

What We Are Learning About Learning, S1 E5

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Kim: Welcome to episode five of What We Are Learning About Learning, a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning, created and produced by the Center for New Designs and Learning and Scholarship, also known as CNDLS at Georgetown University. I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

Joe: And I'm Joe King. The focus of this episode is on what we're learning about teaching and mentoring from graduate students who are in a unique position in higher education, both teachers and students, mentors and mentees. This unique position of wearing multiple hats generates key insights that are relevant to all of us focused on learning in higher education.

The six graduate students you'll hear from today have experience as teachers and teaching assistants, and also participated in the Apprenticeship and Teaching Program, also known as the AT program at CNDLS. The AT program is a campus-wide professional development program for graduate students. Its primary goals are for graduate students to engage with a community of their peers, learn about best pedagogical practices, and develop into more reflective and skilled instructors. The program includes workshops, mentoring, and teaching-related assignments, all designed to enhance their preparation for college teaching and other forms of education and to increase their confidence and preparation for a thriving professional practice.

Kim: Being a graduate student often means trying to balance competing demands and interests. For Rabea Kirmani, six-year PhD student in the government department, one of the most challenging balances is the one between teaching and research, a challenge faced by many faculty as well. Experiencing this tension as a student leads her to emphasize a way in which this tension can be constructive.

Rabea: I think a big challenge has been just realizing that I want to focus as much on teaching as I want to on research. The reason why I say it's challenging is because maybe the outcomes are not as clearly measurable, or at least they don't fit — they don't conform to the measure of success that we currently have in academia. So you might not be producing articles or — and some people are savvy enough to actually do that. They produce pedagogical articles which are very useful.

But I guess the challenge for me has been realizing that that is OK, that you're going to be getting something a little bit more intangible out of your teaching experience, which is going to help in other aspects of your work.

Joe: There's also the tug of war between being a student on one hand and being a teacher on the other. As captured by Jaime Brown, Associate Director of the Center for Student Engagement and also a first year flex MBA student, it can be a lot.

Jaime: My schedule is full. My inbox is also full. And sometimes, it's like, wow, how am I keeping up with myself? Most days I do a pretty good job, and I give myself a little kudos when I need to. And then days where perhaps I need to take a step back from something, I give myself grace to do that, too, especially because I'm doing all of this in a pandemic still, right? So that's OK.

Kim: Graduate students regularly express a sense of isolation from university life outside of their departments. Teaching has been a way for some graduate students to feel more connected to the rest of

the university. Sam Weiss, masters candidate in the English department, put it this way.

I am a TA now for two different classes, and have been since last summer, which I love and has been a very different experience than when I wasn't a TA because when I wasn't a TA, I just felt very like graduate students are in their own sphere and not connected to undergrad students really, at all. So being actually able to be in the classroom with undergrad students has been very helpful for me.

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Joe: Graduate students have a unique view of teaching and learning. Often, teaching is a new element of their experience, making the resources that have been most helpful fresh in their minds. The students we interviewed talked about what inspired them and helped them learn more about what makes a good teacher and mentor.

Rabea Kirmani described one of her best experiences as a student this way.

Rabea: I had the benefit of TA'ing for Matthew Garns, who teaches comparative political systems. And I think that was actually one of the best graduate experiences that I've had. I learned so much from his class because he modeled a very engaged teaching philosophy where he made sure that students were able to access the materials, that they knew exactly what they were going to be assessed on. He was very clear about these things.

And I could see that, to some, that would come off as being too strict. But to me, it was coming off as very clear and very consistent about what expectations are going to be.

Kim: Becoming a TA can also include surprises and revelations. Here, Kirmani shares some of her observations in the classroom.

Rabea: It's really interesting because as soon as you become a Teaching Assistant, you kind of get almost a look under the hood of how the course functions. And some of the ideas that you have about how instructors function are dispelled. Some of the myths around how instructors view students are also dispelled.

But something that I've really been surprised by is how different each instructor is. Some people take their pedagogy, their teaching, their classes so seriously while also being excellent research scholars. And some people are very-- I wouldn't say careless, but they're definitely not thoughtful about their teaching commitments. It's just an activity to be performed, and there isn't a feedback loop between them and the students. And as a TA, I've noticed that it really impacts how students view their experience in the course and how much they learn from it.

Joe: Here, Kirmani emphasizes a major theme that came up over and over-- straddling the student teacher divide. She emphasized the importance of having and communicating care and concern for others as a fundamental element of teaching and learning. Sometimes, this starts with the little things. Jaime Brown talked about the importance of taking the time to learn students' names and how to pronounce their names.

Jamie: Using a students' name-- so many faculty members now-- especially with somebody like me, a five letter name, it gets butchered all the time. Let me know if I mess up your name. Seriously, stop me. Correct me. So faculty members are being more open about having that conversation.

Kim: Sam Weiss described how one of their professors created an inclusive environment by not only being sensitive to individual student needs, but actively trying to learn more about them.

I had a faculty member who started out the class having individual-- we all signed up for an individual meeting with her to do a five minute check in to talk about our learning style and our general learning needs. I'm a person who thinks about that a lot because I have needs that are often not met. But not everyone has even been asked that. So it provided a really cool opportunity for everyone to share with her what our learning needs were so that she could incorporate that into her instruction.

Joe: In addition to learning more about students, Sam similarly appreciates when faculty open up more about themselves. This mutual sharing fostered community and led to a shift in power dynamics in the classroom.

I also had a different professor who started out the-- literally, the first day of class, they just introduced themselves and talked about themselves as a whole person, not just as like, oh, I teach this. But they were like, oh, yeah. This is what I do for fun. And these are my pronouns and my hobbies. And I have a partner, and they're like this.

And obviously, some people don't want to do that. And that's totally fine. But it was really cool to have that established like, oh, our faculty is a person. And I think that made students feel a lot more comfortable talking to them and changed that power dynamic a little bit.

Kim: On a related note, neuroscience PhD candidate Cameron McKay claims that in being both a student and an instructor, he's learned that there's centimeter principle undergirding good teaching.

Cameron: The main thing it boils down to is compassion, really digging down into those cura personalis values that we at Georgetown really talk about. I think this is the time more than ever that we need to put those into practice. It doesn't hurt to be kind. It costs you nothing.

So just being gracious with workload, with deadlines, with assignments-- I think that, end of the day, we really want students to enjoy learning. I, for better or worse, started my teaching career being a little less sympathetic. So I really didn't come to any student issues with a sense of compassion by default. Really, it was something that I had to work towards, really thinking, OK, these students are just complaining. They think that the workload is too much compared to their other classes. But I'm not in their other classes. I don't really know what else they have on their plate.

And some of the classes that I taught had people who were nontraditional students, people who were not 18 to 22. Some of them are older. Some of them were part time students. Some of them had children.

And that was an experience that I think, before the pandemic, really opened up my eyes to think, people have lives outside the classroom. And they are dealing with so much more that they don't even tell you about and that you will probably only know a fraction of. And to really just approach situations on a case by case basis-- but to default to I understand. It's OK. Let's work towards a solution.

And not, I'm sorry, that's just the way it is. It's in the syllabus. I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do. You agreed to take this class. I'm sorry.

So I think over the course of my teaching and seeing what life is like for students as an instructor has really helped me realize that, yes, I think being compassionate and being kind is the way to go.

Joe: Christina Colla at the McCourt School of Public Policy and in the Executive Masters of Policy Leadership program has this to say about compassion in professors and students alike.

Christina: I think that that has an effect on a student's psyche when you've got a professor like that

who you feel is interested in your well being, your mental health, your physical health. And I would encourage all teachers to be like that. Once again, when your students know that you care, like I said, not only about what they're doing in your classroom but about their mental and physical well-being, I think that makes a difference in how your students respond to you.

As far as the students, I would say that they have to speak up. If something is not working for them, they really need to just speak up and tell the professor, hey, this isn't working. What can we do? And that professor has to be willing to hear them out and-- let's figure this out. Let's have this conversation, and we'll work it out.

So I think it's being open and being willing to be flexible-- That, flexibility is always key-- and listening, ultimately, not just hearing somebody but really listening to what they're saying and knowing that they're coming to you from a vulnerable place, many times.

Kim: And here's Kirsty Jones, a fourth year graduate student in the theology department.

Kirsty: Be responsive. And I don't mean replying to emails 30 seconds after you get them. I mean listening to what students are saying.

Joe: For Jones, it's also about respect for students.

Kirsty: I have an open access policy that, if students need not accommodations in terms of things they would go through the Disability Resource Center-- but if they're sick and need an extension, I tell them that they don't have to disclose to me, but that I trust them as adults to do what they need to do and work the program around that. And I think that because I trust them and treat them like adults, they're more likely to respect it.

Kim: Jaime Brown argues that this emphasis on care for students is a matter of values.

Jaime: I feel like we hear this all the time, what I want to say. So I'm trying to word it in a way that is new and fresh but also what we should be doing. And that is coming into the learning environment, your classroom from-- entering that space from a place of care, a place of love, really embodying these Jesuit values.

It's not enough to just have them in the syllabus. It's not enough to just have the accessibility statement in your syllabus. Your classroom has to be accessible and inclusive and a place where students feel cared about and loved. Yes, that is true in all subjects.

So that's what I would say, shout, scream. And I say, shout and scream those things, because I love Georgetown, because I do hold so many different titles and positions here. And I think when you love something you are more open to seeing its blind spots and where it can do better-- but I try to come from a place of like, how can I help it be better? So I'm excited that we are talking about this.

Hopefully, people will listen. Maybe they've heard it from me and 20 other people, and they're like, yes, we should definitely do that.

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Joe: Their experiences have shaped these graduate students as teachers. They've also helped them figure out how to succeed as students and as learners. They shared their candid advice to all learners, advice that is relevant to both students and faculty alike. Cameron McKay.

Cameron: I actually have some advice that-- and something I've been thinking about. It's, remember why you're here. And that's been something that has been helpful for me as I approach the twilight hours of my PhD, sort of thinking, well, what drew me to Georgetown? What drew me to this PhD? What drew me to this research that I'm doing?

And that has been really helpful to think about, what was my motivation several years ago to get to where I am now? And thinking about, I have probably outpaced even the wildest dreams of my pre-grad school self. And I think that's the same thing can be true for thinking about-- it's undergraduate students or graduate students thinking about, why did you come here? What was your motivation? What aspects of the in-person experience really captured your attention?

Because there was something that the drew passed you to where you are now. And reminding yourself of that can be a tremendous source of motivation and inspiration, I think.

Kim: Here's Jaime Brown.

Jaime: For the undergrads, I really try to set them up for success in my teaching. And part of that is telling them like, you have to try to be your full, authentic self in every space. So that would be my feedback for them.

I'm a big fan of self-advocacy. I don't know what I don't know. And yes, I can act. But you also have to tell me, too, one, if I'm not asking frequently enough. But when I ask, definitely tell me what's right, what's working, and what isn't.

Hopefully, there's an environment where feedback is welcome, whether it's being explicitly requested or not. And I guess that would apply for grad students, too. I'm very honest with my professors when I show up for office hours. Yeah, I'm not really catching this part or picking up on this.

And again, that comes with more experience. But that's what I would say. Self-advocacy is important for students to get through their time in college, especially in undergrad. So don't be afraid to say what you need.

Joe: Graduate students had some advice for undergraduate students, starting with Kirstie Jones.

Kirsty: Continue to push yourself, but be kind to yourself at the same time. So push yourself within your limits, I guess. And here's Rabea Kirmani.

I have two pieces of advice. And one is very tried but so true. Make sure you get enough sleep. Cannot press that enough.

But the second would be to understand that instructors are there to help them learn. And so approach them. Don't hesitate to reach out to somebody if you have questions or concerns, ideas, you want to talk to them. That's the best way to learn.

Joe: It isn't always easy, but these graduate students have found ways to balance their different priorities and allow those priorities to reinforce one another. Kirmani again.

Rabea: Despite repeated advice from multiple people, both at Georgetown and outside, where the focus is you should be only looking at your research work and not thinking about teaching, looking at some of the people that I admire who balance these two has really made me realize that is not the advice I want to follow.



Kim: In acknowledging that tension exists between teaching and research, graduate students relatively new to both have also discovered that there is a real potential for teaching and research to reinforce one another. Here's Kirmani again.

Rabea: I realized that people who are engaged in conveying knowledge are the ones who are also capable of doing some really innovative research just because they know how to get ideas across and get people excited about them.

Joe: Graduate students at Georgetown are a critical part of the teaching force. From mentors and tutors to teaching assistants and instructors in their own classrooms, their dual roles of being student and teacher simultaneously comes with challenges, tensions, and competing demands. The proximity of these differing roles in the lives of graduate students, however, likewise leads to important revelations, insights, and personal growth.

Listening to their experiences and lessons learned highlights what students want and need from their professors as well as how professors can approach their teaching in order to promote greater learning. They also offer a compelling reminder about why teaching is so important.

Kim: Thank you for joining us for this episode of What We Are Learning About Learning. In our next episode, we will explore the transition back to in-person learning in the fall. And we'll focus on what students need.

This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, Sophie Grabiec, James Olsen, Meghan Modafferi, David Ebenbach, Lee Skallerup Bessette, and Eleri Syverson. Big thanks to the graduate students who shared their teaching experiences with us-- Jaime Brown, Christina Colla, Kirstie Jones, Rabea Kirmani, Cameron McKay, and Sam Weiss. Thanks also to Milo Stoute for creating original music for this podcast.

For more information about our podcast series and our guests, check out our show notes, where you'll find links to previous episodes, information about our apprenticeship in teaching program, our website and blog, and other resources. Again, I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski.

Joe: And I'm Joe King. Thanks for listening.