

To Train or Not to Train; That is the Question

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A majority of doctoral students hold teaching assistantships during their graduate careers (Henderson & Woods, 1997). The 2002 Survey of Earned Doctorates (Hoffer et al., 2003) indicated that 20,847 of 36,029 doctoral degree recipients (approximately 58%) held teaching assistantships (TAs). This proportion was even higher in the social sciences, in which 4,198 of 5,950 doctoral recipients (approximately 71%) held such assistantships. Moreover, the proportion of graduate students with teaching duties is increasing (i.e., approximately 52% of all doctoral recipients and 60% of those in the social sciences held teaching assistantships in 1993; Thurgood & Clarke, 1995). Generally speaking, teaching assistants instruct numerous college students, which makes TA training critical.

Unfortunately, within psychology, many TAs either are not prepared or poorly prepared for their first teaching experience (Meyers, 2001; Prieto & Meyers, 2001; Prieto, 2004). A review of national surveys of psychology departments and psychology TAs (cf. Lumsden, Grosslight, Loveland, & Williams, 1988; Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Mueller, Perlman, McCann, & McFadden, 1997; Meyers & Prieto, 2000; Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rogrigue, 2002) indicates clearly that 15% to 30% of TAs have not had the benefit of TA training before undertaking their duties in the classroom.

In assessing the cost for failing to provide psychology TAs with adequate training, Prieto (2002) listed several potential concerns and consequences. Overlooking training ignores the fact that teaching assistantships are the foundation of future faculty development for the psychology professorate. For example, Meyers and Prieto (2000) reported that over 60% of their psychology TA sample expressed an interest in an academic career; yet,

approximately 30% had received either no training for or supervision of their teaching duties. The skills and sense of efficacy toward teaching acquired by psychology TAs during assistantships prepares them for what they will find in the classroom as future faculty. A failure to train psychology TAs may mean that some will embark on academic careers with a sub-optimal grasp of effective classroom teaching. In addition, those TAs who show great promise as classroom teachers and who plan to enter academia, but who do not receive good training and support, may become demoralized and lose interest in teaching without the guidance to help them through the difficulties that classroom teachers inevitably face (Prieto, 1995, 2001). Failing to train psychology TAs also increases the probability of a less than optimal experience for the undergraduate students they teach but may also mean that those same undergraduate students will be less well prepared when they enter advanced courses within the psychology major, and ultimately, graduate training (Prieto, 2002).

What is Being Done?: Current TA Training in Psychology

Investigators evaluating TA training in psychology programs have concluded that the consistency and quality of such training varies greatly, from no training whatsoever to comprehensive, curriculum-based training as a psychology educator (e.g., Prieto, 2004). Prieto and Meyers (1999) reported data obtained from TAs in 116 psychology departments across the country and noted that psychology TA training (such as course work, workshops, etc.), involves about 22 clock hours (Meyers & Prieto, 2000); initial TA training tends to have poor or non-existent follow-up (Rushin, De Saix, & Lumsden, 1997); many TAs reported that they do not take full advantage of TA training opportunities; and department chairpersons indicated that TA training is not mandatory but often only recommended (Meyers & Prieto, 2000). Course work on the teaching of psychology has begun to emerge as a forum for training psychology TAs, but even this format is not yet widely used. Buskist et al. (2002) surveyed 236 psychology departments regarding the prevalence of course work to prepare psychology TAs for classroom duties. A total of 98 departments, fewer than half of the

number that responded to the survey, reported offering a course on the teaching of psychology.

Prieto (2004) summarized recent research on psychology TA training with respect to common methods used and topics covered. Focusing on five key articles published in the journal *Teaching of Psychology* across the past 15 years (Buskist et al., 2002; Lowman & Mathie, 1993; Lumsden et al., 1988; Meyers & Prieto, 2000; Mueller et al., 1997), Prieto distilled the information in these works into the two general categories of (a) training methods employed and (b) topics covered in TA training. Typical training methods included orientation programs, workshops, a course on teaching, observations of teaching, and microteaching exercises. Typical topics included developing and presenting syllabi, labs, and lectures; evaluating and promoting student learning; managing problematic student behavior; ethics; and awareness of campus resources. As to general themes, training methods use an apprenticeship or modeling approach (e.g., TAs watch faculty and have faculty watch or supervise them); TAs actively practice and receive feedback on actual teaching skills (e.g., microteaching); and students learn about teaching (e.g., course work, orientations, workshops, seminars). General themes within topics covered appear to be pedagogical issues (e.g., developing syllabi); evaluative issues (e.g., grading); and networking and resource issues (e.g., TA awareness of campus resources available to both themselves and students).

How Effective is Training?: Outcome Evidence for TA Training in Psychology

Early research into the general area of TA training, although atheoretical, showed clear evidence that skill training helped to improve TA classroom performance (see Abbott, Wulff, & Szego, 1989 for a review). Later efforts demonstrated that training enhances TAs' sense of self-efficacy toward teaching, which in turn can lead to improved classroom performance (Prieto & Altmaier, 1994). Prieto and Meyers (1999), in examining national data from psychology TAs, found that those who received training possessed a greater degree of self-efficacy toward teaching than those not trained.

However, such studies have examined training as a single entity and typically operationalized it dichotomously (TAs received training or did not) or by number of hours of training received (versus assessing outcome by type of training). Yet to be completed is a comprehensive and thorough program of examining the most potent ingredient of TA training programs or most effective training methods. Also interesting to note is that psychology TAs tend to receive training that is more reflective of vicarious learning bases (e.g., observation) than performance learning bases (e.g., practice lectures). Because self-efficacy theory posits that the greatest levels of self-efficacy are acquired through performance accomplishments (cf. Bandura, 1986), psychology TAs are likely to benefit most from training methods that more proximally address and involve actual experience with the skills they will need in teaching. A prime example of this type of training method is microteaching (Allen & Ryan, 1969), especially when coupled with videotape feedback.

Maslach, Silver, Pole, and Ozer (2001) discussed the utility of using microteaching to train TAs in classroom instruction. As typically practiced, TAs develop a short presentation of class materials, then they teach this material to fellow TAs, and finally, TAs receive feedback from their TA colleagues, TA supervisors, and (often) videotaped feedback of their performance. After assimilating feedback, TAs then rework both the content and their teaching methods and immediately re-present the material to their fellow TAs. Maslach et al. (2001) stressed that microteaching allows TAs to develop economy in presentation, explore different teaching styles, and shape changes in teaching over repeated self-examination. Maslach et al. (2001) asserted that microteaching offers TAs superior, concrete, proximal, performance-based feedback.

Prentice-Dunn and Pitts (2001), in their review of research examining the use of videotape feedback to train TAs, found this method to have solid empirical support. These authors use the technique in their own psychology teaching practicum. Their students reported that watching themselves teach on video was an invaluable tool in understanding their teaching styles and to maximize their effectiveness in the classroom.

What's Next?: The Future of TA Training in Psychology

The Teaching of Psychology course shows great promise as a primary venue to impart TA training. Buskist et al. (2002) showed that a great many of the methods and topics typically covered in a component fashion in TA workshops or orientations can all be integrated into the teaching of psychology course. A course-based vehicle for TA training provides several benefits for TAs, including transcript credits and evidence of training, a longer-term period of training (e.g., an academic term versus a brief workshop), and a time-efficient and pragmatic centralization of training. Integrating a TA training course into a curriculum allows departments and students to regard teacher training as a valuable and legitimate part of educating psychologists, a perspective that has yet to permeate all psychology departments, especially those at research-intensive universities (Meyers, 2001).

However, as judged from current reports, it is difficult to determine what particular training methods and topics are necessary, efficient, or effective in assisting psychology TAs to become effective classroom instructors. Investigators need to begin tying TA training interventions to classroom outcomes that relate both to student learning as well as to TAs' development as psychology educators.

Another area for improvement lies in moving toward better understanding effective pedagogical processes in training psychology TAs. This issue calls for moving beyond a focus on training techniques and topics, and requires TA trainers and research investigators to have a more global understanding of the longer-term developmental processes that govern TAs' skill and identity acquisition as psychology educators.

Conclusions

The increasing focus on the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g., the Preparing Future Faculty initiative through the APA Education Directorate) clearly indicates signs that academic psychology realizes that training is necessary to produce effective classroom teachers (cf. Boyer, 1990; Halpern et al., 1998; McKeachie, 2002). As psychology keeps pace with this evolving educational perspective, graduate psychology students who receive teacher

training along with their specialty area, research, and applied training will likely have an advantage in the marketplace (cf. Gaff, 1994). Because most psychology educators work outside of the research extensive settings in the academy (e.g., community colleges, four-year private and public schools), effective teaching skills have been and will continue to be critical to merit, tenure, and promotion (cf. Meyers, 2001). As a discipline, psychology is beginning to view the creation of psychology educators as truly on par with the traditional value placed on creating outstanding researchers and practitioners.

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