

Learning to teach in higher education: Graduate student teachers becoming, being, and forthcoming

Learning how to teach in higher education begins when graduate students first take on teaching responsibilities. It has been often suggested that a way to improve university teaching is to concentrate on developing graduate students' teaching skills (Austin, 2002; Benassi & Buskist, 2012; Fagen & Suedkamp Wells, 2004; Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, Sims, Denecke, & PFF participants, 2003; Golde & Dore, 2004; Marincovich et al., 1998; Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff, & Sprague, 1991; Wulff et al., 2004). However, learning to teach at the post-secondary level is primarily a self-directed learning process that occurs while teaching (Korpan, 2020; Smith, 2017).

As graduate students take on a teaching role (whether as a teaching assistant (TA) or as the instructor of record) and begin the process of **becoming** a teacher in higher education, they bring their experience of being a student. Due to this experience, graduate students hold robust beliefs and dispositions related to teaching and learning. However, their beliefs and dispositions are narrowly focused and based on what worked for them as a student. Further, since graduate students are teaching for the first time and have never been in a 'teaching' role, they default to approaching their work from a student subject position.

Taking on a new role is a difficult transition. Therefore, graduate students need support to recognize that being in a teaching role is completely different from a learning role. This is extremely important because as a TA or instructor, they typically have a lot of autonomy and make many teaching judgements. These judgements can be very detrimental to students' learning if graduate students are not given the support they need through affordances, such as instruction about teaching and ongoing mentorship.

As graduate students are **being** teachers, they control their self-directed learning process as they make decisions on-the-fly. This makes the affordances provided for them important since they determine whether graduate students take an expansive or restrictive approach to learning how to teach. Even if a graduate student is highly motivated to learn how to teach, but they are not provided with instruction, feedback, and ongoing mentorship and support, they will have a restrictive (limited or surface) learning experience. But, if given ample instruction, feedback, and mentorship, they will have an expansive (deeper) learning experience that leads to knowledge development about teaching in higher education.

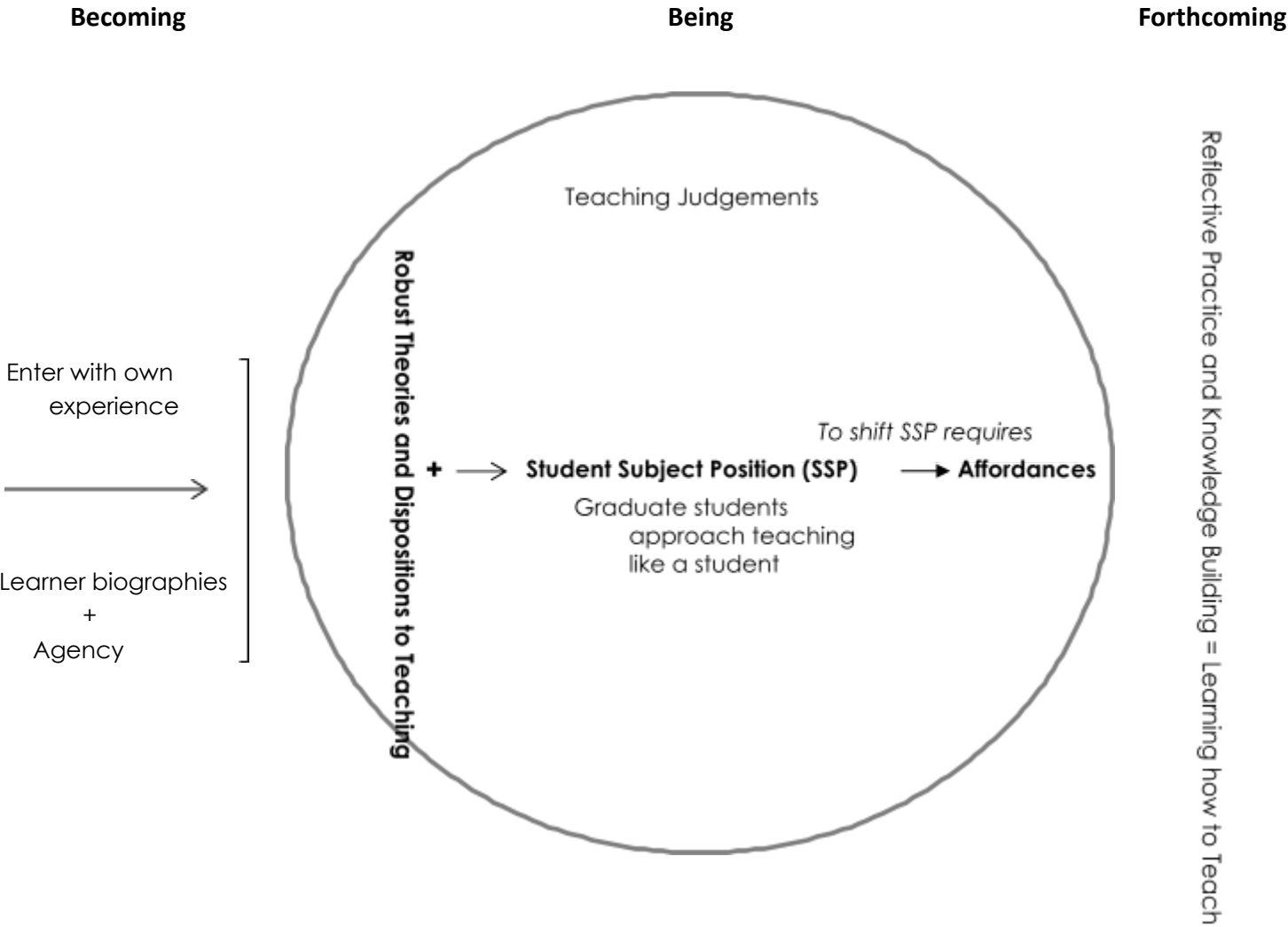
To confirm knowledge development and make explicit what has been learned, graduate students need guidance on how to reflect on their learning so that they can use that knowledge in **forthcoming** teaching. In general, graduate students default to a discretionary reflective practice – only reflecting on critical incidents, which makes development of knowledge about teaching and student learning relegated to chance.

To best support undergraduate students' learning, graduate students need to be supported throughout their whole learning process, as they are becoming, being, and forthcoming. This focus on learning in the workplace illuminates the need for a deep learning approach to learning about teaching and student learning that needs to begin with graduate students' first appointment as a TA or instructor. Dall'Alba and Sandberg (2010) argue it is not simply a matter of transfer of knowledge and skill but a deep understanding of practice that is required for learning how to teach with guided reflection and feedback. In addition, this deep learning approach needs to be encased in an expansive learning environment that

provides opportunities for continuous support through various forms of mentorship, instruction, and development of reflective practice.

Figure 1 displays the learning process graduate students go through in their first experience teaching in higher education.

Figure 1: The graduate student learning process for teaching in higher education



References cited

- Austin, A. E. (2002). Preparing the next generation of faculty: Graduate school as socialization to the academic career. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 73(1), 94-122. doi:10.1353/jhe.2002.0001
- Benassi, V. A., & Buskist, W. (2012). Preparing the new professoriate to teach. In V. A. Benassi and W. Buskist (Eds.), *Effective college and university teaching: Strategies and tactics for the new professoriate* (pp. 1-8). Thousand Oak, CA: SAGE.
- Dall'Alba, G., & Sandberg, J. (2010). Learning through and about practice: A lifeworld perspective. In S. Billett (Ed.), *Learning through practice: Models, traditions, orientations and approaches* (pp. 104-119). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.
- Fagen, A. P., & Suedkamp Wells, K. M. (2004). The 2000 national doctoral program survey: An on-line study of students' voices. In A. E. Austin & D. H. Wulff (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty* (pp. 74-89). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.
- Gaff, J., Pruitt-Logan, A., Sims, L. Denecke, D., & PFF participants. (2003). *Preparing future faculty in the humanities and social sciences: A guide for change*. Washington, D.C.: CGS.
- Golde, C. M., & Dore, T. M. (2001). *At cross purposes: What the experiences of today's doctoral students reveal about doctoral education*. Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts.
- Korpan, C. (2020). *Learning to teach: Teaching assistants' (TAs') learning in the workplace*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation) Victoria, BC: University of Victoria.
- Marincovich, M., Prostko, J., & Stout, F. (Eds.). (1998). *The professional development of graduate teaching assistants*. Bolton, MA: Anker.
- Nyquist, J. D., Abbott, R. D., Wulff, D. H., & Sprague, J. (1991). *Preparing the professoriate of tomorrow to teaching: Selected readings in TA training*. Dubuque,

IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Smith, G. (2017). Where do faculty experience professional learning and development as teachers? Proceedings from POD '17: Professional and Organizational Development Network in Higher Education Conference. Montreal, QC: POD.

Wulff, D. H., Austin, A. E., Nyquist, J. D., & Sprague, J. (2004). The development of graduate students as teaching scholars: A four-year longitudinal study. In D. H. Wulff & A. E. Austin (Eds.), *Paths to the professoriate: Strategies for enriching the preparation of future faculty* (pp. 46-73). San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.