

## Centers for Teaching and Learning: Investing in Your Teaching as a Graduate Student

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Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) are powerful resources for graduate career development. We describe ourselves as grown by CTLs; these spaces were most formative in our trajectories as graduate student instructors. CTLs have a vast interdisciplinary appeal, and they open doors for job market candidates to envision their classroom teaching experience translated into academic, alt-ac, and even industry careers. Because of our investments in teaching centers, we both found fulfilling careers training and supporting both faculty and graduate students. Here, we discuss how CTLs shaped our identities as teaching professionals and encourage readers, especially graduate students early in their teaching careers, to leverage the various resources CTLs offer.

### First, some reflection

*Sarah*

I entered my graduate program (a combined MA/PhD in English Literature at a large, public Research-1 institution) with a strong desire to teach and learn about teaching. I had recently graduated from a small liberal arts college surrounded by eccentric professors who helped me develop my ideas and my identity as a scholar. When I began my graduate career, I assumed pedagogy would be a crucial part of my education; my colleagues and I were, after all, hoping to land jobs teaching at universities. While my department did provide a required semester-long practicum on pedagogy to accompany our first year of teaching, I was surprised to learn that additional training and courses were up to me. Eager to continue learning, I improvised. I attended pedagogy panels at conferences. I took practicums in other departments. I applied to teach special courses. I talked to anyone who would listen about teaching. But it wasn't until I started attending events held by my university's CTL that I found a way to develop my teaching to the level I wanted.

It took me an embarrassingly long time to locate my university's teaching center; while it was advertised across campus, I was not sure that I, a graduate student, would be accepted or even allowed at the center. Finally, on the recommendation of a trusted friend, I attended a "for graduate students" workshop on developing an effective teaching statement. I immediately felt at home as the workshop was full of other

graduate students committed to their teaching. With guidance from the CTL staff, students were able to share experiences, resources, and questions. Not to mention, *everyone* wanted to talk about teaching. Through my university's CTL programs, apprenticeships, and mentorship, I developed and expanded my pedagogy. Within a year, I had won the university's highest teaching award for graduate students. Six months later, I accepted an offer to become an Instructional Consultant at the same center that inspired my growth.

My work at the teaching center as a graduate student not only evolved my pedagogy, but it also revealed a career path that I hadn't known existed (and immediately wanted). My current work at the CTL enables me to continue learning and developing teaching practices and hones my skills of training, collaborating, and presenting. I regularly connect with other passionate educators, and together we are building strong, inclusive teaching communities across our campus.

### *Gabrielle*

Before entering my PhD program (also at a large, Research-1 institution), I had gained a bit of instructional experience teaching K-12 reading courses. While I had gotten a sense of classroom management strategies, I knew virtually nothing about designing college-level curricula, and I was soon to be thrown into my first semester teaching a course that I, like many English PhDs, never took during my own undergraduate education.

I was eager to teach and was disappointed when my composition pedagogy practicum concluded at the end of my first year of teaching. This practicum, along with a week-long August bootcamp, was the extent of the training offered by my home department. This is not to say that we were discouraged from attending further training, but, as Sarah experienced, it was our responsibility to seek out those opportunities.

I'll admit, there are times in a PhD program when taking on "extra" professional development seems unreasonable—PhD students are already bogged down by numerous research, writing, and, in some cases, service commitments. That said, not everyone is equipped to excel in a teaching environment. They are turned completely loose and told to make the best of it. Certain people thrive in this kind of setting, and to some extent, I did. The freedom to design courses and learn the art of course design through trial and error was part of what made learning to teach fun. Yet I constantly found myself looking for models, mentorship, and resources. I could only learn so much from devouring recommended books, like John Bean's fantastic *Engaging Ideas*. I was seeking connection with other graduate students who understood the value of teaching.

I also knew that to be competitive on the current job market I had no choice but to take pedagogy seriously. It wasn't going to be enough to have "good" course evaluations. I had to be able to talk about my teaching in an informed way, and I needed the portfolio materials to back this up. To do this, I needed to workshop my course materials in the CTL setting. It was at the CTL that I learned how to write teaching and diversity

statements. Furthermore, I was only able to clearly articulate my pedagogical values in these documents once I knew what they were; CTL events taught me the how and why of active learning, accessibility, and trauma-informed teaching.

I went to every CTL workshop and speaker event that I could fit into my schedule, and it paid off. My department recognized my commitment to teaching, and I was able to begin using what I learned to serve other incoming teachers by helping lead the bootcamp “Welcome to Teaching” events. I was elected by my peers to serve as a graduate representative on my department’s first-year writing committee. In the four years that I taught in my graduate program, I won two university teaching awards, including the most prestigious award for which graduate student instructors were eligible. Ultimately, this work got me off the market and into a faculty position, one where I am responsible for leading pedagogy professional development workshops for the department’s graduate students. Every day that I am in this position I am using what I learned from my experience as a CTL participant, and I continue to encourage graduate students to attend CTL events in addition to our own discipline-specific programming.

### **The Spectrum of CTL Opportunities**

Each CTL will have its own unique flair and approach to graduate student programming. Some CTLs have events such as workshops and reading groups geared specifically towards graduate students that allow communities of like-minded grads to flourish while others allow graduate students to work alongside faculty to master new pedagogical skills. The latter scenario is not something that should be intimidating. Everyone who steps foot into this environment wants to learn from each other to serve their students better.

When anyone first looks at the impressive list of CTL events, it may seem overwhelming. However, CTLs run with a vast audience in mind, and thus allow for multiple levels of engagement. As a graduate student, you can strategically choose events based on your interest, time, and ability. Some events, like the first one that Sarah attended, are marketed specifically for graduate students. In our discussions of CTL events, we identified a spectrum of engagement opportunities. At one end, participants can briefly engage with ideas about pedagogy. Workshops and webinars allow for engaging in conversations focused on the balance of pedagogical praxis and theory. Many practicums don’t have the time or resources to engage with this equilibrium fully, but understanding both scales is crucial in the work of CTLs.

At the other end of the spectrum, graduate students can be deeply involved, even working as contract-experts for CTLs by hosting and presenting teaching strategies alongside CTL staff. CTLs concentrate on serving the university community through useful teaching practices and education; as I (Sarah) can testify, they will respond enthusiastically to instructor engagement. In fact, some of the best ideas for workshops or learning communities (year-long groups that meet to learn about a multitude of

pedagogical topics) come from instructor-suggested ideas. Other CTLs may also have a blog or podcast where ideas can be pitched. The middle of the spectrum involves a mid-level engagement, where grads can engage with learning and applying specific skills to their courses through design institutes and individual consultations with educational specialists, like Sarah.

Additionally, many teaching centers offer graduate pedagogy certificates that are a fantastic way to concretize your burgeoning pedagogical expertise. If you're not ready to commit to a certificate, you may be eligible to apply for grants and awards through your CTL. Certificates, grants, and awards can certainly be highlighted on your CV, but you can also create a record of attended events to highlight your commitment to professional development.

### **Growing (and Nurturing) a SOTL Network**

CTLs can also be an approachable entry into the world of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL). SOTL tends to exist on the periphery of graduate development programs, outside of Departments of Education, but it can be an important resource as you begin to develop and articulate your identity as a teacher. Since SOTL literature is a diverse genre that encompasses research-based teaching theories and practices, it can be a challenge (albeit an exciting one) to begin investigating. As an Instructional Consultant who works with graduate students in addition to full-time faculty, one of the most frequent questions I (Sarah) am asked is "Where do I begin my research?" As graduate students, we are trained in research-based inquiry, but these methods tend to be discipline-specific. Your university's CTL can help you begin to develop the research skills necessary to engage with SOTL literature and help you connect with others interested in and engaging in SOTL research.

Universities with strong SOTL programs have a variety of opportunities for graduate development. Instructional consultants are often experts in navigating SOTL literature, and, as with other experts, part of their job duties center on staying up to date with the latest research. CTLs may promote databases or host reading groups focused on providing accessible research to faculty and graduate students. It is also common practice for CTLs to invite speakers from across the university or around the globe to discuss SOTL topics with campus audiences. These events not only provide students with support as they begin their SOTL research, but also provide valuable moments for connections with others (at your campus and beyond) who are interested in or are pursuing SOTL projects.

### **Final Thoughts**

As authors who were both trained at large, R1 universities, we also wish to acknowledge that our experiences may not be universal; both our CTLs were well-funded and offered a number of diverse programs. While most universities have CTLs

with devoted staff who can direct students to their desired resources, graduate students looking for additional resources might investigate the public resources that larger CTLs offer. Some well-established CTLs offer training through online edX courses, and others have robust webpages, blogs, or training toolkits available. Graduate students might also seek similar professional development through the Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching, and Learning (CIRTL), which offers many webinars and collaborative opportunities for graduate students.

We'll close by addressing a last major benefit to engaging with your university's CTL: developing lasting connections with peers who are likewise invested in teaching. While the two of us initially met through mutual colleagues in the English department, we connected through our deep investment in the intersections between undergraduate and graduate education and teaching centers. CTLs were (and continue to be) a crucial part of both of our respective journeys and careers. It was this shared experience that catalyzed this collaborative piece. Teaching centers often occupy an unsung position in graduate development, but they are valuable resources that continue to grow and challenge graduate instructors. From evolving your pedagogy beyond your department to collaborations and research with established scholars in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, university teaching centers can deeply impact the teaching careers of early scholars.