

TA Training: From the TA's Point of View

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ABSTRACT: Teaching assistants (TAs) at a major university were surveyed about the annual campus-wide and departmental TA training programs in which they had participated. Responses from these TAs differ markedly from reports based on surveys conducted with the administrators of such training programs. Current training practices can be improved by considering more seriously the TA's point of view.

The past decade in higher education has been inundated with criticism concerning the quality of education being provided to students. One rebuke has been aimed at the poor training given to graduate teaching assistants (TAs), who represent the next generation of professors in academe. Given such criticism, it seems that true change in the philosophy and methodology of TA training should have occurred already. As if to substantiate this expectation, many research studies have been published on the topic, several training directors have been praised for their new programs, and numerous faculty evaluators have been questioned about present successes and future improvements in TA training. Few researchers, however, have asked the TAs themselves to evaluate training programs in which they participated. A different picture emerges when TA training is considered from the TA's point of view.

The importance of teaching assistants to the present and future of higher education was amply documented during the 1980s. Jennings (1987), for example, pointed out that TAs "stand at the center" (p. 5) of higher education during their graduate level teaching careers and, more importantly, in their future careers as full-fledged faculty members. At the University of California-Berkeley, TAs take responsibility for 58% of the meetings of lower-division undergraduate courses (Allen & Rueter, 1990). Gray and Buerkel-Rothfuss (1991) found that almost two-thirds of the TAs they surveyed acted as the sole

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instructor for their assigned courses. Svinicki (1989) has argued that the tasks typically assigned to TAs (grading, tutoring, leading discussions, and conducting reviews) are among the most demanding of the teaching profession.

Despite the central role of TAs in higher education, their training has been neglected throughout most of the history of American teaching assistantships. In fact, TA training programs were not implemented in our colleges and universities until the 1980s (Allen & Rueter, 1990; Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989). At the same time, the 1980s brought forth an unprecedented surge of criticism aimed at higher education. While tuitions soared to levels near \$90,000 for a four-year education at private universities and to an average of \$20,000 at public colleges (Hood, 1988), critics from inside and outside academe attacked the system's ability to provide quality education to its students (e.g., Schaefer, 1990; Smith, 1990; Sykes, 1988). The notion that graduate students should be trained to *teach*, and not merely trained to publish research, arrived too late to avoid this critical onslaught. Those optimists who believe that academe is now beginning to place education instead of research at the head of its philosophy may be interested in the following remark made by a professor at the 1990 meeting of the American Association for Higher Education: "Any junior scholar who comes in and pays attention to teaching at the expense of research and publishing ain't going to get tenure" (Mooney, 1990, p. A1).

Despite such comments, many of us would agree that TA training is important, and numerous research studies support its effectiveness (see review by Abbott, Wulff, & Szego, 1989). The fact that many universities now conduct regular training programs is a step in the right direction. Yet, the effectiveness of these programs must be improved markedly before we settle into the soft cushion of kudos that some researchers have fashioned for us. For example, many training programs have been praised for their strong encouragement of TA participation and their use of awards given to outstanding TAs. Such information, provided by program directors, contrasts sharply with my view as a TA who participated annually in one of those programs for four years. Encouragement to participate in that TA training program seemed nonexistent, and the award for outstanding TAs was not given for two consecutive years because the faculty who were to provide nominations were not aware of the award.

This discrepancy suggested that the views of TAs concerning their training programs might differ substantially from the views of pro-

gram directors. The obvious action was to ask TAs for their opinions. Indeed, it is surprising that many of the researchers investigating the effectiveness of TA training have gathered their data from program directors and faculty evaluators, but not from the TAs themselves. Menges (1987) pointed out the need for research on TAs' own perceptions of their training programs, but few investigators have accepted his challenge.

Method

Subjects

Eighteen subjects participated in this study, all of whom were graduate students and teaching assistants in the psychology department of a university whose campus-wide TA training program has been lauded as an ideal model. Out of 89 surveys mailed, 18 were returned, yielding a response rate of 20%. Although these 18 subjects produced detailed and provocative views of TA training, the low response rate warrants certain cautions that are considered fully in the Discussion section of this article. The subjects were comprised of 6 males and 12 females, with a mean age of 30.06 years.

Materials

The perceptions of TAs about their departmental and campus-wide training programs were gathered by administering a survey. This four-page survey requested information concerning:

1. demographics such as age, gender, and TA experience;
2. subjects' opinions of the TA training they had received within their department;
3. subjects' opinions of the effectiveness of annual campus-wide TA training seminars;
4. written evaluations of TAs by the professors with whom they worked;
5. training provided for nine specific teaching skills;
6. feedback from professors following TAs' classroom experiences; and
7. general effectiveness of both training programs in producing competent teachers.

All ratings were made on a ten-point scale, with ten representing the greatest level of effectiveness or preparation and one representing the lowest level of effectiveness or preparation. The survey and its accompanying cover letter are reproduced in Appendix 1.

Procedure

Surveys, cover letters, and return envelopes were mailed to all subjects. Most subjects returned their responses within one month of the original mailing, although a few did not send their responses in until several months later. Reminders were not sent to those who did not respond to the survey after the original mailing. All survey respondents remained anonymous, except one who volunteered his name.

Results

Although other investigators of TA training have reported correlational and chi-square statistics based on fewer than 18 subjects (see review by Abbott, Wulff, & Szego, 1989), this practice was not followed in the present study because of its questionable validity. The opinions of 18 TAs concerning their training programs seemed important, nonetheless, so general highlights based on descriptive statistics are presented here.

In general, ratings of the effectiveness of both departmental and campus-wide training programs remained below neutral on the ten-point scale. TAs rated the effectiveness of the campus-wide seminar at a mean of 4.42. No subjects ($M = 0.00$) reported being encouraged by professors to attend these seminars. The departmental training program yielded a similar mean effectiveness rating of 4.32. Overall effectiveness of both training programs in producing competent future faculty was rated at a mean of 4.67.

The mean effectiveness rating for the ability of both training programs to produce competent TAs was only slightly above neutral, at 5.69. By contrast, TAs who had experienced a close working relationship with one professor who mentored their teaching skills rated this form of training at 8.20. Obviously, they believed that mentorship, which is not part of the formal program, was highly effective in shaping their teaching abilities.

Specific details concerning these training programs are also revealing. The departmental training program, for example, is billed as a

practicum course providing the same number of credit hours as any other graduate-level course in the curriculum. According to the TAs surveyed, the members of this practicum met 3.41 times for 4.25 hours each time, for a total of about 14.5 hours. No preparation outside of these meetings was necessary. Other graduate-level courses for which the same number of credit hours could be earned met for a total of 30 hours and required a minimum of 50 hours additional time spent working outside of class.

The departmental practicum was directed by a graduate student and consisted mainly of guest speakers who gave presentations on various issues of concern to TAs. A total of 78% of the survey respondents were unable to recall either the general topic or the speaker of even one of those presentations. The mean number of readings recommended to TAs during the departmental practicum was 0.67. Although 89% of the participants were videotaped while giving a practice lecture, 100% of them reported that their audience consisted entirely of other TAs. Moreover, this audience of TAs was small (often less than 10) even though the courses to be taught often consisted of 100 to 400 students.

Considering all sources of training in combination, TAs believed that they had been fairly well-prepared to write exam questions, give lectures, assign grades, and advise students. Accordingly, the mean ratings for these tasks ranged from 6.11 to 7.47. Ratings were near neutral (5.00) for preparedness in developing classroom activities, handling plagiarism and cheating, and writing syllabi. The task of choosing textbooks yielded the lowest preparedness rating: 2.59.

Most TAs indicated that obtaining feedback from professors was troublesome. Faculty in the department are asked to complete written evaluation forms concerning the performance of each TA who is assigned to them, and those evaluations are kept on file for TAs to peruse. More than half (56%) of the respondents were unaware that such evaluation files even existed. Results showed that although each TA had worked for a mean of 6.44 professors, their files contained an average of only 2.00 evaluations. Approximately 67% of the lectures that TAs gave in class received no feedback whatsoever from professors. Almost all (92%) of the review sessions that TAs gave also received no feedback from professors.

The comments written informally by respondents to the survey may summarize the general feeling among TAs concerning their training. One subject wrote,

I have never received any feedback or training from a professor, and the [departmental practicum] course I took was completely inadequate. I developed my style by observation, reflection, and trial and error. The faculty like to think a teaching assistantship is a teaching apprenticeship. It is not.

Another TA summed up her perception of the training program with this remark: "I feel prepared to teach, but only because of my initiative—no thanks to professors."

Discussion

The results of this survey show that TAs view their training programs quite differently than program directors do. Even programs that have been praised in national reviews, as the campus-wide portion of this study has, are perceived by TAs as merely neutral in effectiveness. According to these TAs, encouragement to participate in training does not exist, topics of program discussions are quickly forgotten, and faculty feedback remains dreadfully weak.

One criticism of this study is that selecting survey recipients from one department of one university does not represent random selection. To make matters worse, only 20% of the TAs in that department responded to the survey. This response rate is low enough to warrant caution in interpreting the results of the survey and, certainly, to require future research in following up such a preliminary investigation.

Although there are other possible explanations, I believe that the response rate in this study was reduced by the length of the survey. For the purposes of initial exploration, it seemed best to risk a low response rate in return for the ability to gather large amounts of detailed information from a reasonably small sample. This trade-off produced responses that are quite important: At least 20% of the TAs who participate in one of the training programs at a major university believe that the program could be improved dramatically. Future investigators will need to explore such opinions further by surveying larger and more representative samples of TAs.

The results of this survey clearly reinforce the need for more research on TA training programs *from the TA's point of view*. In addition, they prompt several suggestions for improving TA training:

Mentorship

Since TAs reported that mentorship is much more effective than any or all of the training programs combined, mentorship should be added to existing programs. A TA might be assigned to work with a given professor (by mutual consent) over a series of different courses or for one course over a series of terms. The one constant in this equation would be the relationship between professor and TA, but students and courses would change. This might provide an opportunity for true apprenticeship that would encourage continued improvement over time. Moreover, it would allow faculty members to spend less time indoctrinating new TAs at the beginning of each term.

Required Participation

Encouragement to participate in TA training programs is not reaching the TAs, so participation should be required. If the program is considered a departmental practicum course, then course credit should be earned for completing it successfully. However, the amount of credit awarded should be commensurate with the amount of time required to participate in the practicum, as compared to the amount of time required in other graduate-level courses that are allotted the same number of credit hours. The present disparity in credit hours only serves to remind TAs that their teaching responsibilities are considered unimportant.

Faculty Feedback

Faculty must be shown that their feedback is extremely valuable to TAs and that they have a serious obligation to provide that feedback. As Svinicki (1989) exhorts, the opportunity for professors to have TAs should be considered "both a benefit and a responsibility. . . . Faculty members who misuse or fail to provide their teaching assistants with adequate supervision and training should be denied their assistance" (p. 76). Professors might be encouraged to spend more time evaluating their TAs' performance if they were given course credit by their departments for such supervision. To ensure that meaningful feedback is provided, TAs should have the opportunity to evaluate their professors' supervisory skills in a formal manner, and those evaluations should be taken seriously by the department and the university.

Assignment by Ability

The method of assigning graduate students to teaching assistantships needs revision. Davis (1987) implies that TA training is doomed to failure because TAs "see the position primarily as a job, a source of financial support" (p. 129). It is possible, however, that many TAs do not perceive their position in this light until after they receive an assistantship. At that point, they begin to question the practice of using income as a guide to assigning teaching assistantships.

Allen and Rueter (1990) state that the university whose TAs were surveyed in this study assigns assistantships on the basis of "academic status, performance, prior experience, scholarship, and promise as a teacher" (p. 4). Unfortunately, the facts refute that statement. At least from 1984 to 1989 at that institution, all TAs were required to submit a complete financial statement detailing expenses and sources of income before their teaching applications would even be considered. The TA application forms used at that university contained 41 questions concerning financial need and 3 questions concerning teaching experience. Furthermore, those three questions were biased by the written disclaimer that answering them was necessary "to help eliminate errors when pay rates are calculated."

When TAs see that financial need is the most important criterion in determining who receives a teaching assistantship, they naturally begin to view that position as nothing more than a source of funding. It is time to begin selecting TAs on the basis of their teaching abilities, regardless of the size of their savings accounts.

Emphasis on Teaching

We must begin to recognize and convey the value of teaching. This, of course, is old news: Nearly every recent treatise on higher education has emphasized it (e.g., Schaefer, 1990; Smith, 1990; Sykes, 1988). However, no real change has occurred. Many TAs are still told not to let teaching interfere with research. In that climate, it is not surprising that even the best TA training programs suffer a disastrous fate.

Good teaching does not interfere with good research, but rather enhances it. The operative word here is *good*: If the object of the research game is merely to turn out publications quickly, then teaching will not enhance that process. Similarly, if teaching is defined as standing before a captive audience speaking in a loud monotone, then research will not be enhanced. But *good* research, research that is

generated by critical questioning between professors and students, and good teaching, teaching that encourages active discussion of new ideas, can only enhance each other in a symbiotic fashion.

In conclusion, recent estimates suggest that 500,000 new professors will be teaching American youth by the year 2014 (Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989). If current TA training programs remain as they are, these new professors may find it difficult to develop the teaching skills necessary to provide a quality education to their college students.

TA training is vital to higher education, and the development of new training programs during the 1980s is to be commended. However, the fact that TAs who have invested their time and effort in a highly praised training program view its effectiveness as neutral suggests that we need to continue to improve that training. This can be done by including the perceptions of real TAs in our investigations, by applying those perceptions to the methodology of training, and by generating a devout belief in the fundamental philosophy that many recent critics of academe have advocated: We must place education first!

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Appendix 1

Cover Letter

To [U of X]* Psychology TAs:

Some of you may remember that I was a graduate student and TA in your psychology department from 1984 to 1989. I now need your help in providing data regarding the training you have received at [U of X] as a teaching assistant.

A survey is attached to this note, and it should not take more than 30 minutes of your time to complete. Please complete it even if you are not employed as a TA during this term. Answer each question as accurately as you can, and base your answers strictly on the TA training you have received *at [U of X]* (not on your own or at another school). Additional information is welcome, so feel free to attach a separate sheet of your comments or ideas on the subject. If you would like to receive a copy of the results, include your address and then be patient while I juggle research, four courses of teaching, and participation in several faculty committees.

I've also enclosed a stamped envelope so that you can mail the survey back to me easily. Please complete the survey and return it as soon as possible. Thank you very much for your help.

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TA TRAINING SURVEY

Demographic Information

1. Your age _____
2. Your sex _____
3. Number of different [U of X] courses in which you have served as a TA _____

[* Anonymity has been preserved in publication of this cover letter and survey to avoid the faulty implication that TA training improvements are needed at only this university.]

4. Number of different professors for whom you have TAed _____
5. Number of terms in which you have served as a TA _____
6. Number of years you have been in graduate school at [U of X]

Psychology 495

7. Have you taken the TA practicum course (Psychology 495)?

If so, please answer the following questions:

- 7a. How many times during the term did the class meet?

- 7b. Approximately how long was each class meeting? _____
- 7c. Please list the names and titles of each guest speaker for the course as well as the general topic of each speaker's presentation. There is no need to include the name of the TA liaison who is in charge of Psychology 495 each year.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Title</u>	<u>Topic</u>
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

- 7d. How many books on teaching were recommended to you during Psychology 495? _____
- 7e. Were you videotaped while giving a lecture as part of the training? _____ Who was your audience? _____
- 7f. How many terms had you TAed before attending Psychology 495? _____
- 7g. On a scale from 1 (not at all effective) to 10 (extremely effective), how would you rate the general effectiveness of Psychology 495 in preparing you to teach? _____

Annual Campus-wide TA Seminar

8. How many annual TA seminars have you attended at [U of X]? _____
9. How many of the professors you TAed for have encouraged you to attend the annual seminars? _____
10. How many books on teaching were recommended to you at the seminar? _____

11. On a scale from 1 (not at all effective) to 10 (extremely effective), how would you rate the general effectiveness of the annual TA seminar in preparing you to teach? _____

TA Evaluations

12. On a scale from 1 (never) to 10 (always), how often do you believe the professors you TAed for read the student evaluations of your work as a TA? _____
13. On average, how many times per term do you receive praise from a professor regarding student evaluations of you? _____
14. On average, how many times per term do you receive a reprimand from a professor regarding student evaluations of you? _____
15. Professors are given the opportunity to fill out evaluation forms on their TAs each term, and those evaluations remain on file in the Main Office. Were you aware of this? _____
How many evaluations by your professors are in your TA file? _____

Teaching Skills

Listed below are several skills that are used in teaching a course. For each skill, please provide three pieces of information: First, record the average number of times per term you are asked to perform that skill as a TA. Second, record the average number of times per term you receive feedback or instruction from your professor regarding that skill. Third, rate how well you think you have been prepared to take over these skills when you teach courses on your own. For the second rating, use a scale from 1 (completely unprepared) to 10 (extremely well prepared).

<i>Skill</i>	<i>Number of Times</i>	<i>Amount of Feedback</i>	<i>Rating of Preparedness</i>
16a. writing a syllabus	_____	_____	_____
16b. choosing a textbook	_____	_____	_____
16c. handling plagiarism	_____	_____	_____
16d. handling exam cheating	_____	_____	_____
16e. writing exam questions	_____	_____	_____
16f. giving lectures	_____	_____	_____
16g. developing classroom activities or demonstrations	_____	_____	_____

- 16h. assigning grades _____
- 16i. advising students _____

17. Now imagine having full responsibility for a new course in your area but outside your field of specialization, with no TA to help you. In general, do you believe your TA training at [U of X] has prepared you to do this *well*? Rate your answer on a scale from 1 (definitely not) to 10 (definitely so). _____

Classroom Feedback

18. On average, how many lectures per term do you give?

19. How many lectures per term received feedback from the professor you TAed for? _____
20. On average, how many comments do you get from a professor per term on your grading of assignments for his or her course?

21. On average, how many review sessions per term do you give?

22. Of these review sessions, how many have received feedback from the professor you TAed for? _____
23. On average, in how many courses you've TAed have you attended most of the lectures that were given by the professor?

24. How many of the professors you've TAed for have actively encouraged you to attend their lectures? _____
25. How many of the professors you've TAed for have actively discouraged you from attending their lectures? _____
26. On average, how many review sessions per term do you give without having attended the professor's lectures? _____
27. TA training often occurs informally when a TA and professor work together developing course materials. How many times have you developed this kind of close working relationship with a professor for whom you have TAed? _____
28. If you have developed a close working relationship of this kind, rate its effectiveness in preparing you to teach a course of your own. Use a rating scale from 1 (not at all effective) to 10 (extremely effective). _____

General

29. On the whole, how effective do you believe [U of X's] TA

training to be in terms of producing competent TAs? Please use a rating between 1 (not at all effective) and 10 (extremely effective). _____

30. On the whole, how effective do you believe [U of X's] TA training to be in terms of producing faculty members who will be competent at teaching courses of their own? Please use the same rating scale between 1 (not at all effective) and 10 (extremely effective)._____