TEACHING EFFECTIVELY WITH GSI-FACULTY TEAMS

Mary Wright

The relationship between the Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) and the professor plays an important role in the success of a course. At its most effective, the relationship serves as a key conduit, with the GSI helping to clarify and apply ideas presented by faculty in lecture and then bring students' questions and feedback to the faculty. A positive instructional role model is also an important contribution to GSIs' professional socialization (Austin, 2002). However, the relationship can also be difficult to negotiate for both parties, as it is often challenging to establish the "balance between exercising control and granting autonomy" needed for a successful exchange (Wilson & Stearn, 1985 in Meyers, 1995, p. 107).

This *Occasional Paper* summarizes the literature on GSI-faculty relationships in order to offer strategies for both GSIs and faculty to construct effective working partnerships. The nature of GSI-faculty teams varies widely across the University of Michigan, by factors such as size (some faculty supervise many GSIs, while others work with only one GSI), GSI responsibilities (such as grading, holding office hours, leading discussion sections, and studio or clinical work), discipline, and instructor identity. As a result, this research is contextualized by recommendations drawn from the 2003 Provost's Seminar on Graduate Students as Teachers, at which over 162 faculty and GSI attendees from fourteen U-M schools and colleges strategized about ways to proactively cultivate effective GSI-faculty relationships and address problems when they occur.

While critical to the success of student learning, a positive GSI-faculty relationship also has benefits that extend beyond the classroom. Mentoring has been rated by graduate students as one of the most effective means of learning skills and knowledge needed to teach well as a future faculty member (Boyle & Boice, 1998). Relationships between faculty and graduate students, whether research or teaching-related, have a significant impact on graduate students' success in their doctoral programs (Sorenson & Kagan, 1967 in Selke & Wong, 1993, p. 7). Faculty can benefit as well; research shows that effective mentors save time on their work with graduate students and improve their own undergraduate teaching (von Hoene & Mintz, 2001).

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This *Occasional Paper* is divided into two parts. First, it presents research on stages of GSI development, including strategies at each stage for effective GSI-faculty collaborations. Some strategies are targeted to faculty and others to GSIs. Part two examines common problems in the GSI-faculty relationship and how U-M instructors suggest preventing them.

Stages of GSI Development and Roles for Faculty Mentoring

As GSIs gain more experience, research finds that they progress through several developmental stages, in response to which effective faculty course supervisors will need to adjust their leadership styles (Nyquist & Sprague, 1998; Nyquist & Wulff, 1996; Sprague & Nyquist 1989, 1991). Developmental stages are not determined by years of experience. Some new GSIs may jump quickly to beliefs and behaviors characteristic of advanced GSIs, while GSIs with multiple terms of teaching experience may continue to benefit from supervisory behaviors associated with new GSIs. Likewise, experienced GSIs faced with instructional challenges may revisit earlier stages momentarily as they figure out how to deal with the problem. Therefore, the best way to understand GSIs' stage locations is through conversations about their particular needs, expectations, and strengths. The following sections offer some key concerns that may be voiced by new and advanced GSIs in that conversation.

Senior Learners

Beginning GSIs often are located at a stage Nyquist and Wulff (1998) title "senior learners." Senior learners' main questions about teaching include (Nyquist & Sprague, 1998):

- Will students like me? Will they listen to me?
- How can I balance time between my graduate student coursework and my GSI responsibilities?
- How can I get help from the faculty supervisor?
- What is the right way to teach? Where do I start?
- Am I doing a good job?

- *For Senior Learner GSIs*

If you recognize yourself asking many of these questions about your teaching assignments, you will want to make sure that you meet with your faculty supervisor before the course starts in order to clarify the professor's expectations of you as a GSI, as well as your expectations of the professor. Some issues that are useful to discuss at this initial meeting include (Center for Teaching and Learning, 1991, 1992; Curzan & Damour, 2000):

- What is the purpose of the sections or laboratories? How much freedom do I have to set the methods and content of these course meetings? How should we – the faculty and the other GSIs – coordinate what is taught?
- What is the relationship between the course readings, lectures, sections, and/or laboratories?
- How much involvement should I expect to have in exam/assignment writing and grading? Can the faculty meet to preview exams/assignments, to discuss how to best grade them, and to explain what the course's grading policy should be?
- Are any grades determined according to my own discretion? How will grade conflicts be handled?
- Will I be observed or evaluated in other ways, both before and at the end of the term? If not, how can I get feedback from the faculty and the students?
- What's the best way to give feedback, for example if a student complains about his/her grade or if students do not understand a concept discussed in lecture?

You also may have received a contract from your department that establishes additional expectations about your work as a GSI or requirements for GSI training.

- *For Faculty Supervisors of Senior Learners*

If you are the faculty supervisor of a senior learner, regularly scheduled meetings – from before the term starts to the time when grades are submitted – can help to clarify expectations throughout the term and establish good lines of communication. Research on senior learners indicates that many prefer a more structured, managerial style of supervision (Meyers, 1995; Prieto, 1999; Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). Such a supervisory style is characterized by the following behaviors:

- Remain visible and accessible (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). To resolve issues expediently, establish regular meetings and let GSIs know how and when they can contact you if they have questions at other times. Regularly scheduled meetings promote mentoring relationships, and they can be important forums for faculty and GSIs to discuss both logistics and pedagogy (Boyle & Boice, 1998; von Hoene & Mintz, 2001).
- Work collaboratively, being open to feedback and a provider of feedback. (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). As a class, you and your GSIs can participate in a midterm student feedback process, where both you and they receive feedback from students. Other forms of early feedback that you and your GSIs can use include videotaping, consultations, and student surveys.
- Promote discussion of your expectations as an

instructor. With your GSIs, make clear your standards for their work and performance, but be open to feedback and change. For example, a GSI with family obligations may find it difficult to make evening meetings, but be open to daytime scheduling (Meyers, 1995).

- Consider GSIs' differences in interpretation and approach. How should GSIs raise interpretations of the material that differ from yours, either in course meetings or with their students?
- Allow GSIs some mechanism for providing input into the class (Meyers, 1995; Wilson & Stearn, 1985). Sometimes, these ideas can be implemented for future courses only (e.g., change of textbook), but often, GSIs offer a valuable window into student feedback about changes that would enhance the course in the current term. Some instructors ask their GSIs to give them very brief written updates each week on any problems the students are having in the course (Davis, Wood, & Wilson, 1983).
- Discuss time and role management issues with GSIs. For new GSIs, the adjustment from student to teacher can be difficult. You may want to offer suggestions for managing their workload as both a graduate student and a GSI, or give concrete strategies for efficient grading and course planning.

Colleagues-in-Training and Junior Colleagues

GSIs with multiple terms of teaching experience often are located at stages Nyquist & Sprague (1998) term "colleagues-in-training" and "junior colleagues." Studies of experienced GSIs find that they are more satisfied with a collegial and mentoring approach that encourages collaborative problem solving and solicits GSIs' opinions on training, supervision, and instructional activities (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996; Prieto, 1999). While colleagues-in-training can benefit from learning more about teaching, such as new and innovative instructional activities, junior colleagues often can serve as co-decision makers in a course.

Just as new GSIs have questions about their teaching, more experienced GSIs will have concerns, albeit about different instructional issues. Some these concerns may be:

- Are students learning?
- How can I learn about new teaching techniques?
- How can I get experience teaching my own course?
- What do I do if I have a different viewpoint about the material or course requirements than the professor?
- How can I prepare for a future position as a faculty member or professional?

- *For GSIs Who Are Colleagues-in-Training or Junior Colleagues*

If you recognize yourself asking these types of questions, it is beneficial to meet with the faculty supervisor to construct an instructional plan for the term. You may wish to discuss some of the same issues as senior learners (p. 2), but to further your development in the profession, it will be useful to establish additional collaborations. For example, you may want to:

- Establish times when you and the faculty member can discuss the ideas behind the course's organization: What were the faculty's goals for the course? Why were certain readings or assignments chosen? How does the faculty prepare a lecture?
- Arrange for the faculty, a Graduate Student Mentor, or a CRLT consultant to observe your teaching and conduct a midterm student feedback. This process will give you invaluable information about how to enhance your teaching as well as what you are doing well. Faculty observations can be very useful for future job applications, as many colleges and universities like to see evidence of successful teaching documented in recommendations.
- If possible, work with the faculty on a course for a subsequent semester to jointly plan the course and its instructional activities. Some departments also allow GSIs to teach their own courses during the summer, and you could ask a faculty member for feedback on your own syllabus. If opportunities are not available in your own department, consider participation in the Rackham-CRLT Graduate Student Mentorship Program (http://sitemaker.umich.edu/rackham-crlt/gsi_introduction).
- Ask for the faculty's guidance on how you can grow as a teacher. Which CRLT Seminars would s/he advise? What departmental training activities are available? Are there any pedagogical journals or conferences in the field?

- *For Faculty Supervisors of Colleagues-in-Training or Junior Colleagues*

If you are the faculty supervisor of a colleague-in-training or a junior colleague, it may be tempting to feel that work with a more advanced GSI translates into a more "hands-off" supervisory style. Instead, research suggests that rather than lack of supervision, GSIs at this stage benefit from a different type of faculty relationship, in the form of a "role model" or "mentor."

A "role model" supervisory style works well for colleagues-in-training, or GSIs who are in intermediate stages, with more experience than a novice instructor but

not yet ready to take on significant independent course responsibilities. These GSIs still desire some structured supervision, but also wish to branch out to learn new and creative pedagogical techniques. As a role model, you can demonstrate good pedagogical practice, observe your GSIs' sections, encourage them to give you feedback on your own teaching, and direct GSIs to instructional resources in your field. When problems or issues arise during the course, these more experienced GSIs may seek input in the decision-making process. As a role model, you can collaborate with the GSI to "think about the problem, generate options, and…discuss potential outcomes" (Nyquist & Wulff, 1996, p. 27).

Very advanced GSIs, or "junior colleagues," will seek more independence in their instructional roles. As a faculty supervisor, your role will gradually transition to that of a mentor, where you and the GSI work jointly to plan and execute the course. You can play a valuable role by helping GSIs plan their own courses for your department, school, college, or a nearby institution. Junior colleagues also can play a valuable role in helping to mentor less advanced GSIs. Many departments employ Graduate Student Mentors (GSMs), experienced GSIs appointed to work with other GSIs in a course or department to enhance teaching. CRLT has a variety of examples of how GSMs can be used, as well as workshops and resources to help prepare experienced GSIs to take on this role (see Figure 1).

For Faculty Who Work with Several GSIs at Different Stages: Strategies and Resources

In some courses, it is common for one faculty member to be assigned one GSI. In this case, the faculty and the GSI can tailor their working styles and meeting schedules to meet their own developmental, professional, and instructional needs. However, in many large courses, faculty may encounter GSIs at multiple stages, some senior learners, others colleagues-in-training, and still others junior colleagues. How can a busy faculty member meet all of their needs?

Many supervisory strategies are common to GSIs at all stages, the most important being:

- Regular contact.
- Getting student input, whether through GSIs' feedback, faculty observations, or student feedback.
- A commitment to developing graduate students as future faculty and professionals.

Therefore, even though some GSIs will need individualized support, all GSIs on the team can benefit from these shared supervisory strategies.

Additionally, an understanding of GSI stages can help enlist advanced GSIs as invaluable partners for course management. Experienced GSIs may wish to take on a mentorship role, because this supervisory experience can be useful to their professional development. Useful peer mentoring activities include:

- Letting more advanced GSIs take the lead at team meetings.
- Having new GSIs observe more experienced colleagues' classrooms.
- Utilizing a department's GSM to work intensively with GSIs who need extra assistance.
- Having GSIs work together to prepare one lecture for the course.

Preventing and Dealing with Problems

As in any other human relationship, conflicts between students, GSIs, and faculty arise that must be negotiated. Anticipating these problems and working proactively will help address any problematic issues before they blow up. Participants at the 2003 Provost's Seminar on Graduate

Figure 1: CRLT Services for GSI-Faculty Teams

CRLT offers a number of resources to support GSI-faculty teams. These include:

- Coordination of student feedback, such as midterm student feedback or videotaping. Course-level midterm student feedback, which collects information on student learning for all members of the GSI-faculty team, are available on request.
- Instructional consultation services and workshops for faculty or GSIs.
- Assistance with early evaluation, a system that utilizes a brief Evaluations & Examinations (E&E) survey to give GSIs feedback about how their course is going early in the term. This system can help identify GSIs who need more support.
- Workshops and consultations for Graduate Student Mentors (GSMs) and faculty GSI Coordinators. Additional resources include models for GSM work and the *Handbook on Departmental GSI Training*.
- Mentorship opportunities through the Rackham-CRLT Graduate Student Mentorship Program, to supplement the instructional mentorship that U-M faculty can provide. These contacts can help advanced graduate students develop professional networks and learn about faculty worklife at places other than U-M.

To learn more about any of these services, please call 734-764-0505 or visit CRLT's website at http://www.crlt.umich.edu.

Students as Teachers identified several common conflicts, how to prevent them, and how to address them.

Potential Problem #1: Challenges to the Faculty or GSI's Authority

For both faculty and GSIs, establishing instructional authority can be a difficult and ongoing process. This process can be made even more problematic because of one's race, gender, age, native language, educational background, or teaching experience. These dynamics may make it more difficult to establish authority in the GSI-faculty relationship (for example, some professors note that GSIs are less likely to respect them because they are female) or in an instructor-student relationship (likewise, faculty and GSIs report that students challenge women and instructors of color more frequently) (Kardia & Wright, 2004). Additionally, the discipline in which a course is taught may exacerbate problematic dynamics, such as in fields where women or racial minorities are traditionally underrepresented.

Participants at the Provost's Seminar indicated that it is best to make discussions of potential authority issues explicit. Conversations about GSIs' and faculty's mutual expectations during weekly meetings can help highlight or forestall potential problems before they occur.

Participants also emphasized that it is important for early discussions to stress that both faculty and GSIs should "have each other's back" by affirming the other instructor's authority in front of the students. For example, at the first course meeting, faculty can enhance the authority of GSIs through their introduction, emphasizing GSIs' prior teaching, educational, or occupational experience or special skills that they bring to the classroom. In sections or laboratories, GSIs can do the same. When differences in academic interpretation arise, GSIs can help by clarifying (not undermining) the professor's position, while also offering alternate viewpoints if student learning would be enhanced. CRLT Occasional Paper No. 19, *Instructor Identity: The Impact of Gender and Race on Faculty Experiences with Teaching*, offers additional strategies for instructors experiencing challenges to their authority (available http://www.crlt.umich.edu/publinks/occasional.html).

Potential Problem #2: Lack of Coordination Between Faculty and GSI Work

In a large, multi-sectioned course it can be difficult to coordinate the work of all the instructors and ensure tight linkages between what is taught in the lecture, laboratories, and sections. Coordination problems often are highlighted when they become visible as student complaints, such as:

- "My GSI is teaching (or grading) differently than the other GSIs."
- "The test did not reflect what was covered in lecture (or section)."
- "What we learn in lecture and section seems completely unrelated."

While GSIs often attend lectures, many faculty do not have the benefit of a reciprocal arrangement in which they visit sections to learn about the GSI's instructional plans. Therefore, many participants in the Provost's Seminar found it useful to establish at least one time (preferably early in the term) when faculty would visit each GSI's classroom, so that both GSIs and faculty could benefit from seeing each other's teaching.

Regular meetings between faculty and GSIs also help to update all of the instructors about instructional issues, upcoming assignments, questions, or problems. Disciplinary research cultures may shape the type of gathering GSIs and faculty wish to arrange for their teaching work (Austin, 2002). In the sciences, where it is common for lab groups to get together regularly, instructional meetings can take a similar form, albeit focused on instructional issues. In the social sciences and humanities, which often utilize more independent research, more frequent one-to-one check-ins and the occasional group meeting may be preferable.

To get a bird's eye view of sections, another possibility is for an instructor to set up a course-level midterm student feedback, where a CRLT consultant would aggregate the strengths and suggestions made by undergraduates and present them to the supervising faculty without identifying information about any one GSI (see Figure 1).

Potential Problem #3: Student Complaints

Both faculty and the GSI can hear complaints from students about the other's teaching or assessment practices. Responding to the complaint can become a difficult balancing act as the instructor weighs the need to address the student's concerns with the desire to maintain the other instructor's instructional authority.

Provost's Seminar participants recommended that both faculty and GSIs listen carefully to the student's complaint and ask questions to understand what specific issues are most important for the student. One effective strategy is to offer a descriptive report of the issues the student addressed, along with any observable data relevant to the claim (Boehrer & Chevrier, 1991). For example, GSIs who hear

from students that the professor's lecture pace is too fast can try taking notes themselves, in order to report on whether it was difficult to keep up. Similarly, if a faculty hears complaints about a GSI's disorganization, the faculty's observation of the GSI's section should include descriptive notes about items like agenda-setting, staying on topic, and reviewing key points. With these descriptive data, the GSI and faculty can then work on problem-solving in order to come up with a solution that best meets the students' learning needs and the instructors' instructional goals.

Conclusion

Working together, faculty and GSIs can have a positive impact on student learning. Faculty are GSIs' most important role models for their future classroom performance, and faculty can transmit the value of teaching to their future colleagues. However, the relationship is not one-sided. As GSIs develop new skills and confidence, they bring new valuable perspectives to a class. As an effective working team, faculty and GSIs can collaboratively impact student learning and effectively communicate the University's commitment to teaching.

After Your Best Efforts

Infrequently, GSI-faculty teams may encounter stubborn issues that seem irresolvable and defy the team's best efforts to solve problems internally. For intractable GSI-faculty conflicts, U-M resources include:

- Others in the unit who work with GSIs
  The Graduate Student Mentor, a GSI Coordinator, a Graduate Chair, or the Chair can be good contacts to talk through a problem.

- The Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT)
  1071 Palmer Commons
  734-764-0505 or crlt@umich.edu
  Consultants can talk with both faculty and GSIs about how to address problems or tensions related to teaching. These services are confidential.

- Rackham Graduate School Grievance Resolution Officer
  1566 Rackham
  Contact Darlene Ray-Johnson (734-936-1647 or rayj@umich.edu)
  The Rackham Grievance Resolution Officer gives confidential assistance and informal mediation to Rackham graduate students experiencing academic or professional disputes.

- Ombuds Office
  6015 Fleming Administration Building
  734-763-3545 or umstudentombuds@umich.edu
  The Ombuds Office provides confidential, impartial, and informal dispute resolution services for students with a significant dispute.

- Faculty and Staff Assistance Program (FASAP)
  1009 Greene Street
  734-936-8660
  For an issue that involves personal difficulties encountered at work or home, FASAP offers confidential counseling or mediation services.

- Office for Institutional Equity
  2072 Administrative Services Building, 1009 Greene Street
  734-763-0235 (V) 734-647-1388 (TTY) or institutional.equity@umich.edu
  The Office of Institutional Equity assists with questions, concerns, or complaints involving discrimination or harassment based on race, sex, color, religion, creed, national origin or ancestry, age, marital status, sexual orientation, disability, Vietnam-era veteran status, or gender expression and identity

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