

A Pair of Proposals for the Philosophy Department Pedagogy Seminar

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Currently, graduate students in the department are required to take part in the weekly pedagogy seminar in their first year of teaching at Harvard. Typically, this happens in the third year of the PhD. The pedagogy seminar meets weekly both semesters. In the Fall, the seminar focuses on the fundamentals of teaching. The Spring semester has been more variable but a characteristic focus has been on helping students to develop as mindful and self-aware teachers. One way this has been prompted in the past has been by having G3 students write a teaching statement over the course of the Spring semester.

Primary Proposal:

In the Spring Semester of the G2 year, graduate students attend several sessions which cover the fundamentals of teaching and also sit in on 1-2 sections led by experienced graduate student teachers.

Secondary Proposal/ Floating Idea:

Incorporate the material that is covered in the (voluntary) academic productivity seminar into the pedagogy seminar. (One way this could be done is by alternating the focus of the meetings each week. This alternating pattern could continue in the Spring of the G3 year albeit with bi-weekly meetings).

Why adopt the primary proposal?

1. Many G3s are entirely new to teaching. By moving sessions such as 'how to write a section syllabus,' 'strategies for encouraging participation,' and 'managing expectations' to the Spring semester of the G2 year, G3s would be better prepared to teach right at the beginning of the Fall (currently, these sessions are spread out over the rest weeks of the semester).
2. Many graduate students begin to think about teaching in the Spring semester of their G2 year as teaching assignments for the following year occur then. Anecdotally, many G2s feel anxious about teaching over the summer prior to their G3 year. Again, anecdotally, over the course of the Fall semester, new teachers find that their previous worries were unfounded. By moving some basic sessions of the pedagogy seminar to the Spring of the G2 year, my hope is that graduates will worry less about teaching over the summer.

Below are two quotes from a wrap-up exercise at the end of the Fall semester that express some of what I have said above:

“At the beginning of the semester, I don't think I had a good sense of the sense of authority I would have in the classroom. I think that if I had a firmer grasp of how what I say impacts what students think and write in a pretty direct and concrete way, I might have taken this up more confidently in the start. I think concretely, I would have felt more secure about the times I was speaking and not speaking and feel okay about actually teaching a lesson.”

“I was worried about the possibility of: some students not respecting me properly; suffering some kind of speaking block (not being able to come up with the right words) while leading section; spending too much time teaching. Only the last eventuated.”

Why incorporate the productivity workshop into the pedagogy seminar?

The quote directly above suggests an answer to this question: new teachers spend a lot of time on teaching and not as much time on their research. Other than attending either the Moral and Political Philosophy Dissertation Workshop or the Metaphysics and Epistemology Dissertation Workshop and, perhaps, meeting with their advisor, graduates have very few regular, research related commitments. Research does not give immediate, positive results whereas teaching often does. It is thus easy for G3 students to spend the vast majority of their time on teaching. This often contributes to graduate students feeling stressed and burnout. Because teaching has a fast feedback loop, as people become stressed, they tend to prioritize teaching at the expense of research, subsequently becoming more stressed.

Why meet weekly in the Fall of the G3 year?

The weekly meetings would give students a chance to talk through any challenges they have experienced and provide support and encouragement. This, I think, has been one of the most valuable aspects of the pedagogy seminar over the last two years. This schedule of meetings would also allow sufficient time to cover the necessary topics (both teaching related and productivity related).

Why meet biweekly in the Spring of the G3 year?

Students typically feel much more comfortable teaching in the Spring semester and need less support. With core skills covered, the seminar can aid professional development and play a role in helping students maintain good work habits but without placing too much of a burden on them. Biweekly meetings would also give the leaders of the seminar time to work with the G2 students.