

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 2 / NUMBER 2 • JANUARY 1998



Pedagogical Hothouses: Departmental Teaching Initiatives for Graduate TAs

During the fall semester, the four 1997- 98 Graduate Teaching Fellows, Michael J. V. Woolcock (Social Sciences), Margo L. Ballou (Humanities), Carolyn P. Schick (Physical Sciences), and Richard Bungiro (Life Sciences), gathered information on departmental pedagogical initiatives which support the teaching and professional development of graduate students. These reports are based on discussion with either Departmental Graduate Student Liaisons (GSLs) or Faculty Teaching Liaisons (FTLs). They suggest that many departmental faculty are actively involved in supporting graduate students to perform their teaching duties as an integral and beneficial element of their research work here at Brown. We hope that other members of the faculty will be inspired by what their colleagues are doing and develop programs which suit their specific departmental pedagogical culture. If we missed something your department is doing, please let us know and we will include it in the next issue of the Teaching Exchange! If you have questions about these initiatives or wish to discuss ways of addressing these issues in your department, please give us a call or e-mail.

Orientations for fledgling TAs

Across the University, the most widespread department pedagogical activity is the orientation for new graduate TAs. A number of Brown departments offer this support for their teaching assistants to ensure that they are prepared to enter the classroom with confidence and some sense of what they will be encountering. **American Civilization** holds a general orientation for all new TAs early in the fall. **Sociology** holds an orientation for new students each year, including a short presentation about the Sheridan Center. **French Studies** holds a three-day orientation for new TAs and TFs in late August. **Classics** holds an orientation for new TAs and TFs in late August organized as a panel discussion with former TAs and TFs sharing their experiences teaching language, translation, and civilization courses in the department.

German Studies and **Slavic Languages** co-sponsor the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Summer Workshop for three days in late August of every year. The program

changes every year but always includes an introduction to language teaching, a brief history of methods in language pedagogy, a micro-teaching session, a tour of the language lab coordinated with the Center for Language Studies and the other language departments, and presentations on various Brown resources, including the Sheridan Center. The departments also meet separately with their teaching assistants to introduce them to the courses they will be teaching. This year the program included a videotape of Brown students and teachers talking about teaching at Brown and in the U.S. in general.

Hispanic Studies also offers its own orientation for new TAs, a two-day workshop familiarizing instructors with language teaching at Brown and explaining course structure. The orientation touches upon a number of issues in language pedagogy, such as Brown's emphasis on communication rather than the mastering of grammar, student-centered rather than teaching-centered classrooms, student to student correction, group work, and the importance of providing cultural contexts for language. Follow-up videotaping and class visitation by faculty is an integral part of the process.

Creative Writing offers a TA training workshop. Once per week for about 5 weeks in March and April, the assistant director of the program, Peter Nelson, leads meetings for first-year graduate students, who will be designing and teaching their own one-semester courses in the following year. The workshops cover pedagogical methods, designing syllabi and reading lists, ordering books and setting up course packets, creating a safe environment for writers, listening to students, dealing with work that's offensive, and more. Second-year graduate students visit and talk about how their classes are going. Graduate students are shown the importance of their writing workshops for undergraduates, who have to compete to get in.

Chemistry faculty lead a one-day New TA Orientation at the beginning of each academic year. Issues at the orientation include administrative procedures, laboratory check-in, and safety. This orientation does not focus on pedagogical issues, but does offer handouts that address various aspects of teaching.

Geological Sciences requires two fall orientations for TAs. The first meeting is required for incoming graduate students and includes such topics as "How to Survive Your First Day," "How to Write a Syllabus," "What, ME Teach???" and "Help for the Desperate." The session addresses the mechanics of faculty/TA interaction, student/TA interaction, and how to deal with serious problems such as academic dishonesty. A follow-up discussion is held without faculty. Finally, as part of their orientation, all new TAs participate in a micro-teaching workshop. Around the middle of the term TAs meet again to cover questions and problems that have arisen over the course of the semester; faculty and experienced TAs are encouraged to attend. The department also holds a brief orientation at the beginning of the spring semester.

Mathematics holds a TA Orientation which consists of a micro-teaching session held in the summer before the school year begins. A representative of the Sheridan Center attends this session. The program may be augmented in the future.

Physics also offers lab-specific training for TAs at the beginning of each semester.

Molecular Biology, Cell Biology, and Biochemistry has a departmental TA orientation, and a mid-year departmental workshop for TAs is currently under consideration. In lab classes TAs are typically trained on how to do each particular lab exercise beforehand.

Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences is currently developing its own departmental orientation to provide more explicit training and support for TAs.

Departmental Teaching Seminars

Most language departments have weekly meetings between TAs and course supervisors. In addition, the **French** department invites TAs to attend departmental faculty meetings to discuss pedagogical issues. Professor William Wyatt of **Classics** holds a general TA meeting once each semester, and also visits courses during the year and makes written reports which TAs can see.

History offers a series of informal TA workshops, beginning in September. These are largely student-run, but are attended and overseen by senior faculty. The departmental program is designed to complement the Sheridan Center Teaching Certificate Program which many History graduate students receive each year. This year **Sociology** held an informal grading workshop which addressed time management, grading vs. editing, quantity and quality of written comments, ensuring students read feedback, dealing with grievances, and linking assessment and course goals. **English** offers four optional TA workshops each year. The fall workshops address first the practical mechanics of running a discussion section, then how to respond to drafts and offer revision strategies. The spring workshops cover balancing theory and criticism with teaching, and designing a syllabus, of especial interest as graduate students in English design and teach their own undergraduate courses.

Neuroscience has run a spring semester Presentation workshop for the past two years. Two faculty members oversee it each time, and grad students are required to attend each year until they have completed their thesis proposal. In 1995 **Pathobiology** hosted a two-day presentation skills workshop for graduate students run by Nancy Dunbar. The department plans to run a streamlined version of this workshop in January. There will also be a small workshop on computer presentation skills in the spring.

Pedagogy in the Departmental Graduate Curriculum

Some departments offer introductions to pedagogy in their field as part of their graduate curriculum. All second-year students in **American Civilization** discuss pedagogical issues - preparing a syllabus, communication skills, etc. - as part of their coursework for AC 252, *American Studies: Method and Theory*, which prepares them for the challenging task of teaching their own class in third year. Professor Susan Smulyan is the driving force behind this initiative, and it is well received by students. In fact, for some students, the department's emphasis on acquiring teaching experience is the reason they came to Brown for graduate studies.

French Studies, Italian Studies, Hispanic Studies, and German Studies co-sponsor 290, *Theory and Methods of Foreign Language Teaching*, which they require graduate students to take in their first year. The course is team taught by two members of differing departments each year.

English requires its first-years to take *Introduction to Graduate Literary Studies*, EL 210, which gives them an overview of the profession. The course covers changes in the profession, such as the movement from manuscript to hyper-text; manuscript studies; and the career of professor. Aspects of teaching, such as teaching the material vs. teaching the student are considered. First-year graduate students also take EL 295, *The Teaching of Writing*, in which they are introduced to the pedagogies of teaching reading and writing, and then they are walked through the process of preparing to teach a course at Brown.

Departmental Colloquia: Research & Pedagogy

A number of Brown departments hold colloquia, which may be devoted to teaching and/or research. While many of these involve presentation of research, how to present the material effectively is often valued as an integral part of what is being set for departmental consideration. **German Studies** holds departmental colloquia three to four times per semester; one of these colloquia is devoted specifically to teaching. This semester visiting scholar Johanna Dominiczek demonstrated her method of using literature in the foreign language classroom to encourage independent thinking among her students. **Slavic Languages** hosts departmental colloquia every two to three weeks, and graduate students hold separate colloquia to practice conference papers as the need arises. The **Classics** Department plans to hold a spring colloquium on pedagogical issues in teaching Latin and Greek. **History of Art and Architecture** holds a lunchtime research roundtable once a month, where graduate students or faculty present some of his/her current work. First-years are required to attend. **Theatre, Speech, and Dance** holds four to six colloquia per year with prominent scholars in the field who discuss their current research and share information about the graduate programs in their home institutions.

Creative Writing has a "demitasse" every Thursday, where roughly five grad students read from their work. The department sponsors frequent outside speakers; faculty read from works in progress or recently published; and students have the opportunity to read publicly in forums promoted by the department.

Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences holds a weekly seminar that serves as a forum for student presentations. **Pathobiology** has a student-organized research/ journal club which serves as a forum for all students to present and receive peer feedback at least once a year. There is also an annual program retreat each fall, at which selected graduate students give seminar-length talks to their colleagues, which participants consider to be good practice for their defense talk.

Informal Departmental Gatherings

Departmental faculty often seek to involve graduate students in the professional life of the discipline through informal gatherings. Less formal than colloquia, **Theatre, Speech and Dance** offers its graduate students a series of brown bag luncheons where any topic of interest or concern can be discussed. **Geological Sciences** has recently begun a series of informal lunchtime discussions of teaching experiences of faculty and graduate students. **Engineering** holds a summer series of lunchtime presentations.