

## Surviving to Thriving: Supporting Graduate Student Instructors and Teaching Assistants During the Transition to Online Teaching

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### ABSTRACT

Though we all survived the rapid transition to emergency remote instruction in the spring, many of us were so caught up in managing our own stressful transitions that our role in mentoring and guiding our graduate student instructors and teaching assistants became subject to neglect. This must change going forward. Thinking the crisis has passed or will do so by the end of the calendar year does not recognize the reality of the situation facing Classics. We must invest more time in helping our instructors manage their own instructional design challenges. Undergraduates were forgiving in the spring, but there are already signs expectations will be heightened for the fall and beyond. A discipline as reliant on enrolment for its continued survival as Classics cannot afford complacency at this critical juncture particularly when graduate students teach so many undergraduate courses (ca. 25% of all undergraduate students in Classics at Florida State University) and the application of thin-slicing (first impressions) to retention is clear. This reflective essay draws on my experience as the Supervisor of Teaching Assistants in the Department of Classics at Florida State University to provide guidance for faculty members in supporting graduate student instructors during this crisis.

In surviving the rapid transition to emergency remote instruction this past spring, faculty expended intense physical and mental energy to stay afloat in their own courses. For those at institutions with graduate programs, this made it difficult to provide consistent support and mentorship to graduate student instructors and teaching assistants. This must change going forward.<sup>1</sup> Thinking the crisis has passed or will do so by the end of the calendar year does not recognize the reality of the situation facing higher education in general or Classics in particular. Undergraduates were at least understanding (though disappointed) in the spring because of the situation we collectively found ourselves in, but there are clear indications that the *status quo* will not be enough to satisfy student expectations in the fall and beyond.<sup>2</sup> Many of us did have the entire summer to think about how best to adapt and

1 Johnson and Huwe, 2012, 46-47 explored the negative effects of 'Mentor Relationship Incompetence' and 'Mentor Neglect' on graduate students.

2 Means & Neisler 2020 effectively demonstrated the dramatic dip in student satisfaction after remote instruction began in the spring. It is also telling that many universities, justifiably, did not automatically count teaching evaluations from Spring and Summer 2020. For one example, see Florida State University's statement <https://news.fsu.edu/announcements/covid-19/2020/05/22/up->

deliver our courses for the fall, so it is reasonable for students to expect some improvement. In the face of this challenge, a discipline as reliant on enrolment for its continued survival as Classics cannot be complacent and must instead be proactive. This action should not be directed only at ourselves, but also at our graduate student instructors who teach so many undergraduate courses at R1s (ca. 25% of all undergraduate students in Classics at Florida State University in a given semester) and now face significant challenges in performing their critical duties. These duties include teaching the majority of introductory courses. To borrow a term from social psychology, the thin-slicing taking place in these courses factors heavily in future enrollment, which in turn determines the health of a department.<sup>3</sup> By helping our graduate students manage their own instructional design challenges and deliver high-impact educational experiences in the midst of a pandemic, we are better serving our undergraduates, graduate students, departments, universities, and our discipline. This paper draws on my experience as the Supervisor of Teaching Assistants in the Department of Classics at Florida State University to provide guidance for faculty members in supporting graduate student instructors and teaching assistants during this pandemic.

### **Defining the Challenges**

We cannot effectively provide support for our instructors without identifying the challenges they face. As students themselves, many graduate student instructors encounter the same challenges as our undergraduates. As instructors they must contend with many of the same pressures as faculty. In many cases, this ambiguity (are they students or are they staff?) has exacerbated the issue. In developing solutions to the challenges facing graduate student instructors, we must recognize the two major online teaching stressors: time and technology.

Time is the well-known enemy of the academic, but the pandemic has added additional demands on instructor time. Many graduate students have been forced to find second jobs at home in a stagnant economy, take care of sick relatives or younger siblings, and continue their own research, all while teaching remotely.<sup>4</sup> These factors also affect the mental health of graduate students which can lead to feelings of helplessness and a lack of motivation.<sup>5</sup> This is in addition to overpreparation being a systemic problem among

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[date-adjustments-to-faculty-evaluations-due-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/](#)

3 For more on thin-slicing see Ambady 2010.

4 For some excellent case studies and interviews see Zahneis 2020.

5 Evans *et al* 2018 provides a useful summary of current research on graduate student mental

early-career instructors, which compounds the issue. Students also need time to sit down and focus. Graduate students whose campuses are closed in the Fall have been deprived of a dedicated space to engage in sustained concentration on their work. Offices, the library, or even their apartments are not always accessible. We have all seen students trying to participate in a Zoom session at their kitchen table while someone makes lunch behind them. It would be naïve to imagine many of our graduate students are not in those same circumstances, so our priority must be in helping graduate students maximize the time they have available and allow them to match their duties to their personal schedules.

The topic of virtual meetings brings us to our second limiting factor, technology. Being away from campus means that many students no longer have access to reliable internet or university provided computers. Even under supposedly ideal conditions, live classes and meetings may be derailed due to unstable internet connections. Though some universities will provide technology to their student instructors to varying degrees (purchasing microphones, webcams, designating a recording space in the department, etc.), not all will, especially those working away from campus. Instructors may need to share technology with siblings, parents, and other relatives who are studying and working from home. Recognizing this reality means that we should focus on allowing students to work with the resources they have.

So what actions can we take as faculty members that account for the two variables above and help our graduate students thrive as educators? The answer to this question is largely dependent on the institution and its plans for negotiating the wider challenges caused by this pandemic. However, there are some basic principles and tools we are developing and implementing in Classics at Florida State University which those at other institutions might find useful starting points in supporting their own graduate instructors. It is important to remember that all of these action items and strategies are interrelated, but for the sake of organization and clarity, we will proceed with one item at a time.

### **Course Format: Bringing Balance to the Course**

The Department of Classics at Florida State University is teaching remotely in Fall 2020, so this necessitated some decisions on how exactly to run each course in a way which maintains rigor while allowing some flexibility. Rather than sending down an edict from on high, we gave graduate student instructors the option to conduct their classes health.

asynchronously, synchronously, or as a combination of the two. This allowed them to choose a format which best fit their personal circumstances in regard to both time and technology, but curricular needs did still play a role in these decisions. Those teaching language courses understandably opted for synchronous learning as so much of language teaching relies on consistent, immediate, real-time interaction between the student, their peers, and the instructor. This may seem problematic if we are attempting to respect the guardrails of time and technology listed above, but the burden of crafting an effective asynchronous, online language course was too much to responsibly ask of our graduate students. Additionally, the decision to teach language courses synchronously was crucially made early in the summer so that both students and instructors were aware of the requirements imposed by the format. This early notification is critical in allowing both students and instructors to make informed decisions. Even though language courses are all synchronous, only a small percentage of the total undergraduates in Classics are enrolled in language courses in a given semester, so the majority of instructors have significantly more flexibility in how to structure their courses.

Only two graduate student instructors have opted for the completely asynchronous approach to the semester, but the fact that they had a choice to begin with allowed them to do what they felt was best for their own schedules and wellbeing. Of the rest, many are experimenting with a hybrid option (not to be confused with HyFlex) which incorporates a blend of synchronous and asynchronous learning. Many were attracted to this option because it allowed for flexibility for all involved while still providing some degree of continuity from the in-person classroom experience. The asynchronous portions mitigate the constraints of both time and technology. Students and instructors do not have to be in the same place at the same time, allowing students to watch lectures and participate in the course on their own schedule and instructors to pre-record content when they have time and resources. The synchronous sessions enable interpersonal connections that are so important in building a community of learners. This creates at least some semblance of a traditional classroom, which is, after all, how these courses were meant to be delivered.

In terms of helping graduate students develop an exact model for this unfamiliar hybrid format, there are a few mechanisms in place at Florida State University. First, as the TA Supervisor, I require graduate student instructors to submit their syllabi for review well in advance of classes starting. This allows us to essentially troubleshoot any potential issues together and refine both the format and content of each course. If your institution

does not have a faculty member designated as the TA Supervisor, it would be well worth considering doing so even if it is only for the duration of the current pandemic given the amount of support that graduate student instructors will need as they face challenges on both professional and personal fronts.

Second, I taught two courses over the summer which, allowed me to experiment with a hybrid structure that I then encouraged (but did not require) the graduate students to use. This structure, for a course which meets three times a week, was adapted from the tutorial model at my alma mater, the University of St Andrews. The basic organizing principle divides all sessions into two categories, content delivery (lecture) and critical engagement (tutorial/discussion). The asynchronous sections serve as content delivery as students are asked to watch lecture videos (narrated PowerPoints to keep the file size down while still providing a personal element) and answer discussion posts relating to the readings and lectures. These lectures and discussion posts provide the context necessary for the weekly synchronous meeting on Fridays. Synchronous sessions are then a deep dive into the topic and associated primary material. So, for example, if we were spending a week on Julius Caesar, students would watch lectures on the Gallic and Civil Wars as well as some clips from HBO's extremely well-cast *Rome*, read selections from Caesar, and answer questions about how Caesar portrays himself and his opponents, all asynchronously. Students would then be prepared for a synchronous discussion session where we debate where on the spectrum between history and propaganda Caesar's works should be placed and how Caesar himself should be viewed in the modern world. This type of structure balances flexibility and rigor while breaking the semester down, for both the student and the instructor, into repeatable, purposeful, and focused units.

### **Workshops**

In addition to providing students with options regarding the structure of their course, we also want to focus on providing training throughout the semester for instructors as they encounter new challenges and are forced to adapt to changing circumstances. This is especially true if students are forced to switch to remote teaching during the semester after starting off in person. Our department replaced the usual pre-semester meeting between the instructors and the TA Supervisor with a workshop on online teaching. This workshop will

cover some of the basics and offer discipline-specific activities that are suited for online learning while still working toward the objectives of each course we offer. For example, many of our introductory courses require student presentations as part of the assessment due to meeting certain Liberal Studies requirements, so one thing this workshop will address is how to facilitate those presentations. We also want to focus on inclusivity in our online teaching, so this workshop, in combination with the syllabus review mentioned above, will address how to make courses and content accessible to the widest possible audience through technology. This can be as simple as breaking lectures up into fifteen-minute increments and ensuring that videos automatically adjust for screen size since we know some students will be watching lecture videos and participating in class via their phones.

Workshops can also take advantage of the wider resources offered by the university, and at Florida State University we have the Center for the Advancement of Teaching as well as the Program for Instructional Excellence which offer their own workshops. Most universities with graduate programs will have some kind of teaching center or its equivalent, so I would encourage any faculty supervising graduate student instructors to be aware of and advertise workshops that may be useful. These centers also frequently organize virtual coffee hours that will allow graduate students to interact with peers in other departments and share online teaching strategies and ideas. This combination of ‘in-house’ workshopping and the utilization of university-wide resources will ensure that graduate student instructors have diverse sources of support as they make the transition to online teaching.

### **Sharing Resources: Creating a Teaching Community**

To focus on the positive for a moment, the current pandemic provides immense impetus for pedagogical collaboration between all who teach Classics, both graduate students and faculty. The first step in building this community remotely is to decide on a venue for sharing these resources and having these conversations. Florida State University uses Canvas as its LMS, and so we developed a Canvas Org site which allows us to invite all graduate students to participate while still providing supervision. Once the forum is established, we must curate what is included in the site. We started by posting sample syllabi, readings, and question banks for each course taught by the graduate student instructors. Discussion forums were also established for each course allowing instructors

to interact and share and resources for teaching specific topics. Many graduate instructors were already doing this in small groups, but it is important to guarantee equity in access and having this centralized forum is a simple way to achieve that. This site also serves as a great way to keep students up to date on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) particularly as it relates to online teaching, so one module is dedicated to posting articles and links to eBooks detailing the latest scholarship on online learning. In order to provide some content that was geared specifically toward teaching at Florida State University, we made a few short 'how-to' videos on aspects of utilizing Canvas like how to moderate online exams to ensure that students who need accommodation get the time and resources they require. One of the most exciting aspects of a forum like this is that it has applications beyond just the transition to online, and we have already integrated sections on decolonizing syllabi and advice on teaching difficult topics like slavery, rape, and pederasty. If your department chooses to develop such a site, it is important to do so with the input of the graduate students. The last point, on decolonizing syllabi, was the result of graduate students seeing the potential of this site as a tool to not only help them with the practical issues of instruction, but to work toward making Classics a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive discipline and they specifically asked that this section be included, which leads us to our final point.

### **Communication**

The fluid, often unpredictable nature of working and teaching during a pandemic will necessitate a significant increase in the communication between faculty and students, particularly those teaching for the first time this semester. Continually updating the Canvas site mentioned above is a good way to keep graduate students informed, but communication at its core is really about keeping graduate student instructors healthy. Graduate students will be under immense levels of stress, and it is on us as faculty members to make sure that their hard work is recognized and that graduate students feel supported and valued throughout this pandemic. Nearly all faculty can improve in this area, and all it takes is a little introspection. It may sound extremely simple, but just sending an email to a graduate student to check in and see how they are doing can make a huge difference. It really is about the little things, like answering graduate student emails in a timely manner to demonstrate that we see them as people and value them as peers.

## Conclusions

Most of us spend our entire careers trying to provide students new perspective on the ancient world, but in this historic, unprecedented moment, we as faculty must gain our own new perspectives. We need to take a moment and put ourselves back in graduate school and think about how we would be reacting to the current situation as students. Most of us would agree that we would be under intense stress and would be looking toward our faculty supervisors and mentors to help us cope with these adverse circumstances. It is our job now to be the mentors we would want to have and support our graduate students by providing them with flexibility in how they structure their course. These workshops help them build practical skills for online teaching, a centralized forum where resources and ideas can be shared between everyone in the department and efficient, meaningful communication that reminds them that they are valued members of the department, the university, and the discipline. We spend so much ink and time at conferences talking about how we might ‘save’ and grow the field of Classics, and now as higher education faces one of its greatest challenges in a century, we are presented with an opportunity to do just that. In taking these steps to support our graduate instructors, we improve the quality of education for our undergraduates, leading to increased enrollment and retention, literally growing the field and solidifying the place of Classics within the university. In helping our graduate student instructors go from surviving to thriving in this new era, we bring our discipline to the same state. If you took the time to read this paper, then you are already motivated to be a positive mentor, but I want to ask one more thing of you. Right now, open your email. Message a graduate student instructor just to ask how they are doing.



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