

**Graduate Program Teaching Initiative**  
Wabash Center for Teaching & Learning in Theology & Religion  
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- ***The teaching culture within the doctoral program matters a great deal.***  
The teaching culture is a powerful and implicit part of all doctoral programs. It is shaped by the faculty as a whole and by whether they take seriously the teaching of their own students. Frequent conversations about teaching, “pulling back the curtain” to talk about classroom sessions, valuing the teaching task as a present and future part of the profession, demonstrating transparency with syllabus decisions – all contribute to a teaching culture that nurtures the doctoral student’s own teaching preparedness.
- ***Different structures for teaching preparation can produce similar benefits.*** There are pedagogical theory courses, teaching and learning colloquies, workshops around particular topics, teaching assistant and mentoring programs, programs that work well with their teaching centers on campus and those that mostly ignore them. This variety of structures and methods does not produce starkly different results. Having *something that is valued* seems to be the most important thing, because it signals to the doctoral students the importance of teaching in their future jobs. Having *something that is done well* is even better.
- ***Teaching Assistant programs are too often used as a way to help faculty handle their workloads rather than to prepare or train future teachers.***  
This can be seen when there is a lack of orientation or training of the faculty members who supervise TAs, when they are used for only the grunt work of a class (such as marking exams) or are not given a chance to contribute to the design or content of the class, when there is little genuine supervision or feedback given to the TAs about their classroom presence, and when discussion is not encouraged among the TAs about the tasks they are facing and the jobs they are doing.
- ***Mentoring by mid- and senior-faculty members within formal and informal structures is extremely variable.*** Doctoral school faculty members need to be oriented and developed into their role of forming future faculty. Doctoral school hiring decisions are often made because of many other factors, including their status and standing in the field and their research areas. Yet shaping future members of the profession (which is the goal of most religion doctoral programs) depends on having doctoral faculty who possess the characteristics and abilities to supervise, evaluate, and nurture the teaching skills of a young graduate student. For mentoring programs to be a dependable method of formation, grad programs need a critical mass of faculty members who are invested and skilled in this process.

- ***Watch where your graduates are being hired and value those settings as future teaching settings.*** Also pay attention to the type of teaching that they are asked to do. Are they teaching large classes, small classes, discussion seminars, online courses? Are they teaching interdisciplinary core courses with mostly non-majors, general education courses taught for the humanities curriculum, or advanced courses for majors? The more you know about where your grads are being hired and what they are teaching, the more reliably you can examine your preparation of them. Rarely are their jobs in institutions that replicate the teaching that doctoral faculty members do at a doctoral-granting institution.
- ***Subject matter methodologies are translatable to the practice of being reflective about teaching and learning.*** Most of you are very good at teaching disciplinary methodologies. Most of those methodologies can be used as one interrogates or explores the act of teaching. Some of the same careful thinking to analyze and then scaffold a learning situation is taught in research methodology courses; some of the core skills of exegesis or ethnography transfers to a way of exploring and understanding the students being taught; hermeneutics can enable students to think about teaching as interpretation. The subject matters and methodologies doctoral programs teach can become foundational in your graduates' teaching abilities. Sometimes all that is needed is for someone to make it explicit, for a faculty member to say, "This is how I find that my training as a historian has helped me think about teaching."
- ***Understand and talk about the structure you have chosen for your doctoral students to learn how to teach.*** Some of the programs we observed have the ability to scaffold the coursework and the teaching experiences of their doctoral students so that they move from young graduate student toward future faculty member in distinct steps and stages. Some others throw all of the doctoral students immediately into the deep water of teaching experiences during the first year of their program. A third method might be to strengthen the informal culture so that it becomes the space for teaching conversations. But as with any educational philosophy, there are risks and gains with every method. As program directors and deans, you need to have some understanding of what is needed to support the method you have chosen and what is gained and lost within that choice. In other words, be reflectively engaged in the school's choices about its program, and you will go a long way toward communicating to your doctoral students the reflective engagement with teaching practice that they need to exercise when they teach.

## Elements of Good Programs

Despite our conclusion that there is no single structure to encourage good teaching preparedness, the following elements are helpful to have included:

1. **Course components:** Graduates clearly gain by hearing about the specifics of classroom design – how to set goals for a course, build a syllabus, align assignments with the goals, and build in assessment of student learning. This can be handled through a formal course, through symposia that gather TA's, through faculty syllabi colloquies, through all-university workshops with new or about-to-be teachers, or however. Talking about the basic components is key to their learning to analyze and think about the steps of designing and teaching a course.
2. **Teaching philosophy:** Ask your doctoral students the question as to why they want to teach. Give them time to talk with current faculty about why the doctoral faculty members are teaching and their philosophy of education. What are the hopes that they have for their students? Why do they think their subject matter matters? Encourage doctoral students to think about their goals for student learning. Help the doctoral student shift from thinking about teaching as “unloading,” to an educational philosophy with hopes and goals for the students. Why, for the students' sake, do they want to teach?
3. **Theories of learning:** Encourage the doctoral students to begin to understand the various ways that students learn. This can be done through an engagement with the range of learning theories, through a set of questions around classroom teaching styles (what do students learn when you have a classroom conversation, a group project, or a direct presentation of material?), or through conversations with them as you supervise their teaching. Ask what is learned through a particular teaching methodology or assignment, and whether that matches their teaching goal.
4. **Designing a course and teaching it:** Engagement with the issues of teaching, with course design components, with a teaching philosophy and a theory of learning happens best when there are real students in front of you. This is the constant conundrum of your programs. There is good reason why some of your schools have not constructed a deliberate program of teaching preparation: until you know who you are teaching – what students in which institution – it is very hard to design classroom experiences or to see how projected teaching plans might succeed or fail. Teaching “in theory” is often a vacuous enterprise. Do what you can to facilitate your doctoral students getting into the classroom and then use those teaching experiences as real learning laboratories as best you can.
5. **Exegete the teaching context:** One of the first steps for new teachers is to understand who their students are and what they bring with them into the classroom. Build some understanding of that with your doctoral students. [If

they are TAs, have them look at the demographics and abilities of the students in comparison to one down the road; if they are adjuncts at another institution, have them do a study of its mission and students.] Teaching is situated within the particularities of an institution and department, within a set of school goals and curricula, and must take into account the abilities and backgrounds of the students that will be in the classroom. Figure a way to give your doctoral students the ability to recognize those realities and to adjust to them.

6. **Reflective conversation stimulated by teaching questions:** Beginning teachers are in the midst of new experiences that need sorting and understanding. The more you can facilitate their active engagement with those experiences – help them interrogate them so they can be explored and examined with others – the better. Some schools have the benefit of a very strong grad student culture where grad students who are teaching can prep together and talk about their experiences. Other programs develop forums or teaching seminars where TAs or doctoral students who are adjuncts at other schools can bring in particular problems or talk about a specific issues. Again, it can be done in a variety of ways. But a reflective consideration of the actual practice of teaching will develop their capacity to be a good teacher in whatever institutional context they happen to get a future job.

How many of these elements can be required components of your program, how they will be shaped, what ones need to stay informal or optional, will all depend on your program, faculty, and resources. But the more the program is designed in a way that helps these things happen and explicitly values teaching, the more learning about teaching occurs. A pedagogy course that is introduced into a culture whose subtext implies that teaching is a waste of time will be treated as a waste of time by the graduate students.

The reality is that the job market is able to be more and more selective about whom they hire. Graduates of doctoral programs who have teaching experience and who can demonstrate that they are ready to take on a variety of teaching roles are getting the second looks by hiring schools.