Teaching Effectively and Efficiently: Strategies for Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

Teaching represents the moment at which graduate students reverse roles and take on the responsibility of educating others. Although having the opportunity to teach can greatly enhance the graduate student experience, for many graduate students a teaching assignment can entail having to find a balance between the competing demands of coursework, research, teaching, and their personal lives. This article begins with a description of some of the responsibilities that face graduate students who teach. The article then provides a variety of specific strategies that can help graduate students teach more effectively and efficiently, and concludes with brief thoughts on how to address issues that might arise with respect to teaching.

Key Words: graduate students, teaching, teacher effectiveness, teaching resources.

A dynamic tension exists between teaching and other aspects of graduate student life. As a doctoral student, I teach an upper-division urban geography course; before joining the doctoral program I was an adjunct community college instructor. This article reflects on some of the teaching responsibilities placed on graduate students and, based on my experience, outlines strategies that can make teaching more effective and efficient.

Although my institution is part of the California State University, the state’s “teaching” system, San Diego State University in general and its geography department in particular have focused on – and been recognized for – research. Nevertheless, teaching responsibilities still figure prominently: all doctoral students are “teaching associates” and each semester graduate assistantship activities are self-reported in relation to the university’s teaching mission. Most doctoral students do not teach until their third year, and in some semesters “research assistant” is a more accurate descriptor, but doctoral students have been teaching more in recent years. We teach
classes ranging from freshman survey courses to graduate-level technical courses; class sizes vary from large lecture halls to seminar settings. In addition to courses taught by doctoral students, several master’s students teach multiple Physical Geography labs and many assist faculty in course management.

While I anticipated the effort needed for preparation, time was the most challenging aspect of teaching. Beyond my relatively brief time in the classroom and the longer preparation period, I respond to a stream of student and even parent emails, hold office hours, write letters of recommendation, and plan and lead field trips. Time management was fairly straightforward as a community college instructor, but there are more demands on my schedule as a doctoral student – teaching competes with (and sometimes overcomes) my coursework, research, and personal life. Also, aspects of teaching may cause varying degrees of stress, anxiety, and frustration. Teachers are privileged with great autonomy, but some graduate students’ transition to teaching can seem solitary and isolating because of a lack of support. I enjoy interacting with students, and as a first suggestion, classroom interaction can help maintain sanity – most students, especially good ones, are fun to work with and make teaching worthwhile. In any case, by successfully negotiating the demands of teaching and minimizing the negative effects, one can devote time to other (equally important) aspects of graduate student life. Below are some strategies and tactics that have helped me teach more effectively. Some pertain to efficiency, while others are more general. These strategies may seem obvious, but my experience has shown that they are important to emphasize.

**Network:** It is beneficial to contact graduate students who are in a similar position, starting in your department. When unexpected situations arise you will have someone to vent to and/or bounce ideas off of. When things go wrong, it is reassuring to know that it is not only you who faces these issues. Networking has allowed me to guest lecture on my research in colleagues’ classes, giving them and their students a break from the routine while adding to my experience. Finally, consider going beyond your department: while attending conferences requires time and funding, the results have been worthwhile for me in terms of building a broader network.

**Find resources:** Experienced instructors may be generous with handouts, readings, and assignments from previous courses. Locating resources may be more challenging if you are the only instructor teaching a particular course, or if previous instructors are unavailable or unwilling to share. If you use a textbook, the publisher may have instructor resources, such as prepared lectures and test questions. Before teaching my urban geography course, I searched online for syllabi to obtain ideas about texts and course topics. Pedagogical resources that are not discipline-specific can also be useful: your institution may have campus-wide teaching workshops or other programs for faculty or graduate students.

Here is a short list of helpful resources. The Association of American Geographers’ Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education (EDGE) project’s website (http://www.aag.org/edge) has a variety of valuable resources. Another extremely useful resource is the Geography Faculty Development Alliance site (http://geography.sdsu.edu/GFDA/), maintained by Dr. Kate Swanson of San Diego State University. This site includes faculty-contributed sample syllabi, film suggestions, and more. Also included is an excellent bibliography of teaching resources. In particular, two texts listed in this bibliography are favorites that I have repeatedly recommended to new teachers seeking straightforward and highly practical information on teaching: *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* (Svinicki and McKeachie 2010), and *Teaching College Geography: A Practical Guide for Graduate Students and Early Career Faculty* (Solem, Foote, and Monk 2009). The breadth of topics these books cover makes them especially convenient starting points. New teachers can then find more detailed resources for the areas that they are most
interested in. Finally, journals dedicated to teaching can be helpful. The *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* and the *Journal of Geography* are two journals that present research on teaching and learning in geography.

**Simplify and streamline:** Make assignments and exams as easy to assign and grade as possible. For example, limit the length of an essay, use a grading rubric for a final paper, or make assignments optional. Ultra-clear instructions at the beginning of an assignment or exam can simplify grading. I include “standard” deductions – e.g., “no citation: -3 points, no calculations: -2 points” – on each assignment handout. Finally, consider the “time” implications of students not doing what they are supposed to. For example, because dealing with plagiarism can be time-intensive, spend time at the start of the term to address academic dishonesty and hopefully head off plagiarism before it becomes an issue.

**Don’t take things personally:** When students ignore assignment instructions, do not complete term papers, or are consistently absent, they may receive failing grades. These grades are less a commentary on the teacher and more a consequence of the students’ decision not to fully apply themselves, so do not worry about these situations. Do not be surprised if, at the end of the term, these students request extra credit opportunities or challenge their grade because they “need to pass this class.” Even if students’ demands are inversely proportional to their efforts or they are disinterested in the subject, the main goal (for most) is still obtaining the best possible grade – when you know this, it is easier to deal with. Do not take comments on instructor evaluations personally, especially at the beginning of your teaching career. You can imagine that these comments from a first teaching semester might be discouraging: “He is clearly inexperienced at teaching but very eager to interact. He tries too hard to be fair. Wants to help students, but not very good at it yet,” “Teaches this class as if we care.” While these types of comments will decrease and positive comments will increase in subsequent semesters, it is unrealistic to expect an “excellent” rating from every student. An important caveat is that comments that identify specific things you can improve on in your teaching are extremely helpful. Student evaluations are often the most direct and recurrent source of feedback on your teaching, so you should be aware of trends (as opposed to outliers), and work to improve using genuine and feasible suggestions. A short-sighted dismissal of all negative comments as the work of entitled, lazy, or disgruntled students demonstrates poor reasoning on the part of an instructor.

**Maintain a balance:** It is far too easy to get sucked into your academic roles and responsibilities, to the detriment of your health or relationships. Make time to do things that you enjoy – write them into your calendar if you have to. Some “fun” activities that my peers engage in include maintaining a food blog, playing in a band, being active in church, and running marathons. Balance involves setting boundaries. For example, define your policies regarding contact (e.g., email and office hours) from the outset. Some students seem to expect instant communication and contact. While prompt response is important, do not cater to unreasonable expectations. One of my colleagues responds to all emails within 24 hours, but excludes weekends. Another colleague disables his phone’s email notification feature when he is at home or working on his own research. It is fine to go out of your way to help students, but don’t make a habit of doing it at your own expense. A last thought: question the work-fun binary by considering how you can make your teaching (and your students’ learning) fun. One of my mentors, Dr. Larry Ford, included amazing walking field trips as part of his urban geography classes. He had fun in his “work”, and his genuine enjoyment of these trips was unmistakable and infectious.

Three abbreviated final tips: 1) Be clear. Before the term starts, consider your policies: How will you handle late assignments? Attendance? Missed exams? Write a syllabus that clearly addresses your classroom policies.
When a student wants to debate a policy, being able to refer to something in writing can help resolve a potentially stressful situation. 2) Be organized. Online calendars (e.g. Google Calendar), to-do lists, and realistic deadlines have become my critical resources. I use a digital dropbox for electronic submissions of term projects, saving paper and ink costs for my students, reducing the chances of lost assignments, and minimizing the impact on my email inbox. 3) Be flexible. My semester-long schedule now has a week where the topic is “To Be Announced”, which lets me catch up if I am behind or introduce new topics based on student interest if I am not. Unforeseen situations will arise – you do not always have to adhere rigidly to your term plan (although if you are three weeks behind, there might be a problem). Be ready to adapt to things if and when they change. You will not be perfect, especially the first time. Be reflexive, learn from your mistakes, correct them, and move on.

Gaining instructional experience can be extremely beneficial during graduate school and beyond. For students going into academia, experience as instructor of record is a crucial component of a competitive application to most tenure-track positions. As the vast majority of academic jobs involve teaching, being able to teach efficiently will ease the transition into the academic workforce. Research and teaching do not exist in a zero-sum game – research can and should be integrated into teaching, and efficient teaching can facilitate research. For students interested in private-sector or non-academic public-sector jobs, having the opportunity to teach can enhance a host of skills (e.g. communication, critical thinking, organizational, research) valued by prospective employers.

For graduate students at my institution, teaching can be difficult, but is not overwhelming. While heavy teaching loads and inadequate support can lead to graduate students feeling exploited, such a situation seems unlikely to occur in my department. When issues related to teaching assignments have arisen, advisors and specific faculty have been supportive and assisted students dealing with such issues. If support is lacking, students should take the initiative and communicate their issues clearly to faculty – especially advisors or key faculty members – as clear communication is crucial to solving issues. Students should be persistent if unsatisfactory answers are provided initially. Faculty should make fair and equitable teaching assignments, and even seemingly minor provision of resources and/or training can potentially resolve issues.

One needs to make an effort to be a good teacher – there is always room for improvement. As instructors, we should maintain open-minded, positive attitudes about our teaching. In my opinion, it is unethical to approach teaching with an indifferent or negative attitude – students are short-changed when instructors do not make the effort to teach effectively. However, investing excessive time and effort in teaching can potentially hamper a graduate students’ progress to degree completion. A balance must be attained. It is my hope that the strategies outlined in this article can help graduate students effectively and efficiently negotiate their roles as teachers.

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REFERENCES