization (Ragins, 1989, p. 3).

Perhaps legitimacy is a residual benefit of being selected as an individual to mentor one's peer. When the second semester GTAs, invited to serve as mentors, are viewed by the course director as knowledgeable, trustworthy, responsible, mature, etc., it is reasonable to expect that public pronouncements of that trust can serve to legitimize the GTAs' ability in the eyes of their peers, department faculty and staff, and the undergraduate students enrolled in his or her classes. When surveyed regarding what it meant to be GTAs in this particular department, former GTAs responded with comments such as: "I think it meant being someone who could both benefit from as much help and training as possible, and bring their own ideas and creativity into the classroom with encouragement from others. Real world teaching experience. A little bit of prestige in the department. A big bit of learning."; "The thing that meant the most was that I felt valued by the faculty and most students. My ideas and contribution to the department was acknowledged which I found extremely motivating ... I took my short time with those [terrified] students very seriously."; "I believe being a GTA meant that the faculty had confidence in us to teach the undergrads. I thought of it as an honor and [felt] lucky I was given the opportunity. It meant being honored and entrusted with the responsibility of preparing students to communication. It meant more responsibility. It

meant greater visibility in the department (to faculty and students). It also meant more demands on time and energy.[5]

"Senior" and peer mentors alike can benefit from the experience of consciously articulating why they have adopted a particular teaching style, organized lessons in certain ways, and adopted a certain teaching philosophy (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Fink, & Amaro, 1994). Whitman (1988) found enhanced knowledge in peer teaching. Smith (1993) found that experienced mentor teachers training first year teachers "became more aware of their own development as teachers, and the rationale for their teaching strategies" (p. 9).

Finally, when reviewing graduate teaching assistant strategies, researchers (Allen and Rueter, 1990; Ryan and Martens, 1989) mentioned the need for GTAs to take time for self-reflection, learn how to teach, and adjust their teaching. Mentor/mentee dyads, in particular peer mentoring dyads, serve as one possible means for mentors to self-reflect on their teaching, incorporate the suggestions of their mentees and, thereby, promote professional growth. Survey responses from past GTAs generated comments such as: “I believe this experience was one of the most influential experiences I’ve had in grad school.”; “... it gave me a wonderful opportunity to articulate the struggles I had and I was able to see how things might work as I bounced them off my mentee. We were able to engage in some very productive dialogue about teaching methods, etc. I was able to give some advice but was surprised at how much I learned from them ... The support network generated was very

[5] Out of 28 GTAs from in the program from 1994/1995 through 1996/1997, surveys were mailed to 20 former GTAs with up-to-date addresses on file. Ten of the 20 surveys were returned for a 50% return rate.

helpful."; "As a mentor, I almost felt too green to be showing someone the ropes. But at the same time, I felt my intern was able to take something from my teaching style."; "Very good (for me, at least). Gave me a chance to share what I have learned, but also to compare my ideas with someone elses [sic]. Forced me to closely consider what I was doing in class and *why* I was doing it."[5]

Benefits for the Mentee

> *"I am a graduate student. I am overwhelmed. I am told I will teach a college class. I am a mentee. I am now scared" (Burchfield & Walker, 1995, p. 13).*

When training GTAs, scholars mention the importance of communicating professionalism and appropriate authority in the undergraduate classroom (Willer, 1993) especially given the inexperience of GTAs and the age similarity with their students. Cultivating a professional image entails being well-prepared, demonstrating one's knowledge, wearing appropriate dress, and establishing prior experience. Peer mentors have some experience developing an image of professionalism and can help their mentees develop a more realistic perspective regarding how students will respond to their presence in the classroom as "teacher." Although "senior" mentors can provide valuable information, it would not be unusual to find "senior" mentors attempting to recall their first experience in the classroom from 10 (or 20) years earlier. GTAs can speak at a level more connected to the direct experience of their mentees. And, drawing upon similarities in age, departmental status, etc., young peer mentors can provide emotional support (Gray & Murray, 1984).

According to mentees in this program, having peer mentors has benefited them as illustrated in the following comments:

(a) "Michelle has a different teaching style than I have now. But the differences between us made our relationship even more prosperous. Michelle encouraged me to explore my own innovations and ideas and took a genuine interest in my success and growth." (Burchfield & Walker, 1995, p. 14);

(b) "The mentee realized that she was not a prisoner to any one style and was certainly not obligated to adopt the style of the mentor, but she was encouraged to always seek new ways of teaching that belonged to her and would make her classroom unique." (Lee & Skidmore, 1995, p. 21);

(c) "It was helpful but I felt kind of awkward in the classroom among the students. I wasn't sure what role I should take."; and

(d) "As an intern, I was given the classroom as second in command. My participation was light, because it was very new to me. The best part about it was being a fly on the wall, observing the dynamic of a college level introductory communication class."

REFLECTIONS

As I reflect over the past four years, the program has evolved from the initial year of inception in two ways: mentor training and mentor selection process. In addition, the GTAs have provided insight into how, in my

role as course director, I serve as a role model for both teaching and mentoring.

When I decided to pilot a peer mentoring program, I invited a particular group of individuals to serve as mentors. Each GTA was addressed in person, the duties and time commitment explained, and my availability expressed as well as the voluntary, rather than mandated, nature of the role. Consistent with the previous director, I also used part-time faculty in the role of mentor. All three of the GTAs I approached accepted my invitation and each met with me privately, as they perceived the need, to discuss how to handle the mentoring role and the progress of their assigned mentee.

Being available informally was important (as opposed to regularly scheduled meetings with the director) to provide a support network for all mentors (but especially peer mentors) while minimizing the burden of their busy schedules. At the end of the term, the student peer mentors indicated that group meetings would have been desirable. Such meetings would have familiarized them with activities and the type of relationship the other mentors were cultivating. As a result, while maintaining the informal availability policy, in subsequent years, a group orientation meeting was established not only for the mentees but mentors as well. In addition, time was established for the mentors to discuss issues of particular interest to them at the regularly scheduled GTA meetings and in their teaching journals. Each academic year is ended with a special luncheon for the mentors.

Originally, the peer mentoring experience was conceived as a natural extension of the GTAs' classroom teaching and participation in the teaching techniques seminars. Although there are connections, there is also the additional dimension of successfully maneuvering the changing roles (mentor, colleague, friend, etc.) which

can all occur within the same day. As a result, a course director should take a proactive stance to assist GTAs in the management of these multiple roles. Therefore, being available to the GTAs and written expectations should be paired with some formal training articulating the varying types of mentoring and what it means to be a mentor in a particular department.

The second year of the program, the number of part-time faculty participating in the program was purposely decreased as the number of experienced GTA mentors increased. Due to the increase in the number of GTA mentors and to reduce the likelihood of hurt feelings, anger, etc., a memorandum was sent to all experienced GTAs. The correspondence explained the duties of a mentor and asked for volunteers. Criteria were developed to select the mentors and a group of alternates. Of course, favoritism is always an issue. While none of the three peer mentors, in the first year, approached the director with this problem yet it is plausible that such a problem could manifest itself.

Specifically, is the GTA who accepts the personal invitation (or is selected from a group of candidates) to serve as peer mentor given "grief" by her or his colleagues to whom the invitation was not extended? For instance, all five experienced mentor teachers in Smith's (1993) study indicated negative feelings were expressed towards them by other faculty members – in particular, others who applied to be mentors but were not accepted.

Is it favoritism? Of course, selecting some and not others constitutes relative degrees of both favoritism and realism. The selection process acknowledges that some individuals are better equipped to meet the demands associated with transferring their knowledge to others. Yet, in the case of this Southern university, it is unglamorized favoritism as the mentors receive no

extra pay nor any reduction in their teaching load. The position of peer mentor does, however, afford an opportunity for self-improvement, developing the teaching skills of other person, assisting in departmental training, being publicly recognized as capable, and noting one's skills and departmental contributions on a vita.

Finally, I will share a blindspot. While spending the past few years diligently anticipating the needs of our GTAs and providing a "safety net" as they entered the classroom as novice teachers, I have often somewhat subconsciously considered the importance of serving as a role model of an effective teacher. However, recently one of my students heightened the my awareness of the expansive nature of my responsibility by indicating: "... this TA program is representative, to me, of what all of the literature on the socialization of mentoring should be. I have been included; I have been helped in many ways; I have been counseled, etc. How much more pointed could socialization become than this?" In other words, ideally, course directors are not only models of effective teaching but of the mentoring process.

CONCLUSION

Peer mentoring is a viable means of maximizing resources on campuses with limited (or non-existent) centralized teaching resource services. Care must be taken, however, to structure the mentoring program in a way which clearly identifies the responsibility and authority of the GTA who is assigned to a colleague as a peer mentor. Written expectations for both parties, careful screening of GTAs capable of managing the increased responsibility, and an "open door" policy combined with, at the very least, preliminary training

regarding what it means to be a peer mentor are critical to the success of such a program.

Success incorporates the following:

(a) a mentee's increased awareness of effective classroom teaching preparation and strategies,

(b) a learning experience leading to enhanced teaching on the part of the GTA serving as peer mentor, and

(c) the addition of a useful resource serving as the first stage of a comprehensive program for properly training graduate students to enter the classroom as instructors.

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APPENDIX 1

CLASSROOM OBSERVATION SHEET

Name: Mentor:
Date: Class Time:

1. One thing which went well today in class was:

   My perception was based on:

2. One thing which could have been improved today was:

   _____ Everything went well.

   My perception was based on:

3. If I were teaching this lesson, I would have:

   Because:

4. My mentor and I met on _____ for approximately ____ minutes and discussed:

   This was beneficial/unbeneficial because: