

2003-2004 FALL TRAINING EVALUATION FOR GRADUATE ASSISTANTS

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Abstract

The Literacy/Reading program for Graduate Assistants teaching developmental reading students at a large, state university currently provides one week of teacher training prior to the beginning of the Fall Semester. The small group of graduate assistants in this program (including the program coordinator) are primary instructors and teach one or two sections of developmental reading, test taking, time management, and learning strategies. The main purpose for evaluating the training program was to determine the effectiveness of the training. Data was collected through a Likert survey, which included some qualitative questions, and person-to-person interviews. The results of the Likert survey are that the high quality of the training sessions, the presenters, and the strategies that were presented helped graduate assistants to better do their jobs. The results of the qualitative questions and person-to-person interviews also conclude that the fall training was very helpful and should definitely be continued. However, the results of the qualitative portion of the study also yielded additional, unexpected insights into the perceptions of graduate assistants who feel they are marginalized graduate students, teaching marginalized college courses (Reading and Study Strategies), and serving a marginalized population of students—developmental university students.

Introduction

This evaluation project began as a class assignment to meet the class requirements for one of the graduate level classes in my doctoral study program. At first, the study was mainly a question of accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and convenience as I had already been working in the program for three years and thought I understood its inner workings. But later, as I analyzed and reflected upon the evaluation, I realized that the project could be used to help the graduate assistants in the program improve their teaching situations and have more of a voice in the education of their students.

The developmental reading program services mostly students who are admitted to the university by special consideration and interview. Most of these students either scored low on the ACT college entrance examination and/or had a low high school GPA. Each year, the developmental program chooses 500 applicants out of a pool of 2500, but for year 2003-2004 nearly 600 students were accepted into the program, greatly stretching and stressing limited resources. The majority of these developmental students are African American, with some Euro American, Latino, and ESL students. Most of the students accepted into the program are from a large city area and its surrounding suburbs. Many of these students, though certainly not all, are from some of the city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods, and have lost one or both parents to drugs, alcohol, death or incarceration. The reading program works in conjunction with other developmental programs in communications, mathematics, and English. In addition, the developmental students have extra opportunities for tutoring and counseling. Also, classes are small, having fewer than 25 students. After their admission to the developmental program, students are tested for placement in reading, math, communication skills and English the summer before attending the university.

The graduate assistants in the program, a racially and culturally diverse group, work out of a large office in the College of Education. Each of us has full charge of either one or two developmental reading or strategy sections. In addition, we have charge of some focused

interest group sections and open enrollment sections. Our coordinator and supervisor is also a graduate assistant, and she organizes our training opportunities. We generally have a full week of training in August, immediately preceding the fall semester. In addition, we have periodic, required meetings where further training is provided. The graduate assistant turnover rate is fairly high as graduate students are continually coming into the program, working for a few years, then graduating and moving on. Some graduate assistants in this program have prior teaching experience, and some do not. Our coordinator seeks to hire people who are experienced in teaching or in ESL, but for numerous reasons, including not much pay, this is not always possible. Before beginning the evaluation, the coordinator sent an email out to all the graduate assistants in our office, requesting their cooperation in this evaluation project, which would serve to benefit us all. She also gave me some of the background resources that I needed to conduct the evaluation, such as a report she wrote in 2001 concerning the need for additional training for graduate assistants as well as a summary of the college reading program's activity, which was used for background knowledge.

Purpose of Evaluation

The main purpose for evaluating this program is to help determine what part of the graduate assistant training is helpful and effective, and what parts should be added, dropped or revised. How can the training be more effective, especially for new teachers? What do new teachers need to know to get started? How do we meet the needs of the more experienced teachers? What kind of further training or help do more experienced teachers need? The major goal for this project evaluation is to help graduate students effectively teach their students with confidence. I chose this project because I am a graduate assistant in the literacy/reading department, and I have access to information that an outsider may not have. I want to help myself as well as help our coordinator to improve our program. My objectives for this evaluation project are to develop training for teaching assistants in the program that help them to be more effective teachers.

Stakeholders

The major stakeholders in this project include the graduate assistants working in the program, the Literacy/Reading Department, the students we are teaching, the developmental student program, and the university. The graduate assistants have a stake in this because we need to be the best teachers we can possibly be, which means we need good, effective training in teaching methods, grading, leading discussions and other teaching-type activities as well as managing our time as students and as teachers. Some of us may be able to use this teaching experience to advance in our careers. We also have a responsibility to our students to provide them with good teachers. Our students also have a stake in this evaluation project. They have a right to expect that their teachers are well prepared, well organized and able to teach the subject matter. The Literacy/Reading Department has a stake in the evaluation project because their reputation depends partly upon the ability of the graduate students to carry out our teaching duties. If we do not do our job well, it reflects upon the whole department. Also, the developmental student program has a stake in this evaluation because we work closely with the developmental student counselors to ensure that students are properly taught and that their teaching needs are met. The university itself has a stake in this project evaluation because it is very important that graduate assistants do a good job so that we do not sully the university's reputation. The university apparently realizes the usefulness of the developmental student program because it has supported it for twenty years. The University Provost was a late addition to the list of stakeholders when I discovered that some of the monies used to conduct the program come from that office.

Evaluation Design

The overall evaluation design used in this study is Organizational Learning because all participants are on a fairly even level, all graduate assistants who have full charge of teaching one or two classes. In order to properly accomplish the evaluation, especially due to its Organization Learning design, all the department's graduate assistants need to be involved and willing to give their input. It is necessary that graduate assistants continue to learn and share learning with others in the department in an attempt to maximize the value of their teaching. Russ-Eft and Preskill (2001), Argyris and Schon (1996), Fiol and Lyles (1985), Preskill and Torres (1999), Senge (1990), Watkins and Marsick (1996) are all theorists who agree that dialoguing, reflection, questioning, identifying and challenging values, beliefs and assumptions are contributors to organizational learning. Other evaluation professionals view evaluation as an opportunity for learning in the workplace (Russ-Eft and Preskill, 2001, p. 57-58). The results of Organizational Learning evaluations are for all the participants to see and to discuss. Interpretation of the data is by mutual consensus of all participants agreeing on the findings and deciding what action to take as a result.

This study is informed by the work of (1) Mills, Cervero, Langone, & Wilson (1995), who stress the importance of taking into account the power politics of the organization, (2) Joyappa & Martin (1996), who write on participatory research, feminist research, and feminist participatory research, (3) Lamm (1998), who discusses transformational learning within organizations, (4) Grotelueschen (n.d.) who writes on quality assurance for Continuing Professional Education (CPE) and gives a good rationale for using a Likert Scale, (5) Guba (n.d.), who caused me to wonder if using both a Likert Scale and qualitative methods of interviewing could be used in this study, (6) Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver, & Shotland (1997), who directly address the usefulness of training and the limitations of Kirkpatrick's taxonomy, (7) Preskill (1997), who writes on learning in organizations, (8) Korth (1997), who writes on developing a simple, effective tool for needs assessment, (9) Robertson (2002), who cautions adult educators to constantly evaluate our own teaching and learning and the affect it has on students, and (10) Preskill (1996), emphasizing the importance of critical reflection to learning. Other researchers informing this evaluation are Holton (1996), Kaufman & Keller (1994), Stokking (1996), and Foxon (1992).

Data Collection

Data were collected from graduate assistants by using a combination of two methods: (1) three yes/no questions preceding a twenty-one question five point Likert survey instrument containing three qualitative type questions at the end, and (2) a seven question interview of three of the five participants who took the survey. The three, yes/no questions concerned whether or not the participant had attended the training sessions and whether or not the participant had any previous teaching experience. The twenty-one question Likert instrument had statements about the amount of the training graduate assistants receive, the quality of the training sessions, the quality of the strategies that were presented, the quality of the presenters, and whether or not the participant used the strategies covered in the sessions. The five point Likert scale assigned Agree (5 pts.), Tend to Agree (4 pts.), Unsure (3 pts.), Tend to Disagree (2 pts.) and Disagree (1 pt.). The three qualitative questions at the end of the survey attempted to elicit ideas for training improvement, new workshops, and the strong points of the training. The seven question interview instrument, used to conduct audio taped person-to-person interviews with three of the participants, contained questions concerning reasons why the participant chose to work in the Literacy Reading Department, prior teaching experience, overall opinion of the Fall, 2003 training, how training has or has not helped the participant to be a good teacher, suggestions for

new teachers, and how the department can encourage its teachers. Interviewees are referred to as “Interviewee A,” “Interviewee B” and “Interviewee C” to assure individual confidentiality. In addition, probing questions were asked for clarification. Because I am a graduate assistant in this department, I also used my own thoughts and observations to complete the evaluation. All participants signed a confidentiality and permission statement at the onset of the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed on the Likert survey instrument by totaling the points from the five surveys in each row and column and calculating the mean and median of each column. Then each question was analyzed according to content and divided into five areas: (1) quality of training session, (2) presenters, (3) quality of strategies presented, (4) participants’ use of strategies, and (5) amount of training. The three qualitative data questions were listed, combined, and analyzed with the three person-to-person interviews. The person-to-person interviews were analyzed by transcribing the audio taped interviews, “open coding” the data and deriving categories from the data itself. The categories emerging from this data are (1) quality of the presenters, (2) quality of the training sessions, (3) making use of the training, (3) the amount of training needed for teacher effectiveness, (4) specific graduate assistant training needs, and (5) improving the Literacy Reading Department.

Results

The findings of the Likert survey instrument are that questions 6, 9, 12, 13, 14, and 20 reveal the quality of the training sessions to be high. Questions 5, 7, 13, 19, and 20 find the quality of the presenters to be high. Questions 5, 2, 3, 6, 10, and 11 find the quality of the strategies presented to be high. Questions 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 20, and 21 reveal that training participants actually use the strategies. Questions 1, 8, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21 indicate that the amount of training that graduate assistant teachers receive is sufficient, but one person thinks we need more training. Many of the questions overlap into more than one area.

The findings of the qualitative part of the evaluation are that the fall training should be continued, and that guest speakers should continue to be asked to present certain aspects of the training. There was not a consensus on individual training sessions—some graduate assistants benefited from one session, and some from another session, depending on the individual’s specific needs and personal preferences. All persons interviewed used one or more of the strategies that were presented in the workshop.

Concerning the improvement of the department, graduate assistants’ perceptions are that the Literacy/Reading Department undervalues its graduate assistants. Graduate assistants expressed that we are paid less than graduate assistants in other departments even though we act as instructors for our classes, and we are paid less than any other group currently working with the university’s developmental students. In addition, our coordinator, also a graduate assistant, is too busy to manage our work area, much less to keep the records that need to be kept so that the program can be adequately funded. As a result, we cannot prove what we are doing or not doing because there is no useable data. Also, there are no clear program mission goals, even though the program has been running for nearly thirty years. Our department had four full-time instructors at one period, but when these instructors quit, graduate assistants were hired at much lower salaries to fill their places.

Recommendations

This evaluator recommends that the Literacy Reading Department:

- Continue fall training and ask guest speakers to present certain aspects of the training.
- Follow clearly established mission goals.
- Seek additional funding resources to pay graduate assistants who have full charge of classes at an instructor's rate of pay.
- Provide an adequate copying budget and upgrade all our classrooms.
- Expand the Program Coordinator's position to full-time so that adequate records could be kept and evaluated on a regular, continuing basis.
- Establish mentor/mentoree relationships between graduate assistants.
- Fall training should be evaluated by administration of a survey instrument immediately following training and at the semester's conclusion, and results should be disseminated to the participants and stakeholders.

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