Ep. 081: Support for Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Like any successful public university, Illinois State relies on a corps of graduate teaching assistants as a part of its overall mission of teaching and learning.

In this episode, Jim is joined again by David Giovagnoli, the Center's Coordinator for Scholarly Teaching and Learning, to explore the many professional development opportunities available for both graduate students with teaching assignments and for those who aspire to teach in the academy. The also talk about the particular challenges that face both master's and doctoral-level GAs, and some strategies to help them connect with and support the undergraduates in their charge.

Transcript

JIM: Hi there. I'm Jim.

DAVID: And I'm David.

JIM: Let's Talk Teaching. Welcome to Let's Talk Teaching a podcast from the Center for Integrated Professional Development here at Illinois State University. I'm Jim Gee. Joining me once again, David Giovagnoli. We talked in our previous episode that we did about a couple of different hats that you wear, and one that we wanted to come back and talk about was the work that you do with graduate students, and specifically graduate teaching assistants on campus. I think a lot of folks don't realize that in addition to supporting faculty and academic staff, we also support graduate students and their professional development, especially where teaching and learning comes in. So we just wanted to record a really quick little episode about that. And I wanted to start out by asking you, you're someone who has a long history as a graduate teaching assistant?

DAVID: Yes

JIM: I used to do it too. But I came back when I was, you know, I was like, 38 years old when I was a full time graduate student, again, you've been doing it longer, because you were working on a PhD, in addition to the master's degree. So tell me, what are some of the challenges that you find that new graduate teaching assistants run into?

DAVID: Yeah, I think that's a really good question. And so I guess I'll preface this by saying that I have observed some trends with graduate assistants and I have my own experience; this might not be universally applicable. And so here at Illinois State, we're a pretty big doctoral granting University. Most of our graduate assistants are masters students; there are a handful of Ph. D. programs; I think there are seven or eight Ph. D. programs. Biology has a lot of graduate teaching assistants and English has a lot. So some of these things I've observed, they vary between program to program. But I guess where I'd start is that when we don't have formal training and teaching, we tend to do what our teachers did. And so we'll often do what our favorite teachers did. And so one of the things that I like to remind other students, as I'm still finishing my Ph. D.,

also is that we are not our students. And so the things that we like, the things that work for us, as graduate students, might not work for our students. For instance, we are in, you know, the top 5% if you're a master's student, or 1%, if you're a Ph. D. student in terms of your education level, and so higher education worked for you, like you really, you probably liked college, if you're wanting to stick around and teach. For instance, I was a classics major. I studied Latin and Greek, and that involves a lot of like, that involves a lot of individual studying, like vocab learning, flashcards, things like that, and note taking and reading and that worked for me, sometimes better in some semesters when I was more focused, but that might not work for every ISU student, for instance. And so that's when you take a step back and ask yourself, "Why am I doing this thing in the classroom? Like, am I doing it just because that's what I've seen happen?" And so that's one of the purposes of this unit here within the Center is thinking about scholarly teaching, which is thinking about your teaching the same way you think about your research, your scholarship, like loking for what evidence-informed practices can I do? And so obviously, I think in your first semester, you're going to do some things that are necessary for your survival. For instance, like you're starting in grad school, you've got a limited amount of time to prepare your syllabus, you might only have a few days before the semester. In English, we have a week-long orientation, but that's not across campus. And so letting that first semester be a learning experience, and then sort of being open after that to adjusting your practice. Because I think the trap can be, "Well, this didn't work, but it worked for me. So I just need a different group of students, and then it'll start working."

JIM: Right. And I think you were very deliberate when you said evidence-informed practice, the phrase that often was thrown around, I think more commonly in the past was best practices.

DAVID: Right.

JIM: Best for whom? Best for your students or best for you? Because as you said, maybe that's what your favorite teacher had done. Do graduate teaching assistants coming in, do you find that there's a problem with age, that they are closer to age to the students that they're teaching?

DAVID: What from what I've observed, basically, I found the closer a grad assistant is to the age of their students, the more likely they are choosing authoritarian teaching practices.

JIM: In other words, they're overcompensating a little bit.

DAVID: Right. Like I need to perform I need to show you that I'm an authority figure, even though I'm close to your age, ergo, I'm going to perform the expert and so there's nothing wrong with you know, top down teaching practices in some circumstances and you know, there's nothing wrong with lecture or anything like that. It's, I sort of see an inflexibility with syllabi and things like that, like this regulation, I will make no exceptions for I don't see too often like you might imagine, like, sort of the buddy-buddy thing that might emerge because somebody's close to the same age as their student, I haven't seen that as much as reported to me as much maybe the people

who are taking my programs don't want to report things like that, right. But I have seen it go a lot of different ways, like, because it can also happen that if you've been in the industry for a while and come back to teach, you might be used to a certain amount of, you know, self direction, things Why should I have to explain this process to you. And I think that the transition from undergrad to graduate school is almost as I don't want to say, severe, but almost as difficult to manage as going from high school to college. Even though it's the same institution, just the level of complexity of your courses increases, the specificity increases. And so you're managing that transition at the same time you're managing being behind the lectern, or in front of a classroom instead of just in the class.

JIM: So in other words, graduate teaching assistants are also very busy people.

DAVID: Yes, yes. So figuring out that a strategy your professor used might have worked differently. For instance, if you went to a college where faculty taught a two-two, meaning they taught two courses in one semester, and two in another, so four total a year, and they had time to grade twenty-page essays from eight students in their class, but if you're also a GTA, and teaching twenty-eight students, thirty students in a Gen Ed class then scaling teaching practices to your situation, and that's why we say you know, evidence-based practice, not best practice because it varies.

JIM: Right. Also, just as a side note, I would be gobsmacked if there were a lot of faculty members teaching to to load on our at our institution. I think it's more than that.

DAVID: Not at ISU, I went to a liberal arts college so...

JIM: So you have been working for a long time on the programming. And when we say programming, we mean the workshops, the consultations, the curriculum that we create for graduate students who take advantage of our services here at the Center. And that's really come to the fore since you joined us as a full time employee last whenever it was

DAVID: April

JIM: April. Okay, well, congratulations. By the way, we didn't say your official title is Coordinator for Scholarly Teaching and Learning.

DAVID: Right.

JIM: Exactly what you're talking about. So you've kind of scaffolded if I'm using that word correctly, sort of different things to meet different needs for graduate assistants. So can you talk a little bit about what we offer and what just on the surface, at least what students would get out of it?

DAVID: Right. And so the majority of this programming was co-developed with Dr. Julie McFann, when she was here, she is happy in her retirement in California. Now. I was walking around outside and jealous of her weather, I think today. But there are two certificates of completion that are available asynchronously, meaning you can do them at your own pace through Reggienet, if you're a grad student. Now at ISU, you are

already on that Reggienet, whether you want to be or not, because it's the Graduate School's resource page,

JIM: Right

DAVID: The first of the two certificate programs is called College Teaching for Future Faculty. And so it is meant to be a broad introduction to evidence-based teaching practices, using our Framework for Inclusive Teaching Excellence, which I believe has been the subject of a few of these podcast episodes

JIM: It has and we will, as always, this is the point where I say we'll link to all of that on the show page for today's episode. So yes.

DAVID: Right. And so that framework is divided into six dimensions, which are not saying that, you know, teaching is segmented into different areas, but that you can approach teaching thematically through for instance, Science of Learning is one. So that's exploring how the brain works in relation to how people learn. And Course Design is about course design.

JIM: And I've always seen that kind of almost as a recipe in there or a list of ingredients and, they may be in different proportion to them. You may not be approaching it almost at all science of learning. But anything that you do that is inclusive is going to recognize that we're human beings and our brains are wired a certain way.

DAVID: Right.

JIM: Right, even if you're not explicitly exploring it from that perspective, as opposed to the climate and culture of the classroom and stuff like that.

DAVID: Right. And so the idea is that you can't really have inclusive, excellent teaching, if you're not building some of these things into your teaching, no matter how explicitly it is or not, but the program takes you through the six dimensions as six modules, which are meant to take about the same amount of time as a class would, like about six hours, three to six hours, depending on the amount of content in them. And so as you're going through it, you're creating artifacts, different documents that have you sort of explore within that dimension, how that would apply to your teaching. And so you're building your teaching portfolio across this program, while also building different specialized drafts of your teaching philosophy. So for instance, in the one about evidence-based pedagogy, we have you work on a statement about how you use instructional technology and in the classroom climate and culture one, it's a, what we might call a diversity statement. And so after creating those successive drafts, then you create a draft of your teaching philosophy that goes into the portfolio and so the goal is that you walk away from this program with something that would be suitable as the start of something to hand in for a teaching award, for instance, or also for a Ph. D. application, for instance, or if you're a Ph. D. student for a job application,

JIM: Sure

DAVID: It is designed, whether you're currently teaching or not, to be applicable to you, as long as you have an interest in college teaching. To complete it, you also have to take other workshops through the cCenter, which basically, I think if it is a jumpstart on how to just conceptualize professional development, because I think that's another sort of threshold for people moving from undergrad to graduate school is realizing that not all of your education is going to be in formalized classroom settings.

JIM: Right. No, that's a very good point. And speaking of classroom settings, there's a second asynchronous experience, which is specifically about course design, which is a little more what we've certainly talked about a lot on this podcast, but it hones a little closer to- it's based on a program that has existed longer, within the center and stuff like that.

DAVID: So that that program is called, of Course Design for Future Faculty, and it has been historically called Instructional Design for Future Faculty. IDFF was the acronym. And so that was, I think, 20-

JIM: It was a while ago.

DAVID: I think it was 2015 or 2016, the first time that ran, and that was built by Julia McFann as the graduate student version of another program called Design Your Course. And so that introduces participants to the principles of backward design, which, the short version is, rather than starting with a textbook, start with what do you want the students to learn what he wants you to get out of the course. And then going back from there and developing objectives, and then figuring out what text and what assessments match up with that. And so that one has been going a lot longer than the prereq for it. And we've had a lot of success stories with that one. I took it actually, as a grad student, because in the English program, you have to teach a course that you've designed as one of the comprehensive exams. And so I designed my Gay Men's Studies class in that program. And we've had really good luck with participants in that program actually becoming Teaching Award winners. And so that program used to be a summer cohort. But we wanted to make it more equitable and accessible to people, that's why we've switched to an asynchronous format. But both of these asynchronous experiences have check in points with me or one of the incoming graduate assistants we have on the programming team. And so it's asynchronous, but you're not left to your own devices. We check in and we make sure you're getting the support you need to finish.

JIM: And then really quickly if you're a graduate student listening to this, but you're not the instructor of record for a course, we do offer another program that you're starting up, I think this fall.

DAVID: Right. So we sort of piloted that this spring, it is Effective Tutoring Practices. And so basically, it's using a text called The Master Tutor, which is from the Cambridge Stratford Study Skills Institute. And it walks you through tutoring as a process that has, you know, several evidence-based practices and offers several cycles, you can go through with different scenarios with tutees. And this is really geared towards people who are maybe TA-ing large lectures, and so having to do that tutoring work in their

office hours, or actually working as tutors, or people who aren't graduate assistants and just want to learn more about how to get into a gig like that. And that one is not asynchronous. It's five weeks of meetings starting, I think, in the second week of the semester, but you get a copy of the book. But it's also a way of getting out of your silo as a grad student too, like getting to meet people across campus, which is-

JIM: We talked about that in the previous episode recorded that it is so valuable. And I think that's a good point. I haven't often thought about the fact that grad students often seek like grad students and don't necessarily have opportunities to do that. I mean, there are there's the Teaching and Learning Symposium and the Research Symposium. But beyond that,

DAVID: Yeah, and a lot of grad students don't take courses outside their department even mostly, because a lot of our programs don't allow you to do that anyway. And so this is a good way of building up your network,

JIM: Right

DAVID: Really, I get a little cynical about the term networking, but like, you know, you find your people across campus,

JIM: Right

DAVID: And that's connected really to the other thing, which is the Future Faculty Learning Community. And so we do that every semester. In the fall, typically, we do a more generalized book about teaching; in the spring, we do a book that's more specialized, like on a specific issue of teaching. And so it's not a book club, and there's no reading in advance, but we use a book to develop handouts and theme discussions around a particular issue and this semester, it's going to be "What Inclusive Educators Do," and so I think the theme with all of these programs for grad students is it's a way of getting that vocabulary to be able to talk about teaching in a way that if you're going to a conference or you're in an elevator with Provost Tarhule,

JIM: Right

DAVID: And you want to you want to talk about teaching, you can have the skills to do that because you know, one of the things I found moving from English over to the Center is we were thinking about the same things related to teaching, but we were describing them in different ways.

JIM: Right.

DAVID: So having that ability to, you know, code switch across disciplines,

JIM: And I'm sure we describe them differently over in Communication as well. So yes, you know, I remember they bring the English 101 instructors and the COM 110 instructors together for like a breakfast or something like that

DAVID: That hasn't happened in a few years. But yeah, we have the critical inquiry breakfast. That was always a big tray of bacon that a lot of people were excited about.

JIM: That was the most exciting thing, I think. Yeah. But otherwise, I think people mainly, I look back on it as a bit of a missed opportunity, because I think all the comm people said on one side of the room, and

DAVID: I think so.

JIM: All the English people sat on the other side of the room.

DAVID: The Graduate School does offer- there's the Graduate Student Advisory Committee is a group, they have the across campus disciplines, and the Graduate Student Association is across disciplines. And they put on a lot of social events. But this is just another space to get some of that cross-campus stuff. And we do also encourage grad students to sign up for other programming at the Center, which is generally available to grad students. There are some grant-supported programs, which are for faculty like DART and AIM, for instance,

JIM: Right

DAVID: But we want to support grad students here at the Center. And so part of that is having specialized programming to meet those needs we were talking about at the beginning. And so that's why some things are just for grad students.

JIM: All right. So David, as we wrap up here, one final question for you just to kind of bring it all full circle: knowing what you know now about graduate student teaching, what's the one thing you wish you would have known when you started doing that?

DAVID: Well, that's a good question. And I think that I look back at some of my old syllabi, and I was one of those students, like I was talking about at the beginning, who I think I swung too far on the authoritarian side of things. I had this need to perform. I am the professor, et cetera, et cetera. And I don't know if that was helpful in all situations, like I remember some attendance situations that I could have shown a little more grace on. And so I think what I would have wanted to know a little more explicitly when I started is that it's a learning curve just like any other thing, teaching has its own content. Teaching has its own knowledge that we don't get just from becoming good in the content we're trying to teach. Like, if you're a great biologist, or if you're a great writer, that doesn't mean you're a great biology teacher or a great writer, it certainly helps to have that pedagogical content knowledge is what that's called. But you also need pedagogical knowledge that's more general like best slash evidence-based practices and things like that. And so I think I would give myself a little more slack, going back and saying that this is your first semester, your second semester teaching, you're still learning, I am not a journaler by any means. That's just not my process. Like I've got probably four of these legal tablets like I have in front of me that are like I go between them and things like that. But I would also just encourage myself to make more notes about what's working and what not what's not working a little more systematic about it, because that leads us to one of our FITE dimensions, which is Data-Informed Reflection. So data and assessment sounds kind of scary, I think, especially if you're in

a humanities or arts side, like I am and so be just open like learning what's working, what's not working, like don't put your head in the sand about that, like, it's sometimes we're not going to do it right. And that's a valuable learning experience. Failure is a good teacher.

JIM: Well, David, thank you so much.

DAVID: Thank you for having me, Jim.

JIM: And that's all the time we have for this episode of Let's Talk Teaching. Find out more about the programming we offer for graduate students And in general here at the Center, go to our website pro Dev, that's p r, o d e v dot, Illinois state.edu. For David Giovagnoli and for all of my colleagues here at the Center for Integrated Professional Development, until we talk again. Happy teaching!