

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 6 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 2002



Summer Studies & Graduate Students: An Opportunity to Develop A Reflective Teaching Practice

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For many graduate students at Brown, summer provides not just additional time to focus on research, but also the opportunity to create and teach one's own academic course. In the majority of departments at Brown, graduate students are only able to serve as teaching assistants during the year, so summer teaching offers the chance to be in control of a course – to write a syllabus, give lectures, and plan assignments. Even if one has already taught a course during the academic year, summer teaching offers the opportunity to create and design a new course.

Roughly 48 graduate students teach each summer in one of three programs run by Summer Studies. About 400 Brown students attend courses here during the summer in a shortened seven-week semester that consists of six weeks of classes followed by one week of final exams. Although most students are Brown undergraduates, courses are open to graduate students and students at RISD and other institutions as well. Summer Studies also offers a Pre-College summer program for talented high school students who hope to attend selective colleges and universities in the future. Two types of courses are available within the program: seven-week for-credit courses that are typically standard freshman year courses, and mini-courses. The mini-courses are intense, three-week, non-credit courses in which students can explore new material that they would not ordinarily encounter

during their high school education. For example, mini-courses last summer included *So You Think You Want to be a Doctor: An Introduction to Medicine, Financial Markets and Investments*, and *Genetic Engineering: The Ethical Considerations from Frankenstein to GATTACA*. While non-commuters are required to take two courses during the pre-college seven-week program, those students in mini-courses focus solely on one subject.

Teaching during the summer offers several challenges, but can be an extremely rewarding experience. Due to the short length of the programs, courses often meet every day, sometimes for several hours at a time. Teachers must therefore work harder to keep students engaged with the material. The long hours spent with the students, however, especially during the mini-courses, “provide the opportunity for creative and experiential types of learning,” according to Elizabeth Hart, Associate Dean of Summer Studies. Charlotte Biltkoff from the American Civilization department at Brown taught a seminar entitled *Eating Identity: Food and Culture in Modern America* last summer, and was “inspired to break up the usual seminar discussion format with field trips, presentations and other exploratory exercises that got us out of our seats, out of the classroom altogether, or otherwise outside of a routine.” Alyssa Lodewick from the History department plans on teaching a mini-course in *Adolescence and Youth Culture* next summer, and is looking forward to the daily interaction with her students; “[t]he important task of maintaining intellectual momentum is difficult when days pass between class periods. The (hopefully positive) intellectual energy that builds up on one day will spill over into the next day and won't be dampened by so many intervening hours!” Damien Easson, a former graduate student in Physics, took his *Cosmology: Space and Time* students to the Boston Museum of Science, and Julia Friedman in Art History plans to take her students to the RISD Museum, the Brown University Bell Gallery, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston next summer when she teaches *Survey of Art History: Italian Renaissance to Present*. Simon Feldman, a Philosophy graduate student has taken his *Philosophy of Law* students to the Providence Superior Court to observe proceedings such as jury selection and instruction. Matthew Crosston in the Political Science department who has taught both *Ethnic Self-Determination and State Disintegration* and *Recent Global Strife* stresses, however, that “the success of a course isn't how to avoid the materials or how to make students forget they are in university.” It is essential to “demand as much

from them as humanly possible while still being open to talk with them in a friendly, non-intimidating style.”

There are some drawbacks to this intensive summer schedule, however. Many teachers are careful to strictly monitor the workload they place on their students in order to keep them from being overwhelmed. This is more of a problem with the pre-college seven-week students who are not familiar with the fast pace of a standard college course during the academic year, let alone a course that runs approximately twice as fast. Teaching at such a demanding pace also puts tremendous pressure on one’s own schedule. As graduate students, we are expected to do research towards the dissertation during the summer, and it is sometimes difficult to properly balance these competing obligations. For example, a mini-course involves a minimum of fifteen hours of class time per week, in addition to time spent preparing lectures, grading work, and holding office hours and student conferences. Ismar Volic, a graduate student in Mathematics who taught *How to Think the “Calculus Way”* last summer, notes that although the seven-week courses do leave room for research, the mini-courses are more difficult to balance: “I had to build [the course] from scratch because it was nothing our department offers during school year.” Brett Clifton of the Political Science department agrees “to give your students what they deserve, teaching takes a lot out of you, both physically and mentally.” And ultimately, since summer teaching is often a graduate student’s sole source of summer funding, it must sometimes take priority over research temporarily.

Student focus and motivation are also very different during the summer. Some graduate students did encounter a decrease in motivation as well as classroom attendance, sometimes due to undergraduates who are repeating courses for which they did not receive credit during the academic year. Most summer teachers, however, find their students both more focused, since they are taking at most two courses, and more eager to learn. “The high schoolers were amazingly motivated and highly intelligent – the cream of the crop,” said Brett Clifton, who taught *Religion and Politics in America* last summer. In addition, many teachers find that the students are more relaxed and open with each other, perhaps due to the small class size and number of class hours spent together. As a result, they are able to participate in some stimulating discussions and debates.

Despite the drawbacks that do exist in teaching summer courses, most graduate students are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences. In fact, many continue to teach the next summer. It is a wonderful opportunity to develop a course, hone one's teaching skills, and interact with a small group of talented, inquisitive students.