

Training and Mentoring Novice Instructors at the University Level

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show that graduate students in foreign language departments in the US, who cannot teach in their first year due to accreditation requirements, need to be trained, mentored, and evaluated during their first year of graduate school under the direction of a Master Instructor. To earn their stipend, novice instructors are assigned to a master instructor, take a methodology course, observe classes taught by experienced faculty, do guided grading, and begin to teach sections of a class. At the end of their first semester these instructors teach a full week on their own. In the second semester, novice instructors teach independently under the supervision of the Master Instructor. This method gives hands-on experience in a controlled environment. Time investment for mentors is significant with such models but mentees gradually gain confidence in teaching, departmental policies, and are prepared to teach independently in their second year. Mentors benefit from the positive relationship developed with their mentees who contribute ideas and insights as members of a team. Students benefit because they attend smaller classrooms and receive individual help. This method provides a cohesive training across languages in the same department.

Keywords: *Mentoring training novice language instructors;*

Content

In the United States teaching of lower-level foreign languages used to fall primarily to graduate students pursuing graduate degrees. Today, most large universities with multi-sections of lower-level language courses have shifted to a combination of fixed-term faculty holding PhD's and graduate students pursuing a degree. Since the mid-1950s, the norm was to train new teaching assistants through a methodology course and the tutelage of faculty mentors. The mentor provided a syllabi, materials, model lessons, and involved their tutees in grading student work. The language course coordinator's role was more an administrative supervision than pedagogical training. In the last decade, the course coordinator has taken on a more active role in mentoring new instructors. While the language director and the established faculty modify their programs and curricula to enhance the professional development of graduate students, they also rely on course coordinators/master teachers to mentor and train new instructors to assume their future responsibility as independent teachers.

Course coordinators are logical candidates to mentor and train incoming novice instructors since they already organize the course and are experienced teachers invested in the success and consistency of these courses (Furry & Lindquist). Lack of consistency in mentoring was cited as a problem in the apprentice model discussed by Kost (2008). Successful models reflecting this expanded role of the coordinator entail a substantial logistical planning and collaboration with the language director. First, find, in advance, the best classroom to accommodate a master teacher and mentees. Second, pre-semester orientation with mentees to explain their role and responsibilities in and out of the classroom. Third, set up ongoing guidance during the semester in conjunction with the methodology course.

Universities are committed to improve the quality of undergraduate language instruction by having only well-trained and experienced instructors. The ultimate goal is student-centered and what we do should be in the best interest of the students. At the same time, we want to give each incoming graduate student the necessary training and hands-on teaching experience under supervised guidance. The logistic decisions in the mentoring and training program eases novices into all the aspects of teaching gradually so they are not overwhelmed by their teaching and graduate coursework. These teacher-training models foster an environment in which mentor and mentees work together as a unified team.

Universities strive to incorporate the fundamental principles of Appreciative Inquiry laid out by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) as they have been adapted to higher education, in frameworks known as Appreciative Education explained by Bloom et al. (2013) and Harrison and Hasan (2013), in these teacher-training models. First and foremost, we are guided by the positive principle: improving practice through focusing on potential and the acknowledgement of what is going well rather than an obsession about what is not. Language departments provide positive interactions with mentees by

creating common spaces in and outside class to encourage interaction and collaboration. Master teachers foster a culture based on respect and appreciation for each member of the team. The initial meetings with the master teacher during orientation set the tone for this approach. Besides presenting novice instructors with the department's teaching philosophy and practices during these meetings, instructors start engaging in self-reflection, contribute to teaching discussions, and course decision-making meetings. For example, even though they did not have an input in selecting their classroom, instructors are involved in figuring out how the space will be used and are invited to give their input. Listening to their input lets them know that their opinions are valued and makes them feel part of a team from day one.

The number of incoming graduate students who cannot teach on their own determines the size of the classroom. In a typical year, such novice instructors may number from two to five depending on the language. The ideal master class consists of one master teacher and one or two novice instructors with a total of twelve to fifteen students per instructor. The classroom needs to be large enough to accommodate twelve to fifteen students to sit together with a buffer space between them for instructors to move easily among them and not be distracted by what is happening in other groups. Students assigned to these master classes are divided randomly in two or three sections within the classroom. Each instructor is assigned a group and coordinate with the master teacher on the activities that need to be supervised. The master teacher directs the whole class, presents models to the entire group for the benefit of the students and the new instructors, and observes the latter working with groups to later provide feedback. This random assignation of students creates a community rather than independent groups. Students appreciate the flow between the presentational model to the whole class and the more personalized communicative group work in their sections with the new instructor facilitating the task. Students quickly discover that they are expected to be active participants in class and cannot merely fade unnoticed during the master teacher's presentation. For such a configuration, the classroom must have technical features that can range from chalkboard space, document cameras, projectors, multiple screens to an adequate sound system. When a classroom is missing several components, the coordinator/master teacher asks new instructors to figure out what will be the optimal usage of the classroom space and features.

Administrative procedures and details regarding a course are communicated primarily outside of class meetings with learning management systems. Early in the first semester, the team has short ongoing briefings before and after class. Pre-briefings may be devoted to translating what things on paper or on a PowerPoint mean in the reality of the classroom, or to explore the advantages of certain approaches or practices. During post-briefings, the master teacher solicits observations from instructors about what worked well, what felt comfortable, where they needed help, and suggests different approaches for subsequent classes. Master teachers also address students' questions and issues with the instructors during follow up meetings. In these meetings instructors share personal classroom experiences and adjust their practices accordingly.

Mentoring and training new instructors is crucial so that they focus primarily on facilitating communicative practices in class with their groups and follow the cues set throughout the coordinator's detailed lesson plan. In the pre- and post-briefings the coordinator/master teacher addresses how to implement lesson plans, recycle previous material, and learn time management. Novice teachers often rush through the material or stick to the letter of the lesson plan instead of taking time to involve students practicing the material. On occasions, they get bogged down in details and not move in a timely manner to the next activity. New instructors must see the master teacher stretching the lesson plan and later discuss possible variations during pre- and post-briefing sessions together with all the novice instructors that are facing similar challenges. The briefings become less frequent as the semester proceeds, but later longer meetings broach how to handle more complicated concepts as the material becomes more difficult.

New instructors—outside class—grade the work of the students officially assigned to them, keep track of their progress, and hold office hours. Grading starts immediately and the master teacher trains all neophytes to grade consistently across sections. Besides being trained on how to use online homework systems, they learn how to grade more complex and open-ended assignments (compositions, exams, and oral interviews) with pre-designed rubrics in sample grading workshops. Typically, students have self-graded homework online. The self-grading online assignments give novice teachers time to provide detailed feedback on class performance, open-ended assignments, and help students during office hours. New teachers must hold office hours and be available to all the students in the course. This provides more flexible choices to undergraduate students seeking help outside class.

In the second half of the first semester, new teachers assume more obligations. After observing the master teacher direct class, implement lesson plans, and work with students, they

design portions of the master teacher's lesson plan up to an entire week of lesson plans. Once the lessons are approved, they proceed to direct the class in place of the master teacher who assumes their role. After teaching independently, they receive feedback from the coordinator/master teacher and their peers in a supportive environment to foster confidence in their teaching. In the second semester, they teach independently under the supervision of the master teacher. They create lesson plans, quizzes, composition and interview topics in tandem with the course's official syllabus. The master teacher still approves their lesson plans, observes their teaching, and gives them feedback and guidance as necessary.

The model for the pedagogical training of new graduate students presented here entails significant time and work for the course coordinator who serves as master teacher and mentors all the practical aspects of their initiation to teaching over the first year. Beyond coordinating a course, such mentoring requires commitment to building a relationship with new instructors. To accomplish this, master teachers do not simply model and explain how to do things. They must devote time listening to mentees to understand what they need and involve them in the teaching process. The benefits to new instructors are borne out by their positive comments at the end of this training. By year's end, their assurance has grown exponentially and they feel well-prepared to teach on their own as a result of having spent many hours observing a master teacher and gradually taking on tasks associated with teaching independently. They appreciate the work that the master teacher does for their benefit. The performance of undergraduate students who take these master classes is comparable to that of those in regular sections and their overall response to the master class configuration is positive. Moreover, they seem to appreciate having several instructors who are available and happy to help them. Last but not least, the coordinator/master teacher benefits from the positive relationship built with mentees, having contributed to their development as instructors and gained insights from their input as well. In short, the return on the investment made can far exceed expectations.

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