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# Using Lower-Division Developmental Education Students as Teaching Assistants

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## New York College Learning Skills Association

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## *Using Lower-Division Developmental Education Students as Teaching Assistants*

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### Abstract

There has been little research on the experiences of undergraduate teaching assistants, and this small body of information is usually tightly focused on traditional disciplinary concerns like sociology, psychology, and communications. Additionally, undergraduate teaching assistant research tends to focus on upper-division students. This article explores the benefits and drawbacks of using lower-division developmental education students as teaching assistants in developmental social science courses. Included are comments from students enrolled in a course staffed by a sophomore as the teaching assistant. Employing developmental education students as teaching assistants can be beneficial to instructors, students, and the teaching assistants themselves.

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Noel is freaking out about Ruby writing "Hi Noel" on her anonymous test paper. I mean, it's not like she wrote, "Hi Noel, give me a good grade cause I'm your girlfriend" [and you are the teaching assistant]. But she might as well have.

– *Felicity* Web site (<http://www.felicity.com/>)

The epigraph is from a synopsis of an episode ("The Slump") of the television show *Felicity* (Abrams, 1998), which is about a group of friends adjusting to life as college students. In the show's second season (1999-2000), junior Noel was a philosophy 101 teaching assistant (TA) in the class in which his freshman girlfriend Ruby was enrolled. Many of us with experience in the real-world Academy would immediately spot problems in such a popular culture depiction of our profession: an undergraduate would probably not be teaching a philosophy discussion section, he almost certainly would not have sole responsibility for grading an essay test, and his girlfriend would not be allowed in his section. Similarly, if I suggested that freshmen and sophomore developmental education (DE) students could be effective TAs, one may think I am writing a script for a TV show. I argue, however, that employing such students could be beneficial to instructors, students, and the TAs themselves. In this article, I will explore benefits and drawbacks of using lower-division DE students as TAs in developmental education courses. I conclude that the benefits outweigh the disadvantages, and encourage other instructors to explore how lower-division TAs might be used in their own classes.

First, a few words about me and the TAs. I am an assistant professor in the General College of the University of Minnesota. Jocelyn Gutzman and David McConnell are undergraduate students at the University of Minnesota who participated in my social science classes during each semester of the 1999-2001 academic years. In the fall of 1999, they were freshmen in my GC1211 "Introduction to Sociology" class, and in the spring of 2000 were TAs for that course. As sophomores during the 2000-2001 academic year, they alternated as TAs for GC1211 and GC1903 "Living in the Electronic Information Age" freshman seminar. Jocelyn and

David are currently College of Liberal Arts seniors, and I am in my fourth year as an assistant professor (see Jacobs, Gutzman, & McConnell, unpublished manuscript, for a discussion of our shared first year at the University of Minnesota).

The General College (GC) is one of the nation's oldest developmental education programs. It offers a pre-transfer, credit bearing undergraduate curriculum for students entering degree-granting colleges in the University of Minnesota. GC's curricular model includes a multi-disciplinary range of courses integrating both skills and academic content, providing students with a set of perspectives and academic training for continuing work directly in their majors. Students can take courses in writing, math, sciences, social sciences, and humanities, all of which fulfill university graduation requirements. Students typically transfer to degree-granting colleges of the university at the mid-point or end of their second year (Lundell, 2001, for a more complete overview of the GC).

Many faculty and staff in the GC are participating in an on-going discussion about moving away from traditional skills-based DE models to those informed by new theoretical paradigms (Collins & Bruch, 2000; Lundell & Higbee, 2001). Specifically, some of us are attempting to establish a pluralistic and discursive framework instead of one that focuses on standardized "deficits" and remediation (Lundell & Collins, 1999). In such a framework, the literacies, practices, and aspirations of students are the point of departure for helping students and teachers alike construct a critical literacy of their social worlds, academic as well as those outside of the classroom. This framework facilitates the National Association for Developmental Education's (NADE) 1995 "Definition and Goals Statement" goal of "develop[ing] in each learner the skills and attitudes necessary for the attainment of academic, career, and life goals." When lower-division DE students work as TAs, they gain valuable practice in obtaining this NADE goal by critically reflecting on their own beliefs, experiences, and skills in order to assist other students in the same process.

There has been little research on the experiences of undergraduate teaching assistants, and this small body is usually tightly focused on traditional disciplinary concerns like sociology (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Moxley, 1974; Wallace, 1974), psychology (Mendenhall & Burr, 1983), and communications (Ross, 1990; Socha, 1998). To my knowledge, there has been no research on using lower-division undergraduate TAs in developmental education. Furthermore, existing research tends to focus on the positives of undergraduate teaching assistantships, such as in Swartz's (1996) personal narrative about the value of the TA experience in graduate school success. Indeed, a teaching assistantship can be quite a powerful experience. While I, too, find compelling benefits about employing undergraduates, there are drawbacks to offering teaching assistantships to freshman and sophomore DE students.

### **Benefits of Lower Division Teaching Assistants**

As stated previously, one of NADE's (1995) "Definition and Goals Statement" goals is "to develop in each learner the skills and attitudes necessary for the attainment of academic, career, and life goals." Another is "to maintain academic standards by enabling learners to acquire competencies needed for success in mainstream college courses." In sum, a goal of developmental education is to socialize students, that is, to help them reach constructive understandings of the ways of life of college students, and to teach them strategies for being productive and successful in various student cultures. By definition, TAs have acquired some competency in the area in which they are working; an assistantship expands and deepens their competencies: in order to teach others, the TA must have knowledge of the subject matter. They do not have to be "experts" in the area in which they work, but TAs have achieved a solid grounding.

One of our first tasks is to help students become excited about the process of learning. A teaching assistantship will definitely accomplish this goal, as TAs must think about what they want to get out of the process and how it connects to other goals they have. I selected David as a

TA after he came to me halfway through his first semester in GC and asked for a reading list to supplement some of our recent class readings. Later, as a TA, he requested additional readings to make sense of his experiences. Similarly, Jocelyn received additional readings as a TA, but while David was very enthusiastic about academic exploration during his first semester, Jocelyn's thirst for learning was not really ignited until her first TA assignment in the spring of 2000. A TA assignment can be a way to bring out the potential we sense in students (Fingerson & Culley, 2001).

A lower-division TA can also assist in other students' socialization. In the middle of their sophomore year, I asked Jocelyn and David to write a short reflection on "The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly of being a Freshman TA." Under "The Good," Jocelyn wrote, "One [benefit] is being the same age as the rest of the students, so the students know they can talk to you instead of a professor. I think this helps a lot for the students, because when you come to college you are bombarded with so many things that talking to a professor can be very intimidating." Obviously, we would like for students to talk to the instructor, but for some, talking to an assistant first is a necessary step on the path to approaching the instructor.

In his freshman TA experience reflection, David wrote, "I got to see learning from another aspect, through the teacher's eyes. I now fully appreciate all the work that goes into preparing for each class." I also got to see the classroom through students' eyes, as David and Jocelyn both gave feedback on what was happening in the class, both positive and negative. Feedback from lower-division TAs allows instructors to make informed assessments about what is working and what is not, given that the TAs are close to the ability levels of most of the enrolled students. This TA role can be invaluable.

In my Introduction to Sociology classes, for instance, students write bi-weekly reflection papers on course readings. When these papers are due, the students form groups of four to discuss the papers. During my first year in GC, the discussion was unstructured. As can be expected with minimally structured collaborative learning groups, students frequently drifted off onto topics other than that of the reflection paper (Rau & Heyl, 1990). David and Jocelyn suggested that students be given specific questions to discuss. We decided that the students would have specific roles to play in the group (two readers, one recorder, one 'interlocutor' who led the discussion), would answer two questions (one assigned by me, the other formulated by the group's interlocutor), and would have to justify the answer to my question verbally to the TA, who would be floating around the room. We implemented this change in the spring semester of our second year in GC. Both students and TAs loved this change of format, and on the anonymous course evaluations many more spring semester students than fall semester students commented positively on the reflection paper assignment.

Turning back to "The Good" of the TAs' reflections, Jocelyn wrote, "By being a TA as a freshman, you are able to get a better understanding of the material. You get a chance to really study in depth the material, while having the opportunity of asking your professor any questions you don't understand. This has helped me out tremendously because I have learned things from being a TA that I didn't learn in my classes." David agreed, "Being a TA gave me a good feeling because of the faith that Walt put in my abilities." TAs can use reflections such as these not only to meet immediate academic goals (master course material, obtain good grades, etc.) but also to explore career options. For example, David wrote, "(1) I got to meet other professors in the GC through my connection with Walt, (2) I now have a much better understanding of the ladder I would have to climb if I went on to get my Masters or my Ph.D., and (3) I have a better understanding about how the university works because of conversations with faculty such as Walt." I should add that insights into institutional workings of structures like the Academy are gained through informal discussions with faculty and staff. Perhaps one of the most powerful components of an assistantship for lower-division students is low-level professional socialization: they see what it takes to be a professor.

Life lessons are also learned during the assistantships. For example, in her reflection Jocelyn wrote, "It was bothersome to me that a few guys in the class asked me out." Of course, she rebuffed their advances, but she had to deal with a small sampling of the sexual aggression and/or harassment that will undoubtedly pop up in her life. We discussed issues like these on an on-going basis. In fact, one of the most fulfilling aspects of the job as a professor is when life lessons mesh with academic exploration. In our joint paper on our first-year experience, for example, Jocelyn examines a new understanding of the relationship of race and gender in her life after I told her that these were specific criteria in her selection (Jacobs, Gutzman, & McConnell, unpublished manuscript). As an African-American instructor, witnessing students come to more critical understandings of race that appear to transcend the classroom is a reward unto itself.

As an institution, GC maintains a strong position that students are being served within a multicultural program that addresses issues of diversity in teaching, service, and research. Working with lower-division TAs from a variety of backgrounds is congruent with that policy. As detailed above, when TAs are encouraged to examine their own ideas and experiences, students, instructors, and TAs all benefit.

### **Drawbacks of Lower-Division Teaching Assistants**

In "The Bad" section of her first year TA experience reflection, Jocelyn wrote, "It is very difficult to be the same age as someone with more or less the same knowledge, and knowing you are in more of an authoritarian position over that person. This can cause a great amount of tension between the student and TA because both may feel awkward because of the difference in roles." David expressed a related concern, "Some fellow students from the class that I took with Walt were jealous because they wondered why they were not picked for TAs by Walt." While the TAs gain a lot of insight into the teaching process, some students in the classes staffed by the TAs resist their presence, even when their roles and duties are clearly spelled out.

Student resistance to the authority of TAs and instructors can be reduced when the students have an active voice in how the class is conducted (Lee, 2000), and when instructors share their uncertainties and mistakes with students (Jacobs, 1998). For example, during the spring of 2001, Jocelyn led a discussion in which I left the room. Jocelyn told me that the discussion began with a short exchange on the awkwardness of the situation, which contributed to a reduction in tension and a subsequent productive debate. In sum, some friction will inevitably arise over the course of the semester, so instructors and TAs must address adverse situations immediately and openly.

I have found that when the duties and responsibilities of the TAs are clearly articulated there are few problems with student resistance (also reported by Fingerson & Culley, 2001). David and Jocelyn, for instance, had two main sets of duties: run the class electronic classroom (EC) and serve as an in-class resource. The EC is a bulletin board system on the Internet: students can post messages about topics that all other students can read and respond to. The instructor and TAs can also post announcements and course readings. In one section of the EC (the "Debate House"), the TA would post a weekly question about a sociological topic, and students would respond to the question, using very specific criteria. The TAs graded each Debate House posting based on number of criteria present (all 4=A, 3 of 4=B, etc.). While in the classroom, TAs participated in group work and helped to answer individual questions before and after class.

My TAs did not grade major paper assignments, however, as that would entail a closer and more subjective reading than the checklist employed in the grading of Debate House questions, a reading that I believe should be reserved for the instructor. In addition to philosophical understandings about appropriate grading chores, many institutions have formal and informal rules about grading that would bar undergraduate participation. Thus, one of the benefits of using traditional TAs – reducing grading burden – is lost when lower-division TAs are employed.

There also may be a formal or informal prohibition on undergraduate in-class presentations to be considered. Some instructors use TAs to run independent required recitations (like Noel in the epigraph of this article), which may be too much of a burden on young TAs. In “The Ugly” section of her freshman TA experience reflection, Jocelyn talked about a TA who was constantly on call for her students, that is, she could be reached at all hours by cell phone or e-mail. Jocelyn concludes that both her academic and social lives would suffer under those conditions. Indeed, we must remember that lower-division TAs are also young students with many other responsibilities!

As young students, lower-division undergraduate TAs often require mentoring beyond the standard training that instructors provide to older TAs. Many instructors may find such extensive contact to be burdensome. Additionally, as a developmental student, the TA may have life circumstances very different from the instructor that may make the establishment of rapport difficult. In sum, more meta-discourse (commentary on comments to TAs) may be required. As discussed earlier in this article, however, meta-commentary can be one of the most rewarding aspects of employing lower-division developmental education TAs.

### Student Comments

In the preceding sections of this article, I made extensive use of comments from the TAs, Jocelyn and David, but what do the enrolled students have to say about TAs? Fingerson & Culley (2001) note that students usually only comment on the performance of TAs when problems arise, and do not provide feedback on course evaluations unless specifically instructed to do so. My experiences have been similar. I, therefore, specifically asked the students in Jocelyn’s spring semester 2001 Introduction to Sociology class an open-ended question about her performance (“What did you think of having an undergraduate as your TA?”) on the anonymous course evaluation. 40 students were enrolled in the course, and about 30 were in attendance on the last day of class. 26 students answered the question about the TA, and the only criticism was from 4 students who, while expressing the opinion that Jocelyn did a good job, wished that she were even more involved in the class. All others only listed positive reactions. Most interestingly, 12 students mentioned that Jocelyn was valuable because she was close to them in age and therefore understood their experiences and concerns. A typical response in this set was along the lines of the following student’s comment:

Jocelyn was a very good TA. She knew the material very well. I think that it’s a good idea to have an undergraduate for a TA because they understand how we feel and know what we are going through. Jocelyn put up very reasonable questions in the EC. She is there when we need her help. I think that you should have TAs in all your classes, Walt!

Note that this student also praised Jocelyn’s performance in the EC, of which 10 students referenced in their assessments. Of the 12 students who commented on Jocelyn’s age as an asset to them, there is a particularly interesting subset in which 3 students believe that an undergraduate TA is a good model for other students, and one of these responses includes a belief that an assistantship is also valuable for the TA. This subset is listed below:

I think that having Jocelyn as a TA was very helpful for the class as well as for herself. It gave us some inspiration to have a TA close to our own age and could help us out on activities.

Having Jocelyn as a TA was a wonderful idea. She made everything more clear in the EC. And also I think it is good to have somebody like her to look



upon and see what it is like in future college years. She set a good example for us undergraduate freshmen, by showing us what to expect from college.

My thoughts on Jocelyn being a TA were basically things that were good. It gave the class, I think, a sense of comfort, to relax and not be all uptight about things. It showed to me that even students like ourselves could do the things she does in the future, and I think by having her around made the class more fun.

Finally, one response stated, "I felt more comfortable in confronting her and asking questions compared to my other TAs who were not undergraduate students." As noted earlier, the presence of an undergraduate TA provides a resource that is otherwise not used by some students. Obviously, however, not all students thought that a TA is a necessary resource. For instance, one student wrote, "I guess I didn't communicate with Jocelyn enough to develop an opinion about her," and we don't know the opinion of the 14 people who did not complete course evaluations. In sum, though, the majority of the students who did complete the evaluations expressed the opinion that an undergraduate TA is beneficial to their development.

### Conclusion

Pedely (2001) argues that many developmental education students feel stigmatized, that their peers hold negative perceptions about them and their academic programs. Among other things, they are labeled as "slow" or "dumb," and "not real students." As I have demonstrated, when DE students serve as TAs they dispel stigma, not only for themselves but also for other students. The presence of a lower-level DE student as a TA can help students see themselves as valuable members of the academic community. "If students see another undergraduate participating in the responsibility of transmitting and communicating knowledge, this can demonstrate the capacity of undergraduates to actively participate in this process and break down the notion that only an 'expert' faculty member has anything worthwhile to contribute to the class" (Fingerson & Culley, 2001, p. 311). Indeed, using TAs in collective endeavors can be a way to expand beyond individualistic models of learning that characterize many DE theories and models (Collins & Bruch, 2000; Lundell & Collins, 1999).

Fingerson and Culley (2001) offer four practical recommendations for using undergraduate teaching assistants: (1) use TAs only if they will have specific duties, (2) make the contributions of the TAs visible to the students in the class, (3) require TAs to create a written commentary reflecting on their experience and growth, and (4) query students about their experiences with their TAs in the final course evaluations. In this article, I have detailed my implementation of each of these recommendations. When instructors are working with lower-division developmental education TAs, I would add a fifth practical recommendation: include informal discussion and activities with the TAs in order to foster a sense of full membership in the academic community. David, Jocelyn and I frequently met for lunch to talk about a broad range of topics (including personal ones), David played on the college's intramural basketball team, and Jocelyn served as the student member on the college's curriculum committee. We all believe that we have learned as much from each other (if not more) in informal activities as in official TA business.

I believe that these findings are relevant to instructors in other disciplines and at other colleges and universities. A teaching assistantship can provide TAs and enrolled students with a means of fostering a belief that they are competent learners who can succeed in the Academy and beyond. I urge others to explore the use of lower-division developmental teaching assistants in their own programs and classes.



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