

Informing the Undergraduate Teaching Assistant (UTA) Debate

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Inherent in the job of communication administrators (e.g., basic course directors, chairs, directors, deans) is the never-ending challenge of finding the right balance between economic efficiency and instructional integrity in terms of course delivery. Therefore, the question we continually struggle to answer is where to find balance with regard to compromising educational quality for financial frugality. Although always an issue, this subject is spotlighted prominently today as funding support for higher education wanes. The proliferation of online courses now being offered (e.g., MOOCs/massive open online courses) serves as a prime example.

The dialectic regarding educational excellence and course delivery methods did not arise, however, with the emergence of online course delivery systems. The ongoing controversy about using graduate teaching assistants to deliver courses, for instance, remains alive and well. Even more contentious than the debate surrounding the use of graduate students to teach courses is that of employing undergraduate students as teaching assistants. What is troubling about such debates is not the fact that they occur, but, rather, that the arguments are typically based on anecdotal evidence and opinions. In essence, there is a void in the literature in terms of data-driven empirical research to inform such debates. The three manuscripts presented here aim to begin filling that void.

Few would argue with the notion that undergraduate teaching assistants/apprentices (UTAs) may be a helpful financial resource for programs as they help faculty members with procedural tasks (e.g., taking attendance, managing group work) at a much lower cost than graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). What is much less clear, however, is the educational value for students enrolled in the courses in which UTAs serve, as well as the educational value afforded to the UTAs themselves in doing so.

If we agree with the philosophies of Socrates (e.g., Taylor, 1998) and his contemporaries, for example, that mentoring is the most productive pedagogical method for teaching and learning, then it follows that UTAs being mentored by a faculty member would be likely to learn more from the experience than they might in a traditional lecture-oriented classroom setting. Similarly, it might also follow that UTAs serve effectively as a mentoring bridge between faculty members and the students enrolled in the course. Moreover, if we agree with the experiential learning theories of John Dewey (1938) and his contemporaries, UTAs may also learn course content better as a result of teaching it to others (doing) and reflecting on it than they would as students in a traditional lecture-oriented classroom. The following three articles begin to shed light on the veracity of such ideas by examining the UTA experience via data-driven empirical research lenses.

In “Undergraduate Instructor Assistants (UIAs): Friend or Foe,” for example, Seiler and Abetz examine the value of undergraduate instructor assistants (UIAs) used in courses employing the personalized system of instruction (PSI) method as first conceptualized by Keller (1968). Based on in depth interviews with six former UIAs, they conclude that UIAs report growth in terms of balancing multiple roles, understanding what teachers face in working with students, and developing leadership skills.

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In “The Undergraduate Teaching Assistant: Scholarship in the Classroom,” Flinko and Arnett take a Kantian perspective to focus on the value of the UTA experience as it unites teaching and scholarship. Based on the personal examples offered by a former UTA, the essay employs an auto-ethnographical approach to explain ways in which the UTA experience socializes a student to understand the comprehensive teacher-scholar vocation by “imagining the real” (Buber, 1988, p. 60).

In “Exploring the Educational Value of the Undergraduate Teaching Apprentice (UTA) Experience,” Reynolds, Sellnow, Head, and Anthony conduct a qualitative thematic analysis of reflective essays completed by UTAs while engaged in their first semester serving in the role. Based on three primary emergent themes they describe as *teaching as challenging*, *teaching as rewording*, and *teaching as transformational*, they conclude that UTAs challenge tacit assumptions in ways that transform their world-view with regard to teaching and learning in college classrooms. As such, their conclusions extend the utility and implications of transformative learning theory as described by Mezirow and colleagues (2000).

Taken together, these articles begin to reinforce an argument for the educational value of employing undergraduate teaching assistants/apprentices (UTAs) based on data-driven empirical research. Although they provide a reasonable foundation, they also point to a need for additional research regarding (a) the learning outcomes achieved by apprentices as a result of their one-on-one mentoring experience with a faculty member, (b) the learning outcomes achieved by students mentored by apprentices, and (c) the learning outcomes achieved by apprentices based on the experiential learning opportunity to teach others.

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