

Gaining Teaching Experience in Graduate School

February 28, 2011

As graduate students, we are indoctrinated to value those three little words: *research*, *teaching*, and *service*. Not the words you had in mind? Welcome to graduate school. Though most of us get plenty of research experience and numerous opportunities for service, teaching experiences may not be as easily available. Given that most jobs in academia require undergraduate teaching, developing the knowledge, resources, and skills to carry out this job are particularly important for graduate students. Teaching experience can give you insight into whether you really want a teaching-focused career. Gaining experiences in teaching throughout your graduate career will aid in the transition to becoming a faculty member. Perhaps most importantly, being able to demonstrate your teaching abilities will make you a more marketable candidate for a job in academia. We offer some tips and resources to get you started.

Seek Out Teaching Opportunities

If you have a teaching assistantship, you may be asked to teach laboratories or even your own lecture. Your responsibilities may also include other training experiences like grading papers, proctoring exams, and holding office hours. Make the most of these opportunities. Offer to help make a grading rubric, create exam questions, or hold a review session for students. You can also give guest lectures for classes that you would like to teach in the future. During these lectures, get feedback on your teaching from students and more experienced instructors. Familiarize yourself with your institution's course management system (e.g., Blackboard Vista, WebCT, Moodle, Sakai), including posting materials (e.g., online quizzes, readings), communicating with students, and keeping track of grades. When students fill out course evaluations for the instructor, ask that you also be evaluated (given that you had interactions with students); use this feedback to make improvements in your future teaching.

If your institution does not offer these opportunities, never fear — you just have to be creative. Familiarize yourself with potential teaching positions in your community. Are there local colleges or universities looking for temporary instructors? Are there undergraduate tutoring or writing centers in need of psychology tutors? A number of summer programs are also available for high school and undergraduate students who wish to take college-level courses; consider becoming a summer instructor. Attending conferences or even online conferences can be a great way for you to get involved in learning about best practices in teaching and meeting experienced instructors who can be excellent resources.

In addition, mentoring undergraduate students in research can also help you develop and showcase your skills. Consider collaborating with a faculty member to supervise undergraduate students on their honor's thesis projects, to present posters at local conferences with undergraduate students, or to help them to publish in undergraduate journals. Any capacity in which you can show that you've collaborated with undergraduates in research demonstrates your ability to teach and mentor.

Familiarize Yourself with Research on Teaching and Learning

Do not feel like you have to develop a course from scratch — there is no reason to reinvent the wheel. Browse teaching Web sites — see those recommended below — and journals on the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) literature. In addition, there are a number of free e-books and wikis developed as resources for sharing teaching activities, demonstrations, assignments, and video clips. Beef up your training by looking for university-wide teaching programs, such as opportunities to complete a teaching certificate or teaching portfolio or programs on preparing future faculty members. Take classes on the psychology of teaching and learning. You may want to consider being a graduate officer for your chapter of Psi Chi so you can help organize events for undergraduate and graduate students (e.g., conferences, awards ceremonies, guest speakers, workshops).

Document Your Accomplishments

Develop a teaching portfolio in which you include sample assignments, syllabi, teaching awards, and teaching experiences. When a student does exceptionally well on an assignment, ask the student for permission to use the work in your portfolio (most will be flattered and pretty cooperative). Also, be sure to include a teaching statement in which you describe your teaching philosophy, style, and methods. Do not forget to put a summary of your course evaluations, both quantitative (e.g., Likert scale responses) and qualitative (e.g., student comments). Ask a faculty member — one who has supervised your teaching and can testify to your accomplishments — to write a letter of support for your portfolio.

Find Social Support

A teaching mentor is an invaluable resource who can share advice, help you to problem solve, and offer resources and support. Likewise, finding peers with similar teaching interests will give you a group with whom you can collaborate on course development and teaching projects. But how do you find like-minded colleagues? The first step is to put yourself out there: Tell other students and faculty that you are interested in teaching, and you will be surprised at how many others are passionate about it as well. We have also found it helpful to join teaching societies, which often have local teaching conferences to aid in networking, as well as online conferences and teaching listservs to exchange ideas.

Conclusion

It is too easy for graduate students to fill up their schedules with research and academic pursuits. Tacking on teaching-related activities to your already long list may seem overwhelming. Though finding and documenting teaching experiences can be challenging, we hope the suggestions offered here will be of some help. In the words of John Cotton Dana, “He who dares to teach must never cease to learn.”

References & Teaching Resources

Society for the Teaching of Psychology: <http://teachpsych.org>

International Teaching of Psychology Network: <http://interteachpsy.org>

Association for Psychological Science: www.psychologicalscience.org/teaching

The Chronicle of Higher Education: <http://chronicle.com>

Educause: www.educause.edu

National Education Association: www.nea.org

Preparing Future Faculty: www.preparing-faculty.org

Journals on SoTL: www.jmu.edu/cfi/resources/RandS/SOTL/SoTL_journals.html

Attention Undergraduate and Graduate Students

Winter break is upon us, so why not spend some of your free time sharing your ideas or experiences with your APSSC colleagues?

The Undergraduate Update is currently looking for authors for our Spring edition to discuss various topics, including

Strategies for taking the GRE

Applying to or studying in international programs

Writing personal statements

GLBT concerns as an undergraduate when applying to graduate programs or when conducting research

Differences between traditional, nontraditional, and online programs

Differences between programs in psychology (i.e., MA, MS, PhD)

Other discussions on any topic related to psychology that would be of interest to undergraduate students

For more information, questions, or suggestions, please email the Undergraduate Advocate, Nate Ring, at: apssc.undergrad@psychologicalscience.org

Be Published in the Student Notebook

What Would You Like to Write About?

The Student Notebook is always looking for graduate students to tell us about their science and their experiences. What have you done that's unusual, fascinating, and worth reading about?

Have you conducted research in other countries? Have you gotten jobs overseas? Have you collaborated internationally?

Do you do research on cognition, health psychology, GLBT research, evolutionary psychology, or some other exciting topic?

Do you feel your minority status, sexual preference, or nationality have affected your graduate education or research?

If so, then the Student Notebook wants to hear from you! Readers want to hear about your field, your experiences, and even your brief research reports — share what you know! Contact the Student Notebook Editor, Mandi White-Ajmani, at apssc.sneditor@psychologicalscience.org for more information.