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The Professional Development of Graduate Instructors in the Department of Hispanic Studies

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Hispanic Studies has a long history of supporting the professional development of the graduate instructors in its Spanish language program. The language faculty, Beth Bauer, Nidia Schuhmacher, Silvia Sobral, and I, meet frequently to work out the details of our multi-faceted program, which has grown to be a kind of department within a department. I liken our work to the cultivation of a large garden. At times it is difficult and gritty, it will never be completed and there is always something that needs tending. Fortunately, our toils yield highly gratifying results.

The basic framework for the support of our graduate instructors consists of several components. The first is the graduate seminar HISP290, Theories and Methods of Foreign Language Teaching, created in the early 1990s under the auspices of the Center for Language Studies. It was originally designed as a team-taught interdisciplinary course. More recently it is taught by my colleague, Silvia Sobral, and is offered through our department, though students from other departments are still welcome to attend. HISP290 introduces students to the theoretical underpinnings of foreign language teaching and learning, examines various instructional methods and approaches, and offers some basics of praxis. For example, students observe experienced instructors, do some supervised teaching themselves, and design and evaluate teaching materials. This ambitious course gives students a taste of a broad, interdisciplinary field with which they would not otherwise have contact during their time at Brown.

The next piece of the framework is the handbook entitled *Guidelines for Instructors in Hispanic Studies*, which I initially compiled in the mid-80s at the beginning of my 20-year tenure as director of the language program. My successor, Nidia Schuhmacher, and Silvia Sobral have recently expanded and refined this document. A cornerstone of the program, it details almost every aspect of language teaching in Hispanic Studies, and covers such areas as instructor responsibilities, administrative matters, course management, resources for students as well as instructors, and the teaching evaluation process. Instructors report that

Guidelines informs and reassures them before they start teaching and serves as an indispensable resource once they are teaching.

In addition to studying *Guidelines* before they begin teaching, new instructors are required to attend a 5-day teaching orientation. We usually have 5-6 attendees, including graduate student TAs as well as Associates from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries. The goal of the orientation is to give students enough support for their first semester of teaching at Brown, without overwhelming them with information.

Here's a quick sketch of the orientation program:

Day 1: We present an overview of the language program, familiarize instructors with their responsibilities, acquaint them with general principles of foreign language teaching and learning, and distribute materials and assignments for the days that follow.

Day 2: The group meets in the Language Resource Center to learn about the instructional technology available at Brown. To acclimate our instructors, many of whom are not familiar with the American university, we have designed activities and discussion pertaining to academic and classroom culture in this country. For example, we role-play scenarios that are likely to fluster new instructors.

Day 3: We focus on various pedagogical matters, such as teaching grammar, pronunciation and production skills, and working with error correction. Later in the day, students work with lesson planning, the use of course textbooks, and the development of class activities.

Day 4: We hold a Q & A session, give students time to work on the lesson plans they will present the following day, and discuss with them the complex set of administrative and pedagogical matters that arise at the beginning of the term.

Day 5: This is a half-day session during which instructors present their lesson plans to the entire group, which then critiques and discusses each plan. Finally, we ask students to fill out an evaluation of the orientation program, which assists us in planning the event for the coming year.

Though we help our beginning instructors formulate a lesson plan during the teaching orientation, we believe that they need additional support with the task during the first part of the semester. Consequently, the faculty supervisors of each multi-section course supply instructors with lesson plans for several weeks. (This has the added benefit of ensuring more uniformity between the course sections.)

Regular course meetings with their faculty course supervisors are another important part of our program. They are held almost weekly, depending on the particular course. In addition to being an opportunity to distribute materials and discuss course content, pedagogy, and logistics, the meetings are important for tracking and supporting those language students who might be experiencing difficulty.

The last piece of program's basic framework is our system of teaching observation. New instructors are observed twice during their first year of teaching. Although each class is filmed, the faculty supervisor makes every effort to observe it in person. The instructor is asked to submit a lesson plan to the observer beforehand. After the class, the instructor is asked to view the video and to write up a one-page statement that answers the following questions: What were your goals and objectives for this class? Did you accomplish what you set out to do? What would you change or do differently? Did anything surprise you?

The instructor turns in the statement and the video to the observer, who reviews them and then meets with the instructor to discuss the class.

We consider the first two observations as practice runs for the second year observation, which is more thoroughly evaluated and goes into the instructor's dossier. If difficulties emerge at the time of the second year observation, we make additional observations until we feel the instructor is on track. This can be a challenging process but we feel that it is essential to ensure that our instructors reach a high level of competence.

With our basic framework in place, we offer various means of support once the academic year is underway. For example, we find that frequent meetings of the language faculty are imperative to keep things running smoothly. At these meetings, in addition to discussing many aspects of the program, we regularly discuss the progress of our instructors, with a particular eye for supporting those who might be experiencing difficulty. Beth, Nidia, Silvia and I are fortunate to work very well together and aim to model collegiality for our graduate students. The meetings keep our camaraderie strong.

We consider it is important to foster a similar sense of community among our instructors. Toward this end, we hold a Teaching Chat over lunch each semester with them. The Teaching Chats have been well attended and our instructors have stated that they appreciate the chance to discuss their concerns about teaching in a friendly, informal atmosphere.

There are two formal channels through which language faculty and graduate instructors communicate. The first is the Language Committee, chaired by the Director and comprised of the Language Faculty and two graduate student representatives. The student representatives poll their peers regarding various aspects of the language program and present the results of their survey at the meeting. The second channel is the Departmental Standing Committee, on which the Director sits, along with graduate students and departmental faculty. Both groups meet twice a year and through them we have resolved many issues and developed new directions for the department.

Finally, a few miscellaneous items:

- We attempt to give students a varied teaching experience by rotating them through different courses.
- We actively advertise and encourage participation in the Sheridan Center programs, and give it weight when we evaluate instructors for departmental and university teaching prizes.
- We cultivate the habits of self-evaluation and self-analysis in our instructors. We have developed worksheets to help them better understand their student course evaluations and to analyze their teaching on their own.
- We have begun work to make extra course activities available on-line.
- We encourage our instructors to seek training in MyCourses, and assume their eventual proficiency in its use. This skill is crucial for our program as well as for the professional development of our graduate students.

Several years ago, the language faculty doubled in size, from two to four members. Though still understaffed, we are now better able to foster the professional development of our graduate instructors and believe that we are on the right track. Recently, our language program was given kudos by a team of outside evaluators. Furthermore, we have an

impressive record of winners of Brown's prestigious Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching.

We know that the demand for Spanish at Brown will continue to grow, especially as the university becomes more internationalized. Over time we hope to expand our course offerings and to increase the kinds of support we offer to the future professoriate. We are pleased with our accomplishments and appreciate this opportunity to share them with you. However, as any dedicated gardener knows, you enjoy the flowers and are often inspired by them, then you put your gloves back on and tend to the next task.