

Chapter 13

Professional Development with Graduate Teaching Assistants (TAs) Teaching Online

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ABSTRACT

As the number of online courses offered continues to increase, teaching online will become a standard expectation and responsibility for graduate teaching assistants (TAs). For TAs who will seek faculty positions, experience and self-efficacy teaching online are critical to their future career. The current and future university landscape and the higher education world these TAs will embody will require qualified individuals to be well trained in online course development and delivery. Of equal importance is the quality of teaching TAs provide for the large number of online undergraduate courses for which they have sole responsibility or provide instructional support. Colleges and universities need to develop professional development for TAs that reflects best practices in online teaching and learning and engages TAs in the instructional design as well as delivery process. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature on teaching assistant professional development and the implications for TAs teaching online.

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, one of the authors sat in a classroom for a Rhetoric and Composition course, excited on the first day as a college freshman at a large, public, Research University. She overheard a classmate mention that a teaching assistant

(TA) would be teaching the class. She had only the sketchiest notion of what a “TA” was but that did not diminish her enthusiasm for the class. She had loved English in high school and anticipated the “professor-in-training” would help make the subject challenging yet interesting. This zeal was soon replaced with puzzlement when the TA greeted the class with a mixture of disdain and boredom. He explained the syllabus, announced

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that he did not care much for teaching freshmen, informed the students of the minimum requirements needed to pass the course and dismissed the class. The author wishes she could report that subsequent class meetings were an improvement but, unfortunately, the students in this course soon realized that the TA seemed satisfied to do the minimum required.

As this incident occurred well before the advent of online courses, the authors can speculate that this lack of engagement might have been perceived as exponentially *more* troubling had the students encountered this TA in an electronic learning environment (ELE). This reminiscence is not shared to suggest that all TAs meet their responsibilities with such ennui and detachment. To the contrary, subsequent undergraduate experiences with excellent TAs proved to be enlightening and helped shaped the author's decision to pursue graduate degrees. Still, in the years since this incident, the author has reflected back on that semester in English 101 and that first TA. Arguably, the TA's attitude, pedagogical approach and teaching style were the result of several conflated factors including his personality but as the authors' interest in the scholarship of online teaching and learning has evolved, we considered the extent such incidents were related to the professional development the TA received, or the lack thereof.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the literature on Teaching Assistant (TA) professional development (PD) and specifically, the implications for professional development related to teaching online courses.

The following questions guided this investigation into professional development for TAs who teach online:

- Why do graduate students teach?
- What are TAs' roles and responsibilities in online courses?
- What do TAs need in order to be effective online instructors?

- In what ways does effective professional development benefit TAs, faculty, departments and students?
- What is the theoretical grounding/perspective of the training?
- What are the best practices for online teaching and are these communicated to TAs?
- How are TA professional development programs evaluated?

BACKGROUND

Online Education

Online education has become a viable and a frequently-chosen option for students in the United States. By surveying more than 2,500 colleges and universities, Allen and Seaman (2010) reported that 30% of students in higher education now are taking at least one online course, which indicates a 21% growth rate of online enrollment. At the same time the enrollment growth rate of higher education institutions in general remains below 2%. In the fall of 2009, there were 5.6 million students taking courses online; a nearly one million user-increase from the previous year. Approximately 1/3 of all students in higher education now take at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Clearly the trajectory of online education expansion is trending upward and is not showing any sign of retrenchment.

While some may be skeptical about the quality and consistency of online education across and within institutions, the fact is that more and more college students (full-time and part-time) are considering online education as a feasible option for them to realize their academic goals. As a result, there are increasing demands placed on instructional staff to design and teach high quality online courses. As these data suggest, a large section of instructional faculty are now or soon will be providing at least some (if not all)

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