

GTA Views on Their Own Roles and Student Roles in the Classroom

Jessica Tolchinsky
University of Rhode Island

Keywords: GTA, instructor obligations, student role, GTA role

Graduate Teaching Assistants teach undergraduate students for 50% or more of their time in a classroom. These GTAs may receive little to no training in teaching and for many of them it is their first teaching experience (Sohoni et al. 2013). GTAs are an important part of undergraduate student learning but unfortunately many universities do not have teaching training programs available for them (Luft et al. 2004). GTAs and professors not only vary in teaching experience but also in the power they have. In some cases, both GTAs and professors teach coordinated courses where some resources, such as exams, homework assignments, and lesson plans, may be available to them and possibly required to be used (Rasmussen and Ellis, 2015). There are professional obligations that instructors can use as resources to justify their teaching decisions being different than what is customary (Ko et al., 2023). These obligations are

- (a) “An obligation to interpersonal dynamics and relationships expressed in social groups.
- (b) An obligation to individual students.
- (c) An obligation to schooling institutions.
- (d) An obligation to the discipline of mathematics.” (Chazan et al., 2016).

I will refer to them as Interpersonal, Individual, Institutional, and Disciplinary, respectively from this point on. The PProfessional Obligation Scenario Evaluation (PROSE) instrument looks at teachers’ recognition of the above obligations (Ko et al., 2023). I designed discussion posts for 11 GTAs at a mid-size public northeastern university enrolled in a teaching course in order to expose them to pedagogy using the PROSE instrument as a guide. There are two scenarios for each obligation. This ensured that every GTA was seeing one prompt related to a class they are teaching and one prompt related to a class they are not teaching. The discussion asked GTAs to state whether or not they agree with the prompt and justify their level of agreement or disagreement, state any context they are imagining as they are reading the prompt and then choose 2 of their peers to respond to for each prompt. In their response to their peers the GTA was asked to state why they agree or disagree with the final decision, whether or not they agree with the justification for the decision, and the level to which they had the same considerations as their peers. In analyzing the discussion posts, using open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), I observed differences in some responses being whether the GTA is responding to the specific question topic in the prompt versus for general topics. Some GTAs related their responses to the courses they are teaching. GTA also discussed how they view the student’s role or their own role in a classroom which had related to how they justified their response to each scenario. This will inform what aspects of the Graduate Teaching experience have an effect on how they choose to structure their classroom and how this recognize the four obligations: “Interpersonal”, “Individual”, “Disciplinary”, and “Institutional.”

Acknowledgments

Thank you to Irma Stevens for their guidance on this project and their assistance with finding and obtaining the resources needed to complete this study.

References

- Chazan, D., Herbst, P., & Clark, L. (2016). Research on the teaching of mathematics: A call to theorize the role of society and schooling in mathematics instruction. *Handbook of research on teaching*, 5, 1039-1097.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, 13(1), 3-21.
- Ko, I., Herbst, P., & Shultz, M. (2023). Comparing how college mathematics instructors and high-school teachers recognize professional obligations of mathematics teaching when making instructional decisions. *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education*, 1-28.
- Luft, J. A., Kurdziel, J. P., Roehrig, G. H., & Turner, J. (2004). Growing a garden without water: Graduate teaching assistants in introductory science laboratories at a doctoral/research university. *Journal of research in science teaching*, 41(3), 211-233.
- Rasmussen, C., & Ellis, J. (2015). Calculus coordination at PhD-granting universities: More than just using the same syllabus, textbook, and final exam. *Insights and recommendations from the MAA national study of college calculus*, 107-115.
- Sohoni, S., Cho, Y., & French, D. P. (2013). A Survey to Capture Needs Assessment for Graduate Teaching Assistant Training. *Advances in Engineering Education*, 3(3), n3.