

Proposal: Professor/Student Collaborations in Teaching

Professor Catherine Harris, Psychology Department, charris@bu.edu, 353-2956

Introduction

My proposal is based on the premise that two thinkers collaborating on a project will produce a superior outcome, compared to a solitary worker.

One part of being a professor is necessarily solitary: standing in front of a class teaching. But the front-of-the-class performance is a few hours a week, which is a small amount of time compared to the hours required for course design, preparation and revision. In my 15 years of teaching at BU since 1991, virtually all of my preparation time has been a solitary endeavour. This means that I have spent hours, with books, at the library, in front of my computer, thinking, planning, mentally experimenting with ideas: time thinking and working alone.

I have begun to realize that it doesn't have to be this way. Students at all levels value the chance to interact with faculty members, to learn in one-on-one apprenticeship mode. But at a large university, they think this is all but impossible.

Could students and professors both benefit from working together on lecture design and development? The professor benefits from talking out loud about a new lecture idea with an interested other -- to get feedback, assistance and interaction. Students benefit from watching the expert think and plan, and can learn by doing. They get to join in, advise and work on specific aspects of the planned lecture.

Possible formats for the teaching internship

Students would be paid a stipend to assist in course design and preparation. The length of time could be either one or two semesters with the same professor. Specific duties would be discussed and would match the needs and interests of both faculty member and student. Below I outline some different forms that the internship could take.

Intern while the course is being taught

Doctoral students could be paid about \$1500 for the semester (\$15/hour, 12 weeks, 8 hours a week = \$1450). (Undergraduates could be paid \$10/hour and receive a smaller stipend or contribute more hours.) For a course that meets 3 hours a week: Interns would pick one lecture hour in the week to assist with. With the 8 hours they will be working for that week, they could:

- Read over course material for that specific lecture (1-2 hours)
- Meet to plan the lecture with the professor (1 hour)
- Spend time on their own finding material and/or creating powerpoint slides (2-3 hours)
- Attend the lecture after it is prepared (1 hour). For each lecture, class members volunteer to write feedback notes.
- Meet with the professor afterwards to discuss student reactions and how to revise the lecture (1 hour)
- Spend time to implement the revision (1 hour)

A higher salary would of course be helpful and could lead to a deeper commitment and learning experience.

Summer internship

This is appropriate for developing an upcoming course. Duties would be similar to those above except there would be no lecture attendance or feedback/revision meeting. Advantages (for me) are be that the summer term is more relaxed and I am less busy supervising research assistants. Because I maintain a busy research lab, I typically come to campus almost every day in the summer except for out-of-town travel.

For-credit internship

Would graduate students in the School of Education be able to receive course credit for this internship? In that case I could count on them for about 10 hours a week and I could have the same kind of expectation of consistent effort as I would for a paid employee.

Background and motivation for this proposal

Here I discuss my own experiences that have motivated this proposal

Contemporary society: Material for an audience (TV/radio) is extensively prepared by teams

Teaching is the only audience-focused activity in which preparation is done in solitary mode and the finished product receives little direct feedback (writers have editors; radio and TV content is developed with large collaborative teams). I am awestruck sometimes at the skill of TV science shows like Nova. With the internet and powerpoint, I could aspire to something like Nova -- if I had a team of assistants (or even just one) to hunt down leads and find material.

Feedback on the things I try is scattered, unreliable, or removed in time (as in official course evaluations). My main, immediate feedback is the response of my audience. Are they attentive? What

questions do they ask? But this is scattered. With a class of 100, and with coordinating powerpoint, video and my wireless microphone, I can't always scrutinize students' responses.

But what about the legendary teacher who captivates her audience of 100 with just words alone?

When this works, of course it is admirable. But this is not my preferred lecture mode. Graphs, diagrams and pictures are important for psychology. I like to show data. Much of this is because I really enjoy and learn from the graphical displays that are omnipresent at scientific symposia and conferences. There is something wrong, in my view, with just giving verbal generalizations about a phenomena. I myself want to scrutinize data, and I want to provide data and diagrams to students.

The lecture design questions I want help with are: Is this data comprehensible? I may be fond of some particular story or theory or argument, but I've picked one from 20 possible stories that are being told -- have I picked a story that is too idiosyncratic to my tastes and background?

But why is teaching solitary -- what about teaching fellows?

Because I teach large classes, I have always had (for my 100-student classes) a teaching fellow (a graduate student). Doesn't a graduate TF mean I don't have to do class prep in solitary mode? No. The graduate student must attend lecture, read all course materials, and prepare and deliver 4 hours of section a week, while being the front-person for responding to student emails and calls. Teaching fellows are already overworked. Other than some inquiries while we walk to and from class, I am not going to burden my TF with discussions about what content I should cover in lecture. Similarly, I long ago decided it was inappropriate to press my TF for feedback on my teaching. When I've done this, the TF would say "Oh, it was good" or would find something in the lecture to complement me on. Graduate students need to depend on me for letters of recommendation and other evaluative acts.

Can't I ask fellow faculty members to sit in on a class and advise?

No. The culture for this doesn't exist in my department. Faculty members also can't criticize each others' teaching. We need each others' support to argue for things we need (like money for doctoral students). In addition, this would be advice for just one class.

My current semester with teaching interns ("Trial Internship")

Two undergraduate psychology majors, Natasha Ramanayake and Jane Harries, asked to be teaching interns for the current semester's Developmental Psychology class. Natasha had been a

student the prior semester and Jane had taken the class with another professor previously. Because they were volunteers, we did not lay out an hours-per-week expectation. I conveyed clearly to them that I didn't want this volunteer internship to interfere with their academic performance in their own classes.

At the beginning of the internship, I had powerpoint presentation for all the lectures of the semester. A major goal was to review these to make them better. The reason they needed to be improved was that I had only developed them the semester before. Although I've taught the class for 15 years, it was only last year that I completed a transition from overhead transparencies to powerpoint. I seldom could find the material online that I had transparencies for, and didn't have time or resources to scan in graphics. So instead I had typed up outlines supplemented by graphics from the media kits provided by textbook publishers or other material I had found in online searches. Psychology has changed a lot in the time I've been teaching, and there is a need to keep revising lectures. I thus wanted help from the interns on improving every aspect of the lecture: better graphics, better organization, a better, more compelling story for each class day.

We had to be as efficient as possible with time. Jane and Natasha divided up the lectures they were interested in. We planned for each intern to meet separately with me for 30-50 minutes each week, and then to have a joint 1-hour per week meeting. Our goal for the separate meetings was to discuss what needed to be revised in a specific powerpoint that the student had selected to work on. I would then help with a list of material to find on the internet that could be used to enhance the lecture. They would then email material they had found. They each picked one day a week to attend class, with the idea that this would help them in evaluating the student feedback.

Student feedback was obtained by providing 4-5 students with printouts of the day's powerpoint lecture with instructions to make notes during the lecture about what was unclear, etc. Students (in this class with enrollment of 90) were told they could "give feedback" for a maximum of three lectures and would receive points worth a maximum of 1% of their final grade. Students volunteered to give feedback by raising their hands at the start of lecture. There has been no shortage of volunteers.

My plan for the joint meeting was to review the feedback received on the lectures that the interns had specialized in, thus allowing them to learn from what they had worked on.

Evaluation of the trial internship

The plan to review student feedback worked the first week of class and was useful. On every subsequent week, we ended up never having time for this, using the joint meeting to review the upcoming lectures. Indeed, the interns typically hadn't read over the existing powerpoints for the upcoming lecture and so the joint meeting was used for our group to work through the powerpoint. Our individual meetings were then the time to incorporate material they had found.

In the second half of the semester, the interns ended up being too busy with their own work to contribute regularly. They did come to meetings, but our meetings were often short and sometimes more of a social touching-base than a productive review. The interns did attend class the one day a week they had selected.

There were certainly social and motivation benefits. The interns appears to enjoy meeting, and I was able to write them letters of recommendation (which they requested almost immediately). I also benefited from our interactions, by being more interested in lecture improvement than I would have been without the interns. Without the interns, I might have done only minimal lecture improvement, given that every week there are so many competing demands on my time (as there is for all of us). Because I was meeting with the interns, I was obligated to make time to work on the lectures.

Lessons from the trial internship

I learned that I can not rely on undergraduate interns to advise on any issues of pedagogy. They could not help me think about the process of teaching -- how to craft a lecture from a high level. My interns didn't have sophisticated intuitions about what makes a lecture a good lecture. For them, a good lecture contains interesting or exotic material (e.g., the effects of war on children and families). This is why I approached Dean Marscher and Professor Zook about the ideas of enlisting graduate students in the School of Education who are learning at a more abstract level of what makes a good lecture. I would like to incorporate the "critical thinking" suggestions from Dr. Zook's CET presentation of March 2005, but different suggestions need to be selected for different topics (and to avoid repetition), and discussing this with a teacher-in-training who knows something about the craft of teaching would be useful.

I must be much clearer about the duties for the interns. In particular I should write out the expectations each week. For example: *Before the lecture-planning meeting, read over the existing*

powerpoint; read or skim assigned textbook chapters. Consult the publisher's teaching manual for ideas. Come to the meeting with concrete suggestions about how to revise the lecture.

The interns showed up for meetings reliably, but were not reliable when it came to doing work on their own. If I have two interns at a time (as in the volunteer situation), I can capitalize on their appreciation of social interaction by stipulating a meeting time for the two of them to jointly review course material (they could meet in a room down the hall while I do office work -- they can drop in on with me with questions, etc.).

Future Internships

Would it be helpful for interns to be enrolled in the class for credit? I think this could work in a case like the 500-level Language Development class listed below.

I am also open to hearing about any other ways to structure the internship for the benefit of both faculty and student interns.

Specific teaching intern ideas for my classes this next year

Summer internship. An intern could assist with revising my existing Developmental Psychology lectures for Fall 06. In particular, we could look through the student feedback forms from the current spring semester, which I haven't made use of yet. I would have time for this in either July or August.

Fall 06. I will be teaching Language Development for the first time, following the retirement of internationally renowned language acquisition scholar Jean Berko Gleason. This 500-level class typically has an enrollment of 25-30 students, a mix of undergraduates and graduate students. The main challenge is how to maintain interest and maximize learning when students have different educational backgrounds. I would really appreciate and benefit from a teaching intern as I will be preparing new lectures. Language acquisition is a data-rich field and graphics (tables, graphs) are essential. It is increasingly possible to obtain video clips of specific experimental procedures but work is needed to find and select these. An ideal intern would be someone specifically interested in language acquisition, such as an Applied Linguistics masters or doctoral student, or a School of Ed graduate student.