



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

Report on the Graduate Teaching Program

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Overview and General Impressions

The Graduate Teaching Program at the ANU, now nearing the end of its second semester of operation, is off to a fine start. Given the relatively short time it has existed and the many different needs it aims to satisfy, it appears to have already achieved significant success. In particular, its emphasis on "practical" rather than merely theoretical approaches to teaching, its insistence on enrolling graduate students concurrently teaching undergraduates, and the pedagogic skills of the Program Co-ordinator, John Clanchy, constitute essential strengths. I enthusiastically support the aims of the program, and admire what has been accomplished so far.

My impression of the program's "ethos" is one of a cooperative, caring search for solutions to practical problems in teaching. I noted while visiting a program session that the graduate students seemed ready to help each other, as well as looking to John Clanchy for guidance. The "pitch" and level seem fine. Perhaps a bit more in the way of supplementary materials could be made available to those who want them in the form of a sourcebook. Graduate students should be able to see that some smart people (A.N. Whitehead, John Dewey, and Jerome Kagan come to mind) have thought about teaching in this century. For all its practical side, a program of this sort should convey the too often forgotten truth that teaching is intellectually interesting. But the best supplementary materials are those which John Clanchy has already prepared as after-class handouts, so this is a minor quibble.

The changes made in the program since last semester seem to me sound, and to be moving in the right direction. Frequently new programs such as this begin by attempting to do too much, and attract criticism from their participants on the grounds that they are being worked too hard. I find a good deal of evidence that John Clanchy has taken this problem seriously, has pared down the total number of topics covered in the second iteration of the program, and sensibly opted for covering less in greater depth. In particular, making microteaching mandatory seems to me an excellent step. So does keeping some subdivision of elements of the program along disciplinary lines, that is, giving the natural scientists a chance to discuss demonstrations as a separate group. I think some sort of balance between "plenary" sessions and "smaller group" sessions makes the most sense, and should be maintained. Continuing evaluation is also important. I expect that the reports of the current cohort of participants will be taken as seriously as those of the last, with the aim to make further adjustments if warranted.

In both research and teaching, students learn to practice their craft through observing expert practitioners and mimicking (or, perhaps, studiously avoiding) the behaviours they observe. Thus an important part of any Graduate Teaching Program such should reside, not simply in the content, but also in the mode of delivery. *How* it is taught will convey lessons to students as powerfully, if not more powerfully than *what* is taught. The kind of teaching we seek to foster should be evident from how we act, not just from what we say. One cannot teach active learning skills as successfully by lecturing as by inviting group participation, for example.

One term for this process is "modeling." Among the principal strengths of the Graduate Teaching Program is the fact that good teaching is "modeled" to an exemplary degree by the Co-ordinator, John Clanchy. When I visited the session on student feedback on Wednesday, October 11, I was enormously impressed by John's ability to relate directly and personally to each of the graduate student participants, by his skill in drawing them out in conversation, and by the easy but purposeful way in which he led the discussion. Nothing forced, nothing too mechanical, but a clear intelligence and sense of direction which involved the entire group. This performance was all the more impressive since the focus of the day's work involved listening to and questioning three undergraduates, who themselves needed support, recognition, and skilled "handling" in order to fit into an established group. (My own presence as an observer certainly introduced a third element of possible complication.)

Beyond this very positive general assessment, I would like to offer some suggestions of my own for further reflection or program modification, as outlined below. It is important to stress that the program as it now stands, especially with the modifications introduced after the first semester's experience, is in my opinion first-rate. But even first-rate programs may benefit from enrichment. These observations are intended to improve further an already excellent operation.

Structure

As far as the actual structure of the 13-part program is concerned, I have two observations — one specific, one more general. It seems to me that the issues of student feedback and group management and dynamics, now relegated to the end of the semester, might more profitably be addressed toward the beginning. Of course, in a sense we are faced with the logical conundrum that graduate students should be exposed to ALL these topics near the start of their teaching activity. That is clearly not possible. But I would hope that one of the themes of the program would be the desirability of knowing, not just "Who are my students?" (sessions 5 and 6), but also "what are their expectations" and "what are their reactions" in my tutorial. That is to say, the process of informal assessment should be constant. Graduate students need to be thinking very early on about the appropriate level on which to teach, how students may misunderstand the material, and so forth. Much of this information can emerge during discussions; yet for it to do so requires the right questions. Perhaps if the Co-ordinator does not feel it is appropriate to devote an entire session to this topic, it might be possible for him to engage in obtaining this sort of feedback from the graduate students as to what their expectations of the program are, and how well it is satisfying them, thus once again "modeling" behaviour we would wish to encourage.

Similar, the idea of the "contract" or set of mutual expectations of faculty and students might be a useful one to explore early in the semester within the general framework of group management. Students will generally accept a broad variety of "contracts" at the start of a course, provided that they are spelled out with clarity and given some rationale. However, this window of opportunity closes rapidly. By the third or fourth week of the semester, patterns in a class or tutorial have been set and generally prove resistant to change. Therefore it is important that tutors understand what messages they are sending, and what the implications are of different messages. The advantages of placing this issue early in the program curriculum are principally that it makes sense to discuss them while there is still time to modify the tutorial "contract."

My more general observation is to note the relative absence of "learning" from the program syllabus. A general trend in the discussions of tertiary teaching over the past two or three years has been a growing emphasis on learning as the test of teaching. At the Nineteenth International Conference on Improving University Teaching held this summer in Hong Kong, for instance, where I chaired a panel, the theme was "student-centered learning." Generally speaking, this meant addressing a broad set of concerns, from how students learn to how to make them more active participants in the classroom. But the basic argument is that teaching methods should be derived from our knowledge of how students learn. I believe that good teachers do this almost instinctively; in fact, one criterion of good teachers may well be that they retain an ability to imaginatively recreate the mental world of the student, both insofar as they remember what it was like to be ignorant of their subject, and insofar as they know what it would take to learn it all over again.

Follow-up and Outreach

One of the student comments which struck me most forcefully in the summary of evaluations after the first semester was the student who wrote "How about calling us back in 12 months and seeing what long-term effect it has had on us?" In the margin, I wrote: "YES!" This seems an eminently sound idea. In fact, it might be possible to contact a smaller subset of the same students at six-month intervals thereafter, just to chat and find out if they have any further insights into what worked and what didn't in the program. It is frequently the case that undergraduates have difficulty in identifying

the aspects of a course which will be most valuable to them immediately after they have taken it; only with the passage of time do the course's special merits or weaknesses become clear.

With two cohorts of graduates of the program, and the prospect of thirty more veterans at the end of the next semester, the question also arises whether this group would benefit from further attention — a one-day reunion workshop, or one-on-one counselling, or being videotaped — if they are still teaching. Tim, the student at the tea on Wednesday afternoon, clearly stated his preference for further training. Of course, resources may not permit this. But circulate their names and email addresses, or creating an internet talk group, or circulating a newsletter, or some such? Why not help each cohort to stay in touch with its members even after they leave the ANU by providing some sort of central "post office" function. The experience of shared learning in such a group is too precious to waste, I would argue, especially since the group might be offer each of its members further advice and support as their teaching careers continue.

There are some resources in the United States which might help to amplify the group's experience. Being plugged into a network of faculty development centers, such as the POD Network on the internet, for example, would seem useful. Perhaps "alumni/ae of the program could be given a year's membership in POD, or the Australian equivalent of the American Association for Higher Education, or some such. The program co-ordinator might benefit from similar contacts, and from receiving materials from some of the larger state-sponsored teaching centers in the U.S., such as that at the University of Washington at Seattle, and the University of Texas at Austin. Finally, the biennial (soon to be annual) national conference on teaching assistants in the United States (held this year in November in Denver) would seem a natural link.

As for the vexed question of whether Ph.D. students who are not yet teaching but who want training in preparation for a possible teaching career should be admitted, my feeling is that at present they should not. I think there are certain to be more than enough applicants (even for double the number of places) coming from the ranks of those who concurrently teach. However, it might be possible to satisfy the demand for "preservice training" by a combination of a single afternoon's session on "preparing to teach at the ANU," open to all comers, and/or a booklet compiled on the basis of John Clanchy's excellent handouts, Peanuts cartoons and all. Many American universities (Harvard included) have a "Teaching Assistants' Handbook," a sort of vademecum which one can consult before, during, and after entering the teaching ranks. Given John's writing and pedagogical talents, might it be possible to subsidize such a writing venture with him as principal author?

Summation

Here, as the BBC says, are the main points again:

- Generally excellent conception and execution
- Keep assessing, and, if necessary, paring down the number of topics; some rearranging and a yet tighter focus are still needed
- The move to mandatory microteaching seems excellent (it will be interesting to see how many of this semester's participants complain, and how many find it)
- Some separate sessions for different disciplinary groups (e.g. scientists, non-scientists) seems a good idea and should be maintained
- Put some effort into thinking about how to utilize the "alumni/ae" — whether as an ongoing support group for one another, mentors for new graduate tutors, or simply people you want to continue to contact via fax or email once they begin teaching elsewhere.

The best part of this sort of program, it seems to me, is that it trains people who will take the gospel of good teaching with them out *in partibus infidelium*. A major contribution of the ANU may well be to serve as a center from which a new respect for teaching takes root among Australia's professors and

researchers of tomorrow. Truly integrating teacher training into the Ph.D. is a goal worth working toward with patience, and a small start crowned with success is certainly preferable to a more ambitious program which runs into immediate difficulties due to its size. Beginning with 30 students this year and increasing to 60 students next year feels to be just about right. In sum, there is a lot going for this program, and I wish its sponsor(s) and co-ordinator(s) well.

A handwritten signature in dark ink on a light blue background. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads "James Wilkinson".

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