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Teaching Associates: Bridging Informal and Formal Mechanisms of Support for Graduate Student Instructors

Amanda M. Jungels¹, Marni A. Brown², Mindy Stomblor³,
and Saori Yasumoto⁴

Abstract

Faculty members and graduate student instructors (GSIs) spend a significant portion of their time in the classroom. Much of the literature calls for formal training for graduate students in pedagogy and teaching techniques (DeCesare 2003), and increasing attention has been paid to the benefits of informal supports for GSIs, such as peer networks. But scholars have paid far less attention to examining how formal and informal mechanisms of support might be bridged, thus strengthening support for GSIs. In this article, we explore and demonstrate the importance of bridging available support systems for GSIs, specifically through a position occupied by an advanced GSI, called the Teaching Associate. Using focus groups, semistructured interviews, and surveys, we argue that the Teaching Associate offers formal and informal forms of support for graduate student instructors and their departments and we advocate their use in teacher training.

Keywords

formal networks, informal networks, bridging networks, teaching associate, graduate student instructors, director of instruction, graduate teacher training

Entering the classroom for the first time can be an anxiety-producing experience, charged with complex and often unexpected emotions (Meanwell and Kleiner 2014). Until recently, little literature examined these experiences from the perspective of graduate student instructors (GSIs) or described the types of support that may help to reduce these anxieties. As Smollin and Arluke (2014) point out, GSIs face the challenge of being in the liminal space between “instructor” and “student” in a way that teaching assistants and faculty do not, and GSIs often lack professional networks and institutional supports. Understanding how GSIs face these challenges, and what types of support are most beneficial for GSIs, is an important and underresearched aspect of the teaching and learning literature.

Given their important roles in many academic departments, it is unsurprising that increasing attention is being paid to the ways in which GSIs are trained and receive support. Much of the existing literature focuses on formal mechanisms of training such as internships, teaching assistantships, pedagogy training courses, and formalized or peer-based

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observation (for examples, see DeCesare 2003; Pescosolido and Milkie 1995). More recently, increasing attention has been paid to the potential of informal networks among GSIs as a source of support. Hunt, Mair, and Atkinson (2012) argued that these informal teaching networks may prove to be useful and beneficial to the development of teacher identities and teaching practices, but these networks may be unstable, disorganized, or inefficient at sharing information (Hunt et al. 2012; Smollin and Arluke 2014).

In this paper, we suggest that the role of Teaching Associate¹—a position our department has had for more than 10 years—acts as a bridge between the existing formal and informal mechanisms of support, bolstering both. The Teaching Associate engages in both formal practices (e.g., institutionalized or initiated from the departmental leadership) and informal ones (e.g., generated through casual or unofficial interactions), providing assistance to graduate student instructors and to the department. We offer an analysis of how the Teaching Associate engages in both formal and informal support practices and acts as a strengthening bridge between these types of support.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the available literature on pedagogical support for GSIs focuses on formal, structured programs that are often generated at the institutional level (e.g., teacher training programs, professional development programs, or centers for teaching and learning). Informal supports, in contrast, are those that are created through casual, infrequent, or everyday contact between individuals. Existing research indicates that formal and informal types of support are generated, accessed, and used differently and at different rates, but little research exists that attempts to understand how GSIs access and rely upon these networks.

Challenges Faced by Graduate Student Instructors

While previous research has examined teaching-related anxiety in a variety of types of teaching professionals (see Gardner and Leak 1994; Jones, Davis, and Price 2004), little research has examined the challenges that GSIs face as they enter the classroom for the first time. Smollin and Arluke (2014:2) found that GSIs in sociology report “high levels of anxiety around their first-time teaching experiences and face a number of challenges that shape how they teach.” This anxiety included

feeling unprepared; lack of confidence, especially surrounding issues of presentation of self and authority in the classroom; problems with student-teacher interactions; and lack of support and guidance from faculty, mentors, and departments (Smollin and Arluke 2014). Negative experiences in the classroom can affect GSIs in terms of stress and anxiety, their sense of selves as academics, and their future teaching plans, but it also can have a “trickle down” effect on undergraduate students’ educational experiences and (potentially) their intentions to continue studying sociology, all of which could have a deleterious effect on the discipline as a whole (Smollin and Arluke 2014).

Importance of Formal Mechanisms of Support

Over the past few decades, increasing attention has been paid to the amount, kind, and duration of formalized graduate teacher training programs in sociology departments (DeCesare 2003). Formal training tends to focus on graduate coursework in pedagogical and mechanical issues (e.g., developing course objectives and policies, understanding and choosing forms of assessment, discussing teaching effectiveness, etc.). Recent research has indicated that pedagogy training courses had a positive impact on the amount of anxiety GSIs felt about teaching, increased their confidence, and helped to alleviate specific stressors related to teaching (Meanwell and Kleiner 2014; Pelton 2014; Smollin and Arluke 2014). Formal teaching supports for sociologists have been the focus of research as well. Spalter-Roth et al. (2010) surveyed members of the American Sociological Association about their participation in formal teaching networks, finding that almost 75 percent of faculty members did not participate in these formally organized mechanisms of teaching support, and very few participated in more than one.

Importance of Informal Mechanisms of Support

Rather than the “top down” type of support offered through teacher training programs or other institutional mechanisms, informal networks are generated through “friends, contacts, and accidental communications” (Krackhardt and Stern 1988:123). Among GSIs, these informal networks are often formed through previous friendships, being members of the same teaching cohort, sharing office space, or by teaching the same courses (Hunt et al. 2012).

Informal networks can form in tandem with formal networks of support (Hunt et al. 2012) or in situations where formal support networks are weak (Waldström 2001). Previous literature indicates that informal networks may be more diverse in terms of the experience levels of the members when compared with formal networks, which may be beneficial to those who are seeking information and social support from more experienced GSIs (Hunt et al. 2012).

Unfortunately, informal networks of support may be unstable, inconsistent, and short-lived. These networks may suffer from ideological and theoretical divisions as a result of homophily (Cumming and Higgins 2006; Hunt et al. 2012; Ibarra 1993) and often exist “without the knowledge of those supervising, preventing the transfer of formalized problem-solving information” (Smollin and Arluke 2014:9). Although informal networks can help to alleviate feelings of isolation and anxiety—which are quite common among graduate students in general (Grady et al. 2014) and among those who teach (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010)—they are not universally helpful or accessible due to a host of individual and institutional factors (Hunt et al. 2012; Meanwell and Kleiner 2014; Smollin and Arluke 2014; Spalter-Roth et al. 2010; Springer, Parker, and Leviten-Reid 2009).

In sum, existing literature indicates that formal and informal mechanisms support graduate students in diverse ways and that these mechanisms also have unique weaknesses. We advocate that one way to strengthen these existing networks is to create bridges and connections between them through the creation of an advanced peer mentor position, which we call the Teaching Associate.

TEACHING ASSOCIATE POSITION IN CONTEXT

Our department created a graduate teacher training program more than 10 years ago out of a concern that GSIs were underprepared when they entered the classroom, stemming in part from practical concerns about undergraduate sociology education. In addition, there was concern that graduate students would leave the department unprepared for the demands of a career in academia. Developing an intensive teaching program was one way to address many of these concerns simultaneously. Our program uses a three-prong approach, comprised of a pedagogy course, an internship, and continued support through departmental positions.

Coursework and Internship

Before being allowed to solo-teach their own course, all graduate students in our department must take a one-semester pedagogy and mechanics course. In this course, students develop materials designed for either an Introduction to Sociology or an Introduction to Social Problems course, including syllabi, lectures, discussion questions, and a variety of assessments. During the course, graduate students participate in pedagogical discussions, observe experienced faculty in their classrooms, and discuss challenges that are common to the college classroom and those unique to sociology courses. Teaching Associates act as a “teaching assistant” during this course, offering their feedback and their perspective as an experienced GSI.

Students who successfully complete the pedagogy and mechanics course advance to a seven-week summer teaching internship (graded pass/fail). In addition to teaching their own Introduction to Sociology or Social Problems course, GSIs in their internship semester attend and participate in a weekly discussion session with other interns to discuss their experiences, accomplishments, and challenges in the classroom. During the internship, both the Teaching Associate and the Director of Instruction observe the GSIs in their classrooms on separate occasions and offer individualized feedback and critique. In addition, the Director of Instruction engages the undergraduate students of each GSI in a detailed, consensus-based feedback session (based on small group instructional diagnosis, or SGID) about the instructor’s methods and practices and provides feedback based on this process to the GSI (Black 1998). After successful completion of the two-course sequence, GSIs operate more independently and with less oversight by the department and departmental administration (save for periodic observations and evaluations); at this point, GSIs rely more on informal networks for support.

Positions of Support

In addition to the faculty position of Director of Instruction, a critical element of the graduate teacher training program and the focus of this paper is the position of the Teaching Associate. Applicants for the position are selected by faculty members of the Teaching Committee, who aim to choose a candidate who they believe is well versed in pedagogy, who is supportive of a variety of teaching styles, and who has the ability to offer critique to their

peers in an effective way. Graduate students who are selected to fill the role of Teaching Associate (which the department considers an honor) continue to teach one undergraduate course each semester in addition to their Teaching Associate duties (including attending and participating in the pedagogy and internship courses), and they must sign a confidentiality agreement that prohibits them from discussing GSIs' teaching issues/performance with anyone other than the Chair of the Department, the Director of Instruction, or former Teaching Associates. Teaching Associates earn \$1,000 per semester more than their typical stipend, and (depending on departmental budget) they are awarded \$500 in either travel reimbursement or a cash award.

RESEARCH METHODS

Over the course of spring 2010 and fall 2013, we conducted two focus groups and three interviews with eight current and past Teaching Associates and two interviews with relevant members of department leadership and administration. We chose to conduct focus groups rather than interviews with the Teaching Associates when possible because we believed focus groups would allow for more depth of discussion, in large part because "participants both query each other and explain themselves to each other" during focus groups in ways that are not possible in individual interviews (Morgan 1996:139). Our focus groups with the Teaching Associates (led by the third author) used a semi-structured interview schedule, which focused on the skills required for the position, the roles and responsibilities of the position, the rewards the Teaching Associates felt they received from the position, and challenges the Teaching Associates faced during their tenures. It was from these focus groups and interviews that we originally began to conceptualize the distinction between formal and informal types of support and how the Teaching Associates could serve as a bridge between the two. The interviews with the departmental leadership focused on the development of the teacher training program; the benefits of the Teaching Associate position to the department, faculty, and Director of Instruction; and how other graduate programs might implement a position similar to the Teaching Associate.

Finally, in the spring of 2013, we surveyed GSIs about their experiences working with the Teaching Associates and the types of support that they received from the Teaching Associate. Our sampling criteria were that the GSI had successfully

completed the two-course sequence within the past five years and either was currently enrolled in the graduate program or had successfully completed his or her degree. Thirty-three GSIs met these criteria and were recruited to complete an institutional review board-approved, confidential online survey through Google Drive. Twelve GSIs participated in the research by completing the survey. Questions included in the survey were both closed- and open-ended and were designed to better understand how GSIs accessed different types of support and how the Teaching Associate facilitated the support.

DISCUSSION

We first discuss the formal and informal support offered to GSIs and to the department and the ways in which the Teaching Associates were able to act as a link between these types of support. Second, we discuss the benefits those who have held the position of Teaching Associate received and challenges they faced in the position. We conclude by discussing how other departments might create a position similar to the Teaching Associate.

Formal Support for GSIs: Observation, Feedback, and Critique

GSIs credited Teaching Associates with providing them a host of formal supports within the context of the two-course sequence, many of which were explicit responsibilities of the position. This included conducting observations, videotaping, providing critique, and demonstrating and discussing good teaching practices. GSIs described how Teaching Associates provided formal support such as "constructive critique of my teaching," "practical feedback," "innovative ideas to support and improve my teaching," "tons of advice and administrative support," "[contributing] great classroom examples to convey several of the topics in class," "helping me find teaching resources," "offering motivation and encouragement," and "technology tours [of classrooms]." Being observed and critiqued during the two-course sequence was cited as one of the most beneficial types of formal support, as this GSI discussed:

[The Teaching Associate] was very helpful in giving constructive critique of my teaching. She was supportive and provided innovative ideas to support and improve my teaching. I felt as if she recognized that each instructor must have their own style and did not attempt to change my style, but to aid me

to utilize my particular brand of teaching to my highest potential.

While evaluations and assessments were not always pleasant experiences, GSIs described the observation and critique process as “priceless.” One GSI stated that “[the Teaching Associate’s] experience and critique of lessons . . . and presentations were invaluable.” This GSI added that “having another graduate student’s perspective outside [the professor teaching the two-course sequence]” was also important. GSIs and Teaching Associates described the formal supports and observations as a form of routine assessment, rather than a punishment, which reinforced the supportive nature of the Teaching Associate position. Offering observations and evaluations that are designed to improve performance rather than punish or rank GSIs is critical to GSIs valuing the experience and the subsequent feedback (Smollin and Arluke 2014).

Informal Support for GSIs: Continuing Support

As they continued to refine their pedagogy and as they began teaching upper-level courses, almost all GSIs reported that they approached the Teaching Associate for support and guidance. Teaching Associates were frequently sought out for advice on developing classroom materials and course policies (e.g., improving lecture notes, creating in-class exercises, selecting new readings, or modifying attendance and late paper policies). The vast majority of GSIs indicated they had received assistance surrounding problematic student behaviors and classroom management issues, and GSIs also frequently mentioned how Teaching Associates were useful to help them “debrief” after class (e.g., discussing something that happened in class, how a lecture went, etc.). One GSI described how Teaching Associates continued to support GSIs informally as the formal two-course sequence concluded:

Whether it was a problematic student, a gap in my lecture material, or just discussing pedagogy in general, I found it most useful to have someone to bounce ideas off of who could offer additional information or perspectives. This was particularly important for me after the [summer internship] course ended, and when I started to teach an upper-division course and the “direct supervision” aspect of the teaching program was over.

The vast majority of the GSIs said that when they discussed issues with the Teaching Associate it was because the GSI initiated the conversation. These findings validate the importance of the two-course sequence in offering formal support to graduate students but indicate that continued support to graduate students as they continue their teaching career is beneficial as well. The fact that GSIs were most likely to initiate the conversation demonstrates that when given a resource to rely upon, GSIs are proactive in using it. Despite the fact that their role of mentor continued after their term ended, none of the Teaching Associates felt that this continued contact was burdensome. In fact, this long-term contact often reaffirmed to the Teaching Associates that they were an important part of the continued development of GSIs and that their experience as mentors was valued.

Bridging Formal and Informal Support Mechanisms for GSIs

While Teaching Associates offer both formal and informal support mechanisms for GSIs, their position is most unique in the space that it occupies between the two types of mechanisms and the fact that being able to access both types of support was important for GSIs. Our GSIs stated that the types of support they received most often were informal types of support (continued support after the two-course sequence ended) but that the types found most beneficial were the formal types of support (in-class evaluation). This indicates that while both types of support are valuable to GSIs and were accessible through the Teaching Associate, the types of support that are most sought after or desired are not always the types that are most beneficial.

After the completion of the two-course sequence, the Teaching Associates took on a new role in relation to the GSIs—that of peer mentor rather than supervisor. Their previous relationship allowed them to occupy this unique middle ground of peer and mentor, a position that was valued by the GSIs in our sample. Many GSIs stated that they viewed the Teaching Associates as more trustworthy and knowledgeable than members of their informal networks, a sentiment illustrated by this GSI:

The Teaching Associates usually had significantly more teaching experience than my peers, so it was useful to approach them because it was likely they had dealt with a similar situation, either first-hand or through

problem-solving for someone else. Asking [my peers] was, in my opinion, particularly risky because you have no idea what kind of teacher they are, what their pedagogy is, or whether or not their advice is sound and worthwhile. I knew [the Teaching Associate] was selected by the department to do just that kind of mentorship and guidance.

This aspect of the Teaching Associate position remedies one of the major weaknesses with relying solely on informal networks; that is, valuable information is often not shared across the networks because supervisors are unaware that the networks exist or are unable to access them in a reliable way (Smollin and Arluke 2014). Teaching Associates also had information about the GSI's past performances and teaching needs that peers did not have due to their experiences with the GSI during the two-course sequence. In addition, several GSIs stated that the confidentiality agreement that Teaching Associates signed was an important part of the position because they regarded the Teaching Associate as "a confidential resource," which was important because, as one GSI stated, "New instructors face issues with self-confidence and admitting this to a peer can feel threatening. Having access to a peer who is also viewed as unbiased and nonthreatening can be helpful." The Teaching Associates are uniquely able to fill this role, and the confidentiality agreement gave the GSIs the confidence to address their issues without worry that they would be fodder for intradepartmental gossip.

Even though the Teaching Associates were connected to the administration, GSIs did not necessarily view them as being part of the administration. This "insider/outsider" position was essential to the success of the position, allowing GSIs to seek advice and guidance while simultaneously protecting their presentation of self with faculty members. GSIs stated that they felt "less intimidated opening up about mistakes or missteps to the Teaching Associate," in large part because GSIs felt that approaching the Teaching Associates was "a LOT [sic] lower stakes than asking faculty" especially when it felt "like a 'dumb' question." For this reason, GSIs said, "this position is very important for graduate student support." This was particularly true when one considers the fact that, like in many other departments, maintaining funding in our department is tied to one's ability to teach, as this GSI discussed:

[The Chair of the Department and Director of Instruction] are perceived as supervisors or evaluators of your work. If [new instructors are] lacking confidence, they do not want to show that to the person who is making a decision about their ability to teach . . . especially when that would mean the end of funding as a graduate student in our department.

GSIs stated that it was important to know that there were many levels of support for teaching in the department and that there was someone with the perspective of a graduate student whom they could approach for support and guidance. The availability and accessibility of an advanced peer mentor who is connected to but not a part of departmental leadership are especially important given the indications from existing literature that graduate students are "[reluctant] to engage with faculty," a reluctance that is marked by the "shared perception that faculty members were largely aware of challenges faced by graduate instructors" (Smollin and Arluke 2014:9). In their survey responses, GSIs indicated that Teaching Associates offered "unfettered, less-politicized opinions, critiques, and advice" compared with faculty members, because they were uniquely positioned to understand the "always-changing departmental climate that affects each teaching cohort." Many of our GSIs mentioned that they were simply more comfortable approaching a Teaching Associate than a faculty member, especially given the fact that "faculty . . . are not always responsive or interested in shepherding good teachers."

Finally, the role of the Teaching Associate addresses one of the major weaknesses of informal networks: They lack longevity and stability (Hunt et al. 2012; Ibarra 1993). The relationship that GSIs had with their Teaching Associate extended well beyond the teaching course and internship; in fact, almost all of the GSIs who completed our survey said that they had continued contact with the Teaching Associate after their internship period was over. This continued peer support was "invaluable," as one GSI stated: "I know that I have someone—in fact, several someones—that are reliable and trusted sources of support for teaching and other academic-related matters. While my peers can also offer that support, having a long-lasting relationship with someone you know has experience and first-hand knowledge is critical."

Formal Support for the Department: Resources and Service

Teaching Associates were not only an invaluable source of support for GSIs, they also offered a variety of formal types of assistance to the department and departmental leadership. Perhaps most important among these was Teaching Associates' participation in the two-course sequence where they conducted observations, offered another perspective in class discussions, and generally assisted with the course. Another example of formal support was the creation and maintenance of a teaching resource manual for everyone who teaches in the department. This resource included bureaucratic information (e.g., the university's policies on academic honesty and disruptive behavior), support resources (e.g., a list of what the university and the American Sociological Association offer), information about serving on departmental committees as a graduate student representative, and information on the administrative side of teaching (e.g., how to add or drop students from a course, enter course grades, and use the online class management system and technology in their classrooms).

Informal Support to the Department: Liaison and Triage

One of the ways Teaching Associates stated that they provided informal support to the department was through their ability to act as liaisons between the GSIs and the departmental leadership. This usually took the form of conveying information from the administration to the GSIs (e.g., about a policy change). Teaching Associates could be trusted to transmit reliable information about policy or procedural changes at the departmental or university level, in large part because they were in close contact with departmental leadership.

Teaching Associates also served as a form of "institutional memory" for the GSIs and the departmental administration; they were aware of how the administration handled common teaching-related issues (e.g., disruptive students or academic dishonesty penalties) and so could advise GSIs without always involving faculty. This allowed the Teaching Associates to "triage" GSIs' concerns and act as a "front line" for the departmental leadership. One member of our departmental leadership spoke on this point directly during our interviews: "As GSIs approach Teaching Associates, they can either handle the problem and I don't even have to

hear about it, or they can say, 'This is one of those situations that that really does need to be pushed forward.' And that is absolutely so useful for the department." GSIs were aware that Teaching Associates acted in this capacity, as one GSI discussed: "Approaching a Teaching Associate with a problem puts you on a path to an official outcome, without having to engage with faculty before it is necessary. It may be that the situation does not require faculty; but, if it does, the Teaching Associate can put you on course." Given GSIs' reluctance to approach faculty members, having an informed intermediary in the form of a Teaching Associate helped to facilitate the communication and transmission of information between and across the levels, in addition to helping to reduce the workload of faculty members.

Bridging Formal and Informal Support Mechanisms for the Department

Teaching Associates and departmental administrators agreed that being able to serve as a bridge between the formal and informal supports they offered the department was an essential part of their position. Just as GSIs valued having someone to debrief with, members of the departmental administration stated that it was important to have someone to serve as a "sounding board" when dealing with challenging teaching situations:

[Teaching Associates] are thoroughly and delightfully immersed in pedagogy, they have signed a confidentiality oath, and if the situation involves a GSI, they are already aware of the GSI's personality, teaching strengths and weaknesses, and how best to work with [the GSI]. This is something my colleagues are not usually privy to. I love getting a handful of Teaching Associates in my office to problem solve. Problem solved!

While these aspects of the position clearly benefited the department and members of the departmental administration, they were also beneficial to the Teaching Associates, who were given unique insight on how to use an administrative lens to approach teaching-related issues. As one member of our departmental leadership explained:

It's very hard to get out of the perspective of just being the teacher when you get a taste of, "How does the administration see this?"

One example I can think of is Teaching Associates advising GSIs who are writing their syllabi. They can think to themselves about the different situations that they've heard of or discussed and see potential problems in the syllabi. It's gonna pop out, like, "Oh, no, don't do this attendance policy. I remember what happened when so-and-so did it. That's going to lead to forty grade appeals at the end of the semester."

In addition to offering support to the GSIs and to the department, individuals who served as Teaching Associates also benefited from having held the position, and significant portions of our discussions in the focus groups centered on these benefits.

How Teaching Associates Benefited from the Position

In addition to providing formal and informal benefits to GSIs and the department, the Teaching Associates received a number of benefits from having held the position. Foremost among these benefits were gaining experience with the administrative and bureaucratic aspects of teaching and the ability to reflect upon their own teaching. Working with the Director of Instruction to problem-solve offered Teaching Associates a broader understanding of the multiple constituencies in any given situation (the undergraduates in the class, the GSI, the department and university) and the ramifications of decisions (legal violations, setting precedents, etc.). This experience not only was useful for the department but also offered valuable learning experiences for the Teaching Associates, who said that they used these experiences to advise other graduate students and to inform their own pedagogy and course policies.

Teaching Associates said that in addition to being able to navigate university bureaucracy, learning how to offer constructive feedback and critique was one of the most important benefits that they received. This skill began to develop in the pedagogy course and was strengthened during the internship observations and feedback sessions, as this Teaching Associate discussed:

Well, sitting through the [pedagogy] class [as a GSI] where we're asked to give feedback on individuals in their mini-lectures . . . we're asked to find something positive and something to critique for them

to improve. I could find things for everybody, regardless of where they were in their skills and [their] success in our class. It's giving that kind of constructive feedback to other new teachers in a way that supports them growing as teachers.

An essential part of this skill, according to the Teaching Associates, was the ability to support and communicate with GSIs who were reluctant to participate in or were resistant to the critique process. In our focus groups, Teaching Associates stated that they were required to work with and offer feedback to a diverse set of graduate students with varying levels of experience, skill, and responsiveness to critique and feedback. Being able to give constructive feedback, especially to those who were resistant to the process, was a skill that Teaching Associates said greatly benefited them. Teaching Associates stated that they witnessed a variety of teaching styles and potential classroom issues and spent a great deal of time thinking about and discussing how they would handle a myriad of situations, which one Teaching Associate said was essential to building and expanding the set of skills in her "teaching toolkit."

Challenges of Being the Teaching Associate

Although holding the position of Teaching Associate carried a lot of benefits, it was not without its challenges. During the focus groups, Teaching Associates discussed challenges that fell into two broad categories: dealing with individuals who were resistant to the assessment and evaluation process and navigating conflict between their roles as mentor and peer.

Several of the Teaching Associates stated that learning to deal with individuals who were resistant to the process, who were oppositional, or who had difficult personalities was one aspect of the position that presented a challenge and often caused anxiety. Although their experiences varied in terms of the severity of the situation, almost everyone was faced with a resistant or reluctant personality. This excerpt from a Teaching Associate focus group exemplifies the types of conflicts and associated anxiety that Teaching Associates experienced:

The hard thing, I think, was dealing with [GSIs] who weren't super happy about having somebody come into their classrooms

to observe and evaluate them and give feedback. [I had] one of those people . . . so I was kind of dreading how that was gonna go. It ended up not going down that bad. I mean it was fine, once we met, but there was this anxiety leading up to meeting with her.

One additional challenge that arose in our analysis was role conflict between being a peer and a mentor to other GSIs. Being “betwixt and between” roles is a common problem for GSIs in general, and Teaching Associates are no exception (Grady et al. 2014). Navigating these roles was complicated, especially when preexisting friendships came into conflict with the role and responsibilities of the Teaching Associate, as this Teaching Associate stated:

Because the position is a mentor position, I was worried about having to critique the same people in my graduate classes and people I interact with socially. I was a little concerned with them seeing me as a traitor or something. But it didn't turn out to be a problem. But I was worried.

While Teaching Associates said that they had concerns about role conflict, very little of that conflict was realized. The confidentiality agreement, which was in place to protect the GSIs from being the subject of gossip, also created a unique conflict for the Teaching Associates. Although it afforded the Teaching Associates protection from feeling pressured to participate in gossip, it also created a sometimes uncomfortable and undesirable social distance from their peers: “It is a protection in that way but it also adds to the social distance because they want to gossip with you but you can't do that. [You] have to learn ways to deflect it without coming across as shutting them down.” These issues of role conflict were complicated by the link between teaching in the department and receiving funding. Teaching Associates reported that even though they had no direct decision-making responsibilities related to funding, they were concerned about their role (and GSIs' perception of that role) in the process of funding decisions. Previous literature has determined that having peer mentorship is a key way of reducing role strain for GSIs (Grady et al. 2014), and Teaching Associates stated that they relied upon the network of past Teaching Associates for support and mentorship related to their roles as Teaching Associates.

Given all of the benefits that GSIs, the department and departmental administration, and Teaching Associates received from the Teaching Associate position, we wish to conclude by discussing the overall importance of the Teaching Associate position within the scholarship of teaching and learning and the discipline of sociology in general as well as briefly describing how other departments may create a similar position.

CONCLUSION: IMPLEMENTING A TEACHING ASSOCIATE POSITION

Despite the fact that our study has limitations including the representation of only one department, limited sample size of Teaching Associates, and a low response rate from GSIs, we believe that the position of Teaching Associate offers a unique way for departments to create a bridge between formal pedagogy courses and the informal types of support that GSIs generate on their own. Echoing other researchers' sentiments (Hunt et al. 2012), we believe that formal and informal networks of support are beneficial for graduate students who are learning to teach. Offering only formal support means that GSIs and new faculty may not have continuing support across their teaching career (Spalter-Roth et al. 2010), and while informal networks are useful and necessary in their own right, they are often unstable or do not offer the kinds of support that GSIs need and/or want. A position like the Teaching Associate creates a knowledgeable resource for GSIs and departmental leadership to rely upon and helps to strengthen and reinforce the connections between the informal and formal supports that are available. Given the relatively low expense involved in establishing the position, it is, as one member of our departmental leadership put it, “a good investment . . . and to invest in the front end, to have a Teaching Associate who could help improve the quality of instruction, ultimately makes my life easier and makes it desirable for Chairs [in other departments].”

“Investing in the front end” of teaching is an essential component of strengthening teaching, especially given DeCesare's (2003:76) observation that graduate students are “tomorrow's teachers of the discipline.” A GSI who is currently in a tenure-track job as an assistant professor also addressed the broader benefits to the discipline of having strong teaching programs to prepare future faculty:

Let's face it: teaching is difficult, especially in a large university. Even if one has had teaching experience before, there is always room for improvement. . . . I feel that I have learned so much about teaching, that I am confident in my ability to teach, which frees me up to pursue the required research and service work, without spending an inordinate amount of time questioning my tactics as a teacher.

Given the types of support that Teaching Associates offer to departments and GSIs and the benefits that those who hold the position receive, we believe that a position like this would be an asset to departments around the United States. In addition, we believe that a position like the Teaching Associate—even if it were partially implemented in other departments—strengthens the discipline of sociology as a whole. Should they find positions in departments with graduate programs, Teaching Associates are uniquely able to begin teaching programs, expanding the number of well-prepared, educated, and informed teachers and the visibility of teacher training programs as a whole.

We acknowledge that our department is exceptional in terms of its preparation of graduate students as they begin their teaching careers and that many departments have no formal teaching program at all. We would recommend that (at a minimum) those programs create a pedagogy course and routine observations of GSIs, although we understand that this may not be possible in all departments. Even in those departments without the resources or support for an intensive teaching program, we believe that with support from a center for teaching and learning (if one exists), an experienced and accomplished GSI could conduct nonpunitive observations and evaluations of GSIs and offer mentorship to GSIs that could create significant improvements in undergraduate sociology education, GSIs' experiences in the classroom, their future careers as teachers, and the culture of teaching in that department.

The Teaching Associate position has the potential to offer a variety of formal and informal supports to beginning GSIs and their departments, to strengthen GSIs' teaching effectiveness, and to help create a supportive teaching culture within the department. Teaching Associates also receive important benefits from holding the position, including exposure to university bureaucracy and the opportunity to reflect upon their own pedagogy.

In addition, the position offers the possibility to bridge and connect these types of support in ways that have not been previously examined in pedagogy literature, further strengthening the ties between formal and informal types of support. For departments that wish to strengthen an existing teaching program or for those departments that are looking to implement a teacher training program, a position like the Teaching Associate would be an invaluable asset.

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NOTES

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1. This position was developed based on the third author's graduate experience in a somewhat similar position at Florida State University (FSU). While the name and some of the duties overlapped, the position at FSU was a part of the Program for Instructional Excellence (the centralized teaching center) and was not a departmental position.

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