Navigating the Role of Graduate Student on the Teaching Team

Life in the Incubator

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Abstract

Pride, fear, and stress exist on the roller coaster that is the work-life of a graduate student functioning in the role of team member in a mixed-level, collaborative teaching team. These emotions are not uncommon to faculty/graduate student work relationships, but given the power differential, the interdependent team dynamic adds an incubator effect that can be a great place to grow or a miserable sweat box. The goal of this article is to examine the mixed-level teaching team by discussing the benefits, pointing out some of the challenges, and offering advice to faculty and graduate students about how to navigate a productive and growing life in the incubator.

KEYWORDS: *Mixed-level teaching team, power differential, graduate teaching assistants*

Imagine the pride of seeing the faculty member (who is my supervisor) use the idea I[1] suggested in the classroom when s/he teaches. Based on the philosophy behind the teaching team, imagine the fear of needing to correct the faculty member (who is my supervisor and will be grading my comprehensive exams). Imagine the stress of trying to monitor every facial and verbal reaction to an idea/suggestion because I am trying to make a good impression on the faculty members I work with as part of a team. Imagine working side by side with the faculty member I have put on a pedestal because s/he is a research "hotshot" and realizing s/he is simply human. Such is the roller coaster that is the work life of a graduate student functioning in the role of team member in a collaborative teaching team. These situations are not uncommon to faculty/graduate student work relationships, but given the power differential, the interdependent team dynamic adds an incubator effect that can be a great place to grow or a miserable sweat box. The goal of this article is to examine the mixed-level (faculty and graduate-level students) teaching team by discussing the benefits, pointing out some of the challenges, and offering advice to faculty and graduate students about how to navigate life in the incubator.

The typical path of a graduate student working as a teaching assistant in higher education seems to go one of two directions: "do what the professor says" or "thrown into the deep end" (Johnson, 2007). Often the working relationship is a top-down model in that the graduate student does what the professor asks of him/her. Graduate students assist with grading, track attendance, give an occasional lecture, show a video to the class, assist with more grading, etc. There may be a progression to assisting more directly with a course, then implementing (with supervision and/or support) the course that was designed by the faculty member. Or at the other end of the spectrum the graduate student may be thrown into the deep end with little to no preparation, supervision, or support. The opportunity to serve on a mixed-level teaching team affords a fairly unique view "behind the curtain" about faculty life. Depending on how the team is set up, graduate students have a gradual increase in responsibilities while being exposed to a wider range of work and teaching styles and being part of the discourse that is the negotiation of these different styles in action. The key element that sets this experience apart from the typical path is expectation that the student will function as an equal team member, while at the same time, a very real power differential exists.

As described in several articles in this special issue, a collaborative teaching team creates potential for great innovation and diversity of ideas coupled with potential for miscommunication (Austin & Baldwin, 1991). The element of multiple people with different experiences and professional preparation levels means that decisions are scrutinized from diverse perspectives, a definite strength (Surowiecki, 2005). But it also means that with many moving parts and individual "takes" on a situation there is the possibility that team members can go off in different directions and feelings can be hurt. Our experience shows that it is the power differential between faculty members and graduate students that makes this environment both exhilarating and

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[1]The content for this article is drawn from the first three authors' experiences as graduate students on teaching teams that delivered one of the integrated models described in this special issue. For clarity, the first person "I/we" refers to the graduate student perspective that is a composite of the authors' voices and insights contributed by their peers. Later in the article, the "you" is referring to the faculty members on the team.

challenging. When the mixed-level collaborative teaching team is functioning with consensus, being treated as an equal by the people in positions that one aspires to is fulfilling. Having ideas respected, voice acknowledged, and contributions put into action are all great validation and motivation about the chosen career path. When there is conflict or disagreement, it is another story. Working up the courage to voice a minority opinion in a group where faculty members hold power for graduate student course-work as a student or for the direction and permission for student research is daunting. But it is even worse when the graduate student sees a mistake and needs to correct the faculty member. Negotiating an uneven power balance is not unique to academe, but the normal checks and balances of the workplace can be skewed if the faculty members are not very intentional about how the teaching team is set up and functions. Learning to navigate this "elephant in the room" is one of the many benefits of the mixed-level collaborative teaching team. At the end of the day, the faculty member is still the faculty member, but the graduate student is constantly switching from "peer" to "employee" depending on the context.

Benefits: Why is it Worth the Challenge?

There are many benefits that come from any collaborative team: multiple perspectives, idea vetting, creative angles, more hands (Austin & Baldwin, 1991). The opportunity for the mixed-level teaching team to effectively prepare both undergraduate and graduate students while at the same time sets the stage for layers of learning. It allows a "dove-tailing" if you will, of faculty efforts and graduate student skill-set building, all the while effecting undergraduate student outcomes. The benefits specific to the mixed-level collaborative teaching team center around finding a voice to create a better product, generating authentic mentoring opportunities, and capitalizing on the traditional benefits from teamwork. It is the navigation of the power differential that creates the growth opportunities.

Confidence in one's ideas and the ability to communicate those ideas to others is the key to success in many professional realms (Borrego & Newswander, 2010). The mixed-level collaborative teaching team offers opportunities to develop those skills. Including graduate students as part of the team is both philosophical and pragmatic in an integrated curriculum model. The volume of work required in responding to undergraduate reflection assignments and level of details associated with the service-learning components of the integrated models described in this issue provides a role for graduate students that is both appreciated and needed. In addition, both the student perspective and the "new to the team" perspective are needed on the teaching team. Recognizing that this voice is a valued and needed "place" on the team creates space for graduate students to speak up to share that perspective. As those ideas are accepted and valued, the courage to question ideas and offer broader suggestions grows.

Graduate students are essential members of the teaching team to assist in the implementation of the curriculum, and yet, the added value is in the sharing of a fresh perspective. As the integrated model becomes more routine with a group of people over the years (as opposed to the creation stage at the beginning), it is important for "why" to be asked so that the answer can be checked for relevancy. In addition, there is a constant challenge for the team to stay true to the agreed-on tenants of the philosophy and course objectives. It is the collective responsibility of the team to focus

on the goals we have for our undergraduate students and our programs. Keeping the focus on the learning goals, instead of on the individual group members makes it easier to speak up.

Masters and doctoral students are learning how to teach, mentor, and become successful future professionals, whether it is as a faculty member or a practitioner in the field. True to mentoring research (Ragins & Kram, 2007), the faculty provide opportunities for graduate students to advance in their careers, while intentionally "increasing their positive exposure and visibility, [while] offering them protection and challenging assignments" (p. 5). An integrated curriculum model provides scaffolding for the mentoring process due to the side-by-side work that occurs. Each graduate student brings different experiences to the teaching team. Some may have taught previously, while others may be new to academe. It is important for faculty to work with each individual graduate student to set learning goals (i.e., specific teaching techniques, lesson plan design, etc.) to facilitate one-on-one to help them with professional development for the graduate student. The team environment offers the opportunity to observe different lectures, discussion groups, and learning activities to witness the effects of different teaching styles. So it is helpful to have a system in place to help the graduate students assimilate and create their own style. Other opportunities available to graduate students include partnering to teach with a faculty member, accessing a diverse base of resources to design specific lectures, and redesigning assignments and rubrics. All of these experiences are done while working alongside faculty; relationships help build the confidence for graduate students to be able to ask questions and to begin implementing the knowledge they are gaining in their own coursework as students.

Challenges and Strategies to Navigate Through It

Mixed-level teaching teams present challenges that do not appear with a solitary teaching model, and may not appear as sharply in peer-level collaborations. The single biggest challenge in any collaboration is getting all members of the teaching team on the same page. A common level of agreement is important not only for the teaching team, but affect undergraduate students' perceptions about the course and their learning (Dugan & Letterman, 2008). All members of the team must be committed to maintaining good, solid communication, even when it becomes difficult. This section outlines some of the challenges personally faced in terms of expectations, moving parts, and conflicts. With each challenge, strategies are offered that have been used to minimize the difficulties.

Expectations

While varied backgrounds are beneficial to the success of the team, as a result, expectations can sometimes be different. Organizational styles, time lines, philosophy of teaching, and communication styles all vary. Seeking first to understand members of the team enhances the ability to work with others successfully. Recognizing how styles vary and seeking ways to partner so as to capitalize on strengths the individual does not personally possess allow the team to work smarter as a collective.

In addition, the reality is that a faculty member may be held to a different standard of accountability by the administration than a graduate student, so there may be times when the group process needs to take a step back and the faculty idea

must be adopted. Being transparent about when that is happening is helpful for it to not be viewed as a power move or gamesmanship. Faculty members can help graduate students see when it is appropriate to seek a range of ideas and when a single resolution needs to be adopted to comply with policy or departmental norms. The team as whole should discuss the expectations that each member will be accountable for and also demonstrate the appropriate way to bring up disagreements, lack of follow-through and concerns within the team environment. A full value contract can be a helpful approach (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988).

Traditionally graduate students have had little involvement in the development of curriculum or the opportunity to work with more than one faculty member. The teaching team offers the opportunity to observe differing teaching styles, to be exposed to a broader spectrum of curriculum content and approaches, as well as assessment techniques. Graduate students in an integrated curriculum model are immersed in the learning and teaching process through the variety of perspectives and viewpoints about how to best educate undergraduate students.

Moving Parts

The integrated models have ambitious learning objectives and due to the blending across rational course lines, the number of moving parts is multiplied. It is important to maintain buy-in with all team members and help each other keep up the pace. The following strategies have been helpful:

- It is important to have clear roles, a shared electronic document site, and physical space to store shared equipment.
- Office space matters and can help foster collaboration if it is ready to go and close in proximity.
- Having a coordinator give reminders, handle scheduling and details is a help to the team. Depending on the scales of the implementation, having one faculty member assigned to two specific graduate students has helped with connections and information. Announcements via email or weekly newsletters help keep everyone more informed and up-to-date with changes that occur (due to the productive brainstorming and adopting of new ideas at team meetings).
- There is a transition of mindset in working with the coordinator. If you have been a solitary professor or an autonomous professional, time is needed to navigate and work through the differences. Recognize there are things that are in your control and out of your control in this new context and the relational dynamic. This role is also likely only *one* part of team members' expectations.
- For undergraduate students and team members alike, written assignment sheets and rubrics help everyone know the goals of the assignments and the assessment measures.

It is important that points of uncertainty are brought quickly into the open for discussion. There are times when for the undergraduate students everything is not spelled out directly so that teachable moments are created, but within the team, clarity is the goal. If one person is unsure, there are likely others, so it is vital that questions are asked and answered patiently. There are no stupid questions, but sometimes they appear that way, so practice responses that communicate support and assist with way-

finding for the next time. Seek to find answers there first and understand that the timing of a question is just as important as the question.

Given the number of moving parts it is likely that there will be communication breakdowns. Reaching consensus can be time consuming so everyone needs to be patient and engaged. Assume the best in the other person, and pick battles carefully. Sometimes the breakdown is a style issue as opposed to an effective functioning idea. Brainstorm and talk about ways to keep everyone included in communication. (Should everyone be copied on email? Should google docs be used as a bulletin board? A facebook group?) The system will vary with team size and preferences, but agreement needs to be reached so all are in the loop. It is important to also discuss how to handle sensitive information and social situations with undergraduate students. The phrase "I will check with the team and get back to you" has on more than one occasion bought time to generate a solution. It takes practice to survive the pressure of not giving an answer to a student's question immediately.

Conflict/Disagreements

It is healthy for teams to have conflict, and it is essential to agree to keep disagreements within the team. Civil discourse is a priority. Be honest, listen, and respond with sensitivity. As graduate students are expected to work with faculty members both as members of a team and in student role when the faculty member is the instructor in their classroom and their thesis/dissertation advisors, it is even more important to openly acknowledge that disagreements will occur. When they do occur, the graduate students must feel comfortable enough to share their reasoning in a safe environment, trusting that their bravery in one arena will not be used against them in a different context. This balance is difficult to achieve, but discussing conflict early in the team meetings and reinforcing how conflicts will be managed is especially important in maintaining harmony on the team and getting honest feedback from the graduate students.

Certain times in the semester are high stress for everyone. Acknowledge that aspect out loud and create spaces where team members can "vent" as they are learning and growing through this process. This space should be as safe as possible in terms of fear of reprimand (faculty member losing credibility with students, graduate student losing assistantship/opportunity, disapproval of advisor/major professor, etc.) is mitigated as much as possible. Many times this just equates to a space where they team members feel "listened to" and "heard" and does not always require "advice" or "fixing the problems."

Advice to Increase Likelihood of Success

For Faculty
- Acknowledge the power differential by saying it out loud and bridge the gap by going more than halfway toward the student.
- Do periodic informal and formal personal "check ins" with graduate students so they are assured of the investment in them and can help them think about how to say things in the larger team meetings if there are issues.

- Be as transparent as possible about decisions. It may take longer in that moment, but it helps with the learning curve and the socialization into academe. The graduate students can then see the multiple layers.
- Model teamwork whenever possible; avoid the temptation to short cut the team process.
- Be open to the brainstorming process. Encourage graduate students to throw out ideas and thoughts at weekly meetings regarding content delivering, handling issues with undergraduate students, etc. Good ideas will come!
- Take advantage of the opportunity to work "with" the graduate students, as opposed to them always working "for" the faculty member who should also take more responsibility to create a comfortable, open environment.
- In an ideal world, do not supervise a graduate student that you have other power positions over (teacher in a course, committee chair, etc). If there is a strong working relationship, it can be a real strength, but if there are problems, then in most cases those problems are multiplied across the roles.
- Compliment the graduate student if he or she corrects or offers advice; it takes courage to speak up.
- Go out of the way to ask for the graduate student's opinion.
- Give specific, concrete jobs at first to build confidence in the student, assess competence, and allow for low-stakes remediation if needed.
- Offer graduate students the opportunity to teach content, lead learning activities, and facilitate discussion groups with undergraduate students in the program with and without faculty presence.
- Provide teaching evaluations, as well as assistance creating lesson plans, lectures, course assignment, and rubrics.
- Look for times to publicly praise the graduate student contributions: "You have revolutionized this aspect of the model/implementation," "This innovation is a game changer, a keeper;" "Why have we never thought of this idea before?," "So glad you are part of the team!"
- Be intentional about word choices. Think of cartoon bubbles above the heads of the two people in the interaction if one is the graduate student who thinks they just really messed up. The faculty member may ask, "Did you print this out?" The faculty member is thinking, "I don't want to waste paper, so if we have one already, great!" Meanwhile the graduate student is thinking, "Oh no! Was I supposed to print that out or not? Am I in trouble?"
- Think about the impact of phrasing. "There is a mistake on the website" versus "Something needs to be changed on the website."
- Be clear about times when something is a "yes/no question" versus "this time we need to do it this specific way." Helping all team members know the context for the discussion cuts down on misinterpretation.
- Be respectful that the work load allocated to the student fits within the time parameters for assistantship work for graduate students. People grade at different speeds and with different abilities. Work with the graduate students to become more efficient grading *and* respect their own style. Do your best to understand schedules, writing or other commitments that the graduate students have in addition to their own classes.

- Observe graduate students doing items listed above and provide constructive and timely feedback especially when they are doing these activities for the first few times. If they do not get corrective feed-back they will likely keep doing it the same way the next time.

For Graduate Students

- Observe a variety of faculty members on the team in how they teach content, lead learning activities and facilitate discussion groups. This process is a golden opportunity to gain valuable professional development while also helping to build the team.
- Be courageous and do not be afraid to ask for help or feedback from faculty members.
- Contribute thoughts and ideas in weekly meetings. In other words, speak up!
- Make sure to understand the rationale behind decisions made by the teaching team; seek to discern the motives behind the specific element. If those benefits are not clearly seen, ask, "Why are students doing this activity? What is the purpose? How does this plan connect with the prior learning?"
- If you have a better idea, say it. One way to do so is, "I know you asked me to do "X," because "Y," but have you considered "Z"? This strategy shows that an understanding of the task and the reason behind it before offering the new idea.
- Test out your own teaching style. Seek input before trying something and reflect on it afterwards. Keep the content at the center, and then put a personal mark/ twist on it.
- Realize that faculty cannot always tell you everything. Recognize faculty have to navigate their own level of political dynamics and realities of the institution. In addition, while faculty likely have more experience in the art of balancing numerous expectations, projects, and activities, they still have a lot going on in their world. Be mindful and respectful of this situation, especially in when and how you communicate your needs and wants.
- Know it will take time to grasp the big picture; do not assume that the challenge is because you are a graduate student, and realize everyone new to the team has the steep learning curve. Do not allow yourself to be lost, start with what you know and build on that knowledge.

For All Team Members

- Develop a pack of materials so that a new person can read and have a reference point as they begin, but be aware that there is a lot of information to absorb. The experience can be like coming to a new country; watch for and expect signs of culture shock.
- Have a retreat before the start of the semester. Cover the following topics: team building, SWOT of past semester, logistics, fun (yes, really!), intentional language, policy, full value contract, philosophy and goals, grade a paragraph and discuss.
- Have a coordinator whose job it is to see the big picture. The coordinator should manage the system for all supplies, electronic documents and hard copy documents to store them in an organized and consistent way, manage a full calendar for all team members, maintain overall budget if applicable, and ensure all paperwork is up to date.

- Hold weekly meetings, aim to keep them at an hour, include a personal element, be supportive of each other's ebb and flow; sample weekly agenda (once around, lessons learned, student concerns/celebrations, scheduling, to-do lists, good of the order).
- Keep seeking answers and clarity about how this approach to teaching and learning works. Even if you asked a question before, if you have forgotten the answer, then ask again *but* empower yourself by trying to find the answers before going to the other team members. Most programs probably have policies or old templates of things, look first.
- Do not wait until the ninth hour to tell the team it does not look like a deadline will be met; ask for help sooner versus later. That situation is what a team is for and everyone has lives outside of academia that may hinder the completion of a task.
- Grade one or two assignments and get feedback from someone else before the entire class's assignments are graded. This process will help build more consistency between team members.
- Build relationships as people and colleagues, invest in each other's success (Maintain a sense of humor, listen, work through any issues/disagreements/misunderstandings, forgive and then move on.
- Ask for what you need. Make sure to advocate for yourself and communicate needs, wants, and struggles. Be mindful of when and where those conversations occur. Most people are more than willing to help if they know what is going on *before* things fall apart or get too much. Asking for help may be difficult, but it is essential and no one expects perfection. If you do not say anything, others assume it is all under control.
- Maintain confidentiality; only discuss disagreements within the team. The fastest way to break a team down is to "air the dirty laundry" outside of the team. Each individual has his/her style of handling conflict within a team, but it is important to not undermine each other by venting to individuals not on the team. By venting to another team member, many times the issue can be isolated and counsel can be given about how to best approach the person at the center of the conflict.
- Be vocal about student learning outcomes as priorities, then always evaluate and tweak.
- Get feedback from undergraduate students: Clemson has a student advisory board, UGA uses peer mentors in that role and Utah seeks feedback through their Student Advisory Council. Feedback provides an additional voice and perspective to the process by including student concerns and issues.
- Be nimble; when good ideas occur or change is needed, be ready to embrace something new.
- If possible, establish a rotation for teaching assistants to serve two years working with the integrated curriculum. The value added by establishing this 'succession' plan results in mentorship between teaching assistants and can relieve faculty members from building new training programs each fall.
- Have fun! There will be stress (it is normal) so create fun to go along with the challenging moments.

Final Thoughts

One important aspect to acknowledge about transitioning to an integrated curriculum model is that it is a changing context. As the model is being built, there is a level of energy and buy-in that changes once the model is solid enough to be polishing ideas rather than building them. Reflecting on the life cycle of the team and the model is a helpful step in understanding what is happening around each team member. One lens that seemed to give perspective to both graduate students and faculty is the idea that graduate students are future colleagues (whether in academe or as professional partners) so the investment in growth for all strengthens the current situation as well as future collaborations. The incubator analogy also allows us to think about the chick inside the incubator that needs to break out of its own shell. For faculty and graduate students, the rewards are great, and the idea that it takes two to dance is important. We encourage dancing whole-heartedly knowing that there will be steps forward and backward, but the exercise and joy will create improved learning environments for the undergraduates in the model.

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