Are we doing enough when mentoring our TAs and ITAs?

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How often are TAs and ITAs given a teaching assistantship and expected to be a successful teacher without the benefit of any pedagogical knowledge. This paper describes a concept class whereby TAs and ITAs can gain the pedagogical bases they need while still meeting the requirements of their graduate teaching assistantships.

Are We Doing Enough When Mentoring Our TAs and ITAs?
By Alan Lytle

Higher Education is notorious about assigning teaching assistants (TAs) and international teaching assistants (ITAs) classes without giving them the pedagogical tools necessary to be successful. It is assumed that TAs and ITAs will "know" how to teach, write syllabi with appropriate measurable objectives, construct tests/quizzes, evaluate outcomes, apply proper classroom management skills, and understand the various and intricate cultural concepts that are part of today's classrooms. Elaine Justice (2012) asks in her address, "PCTL: Passing the Academic Torch: Mentoring Graduate Student Teachers":

- Had you had any preparation for teaching?
- Did you feel prepared?
- What challenges did you face?

TAs and ITAs are "thrown to the sharks," as it were, and, expected to succeed. How can we have this expectation of these TAs and ITAs without first giving them the pedagogical tools necessary to be successful? It should be something that we reel against, yet, we continue to send new TAs and ITAs into the classrooms unprepared.

The author describes a TA/ITA "Concept Class" where TAs/ITAs who are teaching can be successful instructors while learning appropriate pedagogy. This model is one that the author has successfully used, is adaptable to many situations, allows the TAs/ITAs to complete the class at any time by demonstrating the required skill sets, and is conducted during the same semester that the TAs/ITAs are teaching, thereby allowing them to put into practice what they are learning and fostering a mentorship environment with the teacher of the "Concept Class" and with their TA/ITA colleagues.

"For when the disciple is ready, the Master is ready also." (Collins, 1904) This saying is oftentimes misattributed to Buddha as "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." Either way, disciple/master or student/teacher, mentoring is a two-way street, one requiring not only the student (in this case the TA and/or the ITA) to be willing to be mentored but also a mentor willing to be a mentor. Thus, there is either a spoken/written agreement or an unspoken/unwritten agreement as to what will be expected and accomplished. Needless to say, the responsibilities of the mentor are enormous as he/she holds, partially, the success or failure of the mentee in his/her hands. A mentor is described as

- helping new teachers find success and gratification,
- show(ing) up for, and stay(ing) on, the job,
- understand(ing) that persistence is as important in mentoring as it is in classroom teaching,
- (being) capable of making a significant and positive impact on the life of another,
- (being) anchored in the knowledge that mentoring can be a challenging endeavor requiring significant investments of time and energy. (Rowley, 1999)

Leslie Simonfalvi (n.d.) does a nice job in his PowerPoint™ entitled, "Mentoring in Education" of further describing a mentor:

- Mentoring is not teaching.
- The Mentor is a learning and developing being.
- The Mentor has a very clear picture of his own development.
- The Mentor is deeply concerned but he does not create dependency.
- Mentoring always has a clear aim.
- The precondition of successful mentoring is a warm, welcoming, accepting environment.
- In Mentoring we only step backwards to gain momentum, and jump longer forward as a result.
- Mentoring is not an analysis. Rather it is a catalyzed synthesis.
- The Mentor will profit from the process by giving and there is no guarantee for a return.
- Mentoring can only be effective in an atmosphere of mutual trust.

Whether a teacher, a teaching assistant (TA), or an international teaching assistant (ITA) steps into a classroom, he/she needs to be prepared with the proper tools to be an effective instructor. Simply having the content knowledge to offer the class does not guarantee that the person "teaching" the class can teach effectively, especially if the teacher happens to be a TA or an ITA. There are expectations that students have of their teachers as mentioned by Robin Cox (2007) in "What Your Students Might Expect of You". However, too often we assign a class or classes to TAs and ITAs without the benefit of their knowing much more than their content area information and expect them to perform as seasoned teachers. In fact, many of these TAs and ITAs have only their own teachers and their own experiences with these teachers to draw upon. (Teach.com, n.d.) Mentoring can be one way to help these TAs and ITAs be successful and not struggle so much during their first semester "in charge of the classroom," as "leader" of the class and of the instruction.

What is "mentoring"? "Mentoring is a developmental partnership through which one person shares knowledge, skills, information and perspective to foster the personal and professional growth of someone else" (Stone, n.d.). Using the idea of mentoring, Barlin proposed that average teachers can become good; good teachers can become great. (2010) The author would posit that with mentoring making use of good-to-great veteran teachers could set a TA or an ITA on the right path to becoming a great teacher. Cedric Cullingford's (2006) book, *Mentoring in Education: An International Perspective*, is an excellent resource in that it gives insight into mentor groups, team building, induction, assessment and support, five systems in five different counties, and so forth. With the multitude of information available for the concept of mentoring, the author designed a "Concept Class" that allows for TAs and ITAs to be mentored at the same time they are actually teaching their first semester.

Concept

The author designed a class that would accommodate the gaps in pedagogical knowledge that new TAs and ITAs have when they first enter graduate school and are assigned their first classes to teach in their content area. There is not a standardized, systematic way of mentoring these new TAs and ITAs to be successful teachers, especially in departments that have multiple

disciplines, in mostly-research-based departments, and in "core" departments (e.g. history, biology, sociology, etc.).

The author's "Concept Class" is a semester-long model whereby TAs and ITAs learn appropriate pedagogy during the same semester they begin teaching. This way, the TAs and ITAs can implement the strategies in their classes, see how they work or do not work for them, adapt them to specific instances, try ideas and discuss them in the "Concept Class," share their successes and challenges with their TA and ITA colleagues, become peer mentors, and so forth. All the while, the "Concept Class" offers a sheltered environment for the TAs and ITAs to gain the instructional knowledge they lack without feeling they are being punished for not knowing something. (Lytle, 2013)

Design

The design of the "Concept Class" is such that it is adaptable to many different instances, such as semester-based, trimester-based, year-long-based, and so forth. It is also adaptable to include as much information as is necessary for a specific graduate program to deem necessary for its TAs and ITAs to be successful in teaching their classes. Additionally, specifically relating to ITAs, there are components of language development (English-as-a-Second-Language – ESL) and language teaching that will help with non-native-English-speaking (NNES) issues such as pronunciation, writing, dialectal listening, etc. However, the main focus is not ESL; it is on pedagogy. Therefore, native-English-speakers (NES) and non-native-English-speakers, alike, benefit equally from the concepts that work well with NES and NNES teachers and students. (Chadwick and Lytle, "Points to Help with ELLS," 2013, & Chadwick and Lytle, "Resources to Help with ELLS," 2013) However, "Mentoring: A Guide for Faculty" (University of Washington, n.d.) is an excellent resource for specific ITA issues.

Prior to the beginning of any academic semester, a graduate department would identify TAs and ITAs that it designates as needing the "Concept Class." The general design is as follows:

- Pre-test to determine pedagogical needs
- Initial Content
  - Writing a complete and content-area-appropriate syllabus
  - Writing appropriate content area objectives that are measurable
- Class-long Content
  - Current teaching methods
  - Multiple Intelligences
  - Multiple Modes of Communication
  - Appropriate construction and analysis of quizzes and tests
  - Rubric writing
  - Alternative assessment methods (e.g. projects, presentations, portfolios)
  - Outcomes evaluations and appropriate feedback
  - Classroom management
  - Cultural concepts, including "higher education culture" and the "cultures of the students in the TAs and ITAs' classes"

- Evaluations
  - Construction of a content-area-appropriate syllabus with measurable content area objectives
  - Construction, administration, analysis, presentation of a content-based quiz – including rubric
  - Construction, administration, analysis, presentation of a content-based test – including rubric
  - Construction, usage, presentation of a content-based rubric-related to a quiz and a test
  - Teaching of a "20 – 30 minute mini-lesson" in the content area with the "Concept Class" acting as the content area students. The mini-lesson must contain an evaluation using a rubric.

As the "Concept Class" begins, the author administers a pre-test which measures the TAs' and ITAs' pedagogical understanding from an American point-of-view. Basically, the concepts on the pre-test consist of the expectations an American instructor would have of his/her students and vice-versa. Some of these include the concepts of current teaching practices, multiple intelligences, varying modes of communication, varying modes of evaluation (i.e. quiz and test construction and their evaluation), objective and rubric writing, alternative assessment, and general classroom management.

The author uses the results of the pre-test to determine where the strengths and weaknesses of the class lie. Once these have been identified, targets can be set with instruction and modeling aiming specifically at the weaknesses. The strengths of colleagues in the class are used to demonstrate "best practices" during teaching demonstrations by way of class discussion. After each teaching demonstration, the "audience," in this case, the class members, peer-evaluate the demonstration using a teacher-designed rubric along with oral comments.

The author might ask targeting questions such as, "What did the "teacher" do especially well, based upon what we have been discussing?" or "What might be another way of doing …?" These questions allow for the TAs and ITAs in varying fields to construct situations specific to their content areas and suggest what might work for them. In addition, during the semester, the author has class discussions where the class shares classroom experiences that were successful or not and why they think that way. It serves as a way of self-reflection, and it allows for other members of the class to offer suggestions for modifications and to hear ideas that might be adaptable to their individual situations.

At any point, if a student in the "Concept Class" successfully demonstrates the evaluations, he/she can then complete the course, thereby allowing TAs or ITAs with some pedagogical knowledge to exit the course early. This allows for more intensive instruction with the TAs and ITAs needing it the most. Once the TAs and ITAs have successfully completed the "Concept Class," they become peer mentors for the next group, helping them in addition to the class and creating a mentoring environment within their own departments.

Conclusion

Whether a graduate student has had excellent models as teachers or not does not guarantee that he/she will be a successful teacher. Good mentors also do not guarantee a successful outcome for a TA or an ITA. However, having the support of a good mentor and a solid mentoring concept (be it an established content-specific program, a department-wide program, or a one-on-one concept) does give the TA or the ITA an extra "piece of the American educational puzzle." This allows him/her to draw from as many sources as needed to help his/her students be successful.

In addition ITAs have special considerations that need to be taken into account – language issues, cultural issues, etc. Allowing TAs and ITAs the opportunity of a "Concept Class" that shepherds them through their first teaching semester using a mentorship idea gives them the tools necessary to be successful and to become confident in their instructional abilities so that this confidence scaffolds the content leading to a truly rewarding experience for the TA and ITA and their students. As Bill Moyer (2013) said, "Sharing is the essence of teaching. It is, I have come to believe, the essence of civilization ...Without it, the imagination is but the echo of the self, trapped in a soundproof chamber, reverberating upon itself until it is spent in exhaustion or futility."

Resources

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