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Notes

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Graduate Students' Perceptions of a Teaching of Psychology Course

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Although graduate students rate teaching of psychology courses favorably on global assessments, their reactions to specific course components have not been quantified. Thirty-six students (86% return rate) who completed such a course at 2 different universities rated the usefulness of the individual aspects of the course. Students indicated that reviewing videotaped and student feedback with a faculty advisor, collecting narrative student comments, and sharing teaching ideas with other new instructors were most useful. Least useful course elements included meetings with past and future student instructors as well as peer feedback. Overall, students believed that their teaching skills improved more from the teaching of psychology course than from the simple experience of having taught a college course.

Increasing numbers of graduate psychology programs now offer a course on teaching of psychology (Buskist, Tears, Davis, & Rodrigue, 2002). Although such courses vary in content, most include tutorials (e.g., preparing lectures, leading discussions, constructing tests), practice, and feedback (Buskist et al., 2002; Meyers & Prieto, 2000). Although students may evaluate teaching courses quite favorably on an end-of-semester, single-item rating (e.g., Rickard, Prentice-Dunn, Rogers, Scogin, & Lyman, 1991), there is a dearth of information about more detailed student perceptions. Students who have completed a course report greater knowledge of psychology, increased teaching ability, and clearer career aspirations (Prentice-Dunn, Rickard, & Lyman, 1995); however, the aspects of training considered most or least valuable remain unclear. We addressed that issue by asking students to evaluate the various components of a teaching course.

The teaching of psychology course has been a doctoral requirement at the University of Alabama for almost 30 years (Ellis & Rickard, 1977). Students have full responsibility for a section of 35 introductory psychology students. During a weekly, 2-hr seminar, students share ideas for lectures and handling student issues, and review assigned readings on various topics including active learning techniques, tests, diversity, Web site construction, evaluation of teaching, and the experiences of new faculty.

Graduate students receive feedback in several ways. Early in the semester they observe and provide feedback for two of their colleagues. At the beginning and end of the semester, graduate students collect numerical ratings and narrative comments from their students. Three times during the semester, students videotape their class and then attend an individual consultation session with the faculty supervisor. To prepare for the sessions, the students view their video and identify themes in the collected ratings and narrative comments. They also list areas of strengths and areas in which they would like to improve.

The teaching of psychology course at Auburn University employs similar methods. Students meet with the faculty advisor twice weekly to discuss assigned reading relevant to course material, practice class demonstrations and presentations, and create sample test items. Feedback includes faculty observation, numerical and narrative information, and a comprehensive meeting with the advisor to review the new instructor's teaching skills. Elements unique to the Auburn course include creating a teaching portfolio, writing an essay, and contributing to a teaching of psychology listserv.

Method

Participants

Students from the University of Alabama ($n = 36$) and Auburn University ($n = 12$) who participated in teaching of psychology courses served as participants. Alabama participants enrolled in the course during the interval of Fall 2000 to Fall 2003 with course enrollment ranging from 3 to 6 students. Auburn participants enrolled in the course during Spring 2004. We designated the 24 Alabama and 12 Auburn participants who completed the survey (86% response rate) as respondents.

Survey

Alabama participants received by e-mail a 17-item survey intended to provide "a better understanding of the value of the various course components" in developing students' in-

structional skills. We reversed two items in direction to control for response set. Students rated each item on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) and 9 (*strongly agree*). In addition, Alabama students listed the three most useful and three least useful aspects, providing a brief narrative about the reason they believed that part of the course was particularly useful or not. We replaced 7 of the original survey items that were not elements of the course at Auburn with items specific to that course due to the slight variations in course content.

Procedure

Alabama respondents sent their replies by e-mail to a designated third party not associated with the study who forwarded the participants' survey responses to us after deleting identifying information to maintain confidentiality. Auburn University students completed an anonymous in-class survey.

Results

For the Alabama sample, we found virtually identical means for the items regarding student narrative comments, student numerical ratings, and videotape feedback assessed for the beginning and end of the semester. Therefore, we combined each cluster of beginning and end ratings into one item to create a final 14-item table (see Table 1). As shown in the table, ratings of components common to the Alabama and Auburn courses were quite similar.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Ratings of Course Elements

Item	UA ^a		AU ^b		All ^c	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Course components						
Consultation with faculty advisor	8.58	0.83	8.58	0.79	8.58	0.73
Feedback on syllabus from faculty advisor	8.29	1.14	8.00	1.81	8.19	1.36
Narrative student comments	8.25	0.74	7.96	1.01	8.15	1.02
Sharing ideas for topics in seminar	8.25	1.12				
Observation of a colleague	7.63	1.60				
Meeting with prior instructors	7.54	0.98				
Numerical student ratings	6.89	1.33	7.58	1.08	7.13	1.56
Videotaping	6.87	1.85				
Writing teaching philosophy	6.86	2.05	8.08	1.38	7.29	1.64
Meeting with next semester's instructors	6.86	1.50				
Seminar readings	6.83	1.42	6.83	2.44	6.83	1.73
Feedback from a colleague	6.09	2.13				
Providing demonstration			8.33	0.77		
Reviewing mini-lectures			8.16	1.74		
Creating teaching portfolio			7.83	1.11		
Creating test items			7.66	1.49		
Essay improved writing			7.25	1.65		
Question/answer sessions			6.83	1.74		
Essay improved teaching			6.58	1.92		
Listserv subscription			3.83	2.58		
Global evaluation						
Teaching course helped develop my skills	8.71	0.90	8.67	0.65	8.69	0.78
Would be just as good an instructor without the course	1.86	1.52	2.08	1.68	1.86	1.51

Note. UA = University of Alabama, AU = Auburn University. Scale used for items ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*), 3 (*somewhat disagree*), 5 (*neither disagree or agree*), 7 (*somewhat agree*), to 9 (*strongly agree*).

^a $n = 24$. ^b $n = 12$. ^c $N = 36$.

When asked to identify and comment on the three most useful aspects of the course, students identified consultation with the faculty advisor as the most useful followed by narrative student comments and videotaping. Students rated as less useful the meeting with the next semester's instructors, the group meeting with previous instructors prior to teaching, and peer feedback. Whereas Alabama students did not regard writing the teaching philosophy to be very useful, Auburn students valued it.

Discussion

Graduate students perceived all components of the course to be valuable. They were especially positive about feedback received from the faculty supervisor and students. Of special note is the perception that their instructional skills were developed by content of the teaching practicum and not the mere experience of having taught a course.

Ratings and comments from the instructor's students can improve teaching, especially if collected during the first half of the term. In a meta-analysis of 22 studies, Cohen (1980) found that instructors who received ratings improved to the 58th percentile of ratings at the end of the term. However, our sample indicated that narrative comments were particularly valuable because they more directly addressed the instructor's strengths and weaknesses. For example, one respondent "found it useful to hear directly from the consumer or student, in his/her own words about what he/she thought about the class. I really was able to use this feedback to adjust my teaching approach." Thus, new instructors may especially benefit from multiple sources of student feedback.

In a recent national survey of psychology departments on the content of teaching courses, fewer than half used video (Buskist et al., 2002). However, Prentice-Dunn and Pitts (2001) described several advantages of taping one's teaching, including seeing the class from the students' perspective and validating other sources of feedback (e.g., students, faculty observers). Video, more than other media, enables the viewer to focus on not only broad themes, but also on the details of teaching. For example, some of our respondents stated that they were unaware of distracting mannerisms and overexplanations of material prior to reviewing their video.

Our respondents saw the consultation session that consolidated the student ratings and videotaping or advisor observation as the most useful aspect of the course for improving their skills. This result corroborates Cohen's (1980) finding that instructors who received both student rating feedback and consultation improved to the 74th percentile at the end of the term. The consultation session allows new instructors to review how well classroom content fits their course objectives and to explore alternative communication strategies with a practiced instructor. Because our sample rated consultations with the faculty advisor with videotaping included as the most useful tool for improvement, we recommend that more training programs use this type of feedback.

No component of the course received a negative rating, but some aspects of the course were not as useful as the consultation and student feedback. For example, respondents

rated meeting with prior and future student instructors as less valuable. Alabama respondents indicated that the teaching philosophy was probably premature in timing and that it did not help them "learn how to teach."

Course elements common to the two courses used in this study received nearly identical ratings. Although there were slight differences in the courses, their fundamental objectives and methods were similar. Indeed, their content compares favorably to other teaching courses identified in a recent national survey (Buskist et al., 2002). However, a larger number of respondents would discount the possibility that our results were an aberration.

Teaching of psychology courses increase graduate students' factual knowledge of our discipline (Prentice-Dunn & Rickard, 1994) and their ability to integrate various subfields in psychology (Prentice-Dunn et al., 1995). Our results suggest that there are some course components that new instructors see as most instrumental to their development. Incorporating such elements may provide an initial teaching experience that is effective and rewarding to both new instructors and their students.

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Notes

1. A link to the course Web site for Teaching of Psychology (PY 695) at the University of Alabama may be found at <http://bama.ua.edu/~sprentic>.
2. We thank Darlene Smith and Bill Buskist for their generous assistance in collecting the data for this project.
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