GETTING PEOPLE STARTED: TEACHING ASSISTANT WORKSHOP FOR SOCIOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENTS AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

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The sociology faculty and graduate students at Michigan State University have conducted a yearly workshop for teaching assistants and other beginning graduate students for the past 14 years. This summary article uses the annual workshop reports to provide an historical account of the workshop’s evolution based on its objectives, structural obstacles, and educational achievements. A more detailed outline of the program is also provided for those interested in workshop design. Finally, the report makes an assessment of the workshop’s educational merits and its structural drawbacks, based on the workshop evaluations by participants and the faculty-graduate student coordinators.

Each year, many young graduates in sociology enter an uncertain and highly competitive job market. This saturated market enables colleges and universities to set higher standards and “acceptable levels of qualifications” in teaching sociology for the “unemployed sociologist.” While support for research in our discipline is widespread, few institutions in higher education actually provide support, either financial or academic, for teacher training programs.

According to Goldsmid (1976, p. 230), we can trace the roots of teacher development activities in sociology to the early 1920s, when the first course for graduate students on teaching sociology was taught at the University of Southern California. But, unfortunately, this practice has not become an established tradition within our discipline. Goldsmid found at least “a half-dozen departments” in the 1940s and 1950s that “had a course, workshop, or structured internships for graduate students” (1976, p. 231). However, these programs were typically short-lived and their survival depended on the personal contributions and interests of a single sociologist.

The social and political awareness of the 1960s had constructive effects on the concern for teaching in the social sciences in general, and sociology in particular. As Goldsmid put it:

In this period, students saw a new relevance in sociology, and teachers faced new opportunities and challenges in their teaching. Of course, in the 1960s, such trends coexisted with the heavy involvement of social science in the public issues of the day; sociologists produced research for a wider range of groups and institutions than had earlier been the case (1976, p. 231).

The impact of this increased concern with teaching sociology was examined in a survey conducted by Ewens and Emling (1975) for the American Sociological Association. The study was based on the responses to a questionnaire sent to the chairpersons of all sociology departments with graduate programs and a 25 percent sample of sociology departments in community and four-year colleges. Ewens and Emling found that:

1. Only 13 percent of all departments had any in-service activities where full-time teachers were provided with opportunities to reflect on, analyze, and review their skills, and improve the overall quality of their teaching.
2. While 50 percent of graduate departments had some type of teacher training activity (such as an orientation session or teaching workshop), only 19 percent of these departments had semester-long courses on teaching.

Thus, despite the fact that 32 percent of graduate departments in 1975 required their graduate students to teach, Ewens and Emling concluded:

Few, if any, sociology departments have yet instituted total, overall programs for the development of teaching expertise that compare either in depth or scope with the more-or-less comprehensive research methodology programs that commonly exist in most graduate sociology departments (1975, p. 4).

SUMMARIZING THE M.S.U. EXPERIENCE

As one step toward a more systematic training program for beginning college teachers, each fall since 1972 the Michigan State University Sociology Department has sponsored a workshop for beginning teaching assistants (T.A.s), incoming graduate students, and returning graduate students who have shown an interest in becoming college teachers. The primary purposes of the workshop have been to introduce new students to the Department, to present sociology as a teaching
profession, and to help graduate students develop the basic skills needed for beginning college teachers. The workshop has been a joint faculty-graduate student effort, with both faculty and graduate student coordinators planning and executing each year’s workshop.

WORKSHOP EVOLUTION

The program began as an intensive four-day event which dealt with many dimensions of teaching. Initially a wide spectrum of topics was covered, ranging from the hands-on practice of teaching to theoretical debates about teaching philosophies and the role of a critical sociologist in a university setting.

Many changes have occurred, however, since this ambitious start. First, while participants universally rated the workshop experience highly, their evaluations consistently indicated the long sessions produced information overload. People were given too many experiences and too much information, with little time to process what they had received. The T.A. workshop in the 80s is now shorter initially, one evening and one full day, and occurs throughout the academic year in the form of afternoon seminars or mini-sessions.

Second, the focus of the workshop has also changed. Decisions about what is covered in the workshop agenda have always been a joint responsibility of the faculty and graduate student coordinators. In the last few years, the people involved chose to shift the content of the workshop away from the theoretical aspects and concerns for teaching sociology toward disseminating more basic information and practical teaching techniques. However, the coordinators of the 1985-86 workshop are reintroducing some of the dimensions of this theoretical orientation and practice.

RECURRING ISSUES

Two elements have continually emerged as factors in the structure of the workshop: issues of shrinking resources and debates about the internal dynamics of the workshop experience.

Shrinking resources have had two important effects on the workshop. The first revolves around a declining number of new T.A.s in the M.S.U. Sociology Department. As resources for new graduate students dwindled, so did the potential population for workshop attendance. Initially, formal attendance was required only for those incoming students who were awarded graduate assistantships. Now all graduate students who receive teaching assistantships are required to attend at least one teaching workshop. In addition, the workshop has always functioned as an avenue for incoming students to begin their integration into the Department. This aspect has been emphasized and the workshop program has incor-
they will need in their first few months of graduate school. Participants are expected to gain knowledge about:

1. The rights and responsibilities associated with the position of graduate student T.A., such as the university and departmental expectations, evaluation procedures, and some potential job-related conflicts;
2. Different methods of planning and conducting discussion groups, alternative approaches to teaching, techniques of dealing with classroom problems, and methods of evaluating classes;
3. Various methods of evaluating students, mastery of course material involving the construction of test questions, the advantages and disadvantages of different testing procedures, and the techniques and implications of grading;
4. The available resources that may be employed by teaching assistants (such as resources from the department, university, and community);
5. The Department’s Program for Certification in Teaching Sociology, and how students can organize their teacher preparation activities while in graduate school;¹
6. How teaching assistants are selected and what financial resources are available to graduate students who are not supported by the Department; and
7. How the issues of sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism will affect them as teaching assistants and as graduate students, and various ways of resolving these issues.

PLANNING AND FUNDING

Planning for the following year’s workshop begins at the end of spring term of the current year. A memorandum is distributed to all graduate students announcing available coordinator positions. Three coordinators are selected by the members of the Undergraduate Education Committee. Several criteria are used to guide the selection process.

¹ At M.S.U., the Program for Certification in Teaching Sociology is a comprehensive teacher development program for graduate students in the Sociology Department. Its basic goals are to assist sociology graduate students to develop knowledge and skills related to college teaching and obtain additional credentials for convincing potential employers of their dedication and competence as college teachers. To achieve this departmental certification, students must successfully complete a program that includes four basic requirements: the Workshop for Beginning Teaching Assistants, the Seminar in Teaching Sociology (Sociology 870), the Sociology Teaching Practicum, and a final Oral Examination over teaching. (For more details, see the accompanying article by the same authors.)

To insure continuity, at least one experienced coordinator is selected who has previously been a coordinator. Additionally, three other criteria are applied in selecting graduate student coordinators to insure that these workshop leaders are representative of the general graduate student population. Hence, one coordinator must be a woman, one coordinator must be a new workshop leader, and one coordinator must be a foreign student. In short, we select graduate coordinators who together reflect these student characteristics. These student workshop leaders work with a faculty member who also has been appointed as faculty workshop coordinator by the Undergraduate Education Committee.

Meetings are held throughout the summer to plan for the fall sessions. The main segment of the workshop is scheduled to coincide with registration at the beginning of fall term. Letters are sent to all incoming graduate students to introduce the workshop. All new teaching assistants are required to attend and others are urged to use the opportunity to become acquainted with the Department. In addition, all current graduate students are invited to each year’s workshop to contribute their experiences and to meet new people.

The workshop costs very little for the benefits it produces. The Department provides both financial and resource support. Resources typically include secretarial help, a small supplies and services budget, and the use of conference rooms. The Department also allocates a small stipend for the graduate student coordinators. Additional funds for refreshments, a party and meals for participants are solicited from the faculty.

WORKSHOP AGENDA: A MORE DETAILED OUTLINE

Since 1980, the workshop has been divided into two parts. The first session, one full day and an evening, is held fall term before the school year begins, and the two shorter mini-sessions are scheduled for afternoons later in the year. These later sessions deal with selected teaching topics in greater depth.

The evening session on the beginning night addresses orientation issues and creates an atmosphere of concern with teaching. Participants are introduced to each other, to the university, and to community resources. We also lead into the following day’s activities by prompting T.A.s to begin thinking about their philosophies and concerns about teaching.

The full-day session focuses on practical classroom concerns. We present specific information about Department policies and prospects, as well as teaching skills and problems. We also emphasize an atmosphere of mutual discussion and sharing. We balance information sessions with video presentations and problem solving sessions
both to demonstrate different methods and to encourage participants to share their experiences with teaching both as students and as teachers (on the basis of previous teaching experience). We give participants a booklet of handouts and articles assembled by the workshop coordinators to help them assimilate and retain the vast amount of information they are given in the main workshop.

The sessions included have varied according to the interests of the coordinators and the emergence of new issues of concern. For example, in the recent years reduced funding for T.A. positions within the Department created an environment of financial anxiety. Consequently, a session on alternative funding possibilities and specifics about the T.A. allocation process was created to provide a forum for these concerns.

The same process has operated in the selection of topics for the mini-sessions. Faculty and students are informally polled about their teaching interests and concerns. An increasing interest among faculty and students in the application of computers in sociology and the recent acquisition of microcomputers by the Department, for instance, gave rise to a recent session on the use of computers in the classroom. We use the mini-sessions to promote an interest and concern for teaching throughout the year. The discussion below presents a more detailed description of the workshop sessions.

Session 1. Get Acquainted. The objectives of this session are to: 1) review the history and purpose of the workshop; 2) help participants further clarify and articulate some of their assumptions about teaching and learning; 3) help new students form supportive social relationships with the coordinators, senior graduate students, and with one another; and 4) familiarize participants with teaching resources available in the department, university, and community.

The workshop begins with an introduction of the coordinators and the participants; each person briefly discusses her/his teaching experiences. The history and nature of the overall objectives of the workshop are then explained by the workshop coordinators. Finally, an informal presentation is given which highlights people and groups within the university and the larger community who could help participants in providing speakers, films and information for their classroom.

Session 2. Perspectives on Teaching. The content of this session varies based on the collective decision of each year's workshop coordinators. In some workshops, coordinators attempt to compare and contrast different teaching techniques that originate from different theoretical perspectives. For example, through group discussion, the distinction is made between the "banking" method of teaching with its "narrative" character, and the "dialogical" method that involves both students and the teachers in a dynamic educational experience (Freire 1970).

In other workshops, participants engage in an exercise designed to help them better understand some of their assumptions about teaching and learning. This exercise draws largely on the works of Mann et al. (1970) and McKeachie (1978), and is designed to allow participants a choice of one of six instructor role descriptions — the teacher as expert, as authority, as socializing agent, as facilitator, as ego ideal, and as a person. We pass cards around to all participants with statements representing these roles, and then ask people to place themselves into role groups that are most congruent for them. When back in the larger group, we discuss the relationship between these role choices and larger questions concerning personal teaching philosophies.2

Session 3. Allocation of T.A.s and Alternative Funding Sources. The selection and evaluation processes for T.A.s used by the Department are outlined both in written and in verbal form. Emphasis is placed on how difficult it is to obtain a T.A. position when there are limited funding sources, and the fact that participants should not take their failure to do so personally. Another objective of this session is to let the workshop participants who are not incoming teaching assistants know about other available funding sources. This information is given in conjunction with written materials in the T.A. workshop package, which consists of a separate packet of the university financial aid materials, and a list of alternative funding sources that are not noted in the official university publications.

Session 4. The Role of Teaching Assistants. This session is designed to acquaint teaching assistants with the nature of their teaching assignment and to help them identify what different sources expect of them:

1. The University. A discussion of the Code of Teaching Responsibility at Michigan State University focuses on what the university expects from them. The code holds all instructors to certain obligations regarding course content consistent with approved descriptions, timely statement of course objectives and grading criteria, regular class attendance, published office hours, and timely return of examinations and term papers.

2. The Sociology Department. Participants are told that although the Department has no formal requirements about the actual role of T.A.s, it eventually relies on the professors' T.A. evaluations in terms of its current and future expectations.

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2 For a more complete description of this exercise see Bergquist and Philips (1975, pp. 23–27).
3. The Professor. A survey of faculty and T.A. experience is conducted periodically. The survey results outline which activities are most routine or expected for T.A. positions, e.g., whether class attendance and note-taking is required, expectations concerning exam preparations and grading, leading discussion sessions, and giving feedback to faculty.

The second part of this session deals with conflicts that may emerge between different sets of expectations and various strategies for dealing with such problems. For example, the structurally awkward nature of the T.A. role is outlined and the importance of negotiation between the T.A. and instructor is stressed. Also, strategies are presented for trouble-shooting in relevant areas such as inadequate faculty performance, the amount of workload, the problem of over-identification with the professor or students, and problems of communication and feedback.

The last part of the session presents the procedures adopted by the Department in evaluating the T.A.'s performance, and the process followed in selecting teaching assistants and T.A. assignments to courses. To codify this information, handouts on these subjects are included in the package given to the participants to serve as a reference manual for the graduate students in their future role as a T.A.

Session 5. Being a T.A.: The Nuts and Bolts of Teaching. An informal panel discussion format is utilized in this session to present the more technical aspects of teaching. Some of the basic teaching techniques emphasized in the workshop are briefly highlighted below:

1. First Day. This section reviews the special characteristics of the first class session and attempts to ease participants' anxiety about their performance on the first day. Some of the areas mentioned include notes on first day physical arrangement of the room, appropriate introduction, and the initial presentation of self as an instructor.

2. Lecture Techniques. Strategies are discussed for preparing and giving lectures. This section includes notes on various preparatory strategies such as researching lectures through utilization of articles, bibliographies, and examples.

3. Discussion Sections. The basic objectives in this session are two-fold: to understand the purpose of having discussion groups within the overall context of the larger class, and to gain experience in planning a discussion session. As an example, a topic sheet of several theoretical positions specific to one area (e.g., social stratification, gender inequality) is prepared. Using this sheet as the equivalent of lecture notes, small groups are asked to develop a discussion plan. Each group then returns to the larger group for an assessment of the strengths/weaknesses of their developed strategies. The session concludes with a discussion on active listening skills, confrontation skills, and how to create a classroom situation where people feel free to participate in discussion.

4. Planning Review Sessions. This session presents options for review sessions such as working from a prepared study guide, answering individual students' questions, preparing conceptual reviews, posing problems, and giving a mock exam.

5. Writing Exam Questions and Grading Papers. A number of issues regarding grading and student evaluation are discussed in this session, such as:

   1. two primary methods of testing—essays and multiple-choice exams:

   2. a discussion of the suitability of each method to different materials and teaching strategies;

   3. techniques for constructing multiple-choice and essay exams; and

   4. ways to evaluate essays fairly and provide students with constructive feedback on their written works.

Session 6. Classroom Conflict Management. In conjunction with the survey on expectations for T.A. performance duties (see Session 4, part 3), faculty and T.A.'s were asked to relate examples of conflict from their teaching experiences in any area, and specifically instances of ethnocentrism, racism and sexism, disruptive or dominating students and passive students. On the basis of examples from the responses, we asked participants to brainstorm solutions to the problems presented. The entire group then discussed the implications of the solutions. In addition, the solution used by the person reporting the incident was shared along with its result.

THE MINI-WORKSHOP SESSIONS

The two later mini-sessions focus more on specific issues and attempt to promote a sense of continuity and ongoing concern for improving teaching in the Department. The first mini-workshop is usually scheduled for the week preceding mid-term examinations in fall term (M.S.U.'s educational program is based on a quarter system), and the second for after the Christmas holidays (the first week of winter term). The format for mini-sessions is a panel discussion with the selection of panelists being based on the topic chosen. Faculty members and graduate students are approached and invited to participate. When the panel selection is finalized, a letter is sent to each panelist that outlines the major topic and issues for discussion. However, since the sessions are informal in nature,
WE DO NOT RESTRICT THE PANELISTS TO THE PROPOSED FRAMEWORK.


EVALUATIONS OF THE WORKSHOP

WORKSHOP EVALUATION BY PARTICIPANTS

Each workshop concludes with requests for evaluations by participants to get feedback on the usefulness of the workshop and recommendations about improving the future ones. In general, participants are asked to comment on the overall outcome of the workshop and those activities or issues which they liked the most or the least. Table 1 illustrates the overall T.A. workshop evaluation by participants in the 1979–1984 period.

As seen in Table 1, the vast majority of participants (90 percent) found the workshop experience rewarding and worthwhile. This table portrays the extent to which participants valued problems related to teaching skills (such as conducting discussion groups, strategies for classroom crises, and conflict management in the sensitive issues of racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism). It may be argued that participants are more concerned about their role and responsibilities as a teacher rather than as a teaching assistant. Participants consistently rated teaching-related activities as the “most useful” (e.g., conducting group discussions, issues on ethnocentrism and other topics, and classroom conflict management). In contrast, participants did not appear to be concerned with rules and Department procedures. These activities have been consistently rated the “least” useful activities. Such ratings suggest the importance of further emphasis on teacher training programs in the Department and the inclusion of graduate students in such activities.

Finally, among many recommendations given for the improvement of the T.A. workshops, participants specifically suggested such things as shortening the workshop to a one-day event, putting more emphasis on the graduate students and avoiding faculty-centered workshops, and having more interaction between “old” and “new” T.A.s.

Table 1. T.A. Workshop Evaluation by Participants, 1979–1984

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions/issues</th>
<th>No. of Responses¹</th>
<th>Total No. of Participants²</th>
<th>Percentage (rounded)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attending the workshop</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. very glad I came</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. mildly glad I came</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. somewhat disappointed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The “most useful” activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. conducting a group discussion</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. issues on ethnocentrism, sexism, and racism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. what to do when things go wrong?</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. get acquainted session (game)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. test construction and grading</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. information on community resources</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g. the role of T.A.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The “least useful” activity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. information on community resources</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. get acquainted session (game)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. test construction and grading</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. issues on ethnocentrism, sexism, and racism</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. conducting a group discussion</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ “Number of Responses” refers to those who have selected and responded to one particular question issue within the six-year period.
² “Total Number of Participants” refers to those who had the specific question/issue in their evaluation form within the six-year period.

Source: Information drawn from Sociology Teaching Workshop Annual Reports, Department of Sociology, M.S.U.
COORDINATORS’ EVALUATION OF THE WORKSHOP EXPERIENCE

All past coordinators were sent a questionnaire asking them to reflect on the positive and negative aspects of their workshop experience. Evaluation of the workshop experience by the graduate student coordinators was universally positive. While coordinators often mentioned “too much work for too little pay,” the overall benefits of being a coordinator seem to outweigh financial concerns.

Coordinators have found that participating in the planning and implementation of the T.A. workshop has both immediate and long-term benefits. The process of deciding which topics to discuss in what ways prompts people to reflect upon their own teaching concerns. Working with other coordinators throughout the summer provides a forum for an ongoing discussion of these issues.

The value of the workshop experience goes with coordinators when they complete their graduate program. In a tight job market, working with the T.A. workshop is one way to demonstrate concern with teaching excellence. As one past coordinator reports:

In interviews since I have left the Department, people have always commented on and asked questions about my teaching. I feel my experience with the teaching program at M.S.U. helped separate me from other applicants.

The value of the workshop does not stop at adding “credentials” to past coordinator’s vitas. Many coordinators report they use the knowledge gained to continue improving their own teaching skills and to help others develop theirs:

My first year having graduate students assigned me in my courses brought home the tremendous value of the workshop experience. My department gives no teaching assistance or training to graduate students. I soon found myself distributing workshop materials and holding “mini workshops” in my office to give my T.A.s a start in the skills they needed to effectively help me with the course work.

Overall, the opportunities created by being a T.A. workshop coordinator provide a strong base for ongoing involvement with improving teaching in sociology.

WORKSHOP EVALUATION BY FACULTY

In addition to the survey of the workshop coordinators’ opinion, a separate questionnaire was also sent to the faculty who have been involved in workshop activities. When asked whether the workshops have been successful in fulfilling their task of preparing graduate students for assistantship positions, their response was affirmative and fully supportive. For example, one faculty member commented:

It is not by chance that our department has yielded so many graduate students who have won the university teaching award. We have not only placed a higher value on teaching than do most graduate programs; we have also helped articulate that value and provided ways in which teaching efforts can be made visible and knowledge transmitted.

In general, the urgent need for teacher training programs and lack of concrete discussion on teaching-related issues is felt by faculty. They see this as a serious problem not only at M.S.U., but in other universities as well. According to another faculty member, the T.A. workshop should become a model “for the university to follow in providing cohorts of T.A.s who perform excellently in the classroom situation.” Others acknowledged the usefulness of T.A. workshops for the faculty as well:

The T.A. workshop — the full session and the later ones held during the year — have helped facilitate such conversation (related to teaching), very much to the benefit of all of us. Each time I attend one of the sessions, I am struck by how little I know about what goes on in the teaching experiences of others, and about how useful it is to hear their experiences and to share my own. The need for such sharing never ceases.

The workshop evaluations by students, coordinators, and the faculty are all indicative of the benefit of attention given to teaching sociology.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Since 1972, we have improved and enriched the T.A. workshop, both in its form and content. With regard to content, however, the workshop’s focus has fluctuated between theoretical issues and the practical aspects of teaching sociology. This lack of balance between theory and practice has yet to

3 The Excellence-In-Teaching Citation award was begun in 1969 and recognizes outstanding teaching by graduate students at Michigan State University. Overall, the University has presented 103 of these awards to graduate students in the more than 100 eligible departments on campus. Fifteen of these Citations, or almost 15 percent of the total number of awards presented, have been presented to graduate students in the Sociology Department. Moreover, sociology graduate students have received seven of these awards within the past five years (1981-1985). These seven awards comprise approximately 23 percent of the total 30 awards presented during the last five years. Thus sociology graduate students have received more of the Excellence-In-Teaching Citations than have students in any of the other departments of the University.
be resolved in the design and execution of future workshops.

The T.A. workshop experience in sociology is still in its infancy. Given the growing concern with teaching in the discipline, there is a need to initiate dialogue and discussion among those involved in this valuable educational activity. Of course, the needs, objectives, and available resources vary greatly from institution to institution. However, as active participants in this worthwhile experience, we hope that our account of the sociology T.A. workshop at M.S.U. will be useful to faculty concerned with teacher development in sociology.

REFERENCES


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Ginger Macheski actively participated in the teacher training program during her graduate work at M.S.U. She now holds an Assistant Professor position at Central Michigan University.