

The Benefits of a Graduate Course in Teaching of Psychology: Results of a Survey of Doctoral Graduates

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Introduction

Teaching of Psychology (PY695), a required course in the doctoral curriculum, originated two decades ago. Graduate students teach an introductory section of 35 students and attend a weekly seminar on instructional theory, ethics, and problem solving. Student instructors are also observed periodically by the faculty member who teaches PY695.

PY695 has been identified nationally as a model program in teaching skills training (Lambert & Trice, 1993). Rickard, Prentice-Dunn, Rogers, Scogin, and Lyman (1991) described the development of the course and Prentice-Dunn and Rickard (1994) demonstrated that doctoral students acquire substantial psychological knowledge (compared to a control group) as a result of taking the course.

This paper presents the results of a survey of 82 doctoral graduates and advanced Ph. D. students (return rate = 74%). Although many of the graduates trained primarily for clinical activities, all revealed that teaching of various sorts occupies a substantial portion of their time. Quantitative information revealed that PY695 increased their perceived teaching ability, confidence and knowledge of general psychology. Narrative responses explored the effect of the course on career plans and the specific ways in which course material and skills were used in their professional activities.

Method and Results

A seven-item survey was mailed to 23 advanced graduate students who had completed the Teaching of Psychology course during the 1991-92 academic year. The survey was also sent to 59 Ph.D.s who had completed their degrees during the period, 1984-1991. Respondents anonymously completed the questionnaire and returned it in a stamped envelope provided by the authors. Eighteen advanced graduate students responded (78% return rate) and 43 Ph.D.s responded (73%), for a return rate of 74%.

Four items on the survey were 9-point rating scales. Since there were no significant differences in the item responses of the advanced students and the graduates (all $ps > .57$), data from the two groups were combined. When asked how the teaching course affected their confidence as a teacher, (1 = less confident, 3 = no change, 5 = somewhat more confident, 7 = much more confident, 9 = extremely positive effect on confidence), the sample responded with a mean of 6.4 ($SD = 1.6$). On an item addressing the importance of PY 695 in creating one's current teaching ability (1 = not important at all, 5 = somewhat important, 9 = extremely important), the mean was 6.7 ($SD = 1.3$). A third item measuring the helpfulness of the teaching course in acquisition of general psychology knowledge (1 = no help, 5 = somewhat helpful, 9 = extremely helpful) produced a mean of 6.4 ($SD = 1.5$). Finally, respondents were asked about the importance of PY 695 to graduate training in psychology (1 = not important at all, 5 = somewhat important, 9 = extremely important). The simple mean was 7.2 ($SD = 1.4$).

In addition to the four rating scales, three items requiring narrative comments were included in the questionnaire. Much judgment was involved in the categorization of the replies. In some instances, respondents expressed several thoughts; in those cases their replies were placed in the category which appeared to be the most prominently reflected. Taken as a whole, the three sets of responses provide a general feel for the perceived value of the course.

First, respondents were asked to comment briefly "on the way in which the course, Teaching of Psychology,

influenced (or failed to influence) your career plans as a psychologist.”

Graduate Students. Four students reported that their preexisting interest in teaching had been confirmed; nine others stated the course prompted an increased interest in teaching. Three noted that the course had not influenced their career choice but that they enjoyed and profited from it. One student stated that the course confirmed that academics was not a choice; one stated that the course should not be graded.

Ph.D.s. Twenty-two indicated that the course steered them toward teaching, either full or part-time. One stated that he/she entered the program specifically because the course was offered. Nine reported that the course increased teaching and communication skills, psychological knowledge, and self-confidence before a group. Three reported the course did not influence their plans; two stated that the experience influenced their decision not to consider further teaching. One respondent entered business rather than psychology as a career but commented on the general helpfulness of the course in respect to self-presentation. Five offered no comments.

Second, the sample was asked to describe how “you may have used information and skills required in the Teaching of Psychology course.”

Graduate Students. Nine noted increased skills – organization, speaking, creative thinking, and general usefulness in preparation for other classes and oral exams. Two stated they had obtained more knowledge of psychology. One reported a negative reaction to the teacher of the course. Six failed to comment.

Ph.D.s. Fifteen stated that the course helped them to tailor presentations to audiences, (e.g., other classes, teaching of interns, and community group contacts). Five noted that the subject matter helped their performance on the licensing examination; three others noted its value when they stood oral examinations. Seven reported they used in various presentations, the materials they had developed while teaching the course. Five commented on the helpfulness of course mechanics such as eye contact, using the board, video feedback, etc. Ten did not respond to the question.

A final item allowed respondents to offer any additional comments that they cared to provide.

Graduate Students. Four took the opportunity to complain about not being paid for teaching. Two stated that the course itself should come the semester before the teaching assignment occurred. Each of the following paraphrased comments were made by one student: time consuming course, grading should be discontinued, dialogue among students was helpful, even more emphasis should be placed on teaching, and a desire to teach. Seven of the students failed to respond.

Ph.D.s. Comments were made by only about one-half of the Ph.D.s; six noted once again the excellence of the course and its value in preparation for teaching. A number of miscellaneous comments were made by one or two: A useful course, helpful at final orals, should yield more than three hours credit, need more support material, taping and critique good, and students should not have to pay for the course. Although there was no hint in the questionnaire that the course might be discontinued, nine respondents spontaneously urged the department to retain the course.

Conclusion

In conclusion, our students believe that the Teaching of Psychology course is a very important component of graduate training in the discipline. Although many of our graduates do not pursue academic careers, they readily recognize the measurable and intangible benefits that result from their PY 695 experience. In addition to enhancing communication skills, the course often produces the content integration that is a primary goal of graduate education. One graduate’s comments are characteristic:

“Because having to prepare and present lectures required me to rethink and organize my knowledge of psychology, the course helped me clarify the confusions I had and restate my knowledge in words understandable to others. It reinforced the idea that complacency in knowledge only leads to intellectual

stagnation.”

Few courses we teach produce such direct practical and conceptual results.