“We are here for research but also for teaching”: Exploring the Impact of Graduate Student Teaching Assistantships on Professional Development and First-Time Teaching Experiences

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Abstract:

Twenty sociology graduate students attending a research-intensive university were asked, during semi-structured interviews, to reflect on their teaching assistant experiences and comment on the ways in which those experiences affected their first-time teaching. It was clear teaching assistantships could be used more effectively as opportunities for teaching and professional development. Specifically, participants indicated the value of teaching practice, seeing the ‘nuts and bolts’ of decisions in teaching, mentorship, constructive and meaningful evaluation, and assistantships aligned with research interests as ways to improve both teaching assistantships and first-time teaching experiences. The graduate students recognized the importance of pedagogical training to their professional development and yearn for opportunities to practice teaching and, importantly, to talk about teaching, formally and informally, in a safe, supportive community comprised of faculty and students alike. For them, teaching required a similar level of focus and professional development as research. Although the study was based on the experiences of sociology students, the findings may also be transferable and relevant to other disciplines and departments.

Key Words:
graduate students, teaching assistantships, professional development, first-time teaching, mentorship.

Acknowledgment

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Introduction

University administrators, faculty, and graduate student instructors (GSIs) face growing pressures and demands due to increased student enrolments, budgetary constraints, and larger class sizes. Graduate students are frequently encouraged and expected to gain teaching experience early in their academic careers. They face increased expectations and responsibilities in the classroom due to rising demands to act as primary instructors (having the sole responsibility for teaching a course) for undergraduate, and particularly introductory courses (Gardner & Jones, 2011). Consequently, GSIs increasingly shape the nature and quality of undergraduate education (Gardner & Jones, 2011), underlining the necessity of pedagogical training for these “new” educators.

Often graduate students’ first experiences with teaching take the form of graduate student teaching assistantships, which may or may not include actual teaching experience in the classroom (Kenny, Watson, & Watton, 2014; Park, 2004). In some cases, these assistantships are graduate students’ only teaching-related training, and they often occur within the context of large introductory classes that preclude the opportunity to actually “teach” a class, or even interact with undergraduate students in a classroom context.

Without adequate teaching preparation, the too-frequent results for graduate students are anxiety-ridden first-time teaching experiences as primary instructors (Smollin & Arluke, 2014). Arguably, the experience might be more stressful for graduate students than a beginning professor who has the benefit of some level of job security. Specific factors influencing anxiety in teaching included feeling unprepared, lack of confidence, problems with student-teacher interactions, and lack of support and guidance from faculty, mentors, and departments (Smollin & Arluke, 2014; Jungels, Brown, Stombler, & Yasumoto, 2014). These negative classroom experiences can impact instructors’ enjoyment of teaching, their self-concept as academics, and their willingness to work on improving their teaching practices in the future (Trautmann, 2008).

Undergraduates may also be impacted by these negative feelings and performances, which can limit their learning, overall enjoyment of the course, and interest in the discipline (Smollin & Arluke, 2014). Harvard University’s (2013) review of humanities education identified introductory courses as critical turning points with respect to students’ engagement in their education and interest in pursuing further courses in a given discipline. Yet, it is these courses that are so often taught by the least prepared and least experienced instructors. This study investigated the impact of teaching assistantships on first-time teaching experiences among a sample of graduate students in a sociology department at a research-intensive Canadian university.

Literature Review

Graduate school is the most important socialization for individuals pursuing an academic career (Hunt, Mair, & Atkinson, 2012; Kenny et al., 2014). It is during graduate school individuals learn what it means to be an academic, what is required to be a successful professor, how to navigate institutional research and teaching landscapes, and generally how to ‘fit in’ to the academic community (Austin, 2002;
Haggerty & Doyle, 2015; Kenny et al., 2014). One avenue for this kind of professional development is the teaching assistantship, available to many graduate students in Canadian post-secondary institutions. Ideally, teaching assistantships provide graduate students with teaching-related experiences that contribute to both their development as academics and should begin the process of developing informed pedagogical theory and practice.

Awareness of the importance of training graduate students to teach is not new. Pescosolido and Milkie (1995) argued sociology graduate programs were encouraging their students to “devalue excellence in teaching” (p. 348) by not providing adequate teacher training. They further argued this deficiency placed students at a disadvantage in their future occupations, whether inside or outside of the university community (p. 438). Has the situation changed since Pescosolido and Milkie (1995)? Evidence is mixed as to whether, or not, teacher training is “an idea whose time has come for some sociologists in some departments” (DeCesare, 2003, as cited in Blouin & Moss, 2015, p. 127, emphasis added). Learning has been at the “heart of the higher education enterprise, even at the most ambitious ‘research-led’ institutions” (Ramsden, 2003, cited in Starr & DeMartini, 2015, p. 71). Starr and DeMartini (2015) suggested “learning how to teach in post-secondary settings should also be at the heart of any higher education institution” (p. 71, emphasis in original).

Many institutions have recognized the need for research on graduate student teacher training as well as the development of programs, courses, workshops and other initiatives to reach this goal. Much of this research and development occurs within post-secondary settings where there is recognition sociology, specifically, should “reduce the gap between cultures of teaching and cultures of research” (Kain, 2006, p. 326) to respond to long-term changes in higher education and generally improve graduate student socialization. “It is hard to imagine a graduate program neglecting to offer a required course that teaches their graduate students how to do research, yet this regularly happens for teaching” (Blouin & Moss, 2015, p. 134).

One obvious example of existing opportunities to provide teacher training to graduate students are teaching assistantships. However, it seems these training opportunities too often fall short of providing real pedagogical training and experience for graduate students. Growing out of research indicating support for graduate student teacher training can positively impact first-time teaching experiences, institutions, departments, and faculty members have developed a number of initiatives to assist with graduate student teacher training. Pelton (2014) developed a 16-week student-centred graduate pedagogy seminar that lowered graduate students’ feelings of anxiety about teaching for the first time and increased confidence in their teaching abilities. After participating in Boman’s (2013) training workshop, graduate students significantly increased their self-efficacy and effective teaching behaviours and decreased their public speaking apprehension. In another study, college instructors who received pedagogical training exhibited significant improvements in their approaches to teaching and self-efficacy beliefs (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Nevgi, 2008). In response to this research, some institutions have attempted to improve the quality of teaching assistantships and teacher training among their graduate students.
Formal training may be effective in the development of teaching skills and an increase in feelings of efficacy, but other approaches can also contribute to professional development and confidence including consistent feedback from mentors, intrinsic motivation, and practical applications (Parker, Ashe, Boersma, Hicks, & Bennett, 2015). Related to this is the importance of practice lecturing for graduate student teaching skills development (Troop, Wallar, & Aspenlieder, 2015). Several studies have pointed to the importance of feedback from peers and faculty on practice teaching sessions (e.g., Parker et al., 2015; Pelton, 2014; Troop et al., 2015). Video-recording each graduate student’s teaching sessions and providing them with detailed feedback and evaluation on their practice teaching sessions has been shown to be particularly valuable (Pelton, 2014).

In addition to technical training, practice, and feedback, research points to the effectiveness of faculty mentoring in increasing graduate students’ confidence in teaching (Korpan, 2014; Pelton, 2014). A variation on faculty mentoring was described by Jungels et al. (2014) who reported on the role of a department designated Teaching Associate, an experienced graduate student who acted as a mentor, bridging mechanisms of formal and informal support for less experienced graduate student instructors. Grekul, Aujla, Eklics, Manca, York and Aylsworth (2018) found novice GSIs were more confident and more willing to teach again after receiving both formal training and informal peer support in their roles as graduate student instructors. While they found formal teacher training helpful (e.g., Writing Centre, University Teaching Services), they most highly valued team-oriented, informal learning opportunities in the form of peer and instructor support, weekly meetings, and regular email communication. Two-way learning that occurred between professor and graduate student instructor, revealing that mentorship can benefit both parties (Starr & DeMartini, 2015).

While informal mentoring and support is important for GSIs, an increasing number of post-secondary institutions across Canada recognize the need for graduate student professional development beyond the departmental level in the form of formalized pedagogical training. For example, Kenny et al. (2014) completed an in-depth review of 13 graduate certificate teaching programs in Canada. Most programs were offered over one to two years, focused on practical skills development and the scholarship of teaching and learning. They provided students with opportunities to create teaching dossiers and practice teaching sessions; upon completion students received a certificate and, in some cases, a transcript notation (Kenny et al., 2014).

Institutional responses to graduate student pedagogical development is growing, raising questions about the role of departments in providing teacher training to their graduate students. However, an institutional response should not eclipse the importance of department level training and support for teaching (Blouin & Moss, 2015). Teacher training and support at both institutional and departmental levels are conducive to the development of a stronger culture of teaching in post-secondary institutions. Furthermore, there are discipline-specific teaching techniques and practices from which graduate student instructors would benefit. Despite the value in offering teacher training to their students, “...many sociology departments have still not heeded Pescosolido and Milkie and others’ recommendation that all sociology graduate programs offer formal departmental teaching courses” (Blouin & Moss, 2015, p. 133).
It is within this context, we interviewed graduate students in a sociology department which is located in a research-intensive university, to get a sense of their experiences with teaching assistantships and first-time teaching. Specifically, our underlying research question was: “What factors in an instructor’s prior experiences as a TA have the most significant and positive impacts on practice once these former assistants become primary instructors?”

**Method**

We conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with graduate students in the sociology department. Seventeen of these graduate students had worked teaching assistants and as primary instructors, while three had worked as teaching assistants and ran a lab section of a course. Nineteen of the participants were in the PhD program and one participant was a Masters student. Of the twenty graduate students, eleven had experience working as teaching assistants in other post-secondary institutions. One of the graduate students we interviewed was supervised by the first author. This interview was conducted by the second author. No other students worked directly under the supervision of the first author. We interviewed graduate students to reach our objective of privileging the graduate student voice to express their experiences with teaching, teacher training, and professional development during their graduate programs. While much research in this area focuses on the kinds of approaches being developed and used to improve teacher training for graduate students, we wanted to explore how graduate students themselves thought about and approached their own pedagogical training and professional development.

Our sample was obtained through an email sent out to the sociology graduate student list-serve. Interested students who replied to the email were included in the study. Participants self-selected hence results may reflect feedback from students more interested in talking about teaching. However, we believe our interviews represented a wide range of opinions and experiences and provide insight into the teaching assistantship and first-time teaching experience. Interviews lasted between one and three hours, were audio-recorded, and then transcribed. Questions in our Interview Schedule were used to frame the interview discussion, with follow-up questions asked throughout the interviews (see Appendix A).

Coding and analyses were conducted by the authors, a tenured professor and a doctoral student in the same department. Interview transcripts were used to develop a coding framework from recurring themes. Interviews were semi-structured and allowed for open-ended responses. Responses to most questions could be coded and categorized thematically. Discrepancies in coding between authors were discussed and coding was refined until no new concepts emerged from the data. The final code structure was used to analyze interviews. Our coding allowed us to quantify how many participants brought up similar themes within the interviews (Kvale, 2007).

**Findings**

Our research demonstrated how teaching assistantships have the potential to provide graduate students with a solid foundation of experiences to assist them in their first time teaching experiences. However, teaching assistantships too often fall short of these foundational experiences. Our interviews revealed a number of critical insights
into the role of teaching assistantships in the professional development of graduate students in the department. Firstly, and not surprisingly, there was a good deal of anxiety among first-time graduate student teachers. In the study, participants identified feelings similar to those identified by Pelton (2014) and Prieto (2001) including general anxiety, nervousness, lack of confidence, and questions (doubts) about their self-efficacy. When asked what might help allay some of the anxiety-producing factors, and therefore what might help improve the teaching assistantship experience and make it more relevant for first-time solo teaching, participants emphasized,

1. the value of practical teaching experience in a safe environment,
2. assistance with the ‘nuts and bolts’ of teaching a course (syllabus construction, lecture preparation, assignment creation, grading, etc.),
3. the importance of constructive feedback (for teaching assistantships and first-time teaching experiences), and
4. teaching mentorship (see Table 1).

Our findings show there was, perhaps not surprisingly, an overlap between most valuable

**TA experiences and what might help improve those experiences**

**Table 1: Most Valuable Experiences Identified by Teaching Assistants in this Study (N=20)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most valuable experiences as a TA</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Running a tutorial or seminar</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watching a professor teach</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grading</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing behind the scenes</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Practice Teaching in a Safe Environment**

Participants reported anxiety about lecturing, feeling insecure, and dealing with authority in the classroom (e.g., standing their ground when it came to undergraduate students requesting higher grades). They reported lacking confidence. Related to this was a tendency for them to over-prepare for lectures and try to “envision every possible student scenario” when it came to lectures, student questions, and classroom dynamics.

The TA experience most frequently identified as the “most valuable” experience was the opportunity to lead a tutorial, seminar, or lab (see Table 1). All participants who had the opportunity to run a seminar or group identified this as their most valuable TA experience. Participants wanted more of these types of opportunities but, specifically,
giving a handful of guest lectures did not translate into thinking about how to plan a semester-long course. Researchers have reported many experienced faculty members wished they had received teacher training during their graduate education to avoid the many pitfalls of the ‘learn by doing’ approach (e.g., Britnell et al., 2010; Kenny et al., 2014, p. 3). Observing primary instructors teach (in situations where teaching assistants were required to attend lectures) was also identified as a valuable experience by participants and one of the ways they gained insight into planning for their own semester-long course. Participants did not, however, explicitly talk with professors about pedagogical decisions, and this was identified as a missed component of teaching assistantships.

Although only two respondents indicated first-time solo teaching for the same course that they TAed for would make the transition from graduate student to primary instructor somewhat smoother and would therefore improve their first-time teaching experience (see Table 2), four mentioned being assigned as TA to a course in their area of research interest would be beneficial (see Table 3), and should be incorporated into the TA-ship to improve the experience. Administratively, participants believed graduate student input into TA course assignments was critically important. However, they were careful to acknowledge inherent difficulties in trying to achieve some of these goals, particularly when trying to manage and satisfy the needs of graduate students, faculty members, and the availability of courses. Also significant was being assigned to a course related to one’s research and teaching area of interest (e.g., criminology students should be assigned to at least some criminology courses). This makes sense, since it is realistic to expect graduate students will probably teach in their area of research interest, “So I would say that would be one thing, that it would be nice to have the department connect with what your goals and aspirations are… and I understand you cannot get everything you want”. Only four of the seventeen participants who taught as primary instructors had worked as teaching assistants for the same course they first taught. Meaningful TA experiences provide opportunities to expose graduate students to the behind-the-scenes planning of a course.
Table 2: Improving First-Time Teaching Through Teaching Assistantships (N=20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What could have better prepared you for first-time teaching?</th>
<th>Number*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Running tutorials/teaching practice</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeing and discussing 'nuts and bolts' of teaching</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations about larger topics</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TA for class you teach</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to teach earlier in career</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running tutorials/teaching practice</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: What could have been incorporated into your TA-ship to make it better? (N=20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What could have been incorporated into your Teaching Assistantship to improve it?</th>
<th>Number*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice teaching/seminars</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incorporating TA into process – ‘nuts and bolts’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to course topic/research area</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring all PhD students have opportunity to be a teaching assistant before teaching</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More feedback</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidance around expectations for teaching assistants</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several respondents identified more than one area for improvement, so the number of responses does not equal the number of participants.

**Assistance with the ‘Nuts and Bolts’ of Teaching a Course**

Planning and structuring a semester-long course was something graduate students viewed as missing in their training (e.g., "seeing behind the scenes"; “seeing and discussing 'nuts and bolts' of teaching”). They suggested value could be gained from having, "workshops on preparing a lecture, syllabus, how to design a course, how to grade…”
In thinking about uncertainty in planning a semester-long course, one participant said:

Initially it seems like an insurmountable problem, how do I grade these people, how do we decide what is a fair grading scheme, how do we organize content? How do we focus on making sure they get certain tools from the course? Just thinking that way, it introduces you to that process as opposed to going in thinking I’m just going to find something I can present on every week and just do that until this awful experience is over.

Participants also suggested teaching assistantships could provide an opportunity for pedagogical training by involving graduate student teaching assistants in the actual pedagogical and content planning of the course. This can become onerous for faculty. However, the teaching assistants thought it could be something as simple as having input into one or two of the readings for the course or helping to create an assignment. Reflecting on a positive TA experience one participant stated, “seeing teaching assistants as central to the development of that assignment was really meaningful to me not only in terms of mentoring me but in seeing what the TA relationship could be like”. Another graduate student said,

The thing I really appreciated about [his] mentorship as well, he is always willing to talk things through with me. I did not know what a marking rubric was before I came to this university. That was a thing I never had at [my previous institution]. And so we had a lot of really good conversations about the pros and cons of having a rubric.

Several participants expressed better communication with the professor during the course of the teaching assistantship about the “nuts and bolts” of the course would also be beneficial, discussions, for example, about creating the syllabus, choice of textbooks, and evaluation criteria. One participant, echoing Pelton’s (2014) and Boman’s (2013) experiences with pedagogy seminars and workshops for graduate students, suggested having a seminar on some of the specifics of planning for a semester course,

Okay it sounds obvious, but, ‘this is a semester, you can run in your class in terms of will you break it into halves or thirds, try to have a section per week so you can stay on top of it, this is how you develop a lecture plan. How do you want to space stuff out? Do you want to do a lot theory all at once, or find strategic ways to spread that out over the semester?’

In reflecting on teaching assistantships and the role they could play in providing exposure to the details of course construction, participants reveal a desire to talk about the course with the professor after its completion, to hear from the faculty instructor’s perspective about the relative success of the course – how did the professor feel the course went overall, and how did this course compare to other times the professor had taught this course? (see Table 2, e.g., “conversations about larger topics).

Constructive Feedback

Being evaluated by their students was a major concern among first-time instructors. Generally, instructors expressed, especially for their initial teaching experiences (as a primary instructors), concerns about student evaluations restricting not only their
freedom to explore and experiment with various teaching techniques, but also their everyday interactions in the classroom, “It is difficult to teach counter-normative, counter cultural topics because of the looming fear of student evaluations.” Teaching assignments in the department were competitive; having negative student evaluations impacts future teaching opportunities. First-time teachers also described difficulties they had learning how to read their evaluations. One teaching assistant was disheartened after reading the evaluations as this negatively impacted confidence at the beginning of the next teaching term. It was not until a department administrator went over the evaluations and ranked the feedback as “good” that the student more confident about teaching.

Hearing about mistakes made and making more constructive use of evaluations was perceived as another practical manner through which graduate students could learn about teaching. The graduate students we interviewed drew attention to the lack of evaluation of teaching assistants in our department. While there were obvious problems with standard evaluations of teaching assistantships because of the varied nature of the duties and expectations of assistantships, the reflections provided by participants raised questions about the value of including robust evaluations of their performance as teaching assistants as part of their professional development. As one participant explained, “… [N]o feedback really, no feedback from instructors after the fact on marking or participating in class. As soon as it was over, it was over.” This is connected to the importance of formal evaluation as well as conversations with professors about the “nuts and bolts” of the class. For example, at the end of a semester talking about how the student assignments compared to work submitted in other terms or classes, or general expectations around grading students and the feedback provided by the teaching assistant could also serve as a valuable informal evaluation.

Including a formal evaluation of teaching assistantships (see Table 3, e.g., “more feedback”, “guidance around expectations for TAs”) would send a message to professors and teaching assistants they are not just “cheap labour”, “TAs generally feel that way. They know they are the hired help; they know what they are doing does not really affect anything.” This participant also suggested how an evaluation protocol for teacher assistantships could help to counteract this perception, “so yeah, some kind of evaluation system, and some kind of emphasizing to professors that teaching assistants are not just cheap labour, that they can actually bring something to the classroom, these are future scholars, these are future colleagues.” Generally, there was awareness among participants of the value in making teaching assistantships more meaningful in a pedagogical sense and a professional development sense. A recurrent theme in participants’ comments, and a pattern unifying many items in Tables 1, 2 and 3 was the idea of mentorship.

**Teaching Mentorship**

Based on our participants’ comments there was an expressed need for more structured, whether informal or formal, pedagogical support and discussion around teaching. A recurring theme was the desire and need for more mentorship, “I think mentorship is really missing here and I think there is a lack of conversation about what we are doing.” One participant described a desire for a more formal discussion group approach to teaching support, a “forum for talking about struggles and lessons learned,”
while another identified the value of “regular meetings to discuss teaching”. Yet another asked, “Why do not we have a pedagogy reading group?” Several participants wanted opportunities to talk to professors in the department about their decision-making processes. One person suggested, “I think maybe even just discussing with professors why this method of evaluation? How do you design a lecture? What is most important? How much work do you expect the students to do on their own? How much detail of the readings do you give?” Mentorship was also connected by participants in our study to discussions about the details of teaching described earlier. Having a more experienced teacher talk about the decisions they made throughout the semester was something many participants felt would have better prepared them for first time teaching.

Informal mentorship already existed, to some extent, in the department, usually taking the form of discussions with one’s dissertation supervisor about teaching (see Table 4).

Table 4: Teaching Mentorship (N=20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching mentors</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No teaching mentor (informal or formal)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal teaching mentor (supervisor)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal teaching mentor (other than supervisor)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal teaching mentor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While students already typically had a mentorship relationship with their supervisors, the participants who identified their primary supervisors as their only informal teaching mentor described the topic of teaching as only coming up if there was an issue, otherwise they would be more likely to use this time to discuss their research. A few participants in our study sought out faculty who are known to enjoy talking about teaching and mentoring students. One participant stated, “In my experience, I felt mentorship with [him] but he took that role on [voluntarily] as a nice person who is interested in my development, as someone who is interested in teaching... So, I guess informally he has been a mentor to me.” The point though, is graduate students have to make the effort to reach out to these faculty members since there is no formal mechanism in place to facilitate such mentorship. In the words of one of the participants, “I just feel like there is not that ongoing mentorship that I think some of us graduate students are really looking for.” Another participant suggested mentorship might take the form of having a first-time teacher be connected with “a faculty member who has taught the course before”. Students offered a variety of ideas on what mentorship might look like. Comments also included reference to the value of having a space in the department for professors and graduate students who are teaching to
share their experiences: “I really want to hear about mistakes that people have made. I feel that would be really helpful.”

Mentors could be a valuable source of constructive feedback. Faculty members who are assigned teaching assistants could also be a source of feedback, as previously suggested by Kenny et al. (2014), “teaching assistants generally do not receive regular feedback or engage with their associated faculty members in a regularly scheduled, thoughtful reflection on their practice” (p. 3). As another participant expressed, “But there was not a sit down at the end to say okay what went well, what did not go well? Which would have been helpful.” Similarly, some participants commented on the value that could come from receiving feedback on their teaching, particularly if it came from someone in a mentoring position. One participant wanted feedback focused on improving teaching, “I would feel nervous if the [administrator] came to my class to evaluate because that person also acts as my employer. So I would want someone to come who is invested in my development as a teacher, so that when I would hear criticisms it would not feel like ‘oh shit, maybe I won’t get teaching next time’”.

In reflecting on the issues raised by participants (i.e., confidence, course planning, evaluations, and teaching mentorship), it appears there are a number of opportunities to improve TA and first-time teaching experiences among graduate students. Participants were forthcoming in suggesting methods for addressing their needs and tapping into what we identified as three broader issues:

1. professional development of graduate students;
2. the need for building a stronger teaching community among faculty and graduate students; and
3. responsibility for professional development and teacher training.

Discussion

We started this project which involved interviews with twenty graduate students with the following research question: What factors in an instructor’s prior experiences as a teaching assistant have the most significant and positive impacts on practice once these former assistants become primary instructors? Participants openly shared their positive experiences as well as the challenges they faced as graduate students teaching assistants and as they moved into primary instructor roles. Participants revealed that teaching assistant experiences have the potential to be fertile ground for professional development. They also suggest that there is a need for developing a broader teaching culture in the academy.

Professional Development

It is clear from our conversations with graduate students teaching assistantships are opportunities for meaningful teacher development and general professional development. Yet, as future university educators, graduate students have “little opportunity for systematic professional development” (Trautmann, 2008, cited in Kenny et al., 2014, p. 2). The participants in our study discussed teaching assistantships as potential avenues for professional development, “How to present, how to speak to students, how to interact with students, how to prepare a syllabus, lecture, choose a textbook…exposure to different types of pedagogy…, how to deal with racism and
sexism in the classroom/assignments….” Teaching assistantships may be undervalued and underutilized as general professional development and as opportunities for teacher development. Simply, more could be done to impact teacher training earlier in graduate students’ careers through more effective utilization of teaching assistantships.

Some of the challenges faced by graduate student instructors may be ameliorated by providing formal and informal pedagogical training during preparatory teaching assistantships (Blouin & Moss, 2015). What is increasingly clear is “the increased emphasis on quality of teaching in higher education, combined with a clear decline in tenure-track faculty positions, means it is essential that graduate students be given the opportunities to develop their teaching skills” (Kenny et al., 2014, p. 3). We concur with these findings as graduate school provides an opportune time to concentrate on pedagogical development for the future professoriate.

Drawing on the findings of this study, based on our conversations with 20 graduate student teaching assistants, our recommendations for improving professional development of teaching assistants potentially across sociology departments are,

- Provide ongoing teacher training to graduate students including some department specific training. For several teaching assistants to whom we talked, the only formal teaching advice or training they received happened in the first year of their PhD programs. For many teaching assistants, this happened too early in their graduate student careers to be as useful as it might have been. We suggest having teacher training just prior to a graduate student beginning teaching.

- Structure teaching assistantships so some, maybe all, provide teacher training. Graduate student teaching assistants we interviewed, understood their role was to assist the professor and reduce the professor’s workload, and sometimes this meant a focus on grading to the exclusion of other experiences. However, there was a wide disparity reported in teaching assistantship experiences. We suggest teaching assistantships be identified as those more centered around grading, and those providing other meaningful experiences for teaching, such as leading seminars, having opportunities to present guest lectures with the professor present to provide feedback. Participants recognized not all teaching assistantships will be pedagogically meaningful and some suggested teaching assistantships focusing on grading or menial tasks might be better placed early in the graduate degree program (i.e., when graduate students are involved in their own course work). Teaching assistantships focusing more on course preparation and course involvement be reserved for later in the graduate degree program, once course work has been completed and they have some flexibility to engage more meaningfully in their teaching assistantships.

- Try to provide at least one teaching assistantship opportunity for students in their general area of research interest (e.g., students with a specialization or research interest in criminology should be assigned to teaching assistantships in at least one criminology-focused course during their time in the program).

- Develop undergraduate courses with seminar components. Running a seminar was consistently described as the most valuable experience for teaching assistants. While this may not be possible for all courses and is increasingly
more difficult because of budget cuts to post-secondary education, the use of seminars may be a way to more effectively incorporate teacher training into teaching assistantships.

**Building a Teaching Community and Culture of Teaching**

Building a teaching community among students and faculty in a department was also identified by participants. Participants in this study were keen to engage in group discussions about teaching. They also recognized the need to elevate these discussions around teaching to the level enjoyed by research, “...I really hope we do a better job of how this department looks at teaching. I think we do a really good job with research and how people think about research in the department but I think we need to change the culture around teaching...” This participant also acknowledged the hierarchy within academic settings in which research is prioritized, over teaching, for career development and execution, “[We need to] not just see teaching as this thing that happens on the side of our desks and that graduate students are not here for teaching, because some of us are and we’re here for research as well but we want that teaching experience...”

Participants described a group with attributes akin to the Faculty Learning Community (Cox, 2013; Lave & Wenger, 1991), a group of instructors who come together for a defined period with the goal of improving their practices. Participants delved deeply into the benefits of a teaching community to facilitate and encourage discussions on broader questions about teaching sociology facilitated by instructors who go beyond syllabi and lecture design,

For example, how do you deal with a [student’s] assignment that tries to argue for racism or sexism? How do you teach about topics that are potentially triggering...? How do you teach about social justice issues to a really diverse group of folks who are in lots of different ways oppressed or privileged by differing systems of oppression?

Referencing the annual department teaching symposium, a two-day event that featured different sessions and panelists on teaching related topics (which no longer occurs), this participant recalls,

I remember at the teaching symposium last year there was a really good panel about how to mark assignments that are racist or homophobic and the three people on the panel had really different strategies for it and that was so useful for me in terms of thinking about these as three approaches I could take.

In addition to these questions about issues of diversity, privilege and social justice, this participant pushed the discussion to a more basic, yet critically important level, “Why do students who are not going to be sociologists take Intro? I think we need to have a better conversation at the department level about what it means to teach sociology.”

Graduate students want to engage in conversations with professors and with each other about the issues so often occurring in teaching classes in the social sciences. Starr and DeMartini (2015) described a collaborative inquiry teaching group pilot project
involving doctoral students teaching undergraduate courses, several faculty member mentors, not dissimilar to what this study’s participants described.

The relative absence of conversations about teaching and sharing of “lessons learned” resonated throughout the interviews. Participants voiced concerns about how these voids have impacted their time in graduate school and their decisions about career paths. We mention this not to draw attention to the negatives since there are numerous examples of students who have done well to embrace the teaching resources available, make the most of these experiences, and go on to become excellent instructors. However, as this participant eloquently explained,

> it is just a simple fact that people aren’t prepared for teaching. And the evasiveness that you get when you mention this…is always the same thing, the best way to learn is by doing. And this is a very old school, outdated, anti-intellectual, frankly wrong approach to learning… [S]o that approach, that you learn by doing, it is dismissive. It ignores the research on learning from multiple disciplines, and this is what you get from people who are educators.

Something we have not explored, but which was mentioned in four of our interviews, was the potential effect of negative teaching assistantship experiences on graduate students’ experiences in the graduate program, and even decisions among graduate students not to pursue further graduate studies or a career in academe. For some, their TA experiences reinforced the limited value placed on teaching assistants as future teachers, seen instead as cheap labour, or a nuisance. For one student, their teaching assistantship experiences failed to provide adequate training for first time teaching, which they felt led to a completely overwhelming first time teaching experience. Following this negative experience, the student re-evaluated their desire to pursue a career with a teaching component. Related to this, many graduate students do not go on to work in academe. This should not minimize the crucial importance of teaching skill development. As participant recognized, teaching skills have applications in the development of broader professional skills like knowledge translation and communication applicable to careers outside as well as within the academy (Kenny et al., 2014; Rose, 2012). The impact of negative teaching assistantships and first-time teaching experiences on graduate students’ career trajectories is something we plan to pursue in future research.

Recommendations emerging from these conversations about teaching community and building a teaching culture include,

- Introduce the role of teaching mentors in departments in a formal way. Rather than placing the onus on graduate students to seek out professors as teaching mentors or relying solely on supervisors to provide teaching mentorship, provide options for students to connect with faculty members for support and information on topics and issues related to teaching. Teaching mentors could also provide more informal feedback on teaching less obviously connected to future job security, compared to formal evaluations by students or administrators.
- Implement department-specific teaching circles. There was a strong desire among graduate students to have the option to participate in larger discussions about teaching, specifically teaching sociology. Even running these larger
discussion circles twice annually could provide a chance for new and experienced teachers to come together and discuss teaching sociology, and more specifically activities or topics that did and didn’t work well in the classroom, reading expectations for different class levels, etcetera.

Conclusion

Responsibility for Professional Development and Teacher Training

Where does the responsibility lie for graduate student teacher training? The University of Alberta currently has a graduate student teaching certificate program offered by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. This program is a multi-tier program focusing on pedagogical theories and is open to all graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. The University of Alberta’s Centre for Teaching and Learning provides workshops, training sessions, and support for teaching across campus. While we have focused on Departmental-level experiences, an effective approach might be to offer a combination of institutional-level teacher training which is augmented by discipline-specific training coordinated at the department level. Several of our participants participated in workshops and seminars provided by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) (institutional level) on campus and one student completed the teacher certificate program offered by FGSR. Participants reported finding the seminars useful but too broad because the intended audience is the university as a whole, “I’ve gone to a few FGSR things but a lot of them… I felt didn’t apply to the challenge of teaching sociology…” Others found the FGSR sessions oriented more to other disciplines (specifically, science and engineering) so not as helpful for teaching sociology, “FGSR put on a lot of seminars or workshops… They were across campus with people in various disciplines but I always felt like they were somewhat geared to the sciences but I would still attend because I felt like they were still something versus nothing.” Clearly, there is a place for both institutionally sponsored teacher training and Department or discipline specific training. Notably, the Department was not new to teacher training opportunities. In the past, prior to cutbacks, some Introductory Sociology sections provided teaching opportunities for up to six teaching assistantships. These often involved weekly graduate student-led seminars. The Department also supported well-attended annual graduate student-led teaching symposia for students and faculty. Doctoral students were required to participate in a professional seminar for credit. Teaching is one of several areas covered in seminars. At the time of writing, the Department had created a pilot teaching mentorship project involving one faculty mentor and two doctoral students early in their teaching careers. The faculty member provided ongoing support throughout the term, met with the mentees every other week, conducted classroom observational visits with each teaching assistant and provided feedback. A debrief with the three project participants and a Department administrator at the end of the term/project resulted in positive feedback and ideas for future teaching assistant mentorships. We are hopeful these kinds of initiatives will continue. They have the potential to contribute to the kind of teaching culture our participants and the literature have identified as critical to a profession that values and expects research and teaching proficiency.
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Appendix A

Interview Schedule

1. For how many courses have you worked as a TA?
2. How types of activities did you participate in as a TA?
3. Throughout your MA and PhD did you receive any formal or informal teacher training?
4. Do you have someone who you feel is a teaching mentor to you?
5. Did you ever receive feedback or advice on topics specifically related to teaching?
6. What do you think was your most valuable experience as a teaching assistant?
7. What was the biggest challenge you faced as a teaching assistant?
8. Did you feel anything was missing from your graduate student teaching assistantships?
9. How would you improve graduate student teaching assistantships?
10. How many courses have you taught as a primary instructor?
11. Had you previously worked as a teaching assistant for the first class you taught as a primary instructor?
12. How do you think your experiences as a teaching assistant impacted your experience teaching?
13. What do you think might have better prepared you for your first time teaching experience?
14. Were there any aspects of teaching you wish you had the opportunity to practice as a teaching assistant?
15. How would you improve first time teaching for graduate student teachers?