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Introduction: Strengthening Graduate Student Teaching through Community-Based Knowledge Sharing

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INTRODUCTION: STRENGTHENING GRADUATE STUDENT TEACHING THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED KNOWLEDGE SHARING

SAM CLEM

This book combines the knowledge of 30 graduate student instructors sharing about how they teach and how they've learned how to teach.

One sentence in and I've already got some explaining to do.

Let's start by clarifying what I mean by graduate student instructors (GSIs). Different institutions, different fields, and different programs use a wide array of titles for the graduate students who teach all or part of a course. Some assist full-time faculty, tasked with running labs or grading tests, and are called Graduate Teaching Assistants. Some are instructors of record—planning, teaching, and grading all aspects of a course—and are also called Graduate Teaching Assistants (what's with that, anyway?). In my department, we're referred to as Graduate Instructors. For this book, I wanted to include the experiences of graduate students across disciplines and departments, encompassing the varying degrees of autonomy and titles that we hold. To do that, we use the term Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) throughout the book to indicate any graduate student who has some responsibility in the teaching or instruction of college-level students.

Now, why create a knowledge-sharing resource? Well, the first (and, for me, the most obvious) reason is because GSIs know a lot about being and teaching and learning as GSIs. Together, we know so much. Full stop.

But that's not to say that we always *feel* like we know a lot. Too often, graduate students enter their first day of teaching underprepared for the tasks they are asked to complete, particularly in STEM fields (see, e.g., Kurdziel, J. A. et al, 2003; Sandi-Urena, S. & Gatlin, T. A., 2012; Zotos, E. K., Moon, A. C., & Schultz, G. V., 2020). While the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) can help instructors prepare themselves with theories and strategies for teaching, many SoTL resources academically marginalize non-tenure track instructors

(Simmons et al., 2021), including lecturers, adjuncts, and GSIs. Compared to tenure track faculty and even teaching-focused faculty, GSIs occupy a different position in the power systems that govern university workings. As such, our unique experiences of teaching and learning deserve additional attention. For this collection, we sought the knowledge of those who best know the contours and contexts of teaching as a graduate student: GSIs.

The purpose of this book is to share some of the many, many things that GSIs already know and have learned and continue to learn about college teaching. The collection seeks to validate and amplify the specific experiences and voices of GSIs. My hope is that this book serves as an opportunity for GSIs from different identities, institutions, and circumstances to recognize a piece of themselves, of their experiences, to connect with and to build on. There's strong evidence that the way we learn best is by connecting new information to prior knowledge, by connecting that which we already know with that which we've yet to learn. Having a book about graduate instruction by graduate instructors is one way of facilitating those connections.

Targeting the specific experiences of GSIs in relation to college teaching, the authors of these chapters present the lessons they've learned as GSIs in their first years of instruction and how that learning happened. There is a focus on narrative and storytelling, belied by a belief that lived experience is a valid and important way of knowing. While the GSIs' narratives play an important role, all of the authors also tie their stories into current literature on teaching and learning. Readers can expect to find not only relatable experiences but also concrete and practical takeaways that they can implement into their pedagogies immediately.

When I put out the call for this book, I didn't know what form it would take. I knew we needed more research about GSIs by GSIs, and, surely, I had ideas about what I would want from such a book, but I couldn't know how well my ideas aligned with those from other GSIs at other institutions, in different fields, and with different backgrounds and identities. So, I put out the CFP and waited for GSIs around the world to tell me about what topics they most wanted to discuss, to share, to interrogate. That's what this collection is—a community-led discussion about what teaching means for GSIs and how it's done.

WHAT'S IN THIS BOOK?

To facilitate skimming, and to help readers find what information will be most useful for them, each chapter begins with 2-4 key takeaways, in which the authors summarize the main points of their chapters. As GSIs, we don't always have the autonomy, resources, time, or energy to teach the way we'd like to teach. Not all takeaways will be possible or practical for every GSI or every situation.

Sometimes, GSIs will need to adapt or reconfigure, or simply bypass the suggestions presented. And that's OK.

To start the collection, we have Melissa Leaym-Fernandez, who writes a love letter to her younger self with the advice and strength we all need to overcome some of the most difficult moments of life, graduate school, and teaching. This chapter invites us to open ourselves to reflection and to consider what we already know and what we have to teach ourselves. It also reminds us of how teaching and living are vulnerable experiences. Hopefully, this chapter in combination with the others will help us develop practices of personal and professional healing.

While most of the chapters describe some aspects of identity, the next chapters in the book focus specifically on that topic. In chapter 2, Simmons, Silve-Enos, and Kelley recount a number of 'landmines' they've hit as GSIs, moments when they were suddenly and unexpectedly thrown into uncertainty and self-doubt. These landmines often bring with them a sense of 'identity whiplash,' where a GSI is pulled back and forth between different aspects of their identities. The authors describe how they've coped with identity whiplash and invite readers to do the same. Next, Ab Latif (chapter 3) describes her experience of being a GSI with an underrepresented identity and how her experience has taught her about building diversity in the classroom. She encourages us to humanize our classroom spaces and structure our pedagogies around collective (rather than individual) achievement. Prado (chapter 4) adds to this theme of identity by telling the story of how her desire to augment representation of minoritized groups within academia led her back to the community college where she got her GED, but this time in the role of adjunct instructor. Prado's chapter reminds us that GSIs hold a vast number of professional titles, jobs, and names.

The next chapter, though specific to the experience of math graduate teaching assistants, has application to all GSIs. Lue (chapter 5) uses critical race theory as a lens into her experience as a GSI and calls on us to further question and challenge the structures of oppression within our teaching and learning practices. Importantly, she recognizes how GSIs are agents in academic socialization, and, as such, we play a role both as students and teachers in the racialized hierarchies of knowledge. Hice-Fromille (chapter 6) then presents us with one approach for explicitly addressing and redressing the kinds of privilege and oppression described by Lue. Hice-Fromille implements a Black girl studies approach to teaching as a GSI, in which the identity and lived experience of Black girls gets centered in our pedagogical decisions. These two chapters reiterate that teaching and learning is always, already racialized.

While the previous group of authors focus on their own diverse identities, the next set shifts the focus more greatly towards our students' identities. Hughes

(chapter 7) stresses the importance of validating our students' diverse identities and how that validation can impact the students' learning and sense of empowerment. She presents original research from a teaching-as-research project she conducted in her classroom, giving readers a great example of how our classrooms can serve both as spaces of teaching and of research. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have recently received a lot of attention for their potential to validate and include underrepresented students. Vilma and Low (chapter 8) apply DEI approaches to the specific context of graduate student instruction, giving concrete strategies for promoting DEI within the sometimes challenging and limiting circumstances in which GSIs teach. While Vilma and Low focus on DEI more broadly, Baker and Wooten (chapter 9) follow up by weaving their lived experience with disability together with current literature on accessibility to suggest ways in which GSIs can develop more accessible pedagogies to better support our students and ourselves.

While GSIs can and do have all kinds of identities, we also share the common experience of being both students and teachers. At times, this dual identity can bring challenges, but the next set of chapters emphasizes that our teacher/student split can also be an asset. Giardina (chapter 10) tells us about a potentially embarrassing moment in her teaching that turned into a valuable lesson about the power of vulnerability. Through radical vulnerability, GSIs can connect with the exploration of learning and create solidarity with our students as a community of learners. Narla (chapter 11) reiterates the importance of vulnerability in teaching, specifically the vulnerability of failure. By modelling failure and structuring our courses and assignments to allow for and even encourage failure, GSIs can challenge transactional understandings of education.

As the vast body of scholarship of teaching and learning indicates, there is a lot of research on how to teach, what to teach, even when and where to teach. For GSIs, there can be a lot of information to take in. Given our unique position in the power dynamics of the academy, some of that information, particularly that written by tenure track faculty for tenure track faculty, may not apply well to the contexts of our teaching. Fisk (chapter 12) maintains the importance of evidence-based teaching but hedges that both evidence and knowledge are terms that we should first interrogate. He argues for an expansive interpretation of 'evidence,' that is nuanced and inclusive. By reframing our understanding of evidence, we can better prepare ourselves to accept that there are multiple ways of knowing—epistemological pluralism. One of those ways of knowing is by experiencing and reflecting. Tocco (chapter 13) makes a case for the many benefits of pedagogical metacognition, of reflecting on and thinking about our teaching, which she claims is particularly important for first year GSIs.

To end the collection, we have three chapters that deal with finding support

within our communities and ourselves. Bluth (chapter 14), who found her graduate education both isolating and irrelevant to her non-tenure-track plans, turned to community-engaged learning (CEL) to find fulfillment. She describes how she overcame common obstacles in graduate education to implement community-engaged teaching and add meaning to her graduate school experience. Next, Athnos, Kou-Herrema, Langley, Oshima, Parker, Rawal, Wilkins, Lee, Hunt, Searle and Marinho (chapter 15) combine the knowledge and experience of two communities of practice specifically for GSIs. By describing the programs and processes of developing GSI communities of practice, they encourage readers to connect with other GSIs and create communities to help navigate and celebrate the ups and downs graduate student teaching. Finally, Cheek (chapter 16) ends the collection by reminding us to breathe. After recounting his own experiences with graduate teaching anxiety, he shares three lessons he has learned about coping with teaching anxiety.

While we were unable to cover every topic, I believe that the content of this book covers some of the most important aspects of teaching as a graduate student. I hope that this collection can help animate other GSIs to research and write about what they've lived and learned in relation to college teaching. There is still so much we can learn from each other.

NOTE ABOUT EDITING

Much of my research is on academic editing and how we can make editing processes more inclusive. Editing this book was the perfect opportunity to apply the inclusive editing paradigm I'd already theorized but never put to practice. One of the main points of the inclusive editing paradigm is to reject the strict enforcement of American Standard English (ASE) in academic texts, providing the space for and validation of other forms of English. For this book, all of the authors had the choice of editing their language to the conventions of American Standard English or not. Some authors have chosen not to conform to those standards, a decision that I heartily support. If when reading, you recognize deviations from American Standard English (often considered 'errors'), please recognize and respect these grammatical decisions as conscious choices on the part of the authors to express themselves in the way that felt most appropriate for the rhetorical situation.

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