

Teaching as a Ph.D. Student in Education:

Reflecting on My Own Experience

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Most universities recruit new faculty members from doctoral degree holders who can show their credential and potential in research and teaching, the two major types of work for new faculty members. As can be seen in many faculty position advertisements, applicants gain attention when they can provide records of teaching accomplishments at the undergraduate and graduate level, and demonstrate commitment to teaching innovation. Teaching experience is not only a necessary baseline criteria for university employers to select their new faculty members, but also a valuable asset with which the Ph.D. graduates are able to increase their competitiveness in the academic job market. In order to prepare graduate students for future academic careers, universities usually provide teaching-skill training by means of workshops and sessions of student career development, and teaching assistant positions for graduate students to assist professors with tasks of grading and tutoring. These two types of programs to a large extent support Ph.D. students in building their conceptualization of teaching and developing their teaching skills. However, neither of them offers the opportunity for Ph.D. students to be exposed to and engaged in a comprehensive and complex process of teaching that a course instructor is supposed to experience.

In many universities in Canada, student professional development programs only provide trainings surrounding general teaching skills regardless of graduate students' disciplinary backgrounds. Ph.D. programs rarely list course instruction as an integral part of the requirements for Ph.D. studies. As a result, graduate students seldom have access to gaining teaching experience specifically in their research field. The experience of course instruction, though recognized as a valuable asset in the job market, becomes a blind spot situated in the intersection of Ph.D. programs and student career development programs, but not covered by either of them. Many academic supervisors consider teaching less important than other components of the Ph.D. training, such as doing research and tutoring (Jepsen, Varhegyi & Edwards, 2012). This little emphasis on practical teaching in the training of Ph.D. students probably occurs because, in academic settings, the obligation to teach and the desire to do research are usually perceived as two opposing forces that are hard to balance. Course instruction can be a time-consuming endeavor for professors who want to devote more time to research, publications and conferences. However, little research has been documented on doctoral students' perspectives on experiences of course instruction in relation to their current studies and future employment.

The purpose of this study is to explore my understanding of course instruction in relation to my current Ph.D. studies. To achieve this goal, I draw on my own experience of teaching an online course at the university level, examining how this teaching experience contributes to my current Ph.D. study and research, and how it reframes my conceptualization of being a teacher. Through this critical self-examination of teaching as a Ph.D. student, I will make suggestions on the components of Ph.D. training for the purpose of improving quality and productivity of graduate education.

Initial Self-Expectations

I was informed of the appointment as the instructor of an online course in early 2015 when I was in the second year of my Ph.D. program. Teaching the online course as a Ph.D. student instructor would be a great opportunity to advance and enrich my academic journey in terms of extending my teaching experience, interacting with various students and seeking inspiration for future research. Besides these high expectations, this short-term online teaching appointment indeed activated my passion for teaching that had been repressed for two years.

Two years ago I prepared for the departure for my Ph.D. studies in Canada after serving as a faculty member in a university in China for over ten years. Suspending the profession was not because I didn't enjoy working with students and professors, but because I wanted to achieve a breakthrough in my academic career through further study and new experiences. I still remember how difficult it was to say farewell to my students and colleagues, experiencing emotional moments over and over again. In my case, studying in Canada was not for the intent to pursue a higher academic degree, but as a way to create and present a better "me" with not only broad and profound knowledge, but also a global vision of education. Teaching the online course was expected to inform me of an online course system that I hadn't experienced before—how the course was designed, delivered and evaluated, how the teacher-student communication was achieved, and how online learning can be supported. Through teaching the course, I could expand, enrich and enhance my experiences in course instruction.

Looking through the background information on the students who registered the in course, I found myself surrounded by a fantastic group of teachers with whom my interaction would produce nuanced insights and perspectives worthy of exploring in my future teaching and research. It was a group of second language teachers, most of whom were teaching at various levels of French immersion programs in different regions of Canada. Some had cross-cultural experiences teaching ESL (English as the second language) in Korea and Bangkok. This online course drew together second language teachers no matter where they were and what languages they taught. Being part of this online community of language teachers brought about memories of my time in China communicating with my colleagues about the ways of teaching, the progress of the course and students' performance in class.

I was fully aware of my primary role as the instructor for the course which focused on issues in second language education. From a background of applied linguistics and

education, I expected that the course instruction would provide me with the opportunity to communicate with people who share the same interests in theories and practices in second language education. More importantly, it would be a great achievement of my teaching if some students felt supported, engaged and inspired throughout the learning process. However, I never assumed online instruction to be an easy job, but rather a great challenge that I had never encountered before. It was a graduate-level course in an online environment where the delivery of instruction, teacher-student conversations, and feedback on assignments all depended upon online exchanges. To make sure there wouldn't be interruptions and issues due to technological problems, I booked a tutorial from the online teaching supporting department and learned how to use the virtual class system. Another concern was the way of communication with students. In this online course there wouldn't be verbal interactions face to face with students, nor illustration through use of speech and body language. The only forms of instructor-student communication were emails and posted messages, which largely relied on written text. I kept telling myself to be extremely cautious in regards to my language use when expressing views and attitudes concerning students' assignments, so that misunderstanding could be minimized.

Instruction and Communication

The subsequent instruction and communication with students was the most satisfying part of my memories of the course instruction. In the process of teaching as a Ph.D. student, I was able to connect my previous profession with current Ph.D. study, and apply the theories I learned to the practice of course teaching.

In response to a student's assignment on motivations for second language learning, I suggested a socio-cultural perspective as an alternative approach. My research interest surrounds unexpected and complex learning behaviors that cannot be explained under the conventional psycho-linguistic construct. From a socio-cultural perspective, desires for learning another language is always related to a learner's life experience and understanding of the world. After a few exchanges of emails, I was delighted to receive a message from the student who expressed her excitement for learning another angle to view language learning. In her email, she made a list of literature on socio-cultural aspects of second language learning for further reading and exploration. That moment was extremely rewarding for I shared her joy of learning and reaped the fruit of my commitment.

While other moments of instruction were not as exciting as the above, they served as reminders that I needed to keep an open mind to theories and views with which I wasn't familiar. One of the assignments required students to create a PowerPoint slideshow to discuss an issue in second language teaching and learning. One student selected to present the topic of "learning disabilities". At the sight of this unfamiliar topic, my intuition was that "disability" was an inappropriate word for students' learning and attention issues. To say a child has learning disabilities equates to labeling the child with an innate impairment in their ability to learn. Who is qualified to make this judgment? On what criteria can this judgment be made? With these questions in mind, I conducted a

quick search of the literature and found a few relevant articles. After reading them, I formed a clearer concept of “learning disabilities”. It is a medical term used by psychologists, therapists and special education experts to refer to certain learning disorders and difficulties that are diagnosed through specialized testings. In the feedback on the assignment, I emphasized that teachers were not qualified to judge which students had learning disabilities, but were able to support those who had been diagnosed. Although I took a long time to do research before giving the feedback, I felt relieved that I didn’t make a prompt judgment on her assignment. From students’ assignments, I discovered alternative perspectives on language teaching and learning, and gained a critical understanding of my previously learned knowledge. In order to become a qualified teacher and reflexive researcher, I need to have a humble mind and rigorous attitude towards students’ expression of views.

An unexpected experience was that my role of graduate student could also be supportive to the learning of distance students. A few days before the deadline of an assignment, a student asked if she could use non-peer-reviewed articles in the essay because downloading the peer-viewed was very expensive. As a matter of fact, the online resources of the university library are free of charge to all registered students and can be accessed by using their ID number and the password. Based on my experience as a graduate student, I immediately provided her information on how to contact the library to get the password for downloading, and how to use delivery service of the library. Eventually she downloaded the articles she needed and was grateful for my information and support. At that moment, I was more of a learning partner than an instructor, as I shared my experience with another fellow student who was struggling in her independent study.

Although teaching was time-consuming, it provided an opportunity to shift between roles of teacher and graduate student, and sometimes be both. Through online course instruction, I was able to combine my past professional experience with the present Ph.D. studies, building coherence of my academic journey. In contrast to the difficult time in transitioning from a full-time lecturer to a full-time student in the first year of my program, this year was fulfilled when I was able to be involved in a dual community of language teachers and graduate students, where my roles as a course instructor, second language teacher and graduate student could be integrated into a new professional identity.

Reconsideration of Teachers’ Power

Teaching is not always rewarding and encouraging. I inevitably experienced challenges and confusion in the process of online teaching, most of which were coincidentally related to ways of teachers’ use of power. Unlike the conventional face-to-face classroom, an online course offers a unique learning environment where students can achieve deep learning outcomes with more space for expression of their voices and more control over their learning (Anderson & Haddad, 2005), while teachers’ authority over the learning process is reduced. Based on my belief in the emancipatory and empowering role of education, ideal forms of educations are those in which students’ voices are

valued in the way that teachers' power should be reduced. However, I made a subtle change to this view after gaining a better understanding of teachers' authority at different stages of teaching through a grade-related request from a student.

After issuing the grade for an assignment, I unexpectedly received an email from a student. In the email, she mildly expressed her dissatisfaction with her grade and requested a higher mark. Never having this experience before either as a teacher or as a student, I was confused about how to deal with such demand from students. This student might expect a higher score based on her investment of considerable time and efforts in the assignment. However, if I elevated her score, it would be unfair to the students who better fulfilled the assignment requirements. Eventually, I turned to my supervisor whose advice saved me from the dilemma—while it may not be uncommon for students to make such a request, instructors must stick to the same criteria in evaluating the whole class. Having confirmed that I treated everyone's assignment fairly, I gained more confidence in accounting for insistence on the grade. Instead of changing the score, I provided the student with more details on which aspects in the assignment to be improved. This experience made me reflect on my previous view of teachers' power in evaluating and assessing students' performance. While a teacher can be a guide and a learning partner in the process of learning, his/her authority in evaluation of students' performance must be defended under the condition that the same criteria should be fairly applied to every student.

There were other instances in which the teacher's authority needed to be exercised cautiously in order to ensure the progress of the course. For example, a few students asked for an extension of the assignment's deadline offering various reasons. Undoubtedly taking an online course at the graduate level can be very difficult for off-campus students with insufficient face-to-face exchanges with teachers and other fellow students. Moreover, adult students have to manage the balance between their study and their work and family. An extension of due date would allow them more time to write, correct and edit the assignment. However, I gave up the idea of giving the due date extension eventually based on two major concerns. The first was maintenance of fairness in evaluation. Was the due date extension for the few students fair to the others who achieved timely completion and punctual submission of the assignment? Was it appropriate to involve submission time in grading the assignment? Another concern was students' progress of course learning. The regular time allocation for one assignment was two weeks. A delay of deadline for one assignment consequently shortened the time for completing the next one. Using the power to disapprove a request for deadline extension doesn't necessarily suggest that the teacher is arbitrary, if teachers' power over the process of teaching and learning is exercised in an appropriate way for the benefit of the whole class.

The way of teacher's exercise of power may impact students' development of critical thinking and creativity. It can also be utilized to ensure the progress of student learning and the quality of course instruction. Reducing teachers' power is not a fundamental solution to student empowerment. Teachers must recognize the significance of their

power in promoting students' learning and maintaining progress of the course, while minimizing its negative influences on students' creativity and autonomy.

Conclusion

Through the process of teaching a graduate course online, I developed a better understanding of myself as a course instructor, a second language teacher and a graduate student. My reservoir of knowledge in teaching and learning was expanded and enhanced. More importantly, I have gained a more complicated understanding of teachers' power in class. This teaching experience supports the coherence and consistency of my academic journey developed over years and across diverse countries, from a teacher, to a student, to a researcher.

For students in the graduate program of education, gaining teaching experience goes beyond building up qualifications for a future career in schools and universities. The practice of teaching can be a valuable opportunity to reconstruct, enhance and expand knowledge and understanding of education through the process of instruction and interaction with students. Furthermore, research-oriented Ph.D. students will be able to enact and adjust their educational ideologies, attitudes and beliefs, and in return involve their insights and reflections in further research.

Based on the reflections on my own experience, I propose that teaching should be an integral part of graduate student training for Ph.D. degrees. The practice of course instruction is for the benefits of students' ongoing studies as well as their future academic careers. In the department of English at Cornell University (Cornell University, n.d.), every Ph.D. candidate is required to teach at least one year as part of the program requirements, under careful supervision of an experienced professor. Another example is Yale University (Yale University, n.d.), where graduate students are supported with services of teaching-related training and matching to teaching opportunities in departments and programs other than their own. International graduate students in Yale University are provided additional assistance in improving competence in the oral content delivery, so that they can get equal access to teaching positions as the local students.

To ensure the quality and productivity of the course instruction by student instructors, it is essential to establish a comprehensive system of support, which may include open access to information on teaching opportunities, matching services, professors' supervision and teaching-skill training. This goal can only be reached through cooperation, coordination and even compromise among various departments and sections of the university. While participation of graduate students in teaching contributes to diversity and multiplicity of teaching culture at university, it indeed poses new challenges to the institutional structure of graduate education.

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