

This "Teaching Note" is prompted by Gerald Benjamin's "On Making Teaching 'U'" (*P.S.*, Winter, 1971). Benjamin, it seems to me, overemphasizes formal entries in university catalogs in asserting that not enough is being done about preparing teachers of political science. While it is unclear where he stands with respect to the formal offerings he cites ("The course descriptions speak for themselves"), I get the feeling that he downgrades some efforts being made at a number of institutions—granted, an insufficient number—to work with graduate students as they are teaching. While they may not be reflected in catalogs, such efforts exist and bear at least the potential for helping the incipient teacher get his bearings. The following is offered in the interest of providing some balance to the picture Benjamin presents and of sharing one school's experience.

Beginning in September, 1969, the Department of Government at Southern Illinois University/Carbondale created the position of Supervisor of Teaching Assistants. Most of the Department's more than a dozen Teaching Assistants are employed in a basic American Government course. The professor holding the supervisory position teaches a large lecture section each term and receives either a slight course reduction or the services of a Research Assistant as recompense for his work. His task involves directly supervising discussion group leaders connected with his own lecture section of the course (one of two each term); supervising senior teaching assistants who are in charge of their own "independent" sections of the same course; running a "Teaching Seminar," a non-credit meeting of all the T.A.'s which meets two-three times per academic quarter; and consulting with the other professor (one each term) teaching a large lecture section, who supervises and evaluates his own discussion group leaders. In addition, he assists the Chairman in assignment of T.A.'s.

Supervision of his own discussion group leaders and of the T.A.'s with their own sections involves some of the same tasks.

These include observing their teaching performance and conferring with the T.A. after each such observation and checking on the grading of exams and term papers. In the case of those with "independent" sections, the work further involves "clearing" syllabi and paperback volumes for use in the course, as well as term paper assignments and examinations before they are given. With his own discussion group leaders, it means involving them in the planning for the course, including the selection of supplementary reading materials, if assignments are made early enough, and definitely involves "clearing" their proposals for what they plan to do during the term in the discussion sections they teach.

The notion of "clearance" goes to the heart of the program. It would be possible for the supervising professor to *tell* T.A.'s what they would have to do, something which would certainly create uniformity between sections of the same course which undergraduates sometimes claim they want. However, it most assuredly would not assist the T.A.'s in the process of learning how to teach. Therefore, the supervisor has used what might be called "autonomy under supervision." The T.A.'s are asked to carry out initial planning, such as choice of reading materials and writing of exams or exam questions, as well as grading of exams and papers themselves, but to bring in their proposals and finished work for checking. This provides an opportunity for one with more experience to examine their work and to ask questions about why the Teaching Assistant wishes to do something a given way or why he has arrived at one grade rather than another. The assumption is that those teaching will develop habits of work and a conscious approach to their teaching which will carry over when they leave the supervision of the program.

The "Teaching Seminar" is primarily an opportunity to discuss problems which have arisen in connection with teaching. Sometimes

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the T.A.'s themselves raise questions; sometimes it is the supervising professor who does so, including matters which he has discovered as he has observed the T.A.'s teaching. Course objectives—"What are we trying to do?"—are discussed, as are reasons for variation in student performance and ways of "getting a course off the ground." The perennial question of one's obligations as a teaching assistant as against one's obligations as a graduate student is discussed at length—as a problem of conflicting obligations which does not disappear when graduate work is finished. In addition, the supervising professor introduces feedback from the "Class Council," a group of student representatives from the various sections of the course, with which he meets twice a term; student queries and complaints serve as a basis for some discussions. Criteria on which T.A.'s might be rated are discussed, as a basis for showing the variety of dimensions at which a teacher must look when considering his own work. Standard pedagogical questions like "What is the best type of exam?" and "What type of term paper is most meaningful?" are often debated. No one contends that the matters discussed are earthshaking or that proposed solutions are terribly new or original. What is crucial is that some of the matters may not have been faced openly before in a systematic fashion (perhaps differentiating it from bullpen discussions) and in a guided session in which those *actively involved in a work situation* share their views. The immediacy of the situation makes the discussion more useful. (The faculty participating in these seminars have learned a great deal as well, as they are reminded of matters which they may have come to take for granted.)

One might ask what the results of such a program have been. Because 1970-71 is only the second year of the endeavor, with a different professor having supervised the operation in each of its years, it is clearly may not be welcomed), in higher education, However, a number of the T.A.'s can be seen to have improved in their classroom performance on the basis of matters pointed

out to them after observation. (The observer's advantage is that he can figure out what the T.A. *should have said* while the T.A. is *wondering what he must say next*. The supervisor can serve as an alter ego, standing back and asking what might have been done to make the class better.) Some teaching improvement might have come with experience in any case, but some of the T.A.'s have noted that they were unaware of the matters pointed out to them. Some, with earlier full-time teaching experience, have indicated that they wished someone had observed and worked with them earlier so that they had not acquired "bad habits" and so they could have sooner found a "handle" on problems like grading objectively. Others seem to be indifferent to the program.

This last comment requires an observation for those who might be interested in starting such a program where one has not existed before. Particularly where T.A.'s have operated with no supervision or in forced lockstep, resistance to a program of this sort will be felt, whether in the form of indirect hostile feedback about the supervisor or passive-aggressive behavior with respect to having to meet with the supervisor to go over grading practices. Where there has been no supervision, it will be resented by many; while primary and secondary school teachers have become accustomed to visits from principals and superintendents (even though the visits may not be welcomed), in higher education intrusions into the classrooms from Deans and Chairmen are intensely disliked, and T.A.'s may feel they should not be subject to such observation—even when it is done after notice that a visit will occur and when it is done well after the beginning of the term (to let the T.A. get his feet on the ground and establish rapport with his students). Where T.A.'s have operated in lockstep, they may flounder when asked to prepare syllabi (even for ten discussion group meetings) and may resist having to make initial decisions subject to review, instead of being told what to do. Yet these problems may be largely transitional ones. If T.A.'s are told, when they enter the Department or when they are granted

financial aid, that they will be expected to participate in a program which involves X, Y, and Z, including observations of their teaching, they may come to expect the presence of the observer (even if they never are entirely happy with his visits) and come to take participation in such sessions as the Teaching Seminar as a matter of course.

Another problem, which may also dissolve with time, is that T.A.'s may be unused to being evaluated as teachers and being shifted from assignments of greater desirability to those of lesser desirability on the basis of the supervisor's evaluation of their performance, since Teaching Assistantships, as Benjamin points out, are usually given simply as a means of support. While ability to accept the fact that people have different skill levels may be a function of personality, it is also a function of the social environment and resistance may decrease over time.

A program of the sort described here does not involve massive amounts of manpower; one professor, who regularly teaches in a basic course, can add the work to his load without a great change in his work pattern. Other professors teaching the same or related courses may be asked to devote time to evaluating discussion group leaders working under them, but if one presumes they would in any case be supervising the work of those T.A.'s, this, too, does not involve a major change. To the extent large amounts of time are involved, compensation can be arranged. Undoubtedly more elaborate programs than the one described here can be developed and have been developed, but the program described here seems a fundamental, if minimal, way in which we as members of the political science professoriate can work with our graduate students to help prepare them for teaching without turning them over the Departments of Education, for which many of us have little taste.