

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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The Associates in Teaching Program: Graduate Student Development, Faculty Renewal, and Curricular Innovation

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Introduction

Conflicting goals define university life. Luckily, conflicting goals sometimes inspire creative innovation. The Associates in Teaching Program is one such example.

At research universities, administrators must balance the needs of graduate students and those of undergraduate students – graduate students need practice teaching to prepare them for faculty life; undergraduates (and their parents) would prefer instruction by more experienced faculty members. Nearly all universities meet the needs of graduate students through teaching assistant positions in labs and sections. Some go further by allowing graduate students to teach independent courses, which benefits most graduate students, but frustrates others who feel that excessive teaching primarily serves the institution. This practice can also annoy undergraduates, and invite scorn among the general public. Other universities, such as mine, have chosen to limit independent teaching by graduate students due to a long-held commitment to using faculty rather than graduate students in undergraduate classes. While laudable in its intentions, this approach, some would argue, limits graduate students' preparation for faculty life and hinders their chances on the academic job market.

In an attempt to find a solution to this dilemma, we have piloted program called *The Associates in Teaching (AT) Program* that creates a new, transformative role for graduate students –that of co-instructor. Through the AT program, graduate students co-design and co-teach undergraduate

classes with a faculty partner. The program, now in its third year, is growing in popularity, and our assessments indicate that AT courses are creating an exceptional teaching experience for graduate students and their faculty partners, and a unique learning opportunity for undergraduates. In addition, the program seems to be encouraging the development of courses that enrich our curriculum. This essay reflects on some of what we've learned by assessing this program.

Gathering Data about the Program

Our assessment approach is formative and we use six data sources to learn more about the program: 1) an end-of-semester survey to graduate ATs; 2) a single-question survey to faculty partners; 3) on-line course evaluations from undergraduates; 4) syllabi, course materials, and websites; 5) an in-class observation and consultation in every course; and 6) focus-group conversation among AT participants.

Graduate Students and the AT Experience

In their feedback, graduate students describe AT teaching as categorically different from serving as a Teaching Assistant. One AT described the co-teaching experience as, "a game changer" -- referring not only to the depth of the experience but to his new-found confidence regarding the job market. Other ATs describe similar transformations, stating that they feel fundamentally changed as teachers -- they look back on being a TA as a former teaching identity that they have moved beyond. Even ATs who have previously taught independently using a pre-established syllabus, describe this shift. It seems that for ATs, building a course from conception to final class is an important developmental process that is heightened by the close partnership with a faculty partner. Our evidence suggests that faculty/graduate student partnerships create, in many cases, a more significant experience of academic maturity and satisfaction than TAing or even teaching alone. Simply explained, teaching in full partnership with a valued mentor, is more transformative than teaching in isolation. Given our belief in Ph.D. apprenticeship, this makes perfect sense, and is also consistent with the literature on co-teaching (Letterman and Dugan, 2004; Ramsden, 1992). It should be noted that the benefit comes with a cost. Most graduate students report that the AT is no easy gig. Most ATs report working harder and spending more time than anticipated, despite the fact that we alert them to this likelihood.

The Faculty and the Curriculum

Many of our faculty members love to mentor and teach, yet even among this exceptional group of scholars, the experience of co-developing and co-teaching a course with a graduate student is, according to our assessment, extraordinary. Our preliminary review of the literature had suggested a positive faculty response (Roth & Tobin, 2002), but we remain happily surprised at how our faculty describe the AT experience. More than a few have stated, unequivocally, that it was their “best teaching experience”, ever. For many faculty members, ATs bring exposure to vastly different approaches to familiar topics. For others, prolonged exposure to a graduate co-teacher is the source of satisfaction. Most have never really co-taught before, and they revel in the level of engagement, feedback, and conversation.

Feedback suggests that our faculty members are seizing opportunities to work with graduate students whose perspective is divergent, and who bring new pedagogical approaches to the course. There is reciprocal mentoring going on here. The AT program creates renewal in faculty teaching that occurs, more or less, within normal responsibilities. Like their graduate student partners, faculty members report spending more time on these courses than anticipated, though most (not all) admit that unbridled enthusiasm, rather than some insidious quality of co-teaching, is the culprit here. For many faculty members who have been teaching “solo” throughout their careers, co-teaching in the AT program is enthralling.

Regarding the effect on the curriculum, we had not anticipated the creative mix of courses this program would inspire. Because these courses are topically and pedagogically creative, they produce new experiences for undergraduates, and important enhancements to the curriculum. Here are a few examples:

Appropriate Technology for the Developing World: The AT pair create a studio course in which students design and build machines that function in places with limited technological infrastructure.

Science Writing: A faculty member in English and graduate student in Chemistry team up to co-teach science writing to undergraduates.

Undergraduate students

Our assessment of student evaluations of AT courses is consistent with the literature (Benjamin 2000; Kimberly & Dugan 2008), which shows consistent high marks from undergraduates for co-taught courses. How do we explain this? First, they get two great teachers instead of one. One student said, “I think having two perspectives on such complicated, multifaceted films really added to the course overall.” Second, when co-teachers grapple with perspectives and interpretations, students get to peek behind the curtain of academic discourse, and see graduate students, who are close to them in age, actively engaged in critical discourse. I have observed as animated dialogue between co-teachers spills out and envelopes everyone in the class, blurring the line between professor and learner, and providing an exhilarating experience for undergraduates. As one undergraduate wrote, [having two professors] “contributed to the feeling of sharing and community that I dug in the class.”

Administrative structures

The AT program is administered by the teaching center for the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. In this pilot phase, the number of AT courses is limited, so the selection process is competitive. AT pairs submit proposals through their academic departments to a committee of deans and faculty. Six, twelve, and sixteen courses have been selected for years one, two and three, respectively.

The teaching center provides support to the AT pairs. Consultation is available at all phases of the process: during the semester proposals are due, the Center hosts a lunch where experienced and aspiring AT teachers can meet and talk about the process, and we provide consultation on conceptualizing the course proposal; after acceptance, a consultant meets with each team to provide guidance on the co-teaching process, connect them to other campus resources, and pass on wisdom from former AT pairs; once the course is up and running, this same consultant visits each of the courses, and talks with each pair about the process of co-teaching and anything else that comes up in the observation. Finally, the consultant collects assessment data, reviews evaluations by students, and makes improvements to the program. Based on recent feedback, for example, we will provide additional opportunities for co-teachers to meet with other AT pairs during the semester they are teaching.

Conclusion

What started out as an attempt to solve a problem -- namely, the creation of a substitute teaching opportunity for graduate students wanting to teach their own classes -- has turned out to be significantly more. The AT experience, which pairs graduate students and faculty members as co-teachers, seems to have created an entirely new and deeply satisfying teaching and learning experience. Far from being a mere accommodation, the AT program is proving to be an innovation with the capacity to redefine the end stages of graduate teaching development and to reassert the classroom as a focal point for the multilayered community of scholars unique to research universities.

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