

## **Exploring the Impact of Graduate Student Teaching Assistantships on First-Time Teaching Experiences**

**Key Words:** graduate student instructors, teaching assistants, pedagogical training, first-time instruction

### **Abstract**

Recent trends in higher education have seen an increased reliance on graduate students for teaching large introductory classes in the arts and social sciences. Previous research suggests that acclimatizing to the role of principal instructor can be an angst-ridden process for graduate students. This pilot study will explore the efficacy of prior training—graduate student teaching assistantships (TAs) in particular—on first-time teaching. How well do TAs prepare graduate students for their first teaching experience? How does this prior pedagogical training improve the experiences of undergraduates undergoing instruction? In addition to developing a framework for expanding research on graduate student vocational training, we will develop a set of recommendations that will be relevant to graduate offices that are tasked with preparing graduate students for the instructional aspects of their future careers.

### **Project Description/Relationship to Educational Theory and/or Educational Practice:**

University administrators, faculty, and graduate student instructors (GSIs) face growing pressures and demands due to increased student enrolments, budgetary constraints, and larger class sizes. GSIs are faced with increased expectations and responsibilities in the classroom due to rising demands to act as primary instructors (sole responsibility for teaching the course) for undergraduate, and particularly introductory courses (Gardner & Jones 2011). Consequently, GSIs increasingly shape the nature and quality of undergraduate education (Gardner & Jones 2011), which underlines the necessity of pedagogical training for these “new” educators.

While graduate students are frequently encouraged and expected to gain teaching experience early in their academic careers, often these early experiences take the form of graduate student teaching assistantships, which may or may not include actual teaching experience in the classroom (Kenny, Watson & Watton, 2014; Park 2004). In some cases, these assistantships are graduate students’ only teaching-related training, and they often occur within the context of large introductory classes that preclude the opportunity to actually “teach” a class, or interact with undergraduate students in a classroom context.

Without adequate teaching preparation, the too-frequent result for graduate students is an anxiety-ridden first-time teaching experience as principal instructor (Smollin & Arluke, 2014). Specific factors influencing anxiety included: “feeling unprepared; lack of confidence, especially surrounding issues of presentation of self and authority in the classroom; problems with student-teacher interactions; and lack of support and guidance from faculty, mentors, and departments” (Smollin & Arluke, 2014; Jungels et al. 2014: 221). These negative experiences in the classroom can impact instructors’ enjoyment of teaching, their self-concepts as academics, and their willingness to work on improving their teaching practices in the future (Trautman, 2008). Undergraduates may also be impacted by these negative feelings and performances, which can limit their learning, overall enjoyment of the course, and interest in the discipline (Smollin & Arluke, 2014). Harvard’s review of humanities education (2013) identifies introductory courses as critical turning points with respect to students’ engagement in their education, and interest in pursuing further courses in a given discipline. Yet, as noted, these very courses are often taught by the least prepared and experienced instructors.

Research indicates that some of the challenges faced by graduate student instructors can be ameliorated by providing formal and informal pedagogical training during preparatory teaching assistantships. Jungels et al. (2014) for example, report on the role of a department designated “Teaching Associate”, an experienced graduate student who acts as a mentor, bridging mechanisms of formal and informal support for less experienced graduate student instructors. In a forthcoming TLEF funded study, Grekul et al. (2015) found that novice GSIs were more confident and more willing to teach again having received both formal training and informal peer support in their roles as GSIs. While they found formal teacher training helpful, (e.g. Writing Centre, University Teaching Services), they most highly valued team-oriented, informal learning opportunities in the form of peer and instructor support, weekly meetings, and regular email communication.

This experience has contributed to our interest in exploring the most effective strategies for supporting graduate students in preparation for their first teaching assignments as primary

instructors. Our proposed study thus asks, “*What factors in an instructor’s prior experiences as a TA have the most significant and positive impacts on practice once these former assistants become principal instructors?*” Among factors we are considering include formal training through University Teaching Services (UTS), mentorship, peer support, opportunities to teach and interact with students in the TA role, and opportunities to learn course content in context prior to teaching it on one’s own.

**Evaluation:** The proposed research consists of in-depth interviews with a purposive sample of instructors in the Department of Sociology. We will identify and contact 10-12 instructors who have had a variety of pre-instruction training experiences (from none, to having had some TA experience, to having TA experience in the course they eventually taught). The findings will be analysed through a social constructivist lens, which considers learning – in this case “learning to teach” – as socially situated phenomenon (Phillips, 1995). In particular, we will focus on applications of constructivism to Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research examining the impacts of various forms of collaboration on teaching practices (e.g. Cox, 2013).

**Outcomes:** In addition to presentations and scholarly publications, the findings from the study will be used to develop a generic, valid, and theoretically grounded framework that could be used by any department to improve learning experiences for TAs. Our research will highlight the need for, and the value of department level supports for improved teaching – not just for novice instructors, but for all faculty.

**Innovation:** This study highlights and compares the very different TA experiences that graduate students actually have, and analyzes these experiences for their effects on eventual, solo practice. Innovation lies in that these formative experiences are an “an important and under-researched aspect of the teaching and learning literature” (Jungels et al., 2014, p. 220). In addition to beginning to address this gap in the research literature, the proposed project is innovative in that it will explore the possibility of formalizing the ‘stream’ or trajectory between graduate student teaching assistantships and first-time teaching. A logical outgrowth of the proposed project is a pilot project that would experiment with teaching assistantship assignments and first-time teaching assignments to promote skill development, and positive, formative teaching experiences that will build confidence and smooth the transition of GSIs to their roles as primary instructors.

**Collaboration:** This proposed project involves a faculty member from the Department of Sociology, a Teaching and Learning Postdoctoral Fellow from the Department of Sociology, graduate students, cooperation from the Department of Sociology Graduate Chair/office, as well as support from the Arts Pedagogy Research and Innovative Laboratory (APRIL). Graduate students from the Department of Sociology will be participants in the study. The Postdoctoral Fellow will play a significant role in the project. He is currently working with the graduate office and has obtained permission from them to access records of previous teaching assistant assignments and the documents outlining the responsibilities of graduate students during these assignments. The project will provide valuable field experience for two graduate student research assistants, who will conduct the interviews with graduate student instructors, transcribe the

interviews, and assist with data analysis. In-kind support from APRIL in the form of research, consultation, analytical expertise, and report/article writing performed by the Research Coordinator will be critical to the study.

**Sustainability:** The proposed project has the potential to significantly impact the ways in which graduate students receive pedagogical training and practical teaching experience without requiring significant additional resources of an academic department. In turn, undergraduate learning is improved: If five graduate students benefit from pre-training for a large introductory sociology course, for example (which typically has an enrolment of 200 students per section), improved pedagogical training could potentially improve the undergraduate classroom experience of 1,000 undergraduate students.

Graduate student instructors will benefit from this training, and will take this experience and training with them as they move into careers as university instructors. The influence on their future teaching techniques and practices has the potential to affect many future undergraduate students, as well as graduate students who may someday see them as teaching mentors. The number of students benefiting from this research would be cumulative across the careers of each graduate student trained. A form of sustainability is created when faculty “pay forward” their positive early experiences by contributing to a positive teaching and learning climate in their departments (Cox, 2013).

If providing course-appropriate teaching assistantship experience is found to be predictive of improved first-time teaching experience, the Department of Sociology would benefit from streamlining their graduate student teaching assignment process. Because the purpose of this project is to experiment with and help develop a “best practice” approach to training graduate student instructors, it has the potential to develop and codify a sustainable process that can be adapted by other departments as well.

**Dissemination:** Immediate dissemination of results will be targeted for the Department of Sociology’s annual graduate student fall symposium on teaching. As well, a summary of the project and results will be posted on the APRIL website. A presentation based on the findings will be made to the Arts Teaching, Learning, and Engagement Committee (ATLEC) at one of their monthly meetings. A roundtable discussion between graduate students and Faculty in the Department of Sociology will also be hosted. Results of the project will be shared and a focused discussion will be facilitated between attendees. The findings will also be presented at the annual conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) or a similar conference. Subsequent dissemination of results will be targeted for scholarly presentations and publications for associations and journals, including an article to be submitted to *Teaching Sociology*, *Teaching in Higher Education*, *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, *The American Sociologist* or *Learning and Teaching: an International Journal of Higher Education in the Social Sciences*.

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