

Graduate Students as Independent Instructors: Seven Things to Know about Teaching Your Own Course while in Graduate School

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ABSTRACT Despite being responsible for a large percentage of undergraduate instruction, graduate students often receive little preparation for their first solo teaching assignments (J. D. Nyquist et al., *Change* 31 (3): 18, 1999). Furthermore, the existing literature on pedagogy fails to address the unique challenges faced by graduate students who are asked to serve as course instructors rather than teaching assistants. This article presents seven pieces of advice intended to better prepare the predoctoral graduate student to assume the role of the professor before assuming the title. By understanding the attitudes of undergraduate students toward graduate instructors, preparing in advance to handle the mistakes that novice teachers often make, and recognizing the correlation between outward confidence and student perceptions of instructor quality, graduate students can derive the most benefit from a stressful and time-consuming assignment. Most important, graduate instructors can learn to effectively manage the time spent on teaching duties to ensure that other responsibilities such as coursework, qualifying exams, and dissertation research do not suffer.

INTRODUCTION

Graduate students at Ph.D.-granting institutions are most readily identified with the role of the teaching assistant. Accordingly, quality published work is available to assist graduate students in learning this role (e.g., Webb 2005; Davis, Smith, and Smith 2002; Allen and Rueter 1990) in addition to mentoring by individual faculty and seminars in pedagogy as components of graduate coursework. However, it is becoming increasingly common for graduate students to teach courses independently, assuming the role of the professor rather than the apprentice. Two factors push graduate students to the front of the classroom in the early stages of their academic careers. First, both undergraduate enrollments and the number of courses offered by political science departments are growing, creating a need for instructors that cannot always be met by new faculty hires. Second, doctoral programs preparing graduate students for careers in academia recognize the value of independent teaching experience in the job market. Teach-

ing during graduate school offers benefits to both departments and graduate students.

Nonetheless, there are challenges unique to this responsibility from the perspective of the graduate student and a dearth of published work recognizing and addressing these issues. In fact, in its four decades of published articles on teaching in political science, neither this journal nor journals representing other social sciences have published a piece speaking specifically to the graduate student-as-instructor. Research has shown that despite their responsibility for a large percentage of undergraduate instruction, graduate students often receive precious little preparation for their first solo teaching assignments (Gaia et al. 2003; Nyquist et al. 1999; Lowman and Mathie 1993). This article presents seven pieces of advice to better prepare the predoctoral graduate student to assume the role of the professor before he or she assumes the title (or salary!). This article does not cover general topics of importance for the novice teacher such as constructing a syllabus, selecting textbooks, or developing methods of evaluation, as these topics are well-covered by extant literature on teaching (e.g., McKeachie and Kulik 1975; Johnson 1995; Lowman 1995). Instead, these tips are intended to assist graduate students in understanding the challenges of and expectations for teaching in the context of a Ph.D. program. Although no advice can change the fact that

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teaching will seem daunting to the uninitiated, with the right expectations, independent teaching can be a rewarding and valuable part of graduate student professional development.

1. ANTICIPATE AND UNDERSTAND STUDENT ATTITUDES

The professor in a college classroom commands a level of respect from undergraduates that the graduate instructor will not enjoy from the outset. This respect must be earned. Students may be disappointed or even angry to learn that they have paid tuition to be taught by an experienced professor and instead have been given a mere “trainee.” Students will see the graduate instructor, an individual who may be only slightly older than they are and similar in appearance, as a peer rather than an authority figure. If they see you as a peer, they will anticipate more lenient treatment. Students may believe that because you have recently been an undergraduate, you will be more empathetic and susceptible to excuses. In one memorable instance, a student expected me to excuse a missed assignment with the entreaty, “Come on, bro, you remember how it is when you party too hard, right?” It is inconceivable that students would make such a plea to a tenured professor, but they may feel entirely comfortable doing so to a twenty-something graduate student.

Preempt this behavior by taking great care to establish and maintain an image of professionalism and control in the classroom. Appearance counts. If you are only a few years older than your students, set yourself apart by avoiding the casual style of dress that graduate students notoriously adopt. Look like the students expect a professor to look. Additionally, while the title of “Professor” has yet to be earned, ask your students to refer to you with the appropriate title (i.e., Mr., Mrs., or Ms.) rather than by your first name. This distinction will reinforce the fact that you may be less intimidating than a professor, but you are not a peer.

The best defense against student expectations is to be positive and present yourself with supreme confidence, even though your initial teaching experiences will be plagued with nervousness and doubts about your own competence. Instructor self-efficacy—your opinion of your ability to teach effectively—is an important component of how you will be perceived by students. In short, success in the classroom starts with confidence (Eison 1990), and graduate instructors need to work harder than professors to build and maintain it. Nothing builds confidence like diligent preparation. Prepare detailed, well-researched outlines of lectures, classroom activities, and written assignments. Practice your lectures either alone or to an audience of colleagues. Mentally prepare yourself to look and act more professional and confident than you will be during your first teaching experiences.

2. PREPARE IN ADVANCE FOR YOUR MISTAKES

As a graduate student with little or no teaching experience, your students will expect you to make mistakes. They are correct; you will. You will plan lectures that last an hour and find that they last only 40 minutes. You will be asked a question to which you do not readily know the answer while dozens of eyes stare at you expectantly. You may end up deviating from the carefully planned schedule in your syllabus. Some of your attempts to foster discussion in the classroom will be unsuccessful. The key to preventing these errors from affecting your overall performance is to spend time planning and practicing how you will deal with inevitable

rookie mistakes. Prepare a backup topic or an in-class activity of 15 to 20 minutes that can quickly be implemented if a lecture runs short. Schedule flexible time in your syllabus to compensate for topics that take more time than expected. Practice delivering a calm response—“I don’t know that off the top of my head. Can I find the answer and e-mail you after class?”—to questions that catch you off guard. Most important, in the same way that a comedian cannot linger over a poor joke, a teacher cannot dwell on mistakes. Inform the class of how you will address the problem and move on rather than drawing attention to something that does not go as planned. Show that you are as calm and collected as a more experienced professor, even if you feel anything but.

3. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES

It is tempting to see our first teaching opportunity as a chance to create and conduct our dream course. Even if the assignment is to teach an established course such as introductory American government, there is great temptation to disregard the existing curriculum and strike out on one’s own. This is a poor strategy. The first teaching experience is inevitably overwhelming, especially for a second- or third-year graduate student who may not feel well prepared to teach. Remember that it is possible to use an existing syllabus that has been successfully used by faculty members in the department while still personalizing the course to make it feel like your own. Colleagues can also provide assignments, in-class activities, and exam questions that can be used directly or modified to meet your specific objectives.

Although budding academics may recoil instinctively from this type of “pedagogical plagiarism,” creating all aspects of a course from scratch is neither required nor expected. In many cases, it will be actively discouraged. Just as reading others’ research can help you develop your own, reviewing course materials used by your peers can spark new questions, ideas, and teaching methods. Starting from scratch may seem like a good idea, but it is necessary to master walking on level ground before attempting to climb a mountain. No matter how much time you expect teaching to take, it will take more. Do not increase your burden by attempting to reinvent the wheel or failing to take advantage of the resources available from other instructors.

A great way to put your personal stamp on a course is through the creative use of new tools and technology in the classroom. These resources are one area in which youth and inexperience can be an asset. You can approach your course without years of accumulated habits and with an open mind about ways to enhance the classroom experience. Compared to your senior colleagues, you may be more adept at improving lectures with visual aids through the use of tools such as Web-based simulations, podcasting lectures, and online course management programs like Blackboard. You are familiar with these tools, as are your students. Take advantage of that situation.

Because you are still a student and have been an undergraduate recently, you have fresh memories of the characteristics of poor teaching: disorganization, a lack of clear objectives, monotonous lecturing, bad PowerPoint presentations, and distant or aloof teachers. The qualities that you disliked as a student are likely to be quite similar to what your students will dislike. At the beginning of your career, you are in a great position to avoid making the same mistakes by getting creative and finding effective uses for all of the tools available to the college teacher today.

4. KNOW WHEN TO SAY WHEN (TO HELPFUL COLLEAGUES)

Aside from providing syllabi, exams, and reading lists, faculty members can be an invaluable source of advice to the new teacher. Do not dismiss their opinions even when your first reaction is to disagree. However, being a first-time teacher is not unlike being a new parent. You will become a recipient—and often an unwilling one—of copious amounts of advice from some of your academic elders and graduate student colleagues. You will be besieged with tips on writing exams, lecturing, choosing textbooks, and every other aspect of teaching a course. Consider the wisdom of experienced teachers with an open mind while remembering that you need not accept all of it. There is a point at which additional advice, however well meant, is unhelpful and can lead you to second-guess decisions you have already made. Politely and tactfully thank your helpful colleagues without reopening discussion of all aspects of the course for revision. Have confidence in the decisions you make and avoid the time trap of repeatedly revising them. Even colleagues with good intentions can undermine your confidence by offering additional advice after you have carefully considered the options and made decisions about the core aspects of your course.

5. AVOID ACTING

Lacking confidence in our skills, many of us assume that the best way to be a good teacher is to imitate one. We see good teachers among our colleagues or recall our favorite college professors and set out to teach as they do. In other words, we attempt to play a character in the same way that an actor does. This approach is a recipe for disaster. What works for your colleagues or great professors from your undergraduate years will not necessarily work for you. Their senses of humor are not the same as yours, nor are their strengths as lecturers or facilitators of discussion. It is important to find your own voice, which is a process that involves trial and error. Furthermore, the teaching styles that appealed to you as a future Ph.D. student will not necessarily be effective in reaching a diverse audience of undergraduates. Heppner reminds graduate students that as undergraduates, “you were comfortable with the life of the mind and enjoyed the challenges of using your brain. That description may not fit all of your [students]. What might be a terribly appealing approach to a committed student might well be a turnoff or even a threat to a student who views college ... as a place to earn [his or her] union card” (Heppner 2007, 12). The student body at your undergraduate institution may be vastly different than the one you will be teaching as a graduate student. Identifying the teaching methods that are appropriate for your audience is preferable to assuming that pedagogical strategies are universally applicable.

A thorough review of over 80 years of quantitative research on undergraduate perceptions of instructor quality reveals that there is no single profile of a “good” teacher (Young and Shaw 1999; Algozzine et al. 2004). As McKeachie (1997, 1218) notes, “Effective teachers come in all shapes and sizes.” Although certain basic traits such as respect for students and fair grading should obviously be common to all teachers, your teaching style will ultimately be unique to your personality and strengths (Grasha and Yangarber-Hicks 2000). As fondly as we may recall our class with Professor Wonderful during our college days, it is neither possible nor desirable to replicate that experience for our students by attempting to be someone else in the classroom.

6. PRIORITIZE AND PROTECT YOUR OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES

Teaching while in graduate school creates significant time management challenges. The average graduate student may have to juggle a nearly overwhelming slate of responsibilities—simultaneously teaching a course, taking three or four graduate seminars, studying for qualifying exams, and making progress on a dissertation or dissertation proposal, all while attempting to lead a normal family and social life. It is important to devote significant time and energy to teaching, but for new teachers, this focus can often come at the expense of other equally important responsibilities. Counter this imbalance by exercising self-discipline and strong organizational skills. Create a schedule with a limited but realistic amount of time for teaching responsibilities.

Several resources provide a useful set of guidelines for budgeting time in teaching a large college class such as a typical introductory American government course (Heppner 2007; Curzan and Damour 2006). Remember that each hour of class time requires a bare minimum of one or two hours of preparation to create a lecture that meets the basic standards of professionalism. Developing *good* lectures involves a preparation-to-lecture ratio greater than four to one (Heppner 2007, 14–25). Designing a syllabus, writing exams and other assignments, and grading all consume time at a similar rate. While most first-time teachers have experience with grading as teaching assistants, novices should note that a minimum of 10 to 15 minutes is required for reading and providing thoughtful written commentary on each essay exam or research paper. Resources are available to help graduate students develop more efficient grading skills without sacrificing accuracy (Walvoord and Johnson Anderson 1998).

Remember that the process of teaching resembles matter in a gaseous state; it expands to fill whatever space you provide for it. Confine work on your teaching duties to the designated times and use the remainder of your schedule for your academic work. Do not lose sight of the fact that your primary responsibility as a graduate student is to execute a dissertation. Developing good college teaching skills will accomplish little on the job market, even at teaching-oriented universities, unless they are accompanied by a Ph.D. and an active research agenda.

7. MAKE IT FUN

Onwuegbuzie et al. (2007) found that although the subject is addressed by few, if any, teaching evaluation forms, enthusiasm is one of the most important predictors of how students perceive teaching. Baum (2002) notes, “When we think about enthusiasm in education, our concern is usually students’ enthusiasm for learning. I think that our own enthusiasm for teaching is even more critical.” Since a novice graduate student will likely make more teaching mistakes than a tenured professor, Baum’s point is particularly relevant. The beginning teacher will need to rely on energy and enthusiasm in lieu of experience and expertise. Students can be harsh, but they can also be very forgiving of mistakes from a teacher whom they perceive to be exerting his or her strongest effort. Projecting a positive attitude and getting excited about teaching does not just improve the students’ experience in your course; learning how to have fun with teaching also makes the job easier on *you*.

Evidence suggests that the culture of Ph.D. programs socializes graduate students to emphasize research and treat teaching as an unwelcome burden on their time (Atwell 1996; Nyquist et al.

1999). But political scientists who enter academia already prioritizing research can hardly expect to avoid teaching duties throughout their careers. Even the most teaching-averse members of the profession must recognize the problems that phrases like “indifferent” or “terrible” on teaching evaluations will create during tenure and promotion reviews. Spending time early in your career to discover how you can make teaching enjoyable is a good investment. You will develop lasting habits during your initial teaching experiences (Boice 1992), so it makes sense to ensure that these habits are constructive. If you struggle to get excited about teaching, move away from the traditional lecture format. There are comprehensive resources available in print (e.g., Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1998; Meyers and Jones 1993) and online¹ that describe dozens of active learning exercises for the college classroom. Although the literature on pedagogy lacks consensus on the greater efficacy of active learning versus lecturing (Omelicheva and Avdeyeva 2008), using the former can do wonders to perk up a class that is becoming dull. The archives of *PS* also provide numerous examples of active learning exercises for specific courses and topics in political science (e.g., Kelle 2008; Raymond and Sorensen 2008; Wallin 2005; Occhipinti 2003; Ciliotta-Rubery and Levy 2000; Alex-Assensoh 2000).

CONCLUSION

It is becoming common for graduate students to be asked to assume the role of professors in the classroom, yet they often do so with minimal preparation. The literature on pedagogy in political science and academia as a whole is extensive, but it fails to address the challenges unique to this common scenario for graduate students in Ph.D. programs. My motivation for writing this article is the fact that I learned several of these lessons the hard way—by failing to recognize these important points before stepping in front of a class for the first time. Trial and error can be effective, but with the right preparation, your first teaching experience can involve more of the former than the latter. The seven pieces of advice described here are intended to help better prepare future graduate students who are asked to assume the role of a professor before their trek toward a Ph.D. is complete. ■

NOTES

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1. Professors Donald Paulson and Jennifer Faust at California State–Los Angeles maintain an online database entitled “Active Learning for the College Classroom,” <http://www.calstatela.edu/dept/chem/chem2/Active/>.

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