



Teaching Concerns

Newsletter of the Teaching Resource Center for Faculty and Teaching Assistants

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Talking about Teaching

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Good teaching is not a mysterious endeavor. Getting good at it happens step by step. By experimenting and practicing, one develops important pedagogical skills: learning how to integrate lectures and discussions, stirring students to participate, and—in a variety of ways—explaining and illustrating ideas, and modeling and exercising academic thinking. These are not mysterious talents one is born with, but skills that are learned. Those who make it look easy have probably worked the hardest.

This autumn the Religious Studies Department unveiled a new seminar to assist new TAs in becoming good teachers. “Pedagogy: A TA Training Seminar” served to help TAs develop and hone pedagogical tools necessary to teaching religious studies at the university level. The seminar itself was constructed to model an effective classroom learning environment. Starting with foundational topics such as “leading effective discussions” and “constructing a considered grading philosophy,” the seminar introduced TAs to their roles as discussion facilitators, graders, etc. The Teaching Resource Center served as an invaluable resource in providing the seminar participants with well-considered tools for facilitating discussions and grading student writing. As the semester progressed, pedagogical issues unique to teaching the discipline of religious studies within a public university occupied the participants. The faculty graciously provided insights gleaned from years of teaching; these “nuggets” were usually coupled with humorous anecdotes from undergraduate courses. The final sessions of the seminar focused on teaching as an integral component of professional development.

The desire of the Religious Studies Department is to promote excellence in undergraduate teaching and to provide participants in this seminar with a systematic orientation to teaching as an integral component of their graduate studies. However, the seminar grew into a much more dynamic gathering. As various members of the Religious Studies faculty and veteran TAs participated in the discussions, the dialogue rose far above the appropriation of instructional tools. Whether discussing particular grading philosophies or approaches to teaching disparate, and often exotic, religious traditions, the conversations between faculty and TAs were animated and lively. Far from being just a course on teaching, the TA Training Seminar spawned a culture of

thinking and talking about teaching and learning. And the conversations still continue.

At the start of the semester, despite the plethora of experts in the religious traditions of the world, no augur emerged to foretell how the participants would respond to the Pedagogy seminar. Some of the new TAs were understandably apprehensive at the prospect of taking a course devoted to teaching. Yet the value of the course further merged over the course of the semester. As discussion sections got underway, we shared strategies to aid facilitation; as papers poured in, we sought one another’s advice. Towards the end, we offered our frustrations, joys, and support as the semester rushed onward. Although some minor changes will be implemented next fall, the seminar enjoys the overwhelming support of both the faculty and graduate students in Religious Studies. In short, it provides a forum for ensuring the highest quality of undergraduate education as well as offering TAs a comprehensive orientation to university teaching. Overall, the success of this inaugural year bodes well for the seminar in years to come.