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ABSTRACT

The organization and activities of a three-day workshop for graduate teaching assistants is described. Emphasis is placed on the role of the teacher, class management, and successful teaching methods. The evaluation questionnaire used at the conclusion of the workshop is included in this descriptive report. (JD)

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COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP FOR GTAs

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COMMUNICATION WORKSHOP FOR GTAs

RATIONALE

Change Magazine Press' 1978 publication, A Handbook for Teaching Assistants: How to Succeed as a New Teacher, concludes that, despite some excellent programs (e.g., University of Michigan, Indiana University, University of California, Harvard, Stanford), the training of Teaching Assistants remains an area of general neglect. This is unfortunate in that one-fourth to one-half of the total undergraduate teaching load is currently handled by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) pursuing graduate degrees. As a result, many students get their only exposure to college level math, chemistry, communication, history, for example, from individuals mastering the art of teaching in a learn-via-grape-vine or sink-or-swim philosophy. Compounding this problem is the fact that the majority of GTAs eventually accept positions on academic staffs where their major function is teaching (only twenty percent of them will ever publish so much as a single article). The case for making meaningful teacher preparation and experience an integral part of graduate programs, then, is a solid one.

This paper focuses on one component of such a program--an orientation session held prior to teaching which we label "Communication Workshop for GTAs." As designed and taught, the workshop brings together GTAs from a variety of disciplines in an effort to: (1) reduce their anxiety about instructional duties, (2) introduce them to educational problems they will face and to methods and resources for coping with those problems, and (3) acquaint them with university resources that are available to them during their tenure as GTAs.

In developing the workshop, we operated from three basic assumptions concerning teaching:

1. Effective teaching is a complex skill that can be improved by providing guided practice and knowledge of results;
2. Since research suggests that there is no one "correct" way to teach, the GTA must have an opportunity to experiment with alternative instructional strategies so that s/he may discover those that work best for her/him and thus develop her/his own individual style of teaching; and
3. An instructor will be able to teach better if s/he is familiar with the research literature dealing with learning, motivation, organization and presentation of subject matter, individual differences in learning abilities, communication, and other materials related to classroom instruction.

STRUCTURE

While workshop length has varied, the most standard format involves three four-hour afternoon sessions. Typically, these sessions are conducted on the Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday afternoons preceding the first day of classes. The content of the workshop has also varied somewhat depending on workshop length and the nature of the workshop participants. The activities identified below, however, capture the flavor of the workshop.

While Wilbert J. McKeachie's Teaching Tips: A Guidebook for the Beginning College Teacher (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath) has been used as a text for the workshop, more often the workshop operates with the use of hand-outs.

Day 1

- Activity: Workshop overview. The overview is used to introduce the workshop staff and to describe the three assumptions undergirding the workshop. During this period participants' expectations and reservations concerning the goals of the workshop are discussed. Great care is taken to insure that the workshop staff serve as models for the teaching behaviors they describe.
- Activity: Brainstorming session on the data one should collect for an outstanding teaching award. Participants are asked to assume that they have been appointed to a college committee that will select individuals to receive outstanding teaching awards. The criteria identified by this procedure serve as a springboard for a discussion of the roles of a teacher.
- Activity: Self-assessment of teaching effectiveness. Participants are asked to complete a self-report inventory, using a five-point scale, and composed of both preparation items (e.g., test construction, specifying objectives) and process items (e.g., lecturing, responding to students). Responses to the inventory serve to focus participants on specific strengths and weaknesses. The concept that teaching is improved through a process of self-inquiry is stressed.
- Activity: Specifying objectives. Participants receive a handout based on Kibler, Barker, and Miles' Behavioral Objectives and Instruction (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1970) which defines objectives in terms of five elements. They are then asked to identify those elements in provided objectives and then to write objectives for the courses they will be teaching.
- Activity: Student roles. Participants receive descriptions of eight clusters of students identified by Mann and his colleagues in a study of students enrolled in four introductory psychology classes at the University of Michigan: compliant students, anxious-dependent students, discouraged workers, independent students, heroes, snipers, attention-seekers, and silent students (McKeachie). Strategies for identifying and coping with student differences are discussed.

--Activity: School and community environment. In order to provide GTAs with an awareness of the attitudes and opinions of students toward the university and toward the expectations for undergraduate teaching, small group discussions are organized between undergraduates and GTAs.

Day 2

--Activity: Classroom seating arrangement. Participants are presented with a description of seven classroom seating arrangements and asked to discuss those arrangements in terms of (1) comfort and (2) task achievement. Participants' conclusions are then compared with those of Syracuse University graduate and undergraduate students as reported by Feltler in the September 1971 issue of Psychology Today. The discussion then focuses on additional nonverbal elements which facilitate or inhibit learning.

--Activity: Teacher roles. Mann and his colleagues' six teacher roles (expert, formal authority, socializing agent, facilitator, ego ideal, and person) are discussed in terms of major goals, characteristic skills, and major source of student motivation. (McKeachie)

--Activity: Teaching strategies. Types of teaching methods (e.g., books, audiovisual aids, simulation and games, PSI) are discussed in terms of factors that condition their effectiveness.

--Activity: The first day of class. Expectations of both students and instructors for the first day are identified. Three functions are stressed: rapport, orientation, and motivation. This activity gives participants a method for structuring early class meetings.

--Activity: Asking questions. A handout defining level of question in terms of Blooms Taxonomy (knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) provides participants with definitions, examples, and typical question words. In small groups, they work at identifying and producing the various levels of questions.

--Activity: Response style. A handout describes ways in which teachers can respond to a student response or to a student initiation. In small groups, participants work at identifying and producing the various types of teacher response.

Day 3

--Activity: Classroom management style. Participants are asked to sort items concerning classroom management style (e.g., "My students call me by my first name," "I expect respect from students") into piles arranged from most characteristic to least characteristic. Group discussion focuses on style similarities and differences and the implications for classroom interaction.

- Activity: Teacher response to aggressive student behavior. Participants, in small groups, draw descriptions of aggressive student behavior (e.g., Object to having a final exam in the course. Criticize a value the instructor has stated s/he holds. Argue that it is unfair to let attendance influence the grade for the course) from a hat, provide a response to the situation, and then discuss the response with other members of the group. Potential responses are identified in terms of six categories: ignore it, become defensive, become hostile, remain neutral, provide sympathy and understanding, and interpret the student's hostility.
- Activity: Evaluation. Participants are asked to sort items concerning their attitudes toward evaluation (e.g., "Using a standard curve is the fairest way to evaluate students." "The amount of effort a student expends should be reflected in her/his evaluation.") into piles arranged from most ideal to least ideal. Group discussion focuses on similarities and differences and the implications for teaching/learning.
- Activity: Micro teaching. Micro teaching is a procedure used to give participants an opportunity to practice specific teaching skills in a simulated class environment. Participants are asked to present a seven minute lesson on a concept from their area of study. The lesson is videotaped so participants can observe their communication style and other members observe and note suggestions for commendation and improvement.
- Activity: Office counseling. Participants view open-ended videotape presentations of common office counseling situations (e.g., a student who has been absent from a number of classes and wants to know how to make up those absences; a student wants to take a final exam early so s/he can leave on a trip to Florida). The discussion focuses on such questions as: How would I handle this situation? Why? What other information would I need to know in order to handle it? What should I avoid doing? Where can I send them for more help?
- Activity: University resources. Participants are provided with a hand-out and a description of the various resources available throughout the university system that can aid them in their development as a teacher.
- Activity: Workshop summary. Participants are reminded of the philosophy of the workshop and encouraged to continue interaction with the workshop staff.

EVALUATION

Each time the workshop is offered, a brief questionnaire is administered to all participants at the last session. In addition to asking for open-ended comments, the following questions are used:

1. The workshop was well organized.
2. The time required for the workshop was: 5 = too much; 1 = too little

3. I feel that I can apply what I learned in this workshop.
4. I believe the information and skills I learned in this workshop will be useful in my future teaching.
5. The instructors were competent.
6. The group discussions contributed much to the workshop.
7. I would recommend this workshop to a friend.