

Navigating the Shoals at Home: Establishing a T.A. Training Course

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THE CLASSICS DEPARTMENT at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) has recently established a semester-long T.A. training course to promote effective teaching in Classics courses, both those in the Latin language and those in ancient civilization in translation. The department has also made the course a requirement for all entry-level graduate students. As author of the original proposal, I served as coordinator for the course in its initial run (spring 2002).¹

The course, already more than two years in the making, represents a joint effort between the department of the Classics and a campus-wide coalition of experts on the various aspects of teaching and learning related to our field. More than anything else it was this broad-based, team-taught approach, built into the course design from the outset, that made such a project feasible and even attractive for us. Mapping out the course itself proved fairly easy, owing to a campus culture favorable to pedagogy and broad-based institutional support.

Oddly enough, while “navigating the shoals,” our keel struck against the largest and sharpest rocks close to home, during negotiations within our own department, especially over whether or not to make the course a requirement. Our voyage of discovery and development continues, but I offer here a digest

¹ In February 2001, at the recommendation of a colleague, I consulted Kenneth Kitchell about certain details of our proposed syllabus and reading list for a new T.A. training course in Classics, then under review by our Graduate College curriculum committee. He responded to my queries with alacrity and enthusiasm, and invited me to participate in a panel at the next APA meeting (January 2002) to talk about the course. My thanks go out to the various colleagues from that panel, to everyone who attended the session in Philadelphia, and to Professor Kitchell above all, for bringing us all together to address this area of vital concern to our profession.

of our experiences to date, both positive and negative, in the hope that we have set some useful precedents.

STARTING-POINTS AND JUSTIFICATIONS

Home to William Abbott Oldfather, Ben Edwin Perry, and Alexander Turyn, among others, our department has a venerable tradition behind it and a distinguished library to match. Thanks in part to that legacy, and also to a number of “service courses” that are always in high demand, the department remains strong in the current climate despite ongoing budget cuts and a string of recent retirements, not all of which have been followed by immediate replacements. With a faculty numbering eight tenured or tenure-track and two visiting assistant professors, we admit approximately half a dozen new graduate students each year.

Why institute a T.A. training course in our department? First and foremost, heavy teaching loads are an unavoidable fact of life for our graduate students, who spend up to 2/3 of their time during the semester not as students but as teachers, and do so mainly for courses in translation. A long-standing shortage of fellowship money in the humanities coupled with the heavy enrollment in introductory Classical Civilization courses that meet campus-wide General Education requirements has led to increased reliance on teaching assistants, and most of our graduate students teach from the moment they arrive until they finish their degrees. In our department that means two years for an M.A. and an additional five years for a Ph.D. The normal T.A. appointment in Classics can include, in any given semester, two to five discussion sections of a large lecture course, one to three sections of beginning or intermediate Latin language, or a combination of the two. T.A.’s starting out with a 50% appointment will often take on an additional discussion section just to help make ends meet.²

Until now the structure and substance of our graduate curriculum has traditionally asked our graduate students to teach these heavy loads year after year with little or no practical preparation. This chronic lack of guidance formed our second major concern. The UIUC campus-wide T.A. orientation did provide new T.A.’s with a day or two of general background on teaching-related issues, and even a few tips and techniques for the classroom. In fact, this program has improved quite a bit in recent years under competent, energetic new leadership, but even so it must remain on a fairly superficial

² The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences has recently made major funding re-allocations aimed at increasing the available fellowship pool, but until the proposed changes take effect it remains unclear how much of a difference they will actually make.

level, taking place as it does before T.A.'s have even met with students for the first time, and with Classicists participating alongside colleagues from Physics, Economics, Sociology, and the like. At the departmental level, before the new course, the Classics T.A.'s would meet with the chair and graduate adviser just prior to the start of classes each semester to hear announcements of general interest, and then break into smaller groups with their faculty supervisors to go over the syllabus and policies for the course(s) to be taught that term. This marked the extent of the formal T.A. training in our department. Subsequent faculty involvement with graduate students in their role as teachers of Classics within our department took place on an informal, *ad hoc* basis. Some professors insisted on weekly staff meetings and kept close tabs on their T.A.'s, while others left them to their own devices. In such a situation some T.A.'s constantly seek advice even when things are going well while others continually struggle but never say a word about it. Some of our faculty began regular observation of their T.A.'s in the classroom and offered them feedback on their teaching, but this is still more the exception than the rule.

When we adopt a "hands-off" approach, we may or may not deliberately set out to inflict on our students the same kind of "baptism by fire" that we ourselves once had to face, but we do leave a great deal to chance and to individual temperament and/or initiative. The results are predictably spotty. Ultimately, those with the right combination of natural talent and a willingness to work hard do quite well, and we take credit for their success, even when the department has had almost nothing to do with it. But should any of them run into difficulties, we conveniently gloss over the situation and do not intervene until or unless something goes truly and catastrophically wrong. But instead of sending out an implicit message that "pretty good is good enough," and that we really do not care very much about what they are doing, we should encourage all of them to strive for excellence, not only for their own sake, but also for the undergraduates whom they are teaching on our behalf.

Moreover, the job market is changing. Teaching matters now as never before. This was our third and most compelling argument for getting the course approved. An increasing number of APA Placement Service ads ask for evidence of teaching effectiveness, and more and more job candidates from the top institutions now submit impressively professional-looking teaching portfolios along with their regular scholarly dossiers. Logically, if we want our students to compete on the job market in the future as successfully as they have done in the past, we must adapt to changing expectations and begin to take a broader view of our role in their professional development. Furthermore, an early start on assembling a teaching portfolio can only help in the long run as preparation for future tenure considerations.

Other institutional pressures, too, encourage us to do a better job with T.A. training. For example, a common argument against unionization by T.A.'s states that their teaching differs from a job that merely pays the bills, in that this teaching actually forms an integral part of their training in becoming future professors. As their mentors, we ought to make this training dimension a reality.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

With all these facts in mind, we set three main goals for our new course: (1) to provide T.A.'s with practical tools to improve their teaching, both for language courses and for Classical Civilization courses in translation, (2) to introduce them to the wide range of instructional resources available to them on campus and elsewhere, and (3) to aid in their professional development by encouraging them to start assembling a teaching portfolio now, which can then presumably grow along with them throughout their careers.

The syllabus is organized accordingly.³ We spend the first few weeks talking about how students learn (general principles of pedagogy, learning styles, Bloom's taxonomy, etc.), next we focus on the skills we rely upon for work in our field (such as reading, writing, critical thinking, grammar, etc.), and finally we work through a number of classroom techniques (active learning, discussions, testing, evaluations, etc.) that our graduate students will need to use. We also try to model some of these same "Best Practices" in the teaching of the course. Along the way the T.A.'s also find out about the job market, particularly about the expectations involving teaching, and begin to work on a teaching portfolio, which functions as a tangible product in lieu of a seminar paper at the end of the semester. Lastly, we are seeking to build up a library of books and Internet links that will help both graduate students and faculty in future years, as part of a long-term commitment to the professional growth of our whole department.⁴

³ More information about the details of our course in Spring 2002, including the syllabus, reading list, annotated web-links, etc., is available through <http://www.classics.uiuc.edu/clciv450/>. Eventually, we plan to create a special "T.A. Resources" section within the department's web-site.

⁴ In 2000/01, as an outgrowth of the Liberal Arts and Sciences Teaching Academy Reflective Teaching Seminar (see below), I received a grant naming me a Dean's Special Teaching Fellow to work on the syllabus for our new course, with \$2,000 to purchase books and other materials for our departmental pedagogy and professional development library.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Of course, the ideal solution to the challenges of T.A. training at the University of Illinois might not work elsewhere. Yet insofar as we have unearthed a general “recipe for success,” I would sum it up in these three simple steps.

1. **Set specific goals.** Determine first exactly what you are trying to accomplish, and break it down into its components. Ask probing questions, such as, “What do we expect from our T.A.’s in the classroom? What skills should they begin to develop now, to use life-long? What challenges do they typically encounter? What painful lessons did we ourselves have to learn by trial and error that we really wish someone had bothered to teach us, back when we first started out?”

In our department we focused on the idea that tomorrow’s Classicists must be flexible enough to teach technical philology and grammar as well as General Education courses stressing reading, writing, and critical thinking. The two spheres differ widely, yet share features stemming from the way students learn. Our course is designed to explore various techniques advocated by experts in the field of teaching and learning, but always shaping them to fit the contours of our particular discipline. We should not have to throw aside our identity as Classicists in favor of the latest newfangled theory, in other words, but ask rather, “How does this model relate to our own experience? How can our students benefit from this approach, or does it even make sense from where we stand?” Thus we encourage our graduate students to become more aware of what they are doing in the classroom and why, and to start thinking critically from the beginning about the relationship between theory and practice in their teaching.

2. **Find the experts.** Here lies the real key to the entire project. Never imagine that you must somehow try to do it all by yourself! That attempt only leads to defeatism and/or megalomania. The trick, instead, is to draw together a kind of “all-star cast” from both within the department and beyond it. As Classicists, we know our own discipline well, but most of us do not feel the same degree of familiarity or comfort with the vast scholarship on teaching and learning. Yet most campuses house experts who have devoted themselves to the study of pedagogy. Establishing a co-operative dialogue brings the two sides together. We can learn techniques and approaches from them that will help us do our job, and they can gain from us an awareness of our field that will broaden their understanding. It works both ways.

At UIUC, in addition to contributions from our own faculty and the more senior graduate students (who have so much hard-won wisdom and experience to offer to their junior peers), we received support from the Writing

Center and Writing Across the Curriculum (both run by the English department), the Office of Instructional Resources (a panoply of services devoted to helping teachers teach), the college Teaching Academy (which runs programs and workshops specifically for faculty), and an off-shoot of the national Preparing Future Faculty program (which networks with other institutions to enhance mentoring and professional development of graduate students). Many campuses have a similar constellation of pedagogical resources available.

3. **Work together.** No single individual needs to tackle the whole jigsaw puzzle when he or she can gather a whole group of variously talented people together and have each of them contribute a little piece. All it takes is organization and teamwork. With our T.A.'s I do not try to set myself up as an expert on pedagogy in my own right. Rather, I view my role as that of facilitator and guide to the many resources that I have found helpful in my own ongoing professional growth. I actually lead less than 20% of the sessions. Everything else, the real substance of the course, comes from the outside experts that I have recruited from literally all over campus.

All of us throughout our lives, from T.A. to emeritus, are works-in-progress when it comes to teaching. During the course of the seminar we talk together as a group and learn from one another. The more different voices brought into the discussion, the greater the wealth of ideas and experiences that comes into play, and the more the whole community benefits. Our former First Lady had it exactly right: it really does "take a village" to bring out the best in teachers at any level.

EPILOGUE: MOVING BEYOND THE *EXEMPLA MAIORUM*

At the darkest moment in the whole process, during the debate in our department over whether or not to make the new course a requirement, the counter-argument finally came down to this: "Formal pedagogical training is a waste of time because good teachers are born, not made. We have only to model ourselves on the great teachers of the past, and the rest will follow."

But any philologist should realize that the image of a perfect transmission, textual or pedagogical, is simply a fantasy. Things change. Knowledge, technology, institutions, societies, values, expectations—all change. Students do not start out just like their teachers at a young age, nor by any stretch of the imagination do they wind up in the same place. They learn the craft only to put their own unique stamp on it. Thus, although every one of us who has ever embarked on a teaching career carries along a whole inner Pantheon of individuals who have inspired us to follow their example, that is just where the journey *starts*, not where it ends. The life of the mind breeds experimenta-

tion and growth. Having devoted ourselves as Classicists to the preservation of the past, we mistrust anything that smacks of the ephemeral, the trendy. But we will be doomed like the dinosaurs unless we can adapt to our changing environment, and find ways to communicate to a new generation some measure of the value and fascination that we have found in the material that we study from the ancient world. From LaFontaine to Bob Dylan, remember “*Je plie et ne romps pas*,” because “the times, they are a changin’.”