How Would Your Teach This Class?

Too many doctoral students are ill-prepared to talk about their teaching when it really matters -- in the job interview

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Graduate students have ample opportunity in their daily lives to discuss their research. They chat with fellow students, meet with their dissertation advisers, present their findings at conferences, and may even try to explain their work to family members outside academe.

But when do graduate students talk in a sustained way about their teaching?

They may talk about it initially in an orientation they have to attend before starting work as teaching assistants. In some departments, they may take a course on pedagogy. The lucky ones have access to a teaching and learning center or to a TA-development program.

Few graduate students, however, have access to all of those opportunities, with the result that many of them are ill-prepared to talk about their teaching when it really matters -- during the academic job interview.

Many departments prepare candidates for the job market by conducting mock interviews, which routinely include some teaching questions. But as a colleague in literary studies reported to us, her mock interviews focused 85 percent on research, while her actual interviews at the Modern Language Association's annual convention focused 50 percent on teaching.

One of us is a career counselor for graduate students at Princeton University, while the other two are assistant directors of teaching centers at Princeton and at Vanderbilt University. We sought to deal with the imbalance we see in candidates' preparation for job interviews by designing a workshop at our institutions to give graduate students a chance to practice talking about their teaching.

We want to share some of the insights from those workshops and offer some practical advice on how to be better prepared to talk about teaching in the next hiring season. In the process, we hope to encourage graduate students and their faculty advisers to make teaching a more audible part of departmental conversations. We've divided our advice into four categories of questions that you may be asked in an academic job interview.

Teaching in the discipline. Say you are a historian. You may be asked, "How would you teach a survey course on the Civil War?" One way to answer that question is to list the texts you plan to teach or the topics you plan to cover. But it's also important to indicate how you conceptualize the course. What are the key themes or questions you
would explore in class? How will your understanding of the objects and methods of study in the field inform the assignments you design and the grading criteria you use? How will your teaching respond to intellectual or pedagogical debates in the field?

Our colleague in literary studies observed that in her initial preparation for the job market, she focused too narrowly on the specific courses she might teach, without adequately considering the broader issues of teaching and learning in the discipline. Consult pedagogy journals in your field or talk with your colleagues about how to effectively teach your students to think -- and argue -- like biologists, sociologists, or art historians.

**Promoting and assessing student learning.** It's not just the disciplinary content that matters. You'll also be expected to talk about your teaching within the context of the classroom. You may be asked to provide specific examples of how you will engage students and foster their learning. For large classes, will you lecture in a traditional way or incorporate active-learning strategies? What technologies do you anticipate using, and why? Think about how you will use small groups or in-class writing assignments to stimulate learning.

How will you evaluate student learning both formally and informally throughout the semester? What kinds of exams, essays, reports, and other assignments do you find most effective in your field? In what combination or sequence will you use them? How might a service-learning component enhance the learning experience for students? You might also want to mention some of the low-stress classroom assessment techniques you might use to gauge on a daily or weekly basis what your students understand and where they need further information or assistance.

**Working with sensitive issues.** In disciplines where race, class, gender, religious traditions, or ethical issues are at the core of inquiry, instructors can expect some tension, or even conflict, to arise in the classroom. If you are in one of those disciplines, you may be asked about how you plan to handle such conflicts. How will you develop ground rules for discussion -- by yourself or in collaboration with your students? How will you teach them to engage in debate in a civil and respectful manner?

Because undergraduates frequently rely on anecdotes and personal experiences to stake a claim or make an argument, you may want to talk in your interview about activities that will lead them to understand what constitutes appropriate evidence in your discipline.

**Using research to inform your teaching.** You may be asked to talk about the relationship -- sometimes antagonistic, sometimes generative -- between research and teaching. Consider how you will teach your research. In a graduate seminar, how will you construct your dissertation's argument -- and invite counterarguments -- over the course of the semester? What parts of your research can you teach to undergraduates? What ideas or assumptions are likely to be challenging for them?

Reflect on how you will involve undergraduates in your research, especially if you're applying to liberal-arts colleges, and be prepared to share those ideas in your interview. How will you motivate their participation in your experiment or project? What aspects of your research can they successfully undertake?

More generally, consider how you will involve undergraduates in the process of
intellectual inquiry that drives your research. How can you put questions and problems at the heart of your teaching, helping students formulate and test hypotheses even at the introductory level?

**Putting it all together.** You can formulate your answers in a variety of ways, but be sure not to limit yourself to those four categories of questions. It also helps to generate additional questions specific to your discipline that might come up in an interview.

With that groundwork in place, once you get an interview, you can then do a little directed research on the college. An institution's Web site can give you valuable information about its history, mission, and goals for the future. Additionally, you may be able to learn more about the type of students it attracts. Compare that profile with the students you've taught at your graduate institution. What adjustments in your expectations and pedagogy might you need to make?

Similarly, a thorough search of a departmental Web site can deepen your knowledge of the college's curriculum and possibly hint at whether your teaching style will mesh with those of your potential colleagues.

Using what you've learned about yourself as a teacher and about the department where you may be a colleague, practice answering questions about teaching. In our workshops at Princeton and Vanderbilt, we gave participants the opportunity to practice being a job candidate and being the one doing the hiring. Many participants found the exercise more difficult than they had imagined.

But just think about how much more difficult it might have been had they waited until the actual interview to engage in that exercise.

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