The Department of Sociology at Michigan State University has offered a certification program in teaching sociology for graduate students since 1976. This program promotes and recognizes the importance of university teaching and provides systematic preparation for such teaching. The program includes four components: teaching assistant workshop, seminar in teaching sociology, sociology teaching practicum and oral examination. The strengths and weaknesses of the program are evaluated and suggestions for improvement of the program are included.

Postsecondary teaching is one important profession for which there is no systematic preparation program. Physicians serve internships, engineers and lawyers serve apprenticeships, and public school teachers get supervised "student-teaching" experience. However, universities tend to be governed by a "do-it-yourself" philosophy in training their replacements.

Many sociology departments may informally recognize the importance of preparing their graduate students for college teaching and may, in fact, offer a course to help fulfill this goal (e.g., Van Vale 1984; Davis, et al. 1979). The four-part Program For Certification In Teaching Sociology offered by the Department of Sociology at Michigan State University, however, appears to be an exception with its comprehensive, highly-structured organization, which provides an internship for future sociology professors.

According to the official program description, the Certification Program was set up to "assist graduate students to develop knowledge and skills related to college teaching and to obtain additional credentials for convincing potential employers of their dedication and competence as college teachers." The essence of the program lies in promoting and recognizing teaching competence as a whole.

The program gained departmental approval in 1976; a flyer described the program, and a description of the Certification Program was placed in the 1976–1977 Sociology Graduate Student Handbook. The Certification Program was first completed by two graduate students in 1979. The originator of the program and the current Coordinator of Undergraduate Studies have been key figures in the continued promotion of the Certification Program. Overall responsibility for the administration of the program rests with the Department's Quality of Instruction Committee and with the Coordinator of Undergraduate Studies. Approximately 100 graduate students have been involved in various aspects of the program.

STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM

The Program for Certification In Teaching Sociology includes four components: (1) Teaching Assistant Workshop, (2) Seminar in Teaching Sociology, (3) Sociology Teaching Practicum, and (4) Oral Examination. The logic behind this sequencing will become apparent in the following brief description of each of these components.

THE TEACHING ASSISTANT WORKSHOP

The Teaching Assistant Workshop is a one and one-half day workshop held prior to fall term each year. The workshop provides a general introduction to the Department of Sociology, assists new graduate students in the basic skills of teaching

\[1\] William Ewens was the originator of the program, and Marilyn Aronoff is the current Coordinator of Undergraduate Studies.

\[2\] The Quality of Instruction Committee is responsible for the overall general instruction program for undergraduate and graduate studies. It is concerned with improvement of the teaching climate.
RECOGNIZING TEACHER COMPETENCE

(such as conducting discussion groups), and highlights different approaches to teaching sociology. The T.A. Workshop has been in existence since 1972. While once required only for new incoming teaching assistants, attendance at the T.A. Workshop is now required of all incoming graduate students and all students receiving a Teaching Assistantship who have not attended the workshop previously. Two follow-up afternoon seminars on related topics, such as critical thinking, grading, and using computers in teaching, are held during the initial weeks of winter and spring terms.

The T.A. Workshop is organized by three graduate student coordinators with the assistance of a faculty coordinator. One important aspect of the workshop is the sharing of knowledge and insights by experienced teaching assistants with new graduate students, thus providing a base upon which these latter students can build. (For a more complete description of the workshop process, see the companion article by Chaichian, Macheski, Ewens and Backus in this same issue.)

THE SEMINAR IN TEACHING SOCIOLOGY

The Seminar in Teaching Sociology is a central part of the Certification Program. This term-length class addresses the theory and practice of teaching sociology. The central foci of the course include general theoretical issues related to the nature and purpose of classroom teaching methods in sociology and practical issues regarding course organization. The class examines various classroom teaching methods, including alternative teaching approaches, contract plans and computer-assisted instruction.

The development of a philosophy of effective teaching for personal growth and social change on the part of each student is an integral part of the class. Students compose a statement of their teaching philosophy, which addresses the purposes of sociology instruction, institutional contradictions and constraints, methods of effective instruction, and evaluation techniques. Students must also construct a complete course syllabus, including examinations, and demonstrate how the course material and organization relate to their overall philosophy of teaching.

Individual videotaping of classroom presentations by course members, with feedback from the instructor, has recently been added. Such videotaping can provide potential teachers with a more realistic idea of how their presence and their teaching actually appear to students. Course texts have included McKeachie (1978), Goldsmid and Wilson (1980), and Freire (1970, 1985).

Since the seminar usually includes no more than ten graduate students, it allows a unique opportunity for interested students to concentrate on pedagogical issues in a personal environment with a professor who is greatly concerned with, and involved in, such issues. This class has been described by one student as “pushing the students to clarify their reasons and rationales for why they teach the way they do.” Many consider this personal contact with an experienced, concerned professor to be one of the major strengths of the certification process.

THE SOCIOLOGY TEACHING PRACTICUM

Each student must complete a Sociology Teaching Practicum to fulfill the requirements of the Certification Program. This practicum entails teaching a sociology undergraduate course independently under the supervision of a three-member Faculty Guidance Committee. The graduate student selects these three people from faculty members who have volunteered to participate as practicum supervisors. Ideally, this committee works with the graduate student in the planning and execution of the class. The committee also reads and evaluates the required report, which analyzes the graduate student’s experiences in teaching the course, and conducts the oral examination.

One advantage of the practicum is that students are allowed the freedom to develop their class as they wish. No format is imposed, and they must design the class from scratch. The graduate student is responsible for the entire class, including grading. Students teaching such classes receive a normal graduate teaching assistant stipend. Classes are usually taught during summer term, when there are more openings due to professors being unable or unwilling to teach.

Five final reports were analyzed to assess the typical concerns of graduate students teaching such classes. The courses included Introduction to Sociology, Social Stratification, two Sociology of Sex and Gender classes, and Sociology of Education. Three of the graduate students writing the reports were women and two were men; three students were Americans, and two were foreign students. The reports follow a general format of discussing objectives for the class, methods for achieving the objectives, and an evaluation of the results. The reports also generally include copies of the course syllabus, exams, and student evaluations.

The reports contain many similar concerns, perhaps reflecting the interest in alternative teaching methods and critical thinking held by many graduate students and professors in the Department who are interested in the quality of teaching. Such concerns include encouraging more active and personal involvement in the education process, stimulating critical thinking, facilitating more democratic relations between students and teachers, and incorporating cross-cultural analysis and historical perspective in their classes.
Graduate students have tried to integrate the theory and practice of sociology by applying theories and concepts to concrete situations: supplying examples from everyday life and supplementing course materials with newspapers and other popular culture data. Teachers have also tried to increase student interest and awareness by using films and guest speakers. Students are also used as resources in group presentations and through tapping individuals with known knowledge or experience regarding course topics. For example, in the Sociology of Education class, a student who was an assistant principal at a nearby high school was asked to discuss problems and concerns of teachers and administrators at his school. In this manner, students see that they can learn from one another as well as from the teacher.

A teacher of the Sex and Gender class discussed the dilemma of dealing with issues that were at least somewhat familiar to the students through their own personal experience, but which could be threatening when analyzed from a sociological perspective. Her primary objective was “to generate a personal understanding of the material as well as a formal academic acquisition of knowledge.”

Several teachers have involved students in such things as selecting texts, deciding on the frequency and types of exams, and making questions for exams in order to encourage democratic relations between students and teachers. All encouraged student discussion, questioning of material presented, and the importance of student evaluations.

All graduate student teachers also expressed the need to include comparative and historical analysis in their courses to facilitate student understanding of how situations have arisen, and how these are different or similar across time and geographical space. Many graduate students expressed concern about the ethnocentrism of American undergraduate students.

Common problems mentioned include hostility to some of the material presented (typically the more “critical” material), how to handle this situation, and the tendency to present too theoretical interpretations of issues or concepts without providing concrete examples and illustrations. Other problems are those typical of new teachers in general: learning how much material is appropriate, reducing the rate of speech and, as one student stated, “never showing films that haven’t been previewed.”

All of the graduate student teachers considered the Sociology Teaching Practicum an extremely rewarding experience. They all felt that it provided a good foundation of accumulated material to use for future teaching, and that it served as a basis for improving their teaching skills.
One participant stated, “I value teaching, I liked the opportunity to be reflective about it, and I hoped the Certificate would help me get a job.” Another student stated that the program allowed her to “develop confidence in teaching and in my ability to grow as a teacher.” Many students mentioned that the program components allowed graduate students to get to know each other and share with each other rather than struggle with teaching problems on their own. Students mentioned that they were exposed to a greater range in the use of materials, format, and requirements than they might otherwise have been had the program not been in existence.

One student mentioned that as a consequence of this exposure to a variety of teaching techniques, she “developed a belief that teaching should be characterized by diversity, flexibility, and complexity.” This student felt that the certificate and the importance placed on teaching by the Department did help her obtain teaching positions, since several employers had mentioned her teaching credentials and experience as key factors in their hiring decision. Another individual currently holding an academic position did not feel that holding a certificate per se aided him in obtaining a job. However, being exposed to an environment in which the importance of teaching is stressed and in which graduate students are encouraged to gain teaching experience may well be a factor in individuals gaining academic positions. The true influence of the program on job placement remains to be seen, since most of the people who have completed the Certification Program are still graduate students.

Students also feel that the program in actual practice is too “loosely” organized. There is a need for more supervision and more one-to-one contact between participating students and members of the student’s Faculty Guidance Committee. This need is particularly present at the time of the Teaching Practicum. Many students are able to plan and teach the required course and to write the required paper with no supervision at all. The value of the oral examination process is also lessened if members of the Faculty Guidance Committee have had no prior direct involvement in the student’s teaching experience.

Another concern is that the Certification Program needs to receive more emphasis and publicity in the Department. The current Undergraduate Coordinator tries to mention the program at relevant times throughout the academic year, such as at the orientation for new students in the fall, and prior to and during summer term, when many graduate students teach classes independently. However, this is often done on an individual basis, and many students are not aware of the specific requirements or operations of the program. These latter elements are often learned informally. Thus, there is a need for a more concentrated and systematic flow of information regarding the Certification Program. The program needs to be considered with more importance by those administering the Program and by other individuals in the Department who are concerned with teaching.

Those who decided not to participate in the program or who started the program but did not finish it either did not want to take the time to complete the extra requirements (the Seminar in Teaching Sociology and the written report) or were unable to complete the written report. Some individuals may also misinterpret the oral examination process to be something similar to comprehensives, rather than as an informal summary of their teaching experience. However, the requirements and the time involved in completing these aspects are not excessive for those sincerely interested in teaching and in obtaining the Certification.

CONCLUSION

The Department’s concern with preparing competent university teachers, as exemplified by the Certification Program, is widely recognized by the University. As one student states, “The T.A. workshops have a good reputation throughout the campus. The Sociology Department is known for the level of commitment many graduate students demonstrate in teaching.”

The University began an Excellence-in-Teaching Citation award program in 1969, which recognizes outstanding teaching by graduate students at Michigan State University. Six awards are presented each year. Sociology graduate students have won 15% of the total number of citations presented, which is a greater percentage than students in any other University department. Graduate students in the Sociology Department have won 23% (7 out of 30) of those awards presented during the last five years (1981-1985). Of the eight students who have won awards since the Certification Program began, two have completed the program, five have served as coordinators of the Teaching Assistant Workshop, and all have attended the workshop.

The Certification Program in Teaching Sociology at Michigan State University thus affirms the high value which the Department places on good teaching and demonstrates its belief in the credibility of teaching as well as research. The program is one example of what may be done to develop an internship program for preparing future sociology professors.

REFERENCES

Davis, E., et. al. 1979. “Preparing Graduate Students of Sociology for Teaching.” Pp. 115-120 in Teaching...


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