Title: Mentoring Graduate Students in the Teaching of Introductory Courses

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Summary: Following a departmental curriculum review, a professor mentors graduate teaching assistants through issues of course design and student assessment in order to align independent introductory sections while continuing to allow measures of GTA autonomy.

Background

In Fall 2007, the American Studies department reviewed the undergraduate major curriculum with the goal of articulating the purposes, content, coherence, and sequence of the courses. An internal report on faculty and graduate student ideas and practices suggested that GTAs teaching the introductory courses needed more faculty guidance and support, particularly for the design and teaching of AMS 100: Introduction to American Studies. Some GTAs serve as discussion leaders in AMS 110: American Identities, providing instruction in small classes for a faculty-designed course, and work under the supervision of a faculty member or lecturer. Other GTAs design and teach AMS 100: Introduction to American Studies as independent instructors assigned to individual faculty mentors for supervision. As foundational courses, AMS 100 and AMS 110 are principal courses that fulfill distribution or general education requirements for undergraduates throughout the College.

In an effort to improve and standardize the content offered in AMS 100, the department agreed in 2009 to create two separate sections of AMS 900 (Teaching American Studies). GTAs who taught AMS 110 discussion sections were assigned for supervision to the faculty serving as lecturer for the course. Another faculty member was appointed to provide supervision for GTAs teaching independently designed sections of AMS 100. This portfolio represents my contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning in AMS 100.

Implementation

Fall 2009

To bring more alignment to the independent AMS 100 sections, the department proposed introducing a common syllabus for the first five weeks of the course, with one faculty-led lecture per week delivered in plenary sessions followed by GTA-led small class discussions. The common syllabus was intended to create a foundation for the independently designed sections, while still allowing the GTAs ten weeks to teach course material that they had independently selected and organized.

We implemented this change in Fall 2009, and encouraged GTAs to incorporate the foundational content in their independent courses the following spring. GTAs found it challenging to align the new foundational materials but became aware of the need to develop more common ground in the content, assignments, expectations, and evaluative criteria offered across the independent sections.
Spring 2010

With the goal of creating more coherence while preserving some GTA autonomy, in Spring 2010 the department assigned a faculty mentor to AMS 900 to collaborate with GTAs in planning the Fall 2010 course offering. To assist GTAs in reflecting on course design, AMS 900 included readings and discussion on the topic of creating a syllabus by using methods such as backward design and signature pedagogies. Most of the semester was devoted to the articulation of common learning objectives and a signature pedagogy, which GTAs used to collaborate on designing a syllabus. Each GTA contributed one unit, including specific readings, handouts, and assignments.

At the culmination of his or her unit, each GTA led a plenary session with the goal of offering students the chance to practice and develop skills necessary to comprehend and question complex ideas presented in a lecture format. Specifically, they aimed at preparing students to engage more effectively and meaningfully with the annual Tuttle Lecture sponsored by the American Studies department.

Fall 2010-Spring 2011

With the benefit of leadership from one GTA who piloted the new collaborative course in Summer 2010, GTAs used AMS 900 in Fall 2010 to finalize their units and collaborate on the redesign. GTAs reflected on the redesign and shared their thoughts through a discussion board; examples of these reflections can be found here and here. While teaching independent sections the following spring, GTAs worked in AMS 900 to create common criteria for assessing student work through a metarubric. To see the first version of the metarubric, click here. The second version can be found here.

Student performance

GTAs used the metarubric to analyze student performance on one class assignment and to determine how successfully the assignment aligned with their learning objectives. They presented and discussed their analyses in class.

GTA A applied the rubric to an assignment that asked students to construct and support an argument using several given sources. In addition to the assignment description, the GTA provided students with the rubric, telling them he would use it to evaluate their work but not to calculate their numerical grades. He also told the students that the rubric was being applied across the AMS 100 classes in order to evaluate the course structure and content. By using the metarubric to evaluate the papers, he learned that the assignment was not testing to all the criteria. For example, while the assignment allowed students to demonstrate their ability to write a grammatical essay and required students to cite sources as evidence, it did not ask them to use the evidence to construct an original argument or take a position. In conclusion, GTA A noted that either the metarubric or the assignment should be revised.

GTA B applied the rubric to an assignment that asked students to explore a provided topic in conversation with at least one given source. The GTA also provided students with the rubric
along with the assignment. By using the metarubric to evaluate the papers, he learned that the assignment was not testing to all the criteria. For example, while the assignment offered students a variety of topics and pointed them toward pertinent source material for discussion, it did not ask students to use the material to construct an original argument or take a position. Furthermore, he learned that the metarubric enabled him to evaluate student performance more consistently. In conclusion, GTA B discovered the usefulness of grading with a rubric and of revising the metarubric to assist in making better distinctions among student performances.

As a result of their drafting and use of a metarubric, students got a general sense of the level of student performance in the course across all the sections. They also discovered disparities between the criteria they identified as important on the metarubric and the assignments that they were using to assess student learning. Finally, they discovered aspects of the metarubric that needed adjustment, such as problematic wording, overlap between categories, and the difficulty of applying some of the criteria in practice. GTAs suggested that norming sessions would help them revise, understand, and apply the rubric more consistently.

**Reflections**

Through collaborative work with GTAs in AMS 900 on the use of backward design to create a syllabus and the use of a signature pedagogy to reflect on the purpose of individual class sessions, the teaching of AMS 100 has been improved and more standardized. In AMS 900, GTAs also collaborated on the criteria for evaluation and on the creation and use of a metarubric. As a consequence, their assessment of students was more deliberate and consistent. Collaboration in AMS 900 provided a forum for spirited debates among the GTAs about their independent selection of readings for each unit. As a result, GTAs became more aware of the issues of greatest significance to the field and more accountable for how their selection of readings was representing these issues for their students. Through their efforts in AMS 900, GTAs collaborated to offer students a first-year experience of issues of significance, including nationalism, culture, power, difference, and discourse. As the new KU core curriculum reframes courses in terms of first-year experiences rather than as foundations in a discipline, AMS 900 can ensure that GTAs teaching AMS 100 are poised to make a significant contribution.