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Abstract: A primary goal of graduate teaching assistant (GTA) training is to prepare new instructors to handle their teaching roles with confidence. One important element of that role is instructional communication. This article describes an exercise called “You’ve Got Mail,” which gives GTAs the opportunity to practice responding to student e-mail messages that they are likely to encounter during the course of a semester, thereby preparing them to communicate confidently and effectively with students in their own classes.

Text of paper:

“You’ve Got Mail’’: Addressing Effective E-Mail Communication in Graduate Teaching Assistant Training

Objective: To prepare new graduate teaching assistants to respond effectively to student e-mail messages

Courses: GTA teaching seminars or orientation programs

Rationale

A primary goal of graduate teaching assistant (GTA) training programs is to prepare new instructors to handle their teaching roles with confidence (Young and Bippus, 2008). According to Shannon, Twale, and Moore (1998), one of the best ways to prepare GTAs is to provide them with ample opportunities to gain experience via simulations, case discussions, and practice teaching. Although classroom teaching and grading may be the most obvious contenders for practice opportunities, there are other instructional responsibilities that lend themselves to practice, as well. One such task is responding to student e-mail messages. In this article, I describe a GTA training exercise called “You’ve Got Mail,” which gives GTAs experience with this increasingly common form of student-teacher interaction.

Student-teacher e-mail communication has the potential to foster positive learning outcomes

(see, e.g., Duran, Kelly, & Keaten, 2005; Waldeck, Kearney, & Plax, 2001); as such, knowing how to respond effectively to e-mail queries and concerns is important. This task not always easy, however. Consider the following example from the *Chronicle of Higher Education’s* “Favorite Student E-mails” discussion forum (<http://chronicle.com/forums>): “Dear Professor, I saw that I lost points on the lab for questions I left blank. I thought they were rhetorical questions. Can I answer them now and get back the points?” (Young 2008). According to the professor who received the e-mail, “the student is a sweet kid and I do believe him, but I swear I have no idea how to respond to this.” The professor’s uncertainty is understandable, as responding effectively to such e-mails is not a simple black-and-white matter. Teachers must often make a judgment call that takes into consideration course policies, individual circumstances, fairness to the class, and the student-teacher relationship. Then, after the teacher decides *what* to say, he or she must determine *how* to say it. Thoughtful reflection is in order, but teachers cannot reflect for too long because students expect quick responses. Timely, thoughtful e-mail correspondence is an important professional responsibility, one that should not be left to chance in the orientation and socialization of new GTAs.

The need for explicit attention to this area became clear to me shortly after I began working with new GTAs, who contacted me frequently during their first semester with questions about how to respond to challenging student e-mail messages. Although I handled those queries on an individual basis, I often thought about how beneficial it would have been to discuss those types of messages with all of the new GTAs. At the time, the subject of teacher-student e-mail communication was not addressed in our departmental orientation program, and it was mentioned only briefly in *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips* (2006), the textbook used in the required pedagogy seminar. For that reason, I developed “You’ve Got Mail,” which allows GTAs to practice responding to fictional e-mail messages and receive feedback on their responses from fellow teachers, thereby preparing them to respond with confidence to future student e-mails.

The Activity

“You’ve Got Mail” was developed for a semester-long pedagogical seminar held one evening a week, but the instructions that follow could easily be adapted for use in orientation programs or regular GTA meetings.

Step 1: Introduce the activity to GTAs.

For a semester-long seminar, include the following instructions in the syllabus, or announce them at an early class meeting:

Before each seminar meeting, you will all receive an e-mail message from a “student.” These will not be actual e-mails from students; rather, they will be representative of the sorts of messages you might encounter from students this semester. One of you will respond to the message. The designated responder for the day will be clearly indicated in the subject line of the message—“Attention: A. Thompson (Basic Course E-mail Exercise).” When responding, be sure to hit “reply all,” which will allow everyone to see your response. We will discuss the e-mails and the responses in our seminar meeting.

Step 2: Create and send the e-mails.

Create a list of possible topics for e-mail messages based on e-mails that you have received directly from students or heard about from GTAs and other instructors. E-mail messages can address a range of themes, including university policies (e.g., “Can I take my final exam early?”), course requirements and expectations (“Can I do a speech on 9/11? The 9/11 Truth Commission has a great website I can use!”), grading (“I’ve been working SO hard on these speeches; it’s IMPOSSIBLE to get a A in here!”), and student development issues (“My boyfriend broke up with me, which is why I’ve missed the last five weeks of class. Is there any way that I can complete the class? Please? My parents will kill

me if I get an F.”) The more complex the e-mail, the better. Messages that require GTAs to balance tensions (e.g., compassion for individual students and fairness to the group; friendliness and authority; enforcement of policies and flexibility) are particularly useful, as will be illustrated shortly in the “debriefing” section. To optimize the learning potential of this activity in a semester-long course, e-mails can be timed to coincide with predictable student concerns. For instance, a panicked e-mail from a student with high communication anxiety can be sent early in the semester, while a complaint about the midterm exam might be sent a week or two before GTAs actually administer their midterms.

As described in the syllabus instructions, e-mails should be sent to a different GTA each week, with his or her name clearly indicated in the subject line. An alphabetized GTA list is an easy option for choosing weekly respondents. Before debriefing the activity with GTAs, it is helpful to make a list of facts and issues, tensions, and overarching principles relevant to the “student” message as well as the GTA response.

Debriefing

The debriefing of this activity, known in my teaching seminar as the “e-mail of the week” discussion, consists of three basic questions: 1) What are the issues in the student’s e-mail? 2) What specific details (e.g., points of information, phrasing) are important? 3) What did you think of the instructor’s response? The last question typically sparks a lively discussion lasting anywhere from 5-15 minutes, depending on the complexity of the message and the response. The GTAs almost always begin by praising the responder, but they also offer suggestions, making comments such as, “I might have also added...” or “When I thought about how I would answer this one, I thought I’d say something a little different.”

Many of the discussions involved the challenge of balancing authority with approachability, which is an important topic, generally, for new instructors to consider. In one discussion, for example,

GTAs debated whether a response to an e-mail about the midterm exam (“Can you tell me when the midterm is? I’m at home in Omaha, and I don’t have my syllabus here. Also, what’s going to be on the midterm?”) was “too nice.” In the response, the designated GTA pointed the student to relevant Blackboard resources and invited her to ask additional questions, all in a very encouraging tone. During the discussion, the GTAs complimented the responder on her tone, but a few maintained that if they had received the “student” message, they would have been more curt, presumably to communicate to the student that she needed to take more responsibility for her studies. This raised a valuable point about the challenge of determining what type of response is ultimately in the best interest of the student and his or her learning.

Appraisal

“You’ve Got Mail” has several benefits. First, it prompts thoughtful reflection on teacher-student communication. As a supervisor of new GTAs, I was encouraged by the instructors’ responses to the messages, which were consistently timely, detailed, supportive, and helpful. They revealed a strong command of university policy and course philosophy, as well as a genuine interest in students, as evidenced by comments such as “I’m happy to see that you are already thinking ahead to our next speech assignment,” and “I take student feedback very seriously and appreciate your thoughts and honest appraisal.” In one of our seminar discussions, several GTAs reported consulting with their peers (including both new and veteran GTAs) about possible responses and sometimes rewriting initial responses before posting a final version for everyone to see, suggesting careful thought about their teacher-student communication.

GTAs also found the activity useful, as evidenced by informal comments as well as responses to

an anonymous midterm assessment of the teaching seminar. In response to the question, “What’s helping you learn?” several GTAs mentioned the e-mail exercise specifically, noting:

- “The e-mail exercise gave me a good reference when I needed to respond to a similar e-mail.”
- “The e-mail exercise is helpful because I like seeing how others answer questions in comparison to how I would answer them.”
- “The e-mail exercises have been useful in preparing for contingencies.”

As indicated by these responses, “You’ve Got Mail” helps new GTAs navigate unfamiliar terrain with greater confidence, and as such, would be a valuable addition to any GTA training program. The outcomes of the exercise might vary depending on the characteristics of the GTA group (e.g., size, commitment to teaching, collegiality) and the length and formality of the orientation and training program, but the exercise can be modified easily to suit a variety of training contexts. “You’ve Got Mail” will not prepare GTAs for every challenging e-mail they will receive, but it will provide them with basic resources for responding effectively.

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