Foreign language teaching assistant professional development: Challenges and strategies in meeting the 2007 MLA Report’s calls for change

Heather W. Allen, University of Wisconsin-Madison
FL teaching assistant professional development:

Challenges & strategies in meeting the 2007 MLA Report’s calls for change

Heather Willis Allen

University of Texas at Austin

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The 2007 MLA Report: A call for change

- **Curricular content**: Language, culture, and literature should be “taught as a continuous whole” in programs focused on translilingual and transcultural competence.

- **Departmental governance**: Collegiate FL programs “must transform their programs and structure” through “sustained collaboration among all members of the teaching corps”

(PP. 3, 4, 5, 6)
The 2007 MLA Report: Unanswered questions

- What approaches might be used to “systematically incorporate transcultural content and translingual reflection” and “holistically incorporate content and cross-cultural reflection” at every level

- How “sustained collaboration among all members of the teaching corps” can be instantiated and maintained

- What the consequences of transformed goals in the undergraduate FL program should be for the goals of graduate student professional development

(pp. 5, 6)
## The role of graduate students in U.S. undergraduate FL instruction

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate student TA</td>
<td>40.7%*</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(57.4%)**</td>
<td>(25.9%)</td>
<td>(2.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenured or Tenure-stream</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time non tenure-stream</td>
<td>19.2%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time non tenure-stream</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
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* overall undergraduate courses, ** elementary-level courses

Lawrence (2001)
What does the 2007 MLA Report call for in relation to FL graduate students’ professional development as teachers?

“graduate studies should provide substantive training in language teaching and the use of new technologies” (p. 7, my emphasis)

“teach graduate students to use technology in language instruction and learning” (p. 9, my emphasis)
“[I]f the only teacher preparation available is language teacher preparation a clear message is sent that language gets taught, but the corollary collocation for literature remains awkward. A further part of the message communicated within the structure of the traditional methods course is that language and literature are clearly separable units. As long as this message is sent from the outset of the graduate student socialization process, the ‘lang-lit split’ will remain entrenched in graduate departments.” (p. 199, my emphasis)
Shortcomings of formal professional development related to teaching in the FL Ph.D.

- The *when*: Persistence of “frontloading” (Freeman, 1993), limited scope (Allen & Negueruela, 2010), unsystematic ongoing professional development (Allen, 2011)

- The *what*:
  - Teaching literature and culture as “sideline experiences” (Byrd, 2007; Mills, 2011; Wilbur, 2007)
  - Conceptual eclecticism (Wilbur, 2007) in the “post-method” era (Kumaravadivelu, 2001)

- The *how*: Dominance of the transmission model (Johnson, 2009)
Consequences of these shortcomings: empirical findings

- **When / Timing-Scope:** Lack of theory-practice connections in teaching during early semesters (Dupuy & Allen, in press; Brandl, 2000; Rankin & Becker, 2006), little research on later development

- **How / Approach:** Lack of appropriation of concepts, internalization of pseudo-conceptual understandings of theoretical notions (Allen, 2011; Dassier, 2001; Fox, 1993), lack of teacher agency in light of perceived constraints (Allen, 2011; Dupuy & Allen, in press)

- **What / Content:** Lack of “transfer” of confidence in the capacity to teach language to confidence about teaching literature (Mills, 2011; Mills & Allen, 2008)
Recurring proposals in relation to these shortcomings

- Additional graduate coursework on SLA pedagogy or linking FL teaching/scholarship (beyond the “methods” course)

- Diversification of teaching experiences
  - team-teaching (graduate student/faculty), particularly advanced undergraduate courses
  - graduate students independently teaching advanced undergraduate courses
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
<th>Teaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>1 pedagogy course, 5 literature/cultural studies/theory/language courses</td>
<td>Elementary language courses most likely (69.9%*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years 2-3</td>
<td>literature/cultural studies/theory/language courses, pre-dissertation exams</td>
<td>Elementary (46%) more likely than intermediate language courses (33%); advanced undergraduate unlikely (8.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 4 &amp; beyond</td>
<td>Dissertation proposal / Dissertation</td>
<td>Varies, intermediate language the most likely option (36%); advanced undergraduate courses less likely (19.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*All figures from Steward (2006), who summarized MLA data from 158 collegiate FL departments*
Toward a new model for FL graduate student professional development?
Obstacle 1: How/Approach
Moving beyond the transmission model

- Teachers as *learners of L2 teaching*

- Learning to teach as a dynamic *process of social interaction*

- Teacher learning as *both internal & collective activity*

- Professional development as *a conceptual process; the use of one overarching concept to unify curricula & provide teachers with coherent notions of FL teaching & learning*

(Johnson, 2009; Lantolf & Johnson, 2007; Smagorinsky, Cook, & Johnson, 2003)
Obstacle 1: Examples
Toward new professional development practices

- Microteaching -> Lesson Study
- Focus on knowledge of concepts -> Knowledge of concepts + Concept mapping
- Individual reflections on the research -> Individual reflections + group blogging
Obstacle 2: What/Content

- Identifying an overarching concept that serves as the foundation for L2 instruction & orientation for professional development efforts

- Focusing on professional development activities that link this overarching concept and other related conceptual tools with associated pedagogical tools of lasting significance in teaching

- Putting text-based instruction at the center of the language teaching / teacher learning
Obstacle 2: Example
From eclecticism to aligning conceptual & pedagogical tools

OVERARCHING CONCEPT

literacy (Kern, 2000)

RELATED CONCEPTUAL TOOLS

4 curricular components, available designs
(New London Group, 1996)
genre (Swaffar & Arens, 2005)

PEDAGOGICAL TOOLS

5-step reading model (Maxim, 2006), text matrix (Swaffar & Arens, 2005), dialogic transformation (Kern, 2000)
Obstacle 3: Scope / “frontloading”

- Including sustainable, collaborative professional development activities and models:
  - exploratory practice (Crane, Sadler, Ha & Ojiambo, 2013)
  - lesson study (Dupuy & Allen, in press)
  - lesson-planning group projects (Paesani, in press)
  - ongoing goal setting & reflection (e.g., through blogging)

- Working to break down the literature-pedagogy divide in how the graduate program is structured (Byrnes & Kord, 2001)

- Arguing for the treatment of pedagogical issues within the “literature seminar” (Reeser, 2013)
Obstacle 3: Example lesson study

Step 1: Teams collaboratively plan a lesson, its objectives, and the role of each team member

Step 2: One team member teaches the lesson, others gather data on student learning that is shared among the team

Step 3: Each team member analyze data collected in a written report

Step 4: Each team shares findings with other teams in an oral presentation and decides collectively how the lesson could be reformulated to minimize its shortcomings
Synthesis: How these proposals respond to the 2007 MLA Report’s calls for change

- **Curricular content**
  - consistent with graduate students’ immediate & future teaching activity
  - facilitate rethinking of interconnections among language, literature & culture through the overarching concept of literacy

- **Departmental governance**
  - seek to prepare AGENTIC FL teachers who take an active role shaping the content of the courses they teach and view collaboration as a key aspect of teaching
  - seek to reorient responsibility for educating FL graduate students as teachers beyond the LPD to include other faculty (professional development ≠ supervision)
“[T]he changes required in TA education are so pervasive as to be beyond one person’s professional reach ... an appropriate response requires programs to acknowledge that the changed social, cultural, and political contexts outside the walled gardens of the academy can only be adequately addressed with changes in the socialization patterns and cultural contexts that departments create internally as they prepare teachers for those contexts ... we must find ways of linking TA education to the core of the intellectual life of departments and reshaping our practices accordingly.” (p. 136, my emphases)
Thank you

This presentation & related publications:
http://works.bepress.com/heatherwillisallen/

Related NFLRC project site (PERCOLATE):
http://www.percolate.arizona.edu/doku.php/start
The transmission model: A metaphor