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COMMENTARY

Practicing what "we are learning": Insights and perspectives from graduate student instructors

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Universities often leverage graduate students to help teach introductory topics (Bettinger et al., 2016). At our university, select doctoral students teach industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology each semester. Kath et al.'s (2021) focal article is a great resource for graduate student instructors (GSIs) who are developing their courses and teaching ability. We seek to expand on their discussion by reflecting on our experiences and perspectives as GSIs. Specifically, we highlight key benefits, challenges, and implications of allowing graduate students to teach I-O psychology to undergraduates. We hope to demonstrate how GSIs are aptly prepared to "practice what we preach," or more accurately, "practice what we *are learning*." In doing so, we provide suggestions for graduate students in light of Kath et al.'s and others' recommendations.

Benefits of graduate student instructors

Graduate students provide several potential benefits to teaching introductory I-O courses. First, graduate students are still learning the core I-O concepts. At our university, GSIs must first complete their master's degree, pass comprehensive exams, and complete a graduate-level course on teaching psychology before instructing. Therefore, GSIs should have foundational I-O principles readily accessible and should be well-positioned to practice what they are learning. This not only helps to ensure that the instructor has relevant up-to-date knowledge for the benefit of the students but also gives the GSI an opportunity implement what they have learned in a real-world setting, reinforcing the likelihood of training transfer for the GSI (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). In other words, GSIs will truly be partners in learning with their students. Further, this context gives GSIs a chance not only to implement but also to model Kath et al.'s (2021) third theme, incorporating active learning. Social learning theory teaches us that modeling serves as an effective learning tool (Bandura, 1982).

Along these lines, a second benefit is that GSIs may be more relatable to undergraduates. They were more recently undergraduate students themselves and may be perceived as able to identify with students' struggles and challenges. This is beneficial for students in multiple ways. One way is that students may be more likely to provide honest feedback because the power differential between the student and instructor is smaller (e.g., Ng et al., 2011). Thus, students may see their feedback as able to make more of a difference. Another way that GSIs can benefit the instructor–student relationship is that the immediate connection as learners creates a common in-group in the course. Both advantages give GSIs a unique opportunity to adopt Kath et al's (2021) first theme, getting to know the students. We know from leader–member exchange (LMX) that, as

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followers find themselves in the in-group with the leader, LMX relationships and performance increase (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

This past spring 2020 semester, technological acumen became a top concern among faculty as the pandemic forced most universities to go virtual. This highlights a third benefit that GSIs can bring. Given their recent experience as students themselves, GSIs are more likely to have used the newest technological resources that undergraduates may need and prefer (see Chung et al., 2010). Thus, GSIs may be more familiar with and accepting of useful, virtually capable programs such as computer-based testing, grading, and communication. For example, the second author was in his second semester of teaching as the pandemic hit and was able to convert his course to completely remote within a matter of hours with minimal change to his course structure. He was able to do so because everything in his course, besides the in-class lectures, was already computer-based. Thus, GSIs may be especially prepared to use online learning platforms, consistent with Kath et al.'s (2021) recommendations.

As we will discuss, the fourth benefit may be a double-edged sword. Specifically, GSIs' lack of experience may concurrently pose benefits and challenges. The potential advantage is that GSIs are less likely to have their course structure and routine firmly established. This should allow GSIs more flexibility in adopting the most recent advances in I-O psychology and the focal article's recommendations. There is a caveat here. Graduate students need an environment where they are encouraged to explore and implement new teaching practices rather than being limited and restrained by the prior practices of professors. For example, some faculty members may discourage changes to courses out of concern for GSIs' ability to finish their dissertation and other degree requirements. Yet, this propensity for exploring new ideas may be particularly beneficial for GSIs today who are facing a teaching environment that is very different from the ones they have experienced and in which their professors have taught, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, new teaching practices should be cultivated and in line with the GSI's recent understanding of the I-O field. The fresh curiosity about the field may be the best asset that GSIs offer when beginning their teaching career.

Challenges unique to graduate student instructors

However, higher education isn't all blooming roses for GSIs. Unique challenges face GSIs that, when identified, can be planned for and accommodated. As previously mentioned, the first challenge that most likely comes to mind for any reader is experience. Graduate student instructors do not have the years of experience that well-seasoned professors have. This limits their developed ability to adjust the course midsemester and to overcome unique challenges as they arise unexpectedly. Our university has attempted to offset this lack of experience by using the undergraduate program committee as a mentoring resource for GSIs. The committee provides feedback on syllabi, course content, and lecturing style all before the GSI begins their first semester as the primary instructor. In our experience, this support has improved our self-efficacy in handling novel challenges in our courses.

A second related challenge is the lack of legitimate authority that a graduate student has compared with that of a professor. This poses challenges in managing a classroom, assigning grades, and communicating feedback about performance. Our undergraduate committee chair provides support through advising graduate students on handling issues of authority and stands available to step in when an authority figure is needed. This limitation does present a great opportunity for GSIs to learn and grow, however. Our undergraduate committee chair encourages the GSIs to handle any challenges to their pedagogical choices (e.g., student grade complaints).

Another challenge that is specifically related to the focal article is triaging which changes to implement. Due to dual responsibilities as students themselves, GSIs may be more limited in the time they have available to spend on course development. As a result, they may face the all-too-normal dilemma of deciding where to allocate time for the most efficient results. From

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our experience in developing courses as GSIs, we recommend that GSIs focus on the small to medium level changes that are suggested in the focal article. We make this recommendation for two main reasons. First, as GSIs, you are still developing your lecturing style and student interaction skills. Many of the small to medium changes that are suggested in the focal article target these two areas in they address issues such as attending to student goals, assigning autobiographies, or having breakout groups in class to discuss and present course content (Kath et al., 2021). Thus, focusing on these changes will help GSIs develop better foundational skills at the beginning of their teaching career rather than trying to change them later. The second reason we recommend focusing on small to medium changes is the CYA principle, "cover your A$$." As previously noted, GSIs have less experience in adapting to changing circumstance and needs. Thus, trying to handle big changes and implementations, such as interdependent group projects, may backfire when the grandiose plans cannot come to fruition. However, we are not rejecting group projects entirely, a note on their applicability will be provided later. We suggest that smaller changes will result in the least amount of chaos if things don't go according to plan, and GSIs would benefit from reducing the amount of chaos they experience in the beginning of their teaching career. For instance, the first author is implementing relevant suggestions for their semester project. Students will use job analytic techniques and sources of information to outline a future career they are interested in and analyze their own fit for that career. Each section of the project paper will coincide with a class activity. This way, the students can practice the skill that they will be using and receive feedback before completing a very similar step for their semester project. This application from research on training models, suggested by Kath et al., will allow students to make changes and improve before their final project evaluation. Additionally, the semester project has a goal-setting component for the final section that is designed to support students on their paths toward a career. Feedback sessions have been planned for after the final project is turned in. This will allow the instructor to give feedback on the students' goals and provide transformational leadership support to students, as is suggested in the focal article.

Another way that GSIs can follow Kath et al's (2021) recommendations, despite time and resource constraints, is to focus on the three common themes across their recommendations. For example, in line with the authors' first theme, the second author had his students develop and follow an individual goal plan each semester. This allowed him to get to know his students because he met individually with each student to guide the development of their plan and monitor their progress toward goals. It also encouraged the students to address their own goals in line with course objectives (see Kath et al.). Furthermore, because the assignment was designed and presented as a direct application of goal setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), it gave students an opportunity to relate to the material and practice what they learned in the section on motivation. The feedback that was provided by undergraduates indicated that a large majority enjoyed this assignment and found it relevant and useful.

Closing thoughts on practicing what we learn

Several additional implications are apparent from a consideration of the GSI's perspective and the guidelines proposed in the focal article. The authors recommend using group projects to help promote learning, diversity, and inclusion and give opportunities for the instructor to be an effective leader and role model. Group projects can have wonderful benefits as noted in this article, but as GSIs, we recommend a few points to be considered before implementing them. First, GSIs need to consider their ability to ascertain whether there are social loafers in the class during and after the project is completed. Second, when social loafing occurs, how will they accommodate a student who is trying to accomplish their part of the project? Experienced instructors and professors have learned how to deal with these issues but, for a first-time GSI, they can be quite overwhelming. Therefore, GSIs might consider making all major point assignments and projects individual in nature but structure participation assignments to be group and interdependent in nature.

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Additionally, in the pandemic world, instructors need to be aware of the potential pressure they may be putting on students to meet and engage with others when they may have serious concerns about their health. Thus, limiting the weight that group work has on the students' grades will reduce unnecessary stress for students.

The focal authors also suggest aligning your course structure to following a specified training model, ensuring that students can practice concepts, receive feedback, and practice the concepts again to show improvement. We respectfully add a recommendation that instructors, graduate and experienced professor alike, should add this structure to their pedagogy. Specifically, when thinking of implementing and improving our teaching practices, we, as I-O psychologists, know that we should not be so narrowly focused as to only measure improvement for one project (e.g., one semester). We should set goals for where we want our teaching to develop over the long term and solicit feedback from students and colleagues along the way over multiple semesters. Then, we can implement that feedback, show improvement, and truly develop as instructors. The literature on training evaluation provides ample guidance for this recommendation (Alliger et al., 1997; Salas et al., 2012). Because GSIs tend to have more short-term teaching contracts, incoming and outgoing GSIs should maintain consistent communication and collaboration to compile evaluation evidence across several semesters.

Conclusion

In summary, the focal article is a must-read for graduate students who are preparing to teach their first undergraduate-level I-O course. We hope that our perspectives and experiences as GSIs aid other graduate students in applying Kath et al.'s (2021) guidelines to their specific situation. Although it is imperative that GSIs acknowledge and address the unique challenges of their situation, we contend they are uniquely well-equipped to "practice what they are learning" and implement I-O principles with fresh perspectives. This will offer novel benefits to the GSIs as budding academics and to the undergraduates they are teaching (see also Bettinger et al., 2016).

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