

Graduate Student Peer Teaching Mentoring
In The Political Science Educator
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Teaching for the first time involves many personal and philosophical decisions, however, it is difficult for new teachers to have successful experiences as teaching assistants and instructors if they lack a background in pedagogy and exposure to teaching best practices. As new teachers, we grappled with many teaching-related decisions largely on our own. After several years of experience, we found ourselves holding ad-hoc conversations with graduate students about teaching-related issues, trying to address individual challenges as they arose. During the 2019 academic year, we decided to scale up our mentoring efforts by developing and running an informal peer teaching mentoring program for graduate students serving as teaching assistants with the goal of providing exposure to pedagogical practices and supporting new teachers. In this article, we review the structure of this peer mentoring program, successes and challenges, and suggestions for implementing this idea.

We designed our peer mentoring program with a focus on flexibility and broad accessibility. Graduate students at our university fulfill teaching assistant and instructional roles with extremely varied duties. Additionally, graduate students' pedagogical base upon which to build teaching skills is often limited: graduate teachers attend a half-day university-wide workshop provided by the university teaching center that mostly focuses on conduct and emergency policies. There is no department-sponsored graduate teaching training. Hence, our program needed to encompass a wide variety of teaching experiences and interests. We also wanted to appeal to all graduate teachers in the department with the hope that our mentoring meetings could be a productive space for both new and more experienced teachers.

After surveying the graduate teachers in our department, we planned one-hour monthly mentoring meetings. Topics ranged from working with undergraduate students, to developing learning goals, to crafting activities and lesson plans, to writing syllabi and designing new courses. Each session started with a short presentation containing basic pedagogical content, followed by small group activities and discussion. Our aim was to make pedagogical content immediately relevant. This meant having more detailed conversations regarding pedagogical theory with students individually and referring them to the university teaching center for advanced topics.

The program was successful at increasing graduate students' interest in teaching. We had high participation, which signaled that graduate teachers had immediate questions about their role and wanted practical advice on how to handle their teaching responsibilities. Graduate teachers felt that they gained familiarity with and appreciation for aspects of the art of teaching. For example, participants became comfortable writing learning-centered course goals and utilizing formative and summative assessments. Mentoring sessions also provided participants with some space to start thinking about their teaching philosophy. Simple concepts like the distinction between content and application-focused instruction helped participants reconceptualize their approaches to teaching. In addition, graduate teachers learned best practices for handling common scenarios like grade changes or stimulating inclusive class discussions.

Graduate teachers gained these pedagogical tools at an accessible level with others in the department. All of the examples and scenarios we used were either broadly about teaching or

specific to political science. For instance, we discussed the advantages and disadvantages of teaching purely substantive or purely methods courses. We considered how to incorporate data and methodological thinking into substantive courses and how to use theory to motivate learning statistical concepts.

Challenges arose when discussing specific strategies to employ in the classroom, as participants had a diverse set of teaching experiences. While some graduate teaching assistants hosted weekly subsections, others' graded essays and problem sets with maybe one teaching opportunity during the semester. On our side, these unequal opportunities in the classroom limited our ability to conduct observations and mini-teaching sessions. On the new teacher's side, the unequal experiences were not conducive to support or develop their broader interest in teaching. In teaching assignments with limited teaching opportunities, graduate teachers were unable to apply their new knowledge about how to craft learning objectives in a lecture and to evaluate whether their undergraduate students grasped the information.

At the most basic level, this was most graduate students' first experience on this side of a classroom. Without enrolling in a course on teaching or a workshop through the teaching center, they had no foundational pedagogical training on which to build. As such, graduate students were limited in their ability to help each other with more advanced pedagogical concepts. There seemed to be a mismatch in graduate students' underlying interest in teaching and their ability to learn about teaching within the department in a structured way.

Overall, graduate teachers expressed high levels of interest in the peer teaching mentoring program, and we were able to discuss some key issues that new teachers face. Our experience corroborates that of Joyce and Hassenfeldt (2020) who find that graduate teachers respond positively to peer teaching mentoring. In our case, peer mentoring seemed to help support graduate teachers, but peer mentoring alone cannot provide new teachers with all of the basic pedagogical tools that they need. With such a pedagogical foundation, peer mentoring can take on a much more active and involved role with teachers observing each other, doing round-robin teaching demonstrations, and designing scholarship of teaching and learning projects. Though there was interest in all of these topics during our peer mentoring sessions, we found it difficult to provide both the basics and to respond to teachers' interests in more advanced topics.

Our main suggestion, therefore, is to couple peer teaching mentoring with a department sponsored pedagogy training program (e.g., Trepanier 2017). Such a program can provide foundational pedagogy instruction upon which peer mentoring can build and it can do so in an environment designed for political science teachers. More general, optional workshops from the university teaching center can then serve to complement department-level programs by offering advanced pedagogical instruction. To be most effective, we suggest that department sponsored pedagogy training programs consist of several days of pedagogy workshops prior to the time graduate teachers begin teaching. Additional workshops should be offered throughout the year alongside peer mentoring. This program should be accompanied with carefully sequenced and designed graduate teaching experiences where each graduate teacher starts as an assistant in lower-level courses and is given more responsibilities over each semester of graduate teaching, culminating in an opportunity to co-teach a course. In essence, our experience with peer teaching mentoring suggests that mentoring graduate teachers is most effective when instructional pedagogy is fully integrated throughout the graduate program.

References

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