

Learning From Others: Classroom Case Stories for Graduate Teaching Assistants

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Case stories are tools for helping graduate students become competent teachers of mathematics and statistics. A case story is a narrative, which explicates a realistic, engaging learning situation in order to contribute authenticity to classroom discussions, emotionally and cognitively involve students, serve as a bridge between theory and practice, and promote discourse. This paper presents four, reality-based, case stories that address issues such as student accusations, cheating, disruptive students, and failing students. In addition, commentaries are provided that draw from research why the problematic situations might arise and practical suggestions for dealing with them.

How do you prepare your graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) to investigate difficult, hard-to-handle situations like balancing graduate school and teaching, giving and accepting criticism, dealing with upset students, teaching ethics in the classroom, saying “no” to students, making exceptions to the rule, and creating and maintaining authority? Unfortunately, the dry platitudes describing university policies and procedures that typically fill most mathematics GTA training programs are insufficient preparation for GTAs to face the difficult instructional challenges that lie ahead (Boyd, 1989; Committee on Preparation for College Teaching, 1989, Gray & Buerkel-Rothfuss, 1989, 1991; Moore, 1996; Worthen, 1992). One way to help them is to enhance their GTA training with realistic case stories relating fictionalized, yet realistic, problem situations that they may one day confront.

The case stories presented in this paper capture some of the dilemmas encountered by beginning instructors who hold full responsibility for a class although some similar situations may be faced by GTAs

who merely assist faculty by holding office hours, conducting review sessions, or grading papers. In particular, this article distilled classroom observations, daily journal entries, and interviews into the case stories thereby providing a vision of a classroom situation and the participants’ interactions. Specifically, case stories arise as part of the case study methodology. Case studies yield descriptive research documents constructed from real-life situations, problems or incidents (Sudzina & Kilbane, 1992), which in turn call for analysis, planning, and decision-making. When implemented in educational settings, the benefits of the case-study method include: (1) reinforcing the connections between theory and practice (Dana & Floyd, 1994; Robinson & Kochan, 1995; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1992; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1994); (2) enhancing both problem solving and critical thinking (Grossman, 2000; Patterson & Fleet, 1996; Stolovitch, 1990; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1994); (3) extending available practical experiences for dealing with classroom problems (McCammon, Miller & Norris, 1998; Simonds, Scheffler & Dana, 1994;

Sudzina & Kilbane, 1994; Watkins, 1994); (4) opening lines of communication to discuss personal experiences (McCammon, Miller & Norris, 1998; Sudzina & Kilbane, 1992); and (5) facilitating group interaction on beliefs, subjectivities and biases (Campbell, 1997; Dana & Floyd, 1993).

However, case stories differ from traditional case studies in two ways. First, case stories according to Ackerman and Maslin-Ostrowski (1995) blend storytelling into the case-study method. In particular, case stories are narratives, which explicate a realistic, engaging learning situation. In doing so, the case stories provide more than a brief description of a conflict by including glimpses into the emotions and reactions of the participants in order to contribute authenticity to classroom discussions, emotionally and cognitively involve students, serve as a bridge between theory and practice, and promote discourse. Second, each of the case stories presents two or three different variations which according to Costanzo and Handelsman (1998) helps avoid the trap of prematurely settling on the 'right answer' (p. 97). As a result, the variations highlight different aspects of the case story and illustrate the lack of an unequivocally correct answer.

These cases, when used with groups of GTAs at a regional state university preparing to take full responsibility for a course and assignment of grades, have been found to (a) induce broad and lively class discussions, (b) illustrate internal biases affecting anticipated coping strategies, (c) require pragmatic responses to specific questions, (d) reflect on personal experiences, and (e) cause disagreement between people. Consequently, the cases do not seek to build consensus but rather to cause personal reflection supportive of anticipatory decision making prior to facing similar classroom problems. In addition, the case stories also come with commentaries delineating potential causes of each problematic scenario. These commentaries are provided to help extend the discussion, provide further background, and identify issues that may not have arisen during discussion. One element that these commentaries do not provide is a definitive answer as to how to overcome any of the particular situations. It is expected that the discussion leader will augment the discussion with the particular norms instanced at his or her institution. The resulting dialogue should enhance the students'

suggestions by pointing out the potential dangers inherent to each of the problematic situations and proposing ways to diminish the potential repercussions.

Case 1: How should I deal with questions about grading?

Variation 1

Omar and John are two students in your precalculus class. They are both freshman at the university and both have C minus averages in your class. The homework answers they hand-in are sloppily done and sometimes incomplete. You get the feeling these two students, amongst many others are disinterested in the class but need to take it for their chosen major. In fact, their lack of interest appears the most when you are lecturing and you see them conversing with their neighbors or reading the student newspaper.

After passing back a test and dismissing the class, several students come up to you to discuss their grades. Omar and John are among them and appear to be visibly aggravated. Omar states, "During the test I asked if what I'd done for this problem was correct and you said it was but I was marked off for it." You can't believe that Omar is accusing you of being the reason he lost points on the test. You recall the incident during the test. When Omar asked that question, you looked at his work and didn't say anything but "hum" and then left. You certainly do not remember saying any comment that could be construed as stating to Omar that his work was correct. Then, as you are contemplating a response to Omar, you look at John. He pipes up, and while shoving his paper under your nose, states "You never said that we needed to check our answers when we solve radical equations but it was required on the test." You are flabbergasted by John's statement since you had said to check your solutions when solving radical equations multiple times during class. Additionally when presenting examples, you also checked them and the book even discussed the need for checking solutions.

Your task is to discuss how you as the instructor would deal with these accusations. What things would you say to each student and how would you expect him or her to react? How do you handle stu-

dents seeking additional points on tests or quizzes? How do you balance fairness to the particular student and justice for all the students since some students may feel uncomfortable coming up and questioning their grade? During assessments, how much additional explanation should an instructor provide? How much help, if any, is appropriate? What are the purposes of assessments and whom do they serve?

Variation 2

Sandy and Samantha are two students in your precalculus class. They are both freshman at the university and both have A averages in your class. The homework answers they hand-in are well done and clearly show that they know the material. You get the feeling that these two students have been working very hard to understand the course content even though they just have to take the class to satisfy their liberal arts requirements. In fact, they appear very interested in your lectures, taking meticulous notes, and paying attention to the examples you provide.

After passing back a test and dismissing the class, several students come up to discuss their grades. Sandy and Samantha are among them and appear to be visibly upset. Sandy stated, "During the test you suggested that I investigate the problem using my calculator, I did that but you didn't give me any credit for my work." You can't believe that Sandy is accusing you of being the reason she didn't receive additional points on the test. You recall the incident during the test. When Sandy was stuck on that particular problem, you suggested that she investigate the problem with her calculator to gain some insight. However, the question's instructions clearly stated that the solution must be accompanied by the algebraic reasoning. Then, as you are contemplating your response to Sandy, you look at Samantha. She states, "You never said we needed to know the intercept form of a linear equation. All you ever discussed was the point-slope and the slope-intercept forms. How are we to answer a question on something that you've never discussed in class?" You are surprised by Samantha's statement since you feel that, although the question asked about a form never discussed, the students should have known how to (a) find x-intercepts, (b) find y-intercepts, (c) graph a line, and (d) find the slope of a line. (Same questions as Variation 1.)

Commentary on grading questions

Grading has been found to be one of the more difficult aspects of teaching for new instructors especially the reactions students have as work is passed back. Some students incorrectly see the grades as a reflection on intelligence and self-worth (McMullen-Pastrick & Gleason, 1986). In order to defray confrontation, many new teachers attempt to use only the last few minutes of the class to hand back tests thereby limiting opportunities for students to argue or complain or choose to return the exams and stand firm in the face of student complaints thereby potentially appearing rigid and autocratic.

Instead of employing these avoidance mechanisms, McMullen-Pastrick and Gleason (1986) suggested that a teacher should first prepare a non-defensive description that addresses why the question is legitimate and why a certain answer is correct. Then, defer the decision, if a legitimate point is raised, telling students that you must consult the lecture notes, text, or other sources to make an informed decision returning with a decision based upon the sources cited. Or, one could have students write down their objections, citing information from their notes and the text as the basis for argumentation, then review these objections and make judgments on an individual basis. In addition to these reactive strategies, Nilson (1998), suggested the following proactive strategies: (a) clearly state grade policies both verbally and in the syllabus, (b) use multiple graded quizzes, exams, papers, and other assignments to lessen a single assessment appearing to be "high stakes" or permit students to toss out their one weakest performance, (c) make comments on students exams as specific as possible, (d) have students check your scoring arithmetic, (e) explain how the grades were computed and either discuss the assessment or provide a definitive key, (f) be willing to discard a disputed item that almost all students missed, and (g) inform a student of the proper procedures for pursuing the grievance further if the case appears unresolvable. Employing these strategies can extend the aura that the students are part of the assessment process and that the teacher is willing to listen to carefully constructed arguments rather than emotional pleas.

Case 2: What if I suspect students of cheating?

Variation 1

Two brothers, Tom and Bill, are in your precalculus class and they usually sit right behind each other during class. On quiz and tests days, the brothers change their normal seating positions so that they can sit next to each other. You have the suspicion that they are cheating off each other but you haven't been able to gather definitive evidence. Your only evidence is that the brothers' answers to the most recent quiz, where the students in the class were told to work alone on them, have identical errors not seen in the work of any other class member. Some of these errors are so off the mark, you are sure that one either copied the other's work or they somehow shared answers.

When passing out the last quiz of the semester, you let your frustration show when you say to the brothers "This take home quiz, as I said before, is for you to do by yourselves. Now if you want to do them with somebody else, I would suggest that you would do it with somebody else that knows the right answers because if you copy it off somebody that doesn't know, that means you do not know either." The brothers act offended and respond in a very incredulous manner.

Your task is to discuss how you as the instructor could have better dealt with this situation. What other things could you have said to the brothers to get your point across without causing such an exasperating situation? For each of your suggestions, describe what you think the reactions from the brothers would be if they did not feel that they cheated.

Assuming you had, in a moment of frustration, actually said those things to the brothers, what things could you say to them in the next class as to diffuse the situation but still get across to the brothers the inappropriateness of copying or working together on quizzes or tests. Do you think it is reasonable that an instructor might get frustrated in class? About what things would you expect to get frustrated? Have you witnessed or heard about an instructor getting frustrated in class?

Variation 2

Two brothers, Tom and Bill, are in your precalculus class and they usually sit right behind each other during class. Tom is a stellar student and has been averaging A's on all of your assessments whereas Bill is pulling a C minus average. Lately, you've noticed that Bill changes seats on days of quizzes and tests so that he can sit next to his brother. You have the suspicion that Bill is cheating off his brother and possibly that Tom is aiding him. Unfortunately, you haven't been able to gather any definitive evidence. The only evidence that you have amassed is that Bill's answers on the in-class quizzes have dramatically improved whereas the grades of most students in the class have declined. In addition, the answers Bill has provided on several of the quizzes virtually are word for word those of Tom's.

When you pass out the last in-class quiz of the semester, you let your frustration show when you say to the brothers "These quizzes, I said it before, are for you to do by yourselves. I don't want to see the same exact responses out of the two of you. Make sure you explain the ideas using your own words and don't copy any answers. Because if you do, all you show me is that you cannot think for yourself." The brothers act incredulous and storm out of the classroom after slamming the completed quizzes down on your desk. (Same questions as Variation 1.)

Commentary on cheating

Faculty and students many times conflict over academic dishonesty issues since their views on this subject diverge widely (Paldy, 1996; Roth & McCabe, 1995). In general, students have engaged in activities such as sharing homework answers and they consider "collaborating" on large exams or major projects not to be violations of the academic honesty code. Specifically, academic dishonesty involves cheating (the use or attempt to use unauthorized materials, information, or study aids in any academic exercise), fabrication (falsification or invention of any information or citation in an academic exercise), facilitation of academic dishonesty (helping or attempting to help another to commit an act of academic dishonesty), or plagiarism (representing the words or ideas of another as one's own in any academic exer-

cise). Of these, cheating and plagiarism tend to be the most common complaints by college faculty (Daniels et al., 1996; Schneider, 1999).

The reason that students tend to engage in activities correspondent to academic dishonesty focus on a multitude of causes such moderate expectations for success, fear of failure, desire for a better grade, pressure from parents to do well, low levels of self-efficacy, being graded on the curve, being tested on material not emphasized in class, previous cheating activity, perceptions of the social norms encourage cheating, and anticipated benefits of successful cheating (Barnett & Dalton, 1981; Evans & Craig, 1990; Murdock, 1999; Whitley, 1998). However, in face of rampant academic dishonesty, many professors do little or nothing formally about the infractions since filing a formal complaint typically involves a laborious judicial process resulting in a punishment often unrelated to the offense (Schneider, 1999). Instead, professors tend to employ a variety of mechanisms to either squelch or diminish occurrences of academic dishonesty such as stern warnings during tests for roving eyes, walking between the students, making eye contact with them, enforcing removal of ball caps, switching from multiple-choice to essay-based exams, separating students, or using multiple versions of the same exam. Alternately, other instructors proactively address the problem by handing out lengthy warnings about cheating and conducting weekly discussions of academic integrity (Schneider, 1999).

According to Roth and McCabe (1995), discussions should reach beyond rhetoric and seek to negotiate a corporately held perspective of those policies. This is done to persuade students to change their context-specific behaviors even though it is difficult to alter beliefs. The goal of such discussions is to address not just the symptoms associated with cheating but rather suggest particular techniques to change the overall perception of what academic integrity is and how it should be implemented in the classroom. In essence, Roth and McCabe (1995) and Murdock (1999) suggested that the classroom culture needed to change by enhancing student value of the material being taught, instilling a desire to learn for learning's sake, and infusing a perception that the students have adequate control over ensuring a successful outcome. Revising a classroom to integrate such perspectives

involves (a) aligning assessment practices with instruction, (b) publicizing scoring rubrics which give students information on expectations and components of a good response, (c) utilizing multiple sources of evidence to allow students to display their mastery of a particular concept instead of "high stakes" assessments which increase pressure and anxiety, (d) integrating high-level questions which emphasize strategies over solutions (it is easier to copy answers than reasoning) and (e) shifting responsibility for assessment towards student self-evaluation thereby increasing the power and control the students have over their own learning. Implementing these revised perspectives in the classroom places the onus on students to effectively employ self-assessment recognizing what they need to learn what they do not know rather than cheating to cover up personal deficiencies.

Case 3: How do you deal with disruptive students?

Variation 1

Cassandra is a non-traditional student in your precalculus class. She is a good student who is an elementary school teacher who has come back to college to get a school administration degree. During class, you notice that she has a number of conversations with the classmates around her. Many times you observe this while you are in the middle of explaining things to the class. You notice that these conversations generally are about the content being discussed and are in response to questions her fellow classmates pose to her in deference to voicing them to the entire class. You are concerned about this since you desire your class to be open where students feel comfortable asking questions during your lectures and you are concerned about Cassandra's explanations since she is a B average student.

One day you notice Cassandra conversing with her classmates during your lecture. You can clearly see that she is not paying attention to your explanation of how to solve a complex problem while disturbing others around her by the conversations. Then after class, she comes up to you and asks you to ex-

plain how to solve the very same problem you had just explained to the class while she wasn't paying attention. You respond to her by saying "If you paid attention when I was doing this on the board instead of helping the people around you, you would understand." Cassandra becomes belligerent and makes the following comments:

- If you were a better teacher then I wouldn't have to spend my time explaining things to my fellow classmates.
- Your explanations go right over their heads and the examples you choose aren't that helpful.
- As a teacher, I can't help coming to the rescue of students.
- The one thing that frustrates me the most at this university is that very few of the professors outside of the education department have ever had a course on how to teach. It seems to be a crime to put people in front of students who do not have any experience in teaching and their only qualification is their subject-matter knowledge.

Your task is to discuss how you as the instructor could have better dealt with this situation and perhaps prevented it earlier. Take into account that you know very little about her background other than she is a teacher and her selected program of study. Try to determine the positive and negative things about the situation and how to take advantage of them.

If Cassandra was not a teacher and she had the same complaints, would you treat her the same way? What do you think about students who converse, read papers, or do not pay attention during your class? How do you control behavior that is disruptive to the learning atmosphere? What supports are available to help you control or eliminate annoying classroom behaviors?

Variation 2

Cheryl is a junior in your evening precalculus class where you extensively use group work. She is a good student who is attractive, vivacious and somewhat flirtatious with some of the guys in class. Typically, you never have problems with Cheryl because she is usually attentive, does her work, and actively participates with her group.

However, for the past several weeks on "bar

night," she has come to your class dressed to bar hop and go dancing. In fact, the way she dresses on "bar night" is a considerable change from the outfit of jeans and sweatshirts that she normally wears to class. On these nights, you've noticed the guys in her group paying less attention to their class project and more attention to Cheryl.

Tonight, as you were waiting for class to begin, you hear Cheryl in the hall telling her friends that she will meet them at a particular bar after class. As she walks in, she has a dress on that you find quite provocative in nature and virtually every male student's eyes are drawn to her. In fact all through the class, the males are preoccupied and clearly not paying full attention to your cooperative learning activity.

What, if anything, should you say to Cheryl to deal with this situation, which seems to be occurring regularly on bar night? What rights does Cheryl have? Do you have the right to try to curb the way she dresses in your class? What could be the potential political and legal ramifications of addressing Cheryl concerning her dress? If you can't intervene now, what additional things would have to happen for you to be able to intervene?

Variation 3

Antonio is an avid bicycle racer and every once in a while, since the weather has become warm, he comes to class wearing biking shorts and a jersey. It is apparent that his muscular build is quite attractive to some of the women in the class. In fact, last week when you had students go to the board to present their solutions to homework problems, you overheard a couple female students whispering comments about Antonio's physique when he wasn't even wearing cycling clothes. Some of their comments you thought were inappropriate and a couple of them you would consider borderline lewd.

It has been your practice that students in your class are required to present their solutions to homework problems. You have used your seating chart in order choose students in a predictable pattern and today is Antonio's turn. As you are about to call the students to the board, you notice that Antonio is once again wearing bicycling shorts and a jersey that shows off his muscles.

What, if anything, should you do in this situation? Should you call on Antonio to present his solutions in his present attire? Is it appropriate for you to take him aside after class and talk to him about how he has been dressing lately and how that could be a distraction to some of the members of the class? What rights does Antonio have? Do you have the right to try to curve the way he dresses in your class? What would be the potential political and legal ramifications of addressing Antonio concerning his dress? If you can't intervene now, what additional things would have to happen for you to be able to intervene?

Variation 4

Paul is a very intelligent student in your Pre-calculus Class in his first semester at the University. Sometimes he acts in ways that makes the instructor feel uncomfortable since it seems that Paul's (fill-in) beliefs is not compatible with the instructor's religious beliefs. The instructor does not agree with Paul's perspectives and as a result, the instructor tried to avoid conversations beyond those appropriate for class.

One day, Paul walks into class sporting a shirt advertising his own (fill-in) beliefs. Upon viewing the shirt, the instructor is visibly shaken and appears to be repulsed by the student's overt display of a perspective the instructor feels is, according to his religious beliefs, sinful. As the instructor teaches class, it is noticeable that he/she does not make eye contact with Paul even though usually Paul will be called upon when he raises his hand in class. Later, Paul comes to the instructor's office and aggressively makes the following comments to the instructor:

- If I weren't (fill-in), you wouldn't treat me this way. Why is it only after I wear this shirt that you stopped looking at me or allowing me to answer questions?
- What do my (fill-in) beliefs have to do with my performance in this class?
I am a good student and have always gotten good grades, what is your problem?
How do I know that I will get the same considerations as the other students with respect to my final grade in this class given the way that you just acted towards me?

Your task is to discuss how the instructor of the course should deal with this situation. Take into account the potential explosive impact of the situation as well as the political, legal, and educational implications of the instructor's actions. Discuss what comments the instructor should make to address the situation and how Paul may perceive them. Should the instructor inform other people about this situation? If so, who should they be? If not, why not?

Commentary on disruptive students

According to Amada (1994), there is an increasing trend at the college level for greater numbers of disruptive students in the classroom. Disruptive acts include: (a) having side conversations during class, (b) sleeping or doing other non-related work, (c) exhibiting a lack of self-discipline, (d) displaying self-destructive behaviors, (e) acting in an overtly harassing manner, and (6) wearing offensive dress. Each of these detracts from the learning environment with some them adversely affecting the well being of participants and potentially lead to legal ramifications. Consequently, teachers need definitive coping strategies for each of the disruptive actions students display in the classroom. Nilson (1998) stated, "Even minor disruptions can mar the atmosphere, break concentration, and really get under your skin. Yet, no matter what, you are not allowed to lose your temper" (p. 43). Responding to such disruptive actions requires the teacher to recognize the need for tact and according to Kilmer (1998) sometimes humor. Nilson (1998) also touts the need for the instructor to remain calm since losing one's temper could escalate the situation leading to a loss of sympathy and support from the other students. Keeping composure does not mean that one should accept or tolerate the abuse, rather particular measures should be employed in response.

Perhaps the first and foremost deterrent is a well-defined code of student conduct complete with described procedures for handling disruptions (Amada, 1992). This code can be transmitted either verbally during the first class meeting or through the syllabus. Sorcinelli (2002) advocates that the instructor, in a positive manner, should explicitly describe to the class both appropriate and inappropriate behavior during class. These rules can be delineated as

part of the syllabus and then explained by the instructor during the first class meeting. In doing so, the students have access to a classroom behavior contract which makes expectations clear.

So, what if a student does not follow the rules of classroom conduct? According to Mishra (1992), the first tactic would be for the instructor to engage the disruptive student in a discussion about the behavior in a one-on-one setting. If this discussion does not help curb the disruptive behavior, it is suggested that the teacher involve non-disruptive students in modifying the conduct of disruptive ones. Only as a last resort should the teacher bring in a supervisor to deal with a student who has shown repeated behavioral problems (Mishra, 1992). In addition, for instances of psychiatrically related disciplinary problems such as harassment, self-destructive acts, assaults, and vandalism, Amada (1994) suggests involving a college's mental health program in providing help to the disruptive student and advocates the potential use of mandatory psychotherapy as an alternative to discipline.

In the case of disruptive dress, one must remember that under the First Amendment, the right to free speech is vastly protected but "public educational institutions can abridge a student's speech or dress in the following situations:

1. If the student's speech or dress demonstrably and adversely affects the health and safety of other members of the college community and;
2. If the student's speech demonstrably leads to a breach of the peace or seriously disrupts the educational process of the college" (Amada, 1994, p. 78).

As a result, the disruptive speech or dress must have potential to incite a circumstance that simultaneously results in harm to those involved and causes a serious disruption of the educational process. However, if a fellow student brings up charges of harassment from another student's speech or dress then the situation becomes additionally problematic since it is unclear whose legal rights prevail. Perhaps the best remedy to such a situation, according to Amada (1994), is to seek legal advice from the college attorney and spend time with the two disputants searching for a reasonable compromise with the aid of students from the class or friends of the disputants acting as mediators.

Case 4: How do you deal with failing students?

Variation 1

Carl is a student in your precalculus class. Up to this point, he has struggled all semester with the course material and you know that he has not passed this course on three other occasions. He has been trying to do the homework but has not done well on the quizzes or tests. You've met with him, almost weekly during office hours, trying to help him understand the material and do better on the quizzes and tests. However even with your best efforts, if you were to project his final grade, it would be an F overall given his performance on the quizzes and tests.

You like Carl because he is a nice student and has been working hard even though it has been a struggle. Because of this, you are pulling for the opportunity to write a C on his grade card. However at the end of today's class, Carl walked up to you, handed in a virtually blank quiz, and stated to you "Well teach, I have been trying but as this material gets more difficult, the less I can do. I'm just not sure if I am cut out for this math crap. It just seems hopeless and I am close to the point that I really do not care. Maybe I'm just not cut out for college or anything ... " With that, his voice trails off and he starts to walk out of the room.

How should you as the instructor respond to Carl's statement? Is Carl's statement a plea for more help or one of basically telling you that he is giving up? What are your immediate concerns for Carl? How about long term concerns? Are there any resources available to Carl that would provide support to help him overcome his struggles with mathematics? What suggestions could you make to Carl to either help him come to grips with his potential failing of the course for the fourth time or excite him to redouble his efforts? What are your opinions of the use of extra credit as a part of the grading scheme?

What do you think about a student that has failed a class multiple times? Is he to blame for any of the failure and why? Are you to blame for any of the failure and why? Whose fault is this failure, the student's or yours?

Variation 2

Allison is a student in your Precalculus class and is in her last semester at the University. She is a bubbly student and a broadcaster on the university's news programming but seems to be lost during class. She comes to you early in the semester telling you "I am really scared about your class. I tried to take this course when I was a freshman and sophomore but either withdrew or failed the course four times. I'm in the last semester of college and I have to pass this course in order to graduate. I've never passed a math class out right in high school but my teachers kept allowing me to pass on to the next class because I would do extra projects to make up points and pull my grades up. I would type letters, organize closets, clean or whatever the teacher would want. I was good in school carrying an A average in everything except math. I just do not have the brain for it. Just thought you should know what you are up against."

After nearly two thirds of the semester has gone by, Allison comes into your office all excited. She says to you "I was just offered a great job in my field. All I need to do is pass this course in order to graduate. I have enough credits but I need to pass this course (in a pleading voice). Is there anything that I can do? I have a 3.2 GPA now and promise you that I'll never have to use algebra or trigonometry in my chosen profession of broadcasting. Is there any additional work that I can do to bring up my grade?" You had just looked over your classes grades that morning and noticed that Allison was carrying a D minus average on tests but she had done every homework and was in class everyday attentive and trying to make sense of the material. Unfortunately, on her tests and quizzes, it is clear that she was getting the concepts mixed up and as a result not scoring well. In addition, you have noticed a downward trend that as the class has gone into more complex concepts, her grades are showing signs of further tailing off.

Your task is to discuss how the instructor of the course should deal with this situation. Should the potential impact on her career in broadcasting be taken into account or is her performance in the mathematics class the only factor that should have bearing? Discuss what you as the instructor could have told Allison when she first came and spoke to you early in the semester. Discuss what things you need

to say now with only a third of the semester left. What are your opinions of the use of extra credit or make-up work as a part of the grading scheme? What do you think of students who have failed a course multiple times?

Commentary on failing students

Student failure in remedial and developmental mathematics courses, according to O'Rourke (1999), typically results from a lack of motivation, self-esteem, or maturity. However, these factors are only a few from the broad range of potential reasons. Student failure can also be attributed to: (a) mathematical anxiety, (b) weak or inappropriate curricula, (c) ineffective instruction, (d) disengaging classroom discourse, (e) poor student self-concept, (f) unsuccessful adjustment to school culture, (g) prejudice, (h) lack of commitment to school, (i) high absenteeism, (j) mismatched educational goals, (k) over commitment to extracurricular activities, (l) mismatched styles of learning and teaching, (m) reading and vocabulary deficiencies, (n) deficiencies in critical thinking skills, and (o) learning disabilities (Arem, 1993; Goodwin, 2000; Somers, 1988; Wilder, 1993). No matter what the cause, when students perceive that they potentially may fail a course, pleadings for extra-credit and make-up work begin to take on heightened urgency. In reaction, the instructor should have established policies published as part of the syllabus (Nilson, 1998). Sorccinelli (2002) suggests that policies concerning missed exams, make-up exams, late homework, writing assignments, written university-sanctioned excuses, etc. should be described both in writing and orally at the beginning of the semester. These policies should be reiterated throughout the term in order to avoid students seeking allowances that would permit them to enhance their overall grade.

If, however, an instructor seeks to be flexible concerning enforcement of the policies, then one should expect students to provide a variety of "good excuses" for missed deadlines. In such a case, the instructor must assess each extension request or request for a make-up on a student-by-student basis to discern valid from fabricated cases. Nilson (1998) finally suggested permitting one opportunity for an extension or make-up and all other incidents would

be met with regular penalties. In addition, Rishel (1999) suggested informing the students that the make-up would be harder than the original and therefore they should take this into consideration. In doing so, you permit some level of accommodation but do not allow the habitual requests for extensions or make-ups.

Implementation and GTA reactions to the case stories

When implementing these case stories early on in the fall semester of my "Professional Aspects of Teaching" seminar for first year GTAs (a three-credit course consisting of two, hour-long classroom contacts and required attendance at departmental colloquia), the GTAs were split into small groups of two to four and each group received a variation of a particular case story. Groups were given about 20-30 minutes to read and discuss their variation of the case story, answer the questions, determine an appropriate course of action, and appoint a spokesperson. During this time, lively discussions of the ways the characters in the scenario handled the situation occurred with students eager to interject their perspectives on proper ways to handle the problems. The class then reassembled with the spokesperson reading his or her version of the case story and delineating the group's recommended actions prior to opening class discussion. Within group and across group discussions generally focused on coping strategies that the GTAs had either witnessed or heard about being implemented by their prior teachers. In doing so, the resultant discussions cause the GTAs to contemplate alternatives to their proposed coping mechanisms. After all of the groups discussed their reactions to the case story, various possible other solutions or perspectives drawn from the literature, not previously identified by the GTAs, were shared as other possible means of addressing the situation.

The situations being discussed can insight arguments between the GTAs especially if some GTAs enjoy debate and argumentation or feel passionate about how to handle a situation. As a consequence, a GTA trainer must be prepared to intervene and utilize techniques of conflict resolution if GTAs digress beyond discussion and approach heated argumenta-

tion. This does not generally occur but a trainer should be ready to step in and diffuse the situation. In addition, the trainer should become adept at listening to the GTAs, asking questions about ideas they have posed, playing "devil's advocate," and even orchestrating a role-playing exercise. It is helpful for the trainer to partition the class and have different groups discuss variations of the same story. When the students reconvene the different groups can share their particular situation and the coping mechanisms they discussed. These may be different for the different variations so the trainer must be prepared to help the GTAs identify the differences between scenarios and how their particular insights may or may not be appropriate across the various variations.

To gain a sense of how the activity of exploring the case stories impacted the GTAs classroom experiences, I had my GTAs write about their reactions to the case stories after they completed a full semester of teaching. In doing so, the GTAs reflected their feelings they had when reading the case stories for the first time and how they impacted future classroom interactions. Most of the GTAs felt the case stories to be entertaining, to be relevant, and to have caused them to think about problematic situations prior to their encountering them. For instance, comments similar to "I think the case stories are a good way to start discussions about teaching situations. I thought they were very interesting", "Fortunately, I did not [face any similar situations], but now I at least have an idea of what to look out for" and "Some of the cases will take a lot [sic] of thought to figure out an appropriate way to approach or solve the problem" were provided. The GTAs saw the case stories as warnings as to possible things that might happen to them.

The GTAs also commented how certain case stories were more common in their classes where others just made them aware of potential problematic situations. One GTA stated, "I think the stories are realistic. We all have our stories about students by now that may seem unrealistic but they are so true! I felt very pressured to give a student a passing grade when he really did not earn it. He said he might get kicked out of the University if he failed my class. He offered to buy me ice cream or wash my car for a good grade. He was desperate. He was failing the tests. I stuck to my grade guidelines and gave him a

D." Another GTA said "To my knowledge, cases 1 and 2 seem to be very common.... I've met a case 2 situation in my class... I asked them, and they said they did the homework together, but never copied it. After that, the situation never happened." A third GTA commented felt that case 3 variation 1 to be most compelling. In fact, the GTA stated, "I was faced with a similar situation last semester, but a little worse! What I did to handle the problem is that I reported the student and the problem to my advisor." Being able to discuss such problematic situations before actually encountering them in the classroom gave the GTAs the ability to think about situations before they faced them, share ideas on how to handle them, and decide upon appropriate strategies for dealing with them.

One GTA posed the following useful suggestion for implementation: "I think that those with similar experiences can share what they have learned from the situations with others. It may also help others to try and prevent some of the difficult situations from happening". In essence when discussing these situations early in the semester, it may be helpful to bring experienced GTAs into the classroom and have them serve as facilitators for the small group discussions. From this and the above comments, one can see that my GTAs recognized the important components of examining such realistic problematic situations prior to actually facing them in the classroom. As one GTA said "It is hard to tell or use a formula to deal with these kinds of problems". By having the GTAs place themselves, even for a little time, into a situation and contemplate how they might handle it, one has the opportunity to help them build appropriate coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

The Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University (1988) called for regular discussions of classroom problems. Additionally, Shannon, Twale, and Moore (1998) stated:

TA training should make further use of the case-based instruction, in which realistic cases are presented and possible solutions are discussed by students— College teaching situations can be captured in the form of written or video cases and discussed

as part of TA training while experienced college faculty serve as facilitators in the delivery and discussion of these cases, affording TAs opportunities to identify problems and address situations that they will later encounter in their classrooms (pp. 458).

Consequently, a clear need is seen for engaging beginning GTAs in discussions of classroom issues surrounding decorum, grading, resolving conflicts, implementing curricula and technologies, etc.

One way to accomplish this is to integrate case stories into the training curriculum. Case stories are useful for practitioners-in-training involved in staff development because they present situations likely to be encountered by those practitioners. In particular, Patterson and Fleet (1996) identify that within teacher education programs, stories of professional practice are a powerful tool for developing understanding and critical thinking. The stories also promote active participation. Those involved in the analysis of a case story have the opportunity to engage with the story rather than merely learning vicariously. The story format initiates a need for anticipatory sense-making, helping to bridge the gap between action and thought. As a consequence, the use of case-based activities in professional development permits a facilitator to emphasize problem-solving and active student participation while using real-life situations which the participants may likely encounter in the near future. This provides relevance and timeliness to class discussions.

The particular case stories presented in this paper were designed to engage the GTAs in discussions of some of the pertinent issues they would be facing. Instead of presenting simple answers, the case stories sought to raise consciousness concerning the potential dilemmas that can arise in the classroom. In doing so, they were designed to engender reflective thinking concerning issues commonly experienced in a semester of classroom teaching. Teachers generally, at an abstract level, tend to philosophize about how they would handle particular problems; however when they experience those problems in an actual classroom, many times the philosophy does not suggest a particularly effective course of action. These cases and their variations help students contemplate the interaction of their abstract philosophical positions with a specific reality faced by teach-

ers. As a result, the cases result in enlivening the discussion, focusing on particular coping mechanisms, and illustrating the difficulties inherent to classroom dilemmas.

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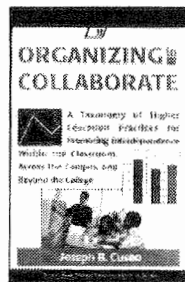
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