Preparing the New Psychology Professoriate to Teach: Past, Present, and Future

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Abstract
The movement to prepare graduate students to teach is relatively new in the history of the academy. During the past several decades, many graduate departments of psychology, like many academic departments, have gone from providing essentially no training to graduate students to teach to developing extensive training programs consisting of course work and supervision of teaching activities. Although as a whole, graduate programs in psychology have made substantial progress in preparing its students for careers in teaching, there remains much to be done in further enhancing graduate students’ preparation for teaching. I discuss and provide recommendations for addressing several key issues that currently or in the future will impede the successful preparation of graduate students for teaching including the need for more research on preparatory practices, the need for more depth and consistency in these practices across graduate departments of psychology, the importance of maintaining the primary responsibility for preparing graduate students to teach within psychology departments, and the utility of having two or more faculty lead departmental preparatory teaching programs.

Keywords
graduate teaching assistant, teacher of record, preparing graduate students for teaching, teaching of psychology course, new psychology professoriate

Graduate programs in psychology, like most other university graduate programs, routinely offer their students opportunities to serve as assistants in undergraduate classes. Typically, these opportunities come in two forms: as a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) or as a teacher of record (ToR). GTAs generally assist professors with specific aspects of teaching such as grading, tutoring students, or leading discussion or laboratory sections of the course, whereas ToRs assume full responsibility for all aspects of teaching a course and may, in fact, supervise other graduate students who may be serving as GTAs for the course.

To prepare GTAs and ToRs for their instructional responsibilities, many graduate psychology departments have created teacher development programs that include workshops, courses, and seminars on effective teaching practices (e.g., Beers, Hill, & Thompson, 2012). Other graduate psychology departments rely on outside entities such as university teaching and learning centers to prepare their GTAs and ToRs for teaching (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrique, 2002; Meyers & Prieto, 2000a). Although ostensibly developmental teaching programs exist primarily to assist GTAs and ToRs with their specific teaching duties at the time, these programs also prepare graduate students for teaching and other public-speaking activities once they enter the workforce (e.g., Buskist et al. 2012; Chism, 1998; Wulff, Austin, & Associates, 2004). Indeed, the past 15 years have witnessed the publication of several comprehensive books used in GTA and ToR preparation programs that discuss teaching within the larger realm of professional development (e.g., Boice, 2000; Buller, 2010; Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004; Solem, Foote, & Monk, 2009).

In this article, I briefly review the history and current status of preparing graduate students to become college and university teachers. I also describe several challenges that may shape the future of how graduate programs in psychology prepare their students for teaching.

The Past: “Here’s the Text—Go Teach”
Although it is understandable why some writers lament the status of preparing graduate students for teaching relative to preparing them for research (e.g., Buskist & Irons, 2006; Fernald, 1995; Wimer, Prieto, & Meyers, 2004), an historical perspective reveals that graduate training for teaching has made remarkable strides during the last 50 years. Many graduate departments of psychology, like many academic departments,
have gone from providing essentially no training to graduate students to teach to developing extensive training programs that in some cases span multiple semesters.

Buskist (2002), in his survey of the Society for the Teaching of Psychology’s (STP) 2-and 4-year national teaching excellence awardees from 1980 to 2000, found that only 8 (22%) of the 36 respondents reported receiving any formal training in college and university teaching. Of these eight individuals, two had taken a course on teaching, three received mentoring on teaching, and three had taken both a course on teaching and been mentored. The majority of respondents in Buskist’s study, who did not receive any formal training for teaching reported teaching themselves to teach by observing how others approached teaching, searching for ideas on how to teach, experimenting with different ways of teaching, and asking students for feedback and using that feedback to enhance their teaching. A similar study of STP’s McKeachie Early Career Awardees from 1980 through 2002 (Zinn, Sikorski, & Buskist, 2004) also found that a large percentage of these individuals also received little or no formal preparation for teaching.

An important caveat is in order. Clearly, receiving formal training in teaching is not necessary for one to become a good or even an excellent teacher. However, research has shown that participating in such programs has several positive effects including, among other benefits, enhancing one’s teaching skills repertoire,kindling an interest in teaching as a career trajectory, expanding one’s knowledge of the academy’s functions and professional roles, and heightening one’s self-efficacy as a public speaker (e.g., Cook, Kaplan, Nidiffer, & Wright, 2001; Marinovich, Prostko, & Stout, 1998; Prieto & Altaier, 1994; Silvestri, Cox, Buskist, & Keeley, 2012). As Boice (2000) pointed out, receiving training and experience in teaching speeds up the transition to the professoriate and allows individuals to jump-start the establishment of their research laboratories. Jared Keeley (personal communication, February 2013), an assistant professor at Mississippi State University, noted that in his case, assigned graduate students to teach courses outside their areas of interest and for which they had not taken the course as an undergraduate. The department provided no teaching mentor or supervisor, essentially leaving students on their own to figure out how to teach the course.

The Present: “The Department Will Help Get You Started Teaching”

Of course, not all graduate departments of psychology left their students unaided in preparing for the teaching responsibilities that the chair assigned to them. Unfortunately, it is impossible to trace the evolution of teacher preparation programs in psychology (or in other academic disciplines) because the vast majority of departments did not publically advertise, promote, or otherwise describe those programs.

Chism (1998) noted that the first national conference on preparing graduate students, regardless of discipline, for teaching took place at The Ohio State University in 1986. Shortly thereafter, researchers started to investigate the nature and effectiveness of training graduate students to teach, particularly with respect to the training of GTAs (e.g., Nyquist, Abbott, & Wulff, 1989; Sprague & Nyquist, 1991).

Preparing the New Psychology Professoriate

Within psychology, Lumsden, Grosslight, Loveland, and Williams (1988) published one of the earliest articles on preparation of psychology graduate students for teaching. The article reported the results of a large-scale survey of nearly 450 graduate psychology programs examining the training of doctoral students including preparation for teaching. They discovered a wide range of training practices and teaching-related activities. A few years later, Rickard, Prentice-Dunn, Rogers, Scogin, and Lyman (1991) published an article describing a required graduate-level course on the teaching of psychology for doctoral students that had been in place at the University of Alabama since 1974. This course required students to read a book on teaching and meet weekly to discuss the book as well as issues related to the students’ experience in serving as ToRs for introductory psychology courses. In addition, the course instructor observed each graduate student teach and provided feedback to students on the quality of their teaching. Since the publication of these two articles in Teaching of Psychology (ToP), ToP has become home for a number of subsequent articles addressing GTA and ToR preparation issues such as preparing graduate students for an academic career (Meyers, Reid, & Quina, 1998), training practices for GTAs and ToRs (Meyers & Prieto, 2000a), using active learning to enhance the training of GTAs (Meyers & Prieto, 2000b), common mistakes made by GTAs (Buskist, 2000), supervision of new teachers (Prentice-Dunn, 2006), and the potential early career benefits of having graduate students teach specific undergraduate courses (Irons & Buskist, 2008).

Buskist and Benassi (2002) reported that, in their national survey of how graduate psychology departments prepare their
graduate students for teaching, 62% (146 of 236) of the responding departments offered some form of teacher training for their graduate students. In addition, a minority (42%) of the responding departments offered a formal graduate course on the teaching of psychology. Other means that departments used to prepare their graduate students for teaching included summer or presemester workshops, weekly meetings to discuss teaching issues, institution-sponsored seminars, and workshops on teaching. These results replicated Meyers and Prieto’s (2000a) findings from a similar national survey of psychology departments. Buskist et al. described the various forms of preparatory activities (e.g., readings, writing activities, observation of students’ teaching) that graduate psychology departments included in the teaching of psychology course at the time for their graduate students. In terms of the content of the teaching of psychology course, they found that more than 90% of their respondents reported addressing issues such as how to prepare lectures, dealing with incivility, and encouraging undergraduate class participation.

In a more recent survey of new assistant professors of psychology, Silvestri, Cox, Buskist, and Keeley (2012) found that 82% of their respondents had taken a teaching of psychology course during graduate school. The sample size in this study was small (N = 47), though, thus limiting the generalizability of the study’s results. Nevertheless, the study presented the intriguing possibility that, as new assistant professors, the respondents felt that their teacher preparation during graduate school had prepared them at least moderately well for college teaching, particularly in the areas of delivering class presentations and interacting with undergraduates.

**Brief Analysis of Graduate Training Programs in the Teaching of Psychology**

STP recently published the second edition of *The STP Guide to Graduate Training Programs in the Teaching of Psychology* (Beers et al., 2012; http://teachpsych.org/ebooks/gst2012/index.php#.Ud9PFMYK8o), which describes the teacher preparation programs of 51 graduate departments of psychology across 27 states. Included among these descriptions are 10 master’s programs, 14 doctoral programs, and 27 programs that offer both master’s degrees and doctoral degrees (PhD, PsyD, or both). In the latter case, many departments offer the master’s degree to students en route to earning the doctoral degree. The first edition of this e-book (Howard, Buskist, & Stowell, 2007) received more than 25,000 hits from over 9,000 distinct visitors (Beers et al., 2012), providing ample testimony that this resource has been a valuable source of information for individuals interested in preparing psychology graduate students for teaching.

To gain a glimpse into the current practices and trends in preparing psychology graduate students for their GTA and ToR responsibilities, I performed a brief analysis of each program described in the *STP Guide*. Specifically, I examined the opportunities each program provided for securing experience in teaching and whether the students’ preparation for these experiences involved any formal course work, faculty supervision, or mentoring.

**Teaching Opportunities.** All 51 departments offered their graduate students the opportunity to serve as GTAs in undergraduate courses. Likewise, the vast majority of departments (45 or 88%) offered their graduate students the opportunities to serve as ToRs. The six departments that did not provide their graduate students with ToR opportunities were all master’s programs. Benson and Buskist (2005) discovered in their study of how psychology faculty search committees identify “excellence in teaching,” among their job candidates that previous teaching experience ranks as one of the top two criteria for hiring new faculty (the other criterion was research publications). Thus, graduate students with ToR experience would seem to have a competitive edge in the job market relative to graduate students with only GTA experience.

**Support for GTA and ToR Activities.** All 51 programs reported supporting their GTAs with formal course work in the teaching of psychology, supervision or mentorship, and, many instances, both course work and supervision or mentorship. A total of 43 departments (84%) required graduate students to participate in a formal course, seminar, or workshop series either before or while serving as a GTA or ToR (one description did not provide any information about requiring formal course work, seminars, or workshops for its GTAs and ToRs). In several cases, this requirement spanned more than one academic term. In other cases, this requirement consisted of only attending a short workshop or seminar related to teaching that may or may not be offered by the psychology department; in a few instances, departments required their students to attend a university-wide summer seminar or workshop just prior to the start of the academic term. Some departments (4 or 8%), offered seminars or workshops on teaching prior to graduate students beginning their assistantship or ToR duties but did not offer a formal class on teaching during the academic term. Other departments (7 or 14%) offered no preteaching seminar or formal class on teaching but instead provided their GTAs and ToRs with either a supervisor or a mentor. Likewise, though, many departments offering formal course work on teaching also provided their students with supervision and mentorship for their teaching. The descriptions that the 43 departments provided for their formal course work, seminar, or workshops on teaching contained in the *STP Guide* varied greatly with respect to the detail they included about the contents of these activities. Some provided only a catalog-like description of the courses, whereas others provided extensive details of course activities. Thus, it is impossible to make any useful comparisons across all 43 descriptions. Nonetheless, among those several detailed descriptions provided in the *STP Guide*, it is clear that the contents of the course work, seminars, and workshops vary considerably because of some the wide differences in the length of the course, seminar, or workshop. Obviously, a much greater array of content can be covered in more detail in a two-
The Future: Challenges and Recommendations

Relative to the colleagues of my generation, who received their graduate degrees in the early 1980s or slightly before, it is safe to say that more recently minted college and university psychology professors have received more preparation for their teaching responsibilities—and in many cases quite a bit more. For example, I taught several undergraduate courses while I was a graduate student in the late 1970s and early 1980s, without any formal preparation provided to me by the department or the university. When I had a question about teaching or faced a pedagogical problem, I consulted with my major professor, but I had no departmental-appointed supervisor or mentor. In contrast and with some irony, I have for the past two decades directed a graduate teaching preparation program in which all first-year graduate students, many of whom have or will go on to become professors, must participate by taking a yearlong course on the teaching of psychology.

Although as a whole, graduate programs in psychology have made substantial progress in preparing its students for careers in teaching, there remains much to be done in further enhancing graduate students’ preparation for teaching. Future progress in advancing both the quantity and the quality of teaching preparation programs in psychology will depend on how well psychology as a field addresses several issues. Based on my experience in training graduate students for academic careers, holding discussions with many other “teachers of teachers,” and conducting research on this topic, I believe that four issues in particular are especially important to advancing the way psychology, as well as the academy more generally, prepares its graduate students for teaching. Some of my recommendations for addressing these issues are admittedly speculative; they are based more on my experience than the systematic collection and analysis of data.

More Research on Preparatory Practices—A Call to Arms

As my review of the literature on preparing psychology graduate students to teach shows, the research is now dated—the most extensive studies on preparatory practices in psychology (Buskist et al., 2002; Lunsmen, Grosslight, Loveland, & Williams, 1988; Meyers & Prieto, 2000a) are well over a decade old. Thus, there is an urgent need to gather data on the most current and cutting-edge approaches to preparing the new psychology professoriate for college and university teaching. Such a survey could potentially lead to compelling descriptions and exemplars of best practices that would be universally helpful to graduate programs in psychology in determining those activities, exercises, and experiences that would maximally benefit their students. The STP Guide (Beers et al., 2012) provides some interesting information along these lines, but it lacks comprehensive coverage of preparatory training in teaching because of its small sample (51 departments).

There is also critical need to discover which elements of teacher preparatory programs in graduate school produce or otherwise lead to the most effective teaching at the assistant professor level. In other words, how does the experience of learning how to teach while in graduate school benefit graduate students as they make the transition to the academy? Although some preliminary work has addressed this question, some of the information is dated (e.g., Boice, 2000) and the data are limited by sample size (e.g., Silvestri et al., 2012).

A third question in dire need of attention concerns the impact of actual teaching experience on marketability in the academic workplace. To what extent does becoming a ToR help employment prospects? Do different kinds of institutions prefer different kinds of ToR experiences in its successful job candidates (e.g., baccalaureate departments vs. doctoral-granting departments)? How much ToR experience is sufficient to enhance one’s marketability? Does experience teaching certain classes (e.g., core courses) as opposed to other courses (e.g., upper division courses) confer any benefit on graduate students competing for academic jobs? If so, how can graduate departments ensure that all graduate students interested in entering academia have access to teaching such courses?

No doubt there are a multitude of other questions about preparing psychology graduate students for teaching, which need empirical attention. Tackling the questions mentioned earlier, however, would be a reasonable starting point for examining the nature, content, and implications of preparing the new psychology professoriate to teach.

More Depth and Consistency Across Departments in Preparatory Practices

One persistent finding across all studies of preparatory teaching practices in psychology, regardless of datedness or sample size, is the massive variability in training activities to which graduate departments expose their students. As I noted earlier, some of these departments require their students to enroll in rigorous multiple-semester courses on pedagogical theory and research,
Thus, a psychology graduate student may, for example, learn in pedagogy but not generally experts in psychological science. Reasons support this conclusion.

Providing more depth and consistency to the preparation of psychology graduate students for teaching would seem to have at least two important benefits. First, it would raise the overall quality of the teaching of psychology nationally, especially given that so many graduate departments use ToRs to teach undergraduate courses. A perusal of the STP Guide (Beers et al., 2012) suggests that these courses run the gamut of the undergraduate curriculum, including pivotal core courses such as research methods and statistics. Second, it would enhance the overall national undergraduate learning experience in psychology: Better prepared teachers are likely to be more effective teachers in terms of teaching the content of psychology as well as in terms of helping undergraduates learn and enjoy learning about psychology. This outcome is especially likely if preparatory programs assist their GTAs and ToRs in developing rapport with their undergraduates (e.g., Wilson & Ryan, 2012).

Obviously, better preparing psychology graduate students for teaching will have effects that outlast graduate school: Preparing psychology graduate students to teach well increases the likelihood that each crop of new assistant professors will positively impact the undergraduate students whom they will teach. It also means that graduate students who go to work in clinical settings or in the private section will likely have effective public-speaking skills, which of course will benefit these students tremendously in communicating their ideas and work to other professionals in their fields.

**Avoid Shifting Responsibility for Teaching Preparedness to the Institution**

During the past several decades, many colleges and universities have established campus-wide teaching and learning centers that assist faculty and graduate students with their teaching. These centers provide a large range of services including, among other things, workshops on teaching issues and techniques, peer review of teaching, specialized programs for new faculty and for teaching international students, and teaching with technology.

As departmental budgets continue to shrink and faculty time becomes more and more pressed to complete nonteaching-related activities, particularly research, it may be tempting for some graduate departments of psychology to pass off their responsibility for preparing their graduate students to teach to the institution’s teaching and learning center. Although teaching and learning centers can effectively supplement and expand departmental preparation for teaching, they cannot serve as substitutes for teacher training at the departmental level. Three reasons support this conclusion.

First, teaching and learning center staff members are experts in pedagogy but not generally experts in psychological science. Thus, a psychology graduate student may, for example, learn how to use active learning by attending a teaching and learning center workshop, but this student is unlikely to learn the nuances of applying it to teach, for example, classical conditioning, how neural transmission works, or attribution theory. To apply a teaching technique effectively, one must first know the content for which it will be used—and clearly, the best resources for learning how to teach content are good teachers within the discipline. As a general rule, GTA and ToR supervisors or mentors are known for being good teachers and, oftentimes, highly skilled, even expert, in both content and pedagogy.

Second, teaching and learning centers generally have small staffs relative to the size of the academic communities they serve. Hence, psychology graduate students are likely to receive more hands-on and one-to-one training experiences with the instructor of the teaching of psychology course or their teaching supervisor or mentor. In other words, the quality of preparation for teaching is likely to be both more extensive and intensive at the departmental level than it is at the university level.

Third, in my experience, providing training for teaching within the department signals to students (and to faculty) that teaching is a valued activity of the department. It essentially makes the statement that “the department believes teaching is an important function of the academy and fully supports your learning to do it well.” In fact, at Auburn University, many graduates partially based their decision to attend graduate school here because of the opportunities they will have both to be trained in teaching and actually to teach courses as ToRs. I am sure that the same must be true of other graduate departments of psychology that provide their students similar opportunities.

**Creating Shared Responsibility for Teaching Preparedness Within Department**

In many, perhaps most, graduate departments of psychology, there is one person—“the teaching person”—who is responsible for the bulk of the work involved in preparing graduate students to teach. This individual regularly teaches the teaching of psychology course, observes countless numbers of graduate students teach, provides them with one-on-one feedback, and, in general, handles all of the problems and issues that arise with new teachers.

Often, the “teaching person” was not hired by the department specifically to train graduate students to teach; instead, the department hired this person to conduct research and teach in a specific specialty area of psychology. In many cases, the “teaching person” oversees the teaching program on top of his or her other responsibilities. Naturally then, a problem arises when this person wishes to take a semester (or longer) off from these duties, lands a position at a different institution, or retires. In the case of a sabbatical, the question is who will temporarily replace the “teaching person.” In the case of a job change or retirement, the question is more often whether to replace the “teaching person.” Without a second or third “teaching person” in the department, any momentum for sustaining the teaching program may slacken, or worse, the program may be dropped from graduate training altogether.
Thus, it is wise for graduate departments with teaching programs to identify several of its faculty to share the responsibility for preparing graduate students to teach. One approach to developing such shared responsibility that the psychology department at Auburn University has found to be particularly successful is the creation of a graduate student teaching committee consisting of faculty and graduate students who are all (a) effective teachers and (b) have strong interests in promoting effective teaching in graduate students. Each committee member shares in the governance of the department’s teacher preparation program. In instances where the instructor of the department’s teaching of psychology course has been on sabbatical or leave, other members of the committee have stepped in and provided seamless instruction in the course.

Final Thoughts

As long as students continue to enroll in colleges and universities, there will remain the demand to teach them—and to teach them well. Therein rests the need for preparing psychology graduate students to become competent teachers of the discipline. Although this need has existed since the earliest days of the academy, it is only relatively recently that psychology and other academic disciplines have taken seriously the challenge of preparing their new professoriate. During the last several decades, graduate departments have created workshops, seminars, and courses to provide the conceptual and practical bases for helping its students develop pedagogical skill sets and appointed faculty supervisors and mentors to observe and advise these new teachers.

Notwithstanding these advances, the work in advancing effective teaching among the new psychology professoriate is, as I noted earlier, far from complete—and several important challenges must be overcome before the mission is accomplished. Two particularly thorny problems are the uneven preparation for teaching that graduate students receive across psychology departments and the dearth of critical information regarding best practices in preparing graduate students for teaching. Other vexing issues such as how to best build “teams” of faculty to assume responsibility for preparing graduate students for teaching must also be addressed in order to universally prepare psychology graduate students for teaching. Clearly, these issues are worthy of the time and effort required to satisfactorily solve them because hanging in the balance is the education of thousands of psychology undergraduates. And, the sooner psychology addresses these issues, the sooner the quality of the education of its undergraduates will advance.

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