Teaching Effectively with GSI-Faculty Teams

Mary Wright
Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

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 also can be difficult to negotiate.

This *Guidebook* article summarizes the literature on GSI-faculty relationships in order to offer GSIs proactive strategies for constructing effective working partnerships. (For a fuller treatment of this subject, including strategies for faculty and possible solutions to common problems that arise, please see Wright, 2005). 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. Therefore, this research should be adapted to your own teaching context.

Stages of GSI Development & Implications for the GSI-Faculty Relationship

As GSIs gain more experience, research finds that they progress through several developmental stages.

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?

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 expectation of you as a GSI, as well as your expectation 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, such as if a student complains about his/her grade or if students do not understand a concept discussed in lecture?

For your department, you also may have signed a contract that establishes additional expectations about your work as a GSI or requirements for GSI training.

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." 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?

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, 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. .

- 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?

After Your Best Efforts

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

- Others in the unit who work with GSIs
  The Graduate Student Mentor (an experienced graduate student appointed in many units to work with GSIs), 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 Conflict Resolution Officer
  1120 Rackham
  Contact Darlene Ray-Johnson (734-936-1647 or RackResolutionOfficer@umich.edu)
  The Rackham Conflict Resolution Officer gives confidential assistance and informal mediation to Rackham graduate students experiencing academic or professional disputes. Call to speak to an impartial party and explore options for resolving disagreements.
- Ombuds Office
  6015 Fleming Building
  734-763-3545 or Ombuds-DSA@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 of 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, veteran status, or gender expression and identity.

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