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A reality of graduate training is that programs tend to focus their collective energies on developing the next generation of researchers and practitioners, but not nearly as much energy is expended on training the next generation of college instructors. When a graduate student is given his/her first class to teach totally on his/her own, the typical process is that a department administrator sends a letter with the course assignment and instruction to order a textbook for the class. Once the new instructor begins the semester, as long as there are no complaints from the undergraduates, the department considers the assignment a success.



Our columnists for this issue, **Angela Pratt**, **Michael Hargis**, and **David Kuttbauer**, went into the trenches at Wayne State and interviewed senior-level graduate students who lend their advice to those facing their first teaching assignment. They give great insights and helpful hints about teaching your first class, and how to balance teaching with your research and your coursework.

As someone who has worked with many students struggling with their first teaching assignment, I couldn't resist adding a few pointers of my own in a postscript.

### Teaching Tips for Graduate Students

**Angela K. Pratt, Michael B. Hargis, and David Kuttbauer**  
Wayne State University

As graduate students, we often teach courses as a means to earn our tuition and ever-so-small stipends. Often we are thrown into the classroom with very little or no teaching experience and are expected to work miracles. For this reason, we thought sharing tips about teaching as a graduate student would be beneficial to *TIP* readers.

Surprisingly, or maybe not so surprising for all of you Web junkies out there, there is a lot of very valuable information on the Internet (see below for a short list of Web sites we found helpful). Many graduate schools post cyber-handbooks on the Web with guides on topics ranging from how to conduct your first class to academic dishonesty and grading. Although some of it may not be rocket science, much of it we found to be insightful. Your university may even post information—check it out! Because information on grading and academic dishonesty is often university specific, make sure you are familiar with the university-specific guidelines that may affect you. Also, if you are lucky enough to be assigned to an I-O class, the SIOP Web site posts

a very helpful guide titled, “An Instructor’s Guide for Introducing Industrial-Organizational Psychology” at <http://www.siop.org/Instruct/InGuide.htm>.

Okay, first, one question that enters all of our minds when we enter graduate school and are faced with many responsibilities and commitments is: How can anyone balance teaching, research, class work, and (can there possibly be an “and”?) family/significant others? To help answer this question, we asked for input from seven upper-level graduate students at Wayne State University, some who have won teaching awards (and all of whom deserve awards).

A few common themes emerged from our experts:

- **Use available resources:** When assigned to teach or TA a class, examine syllabi previously created for the course you are teaching. This can save a lot of time by giving you an idea of what can be accomplished in a semester and give you an example of course layout and assignments. Several of our experts recommend seeking out other graduate students and faculty who have previously taught the course. They are likely to have a lot of valuable information and advice on what did and did not work (e.g., don’t try to cover the entire textbook—pick 10 chapters). Often, fellow graduate students and faculty are even willing to share their slides and lecture notes to give you a head-start on preparing the course. **Kristi Wolfe**, a fifth-year student, suggests finding a senior graduate student mentor who is on a similar graduate path as you; he or she is likely to have a lot of helpful advice about teaching and may be a bit more candid and realistic than faculty.
- **Time management:** It is a no-brainer that time management is extremely important when trying to juggle your many responsibilities. We could spend 80 hours a week working on the course we are teaching, but then we would be ignoring the reasons we came to graduate school—that is, to learn about our field and earn a degree. When under time pressure and stress, it is easy to put off things that don’t have firm deadlines (like working on your thesis or other research). April Boyce, a third-year student recommends setting aside “nonnegotiable time-blocks” to work on each important area of graduate school. For example, work on your thesis from 8 a.m.–12 p.m. on Monday, go to class 12:30–2:30, prep the course you’re teaching from 3–6 p.m. She recommends setting up similar time blocks for everyday of the week and sticking to your schedule. **Linda Bajdo**, another successful student/teacher, recommends making a schedule at the beginning of each week and putting all the important documents that need to be completed that week in separate folders (e.g., one for teaching, one for courses you are taking, one for manuscripts you are preparing or editing). Linda also recommends taking work with you EVERYWHERE. So, while you’re waiting in line to get your license renewed or waiting for your child at a sporting event, grade papers, edit manuscripts, or read an article for a course you are taking.

- **Preparation:** Steve Weingarden, a fifth-year student, recommends spending a lot of time preparing your course the first time you teach it so that you will save a lot of time the next time you teach it. Steve also emphasized the importance of creating a detailed, well-designed syllabus, as it will prevent confusion from students later on. Cara Bauer, another advanced student recommends developing “support materials that are easily customizable” so that they can easily be used again. For example, make nice PowerPoint slides with detailed notes to prevent some of the legwork the second time you teach the course.

Some other useful teaching advice also emerged during our interviews:

- **Boundaries:** When asked about teaching tips for other graduate students, Swati Buddhavarapu, a fourth-year student, immediately exclaimed, “Don’t date your students.” She said she often hears graduate students (in other areas of psychology, of course) talking about their attraction to students, but this can create all sorts of problems with boundaries and fairness to others in the course (not to mention it violates university policy and APA ethical guidelines). Cara Bauer mentioned that setting the appropriate boundaries is essential, but is also one of the more difficult things with which graduate students are faced. Often undergraduate students are very close in age to graduate student instructors and often “view you more as a friend than teacher,” according to Cara. Cara recommends playing it tough from the start by setting up clear and specific policies and procedures and sticking to them. You will probably hear every story in the book as excuses for late assignments and missed exams, but if you stick to your rules and keep a smile on your face, everything should be fine. **Lori LePla**, a third-year student, advises that while you must be firm and set boundaries, this should not prevent you from being nice; it is sometimes difficult to keep up a friendly demeanor when explaining a *z*-score for the tenth time, but remaining accepting and nice is better for everyone!
- **Using I-O training in the classroom:** Cara recommends using your knowledge about realistic job previews when teaching. On the first day of class inform students how much work is involved in the course, how long it will take, and what is expected. Cara points out that this will help avoid the complaint, “I didn’t know this would be soooooo hard.” Steve also recommends using material you learn in the classes you are taking and bringing them to the classroom you are teaching. This can also be applied to the research you are conducting. Often giving students research examples from your own experience can greatly aid in their learning. Steve points out that teaching can also be a learning experience for you...bring ideas you learn while prepping your courses into your coursework and research. If you can tie everything together, you will save a lot of time and have more fun.

- **And finally**, some useful Web sites from universities:  
<http://ase.tufts.edu/cae/pages/Tips.htm>  
<http://www.cte.iastate.edu/resources/teachingtips.html>  
[http://www.cat.ilstu.edu/teaching\\_tips/index.shtml](http://www.cat.ilstu.edu/teaching_tips/index.shtml)  
<http://www.acs.ohio-state.edu/education/ftad/Publications/Teaching-Handbook/>

### **Neil's Postscript**

Beyond all the great advice given above, I have also found the following points to be helpful.

- Ask a faculty member who is known for their teaching quality to visit your class and provide feedback. An experienced, good instructor can usually provide helpful strategies for improving your teaching based on a relatively short observation period.
- Do mid-semester teaching evaluations. You can use the standard university form or create your own, especially if the standard form does not have much room for written responses. Your focus should be on the written feedback more so than the numerical ratings. If you perceive that you have gotten off to a rocky start in the class, you may not want to wait until mid-semester.
- Cara Bauer's point about establishing boundaries is critical, but also don't overcompensate in this area. A common occurrence is that the new graduate instructor makes his/her course too difficult. Perhaps these new instructors are using their advanced knowledge to help establish those boundaries to which Cara refers. Review exams and grading strategies with faculty and/or experienced graduate students to ensure you are not being too easy or too hard.
- PowerPoint slides and overheads are teaching aides—you are the teacher! Some rookie instructors are wedded to the notion that they must cover a certain amount of material in each class. New instructors who think like this tend to brush aside questions and limit participation from students so as to ensure the entire lecture is delivered. Students become frustrated when this occurs, especially if some part of the lecture confuses them and the instructor does not take the time to clear up the confusion. Be flexible in class, you can always adjust what is covered or not covered in future lectures.
- If you are offering extra credit in your class, be sure you understand how documentation of extra credit is being managed, and how you will convert extra credit points into your grading point system. You don't want to come to the end of the semester and deal with angry undergrads who claim that they participated in research but did not receive credits they had coming or the points added to their grade were less than they expected.

**GOOD LUCK!**