

Each year, thousands of students enter art programs around the country with the aspiration of becoming university art professors. The irony is that many of these students receive little or no preparation to help them fulfill this goal.¹ The general assumption among university art faculty is that students come to MFA programs to hone their artistic skills, and teaching assignments or assistantships are often seen as simply a way to provide financial support to graduate students while they work in their studios.

Recently, however, a growing number of university art programs are recognizing the need to offer more formal preparation in pedagogy to their graduate students who receive teaching assistantships. With the increasingly important role that graduate teaching assistants play in providing undergraduate education in university art programs, it is imperative to develop and strengthen

the teaching skills of these colleagues-in-training.

Living in a consumer-oriented society, we in academia are hearing the roar for accountability from legislators, students, and parents that students “get their money’s worth” from their education. The mantra has gotten louder as higher education has been called on to provide a quality education to students and to do so with diminishing public resources. In response, universities have increasingly relied on graduate students and adjunct instructors to teach undergraduate courses, as reflected in a 2006 *Chronicle of Higher Education* report that 46 percent of instructors in higher education were part-time, nontenured faculty.² Given the mounting pressure from outside the university for accountability, the growing awareness of challenges that teachers face in today’s college classroom, and the increasing recognition among art faculty of the impact of temporary workers on the undergraduate curriculum, an appropriate level of support and training for graduate teaching assistants should be a crucial component of our educational mission.

In this article, we provide a historical review of the MFA degree and its role in academia. We then describe the collaborative approach taken by the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida in preparing graduate art students to teach foundations classes in our undergraduate program. We conclude with a list of lessons learned from our experience in teaching MFA students how to teach art at the university level.

The MFA Degree in Academia

The training of graduate art students to teach has only recently been added to the responsibilities of an MFA studio program. Historically, as Howard Singerman made clear in his *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*, the intent of the MFA was quite different. What began in the 1920s as a teacher-training program primarily for women art teachers was recast in the 1930s and 1940s as preparation for professional artists, primarily male.³ In 1959 the Midwest College Art Conference (MCAC) recommended that the MFA be considered the terminal degree for teachers of studio courses. Prior to this determination a degree for teaching was not required; a good artist was assumed to be a good teacher. The College Art Association adopted the MCAC recommendation in

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A Collaborative Approach to Preparing MFA Art Students to Teach at the University Level

1. See Deborah Rockman, *Pedagogy and the Graduate Assistant*, 2002, available online at www.debrockman.com/pedagogy (accessed October 29, 2007).

2. “Chronicle of Higher Education 2006–07 Almanac,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 53, no. 1 (August 25, 2006): 25, available online at <http://chronicle.com/weekly/almanac/2006/nation/0102703.htm> (by subscription; accessed July 9, 2007).

3. Howard Singerman, *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 188.

1960, but by 1965, the language of the CAA determination noted that although the MFA is used as an entry into the teaching field, "it is, evidently, not generally designed in a specific way to prepare the student for this."⁴

By 1977, the MFA was no longer a teaching degree, but rather confirmed that the recipient had the ability to make art. According to Singerman, this emphasis was intended to put the MFA on an equal footing with other fields in academia. Today, according to CAA's recently revised MFA standards, the MFA "demands the highest level of professional competency in the visual arts and contemporary practices." It is "the recognized terminal degree in the visual arts . . . equivalent to terminal degrees in other fields, such as the PhD or EdD."⁵

The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD), the accrediting agency for US university and college art programs, develops standards for the education of artists and designers in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States. In the 2007–8 *NASAD Handbook*, a general requirement for the MFA includes "writing and speaking skills to communicate clearly and effectively to the art and/or design communities, the public, and in formal or informal teaching situations."⁶ The handbook recognizes that many MFA recipients will engage the public as teachers at some time in their career and suggests that attention be paid to appropriate preparation for this eventuality. The guidelines suggest including "an introduction to the pedagogy of subject matter considered fundamental to curricula, for undergraduate art and design majors."⁷ In a 2004 policy paper on the MFA, NASAD states that "holders of the M.F.A. have parity with holders of other terminal degrees for purposes of hiring, promotion, and advancement within faculties of higher education."⁸

As art schools move to close the gap between accreditation guidelines and practice, the topics of studio-art teaching and teacher preparation have become recurring concerns at regional and national conferences such as those of CAA, Foundations in Art: Theory and Education, and the Society for Photographic Education, as well as the focus of a series of think tanks led by Mary Stewart and James Elinski. Our home institution, the University of Florida School of Art and Art History, has made considerable progress over the past decade preparing graduate art students for teaching roles.

A Collaborative Approach

The 1990s brought a substantial increase in student numbers at both the undergraduate and graduate levels at the University of Florida. To accommodate the growth in our undergraduate art programs, the school began to rely on graduate teaching assistants to lead discussion sessions, provide classroom assistance to faculty, and in many cases assume complete responsibility for teaching a course. Typically, these graduate teaching assistants receive financial support for 13.3 hours per week of work and a tuition waiver.

Some members of our school's faculty and administration promptly expressed concern about the potential detrimental effects of untrained teachers on the quality of undergraduate art education. How could we provide graduate teaching assistants with the pedagogical knowledge and strategies they would need to become effective teachers in the classroom? An early outcome of these discussions was the development of a three-credit graduate seminar titled

4. Norman Boothby, Jerome J. Hausman, Henry R. Hope, Alden Megrew, Frank Seiberling, James R. Shipley, and Allen S. Weller, "The Present Status of the M.F.A. Degree: A Report to the Midwest College Art Conference," *Art Journal* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1965): 247.

5. College Art Association, "Guidelines: MFA Standards," 2008, available online at www.collegeart.org/guidelines/mfa.html. The standards were first adopted in 1977 and then revised in 1991 and October 2008.

6. National Association of Schools of Art and Design, *Handbook 2007–2008* (Reston, VA: NASAD, 2007), 117.

7. *Ibid.*, 110.

8. "The Master of Fine Arts Degree and Faculty Policies: A Statement of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design, National Association of Schools of Dance, and National Association of Schools of Theatre," 2004, available online at <http://nasad.arts-accredit.org/index.jsp?page=Brochures+and+Advisory+Papers> (accessed July 9, 2007).

Matthew Whitehead, a graduate teaching assistant at the University of Florida, works with an undergraduate student, 2008. (photograph © Hilary F. Hoffman)



“Teaching Art in Higher Education,” led by an art-education professor and first taught as an elective in 1998.

From its beginning, an underlying aim of this course on pedagogy has been to introduce graduate art students to basic principles and practices of teaching art at the postsecondary level—the “nuts and bolts” of university teaching. Equally important, however, the course aims to engage students in the critical examination of a host of issues with an impact on their future roles as art faculty members, from the role of theory and practice in the studio classroom and the tension between academic freedom and academic responsibility to how to determine what skills and content to teach. Specific course objectives call for students to acquire a basic understanding of:

- the nature and needs of college students and adult learners
- approaches to studio-art instruction at the postsecondary level
- selected literature on teaching art at the postsecondary level
- the characteristics of effective art teaching at the postsecondary level
- procedures for critiquing and grading student art work
- academic, curricular, legal, social, and ethical issues related to teaching art at the postsecondary level
- hiring, tenure, and promotion practices in higher education

Teaching methods used in the course include lectures on topics related to postsecondary art teaching as well as other more collaborative and student-centered activities. Seminars led by groups of students use readings, videos, and faculty guest speakers to explore course topics and foster issue-oriented discussions pertinent to studio-art instruction. In addition, curricular development activities related to each student’s area of studio concentration culminate in the development of a teaching portfolio. Classroom observations and a teaching assignment that pairs new graduate students with current graduate teaching assistants provide practical classroom experience and peer-mentoring opportunities.

Following several years of successfully teaching the pedagogy course as an elective to graduate students, it became a required course for all entering MFA

In the printmaking studio at the University of Florida, Patrick Grigsby, a graduate teaching assistant, works with an undergraduate student, 2008. (photograph © Hilary F. Hoffman)



students in 2003 and a prerequisite to their assignment as graduate instructors in foundations classes. While the course was deemed effective in introducing pedagogical issues to graduate art students, the school recognized the need to hire a foundations coordinator to oversee the foundations curriculum and supervise and mentor graduate instructors. A studio-art faculty member was hired in 2004 to serve in that capacity.

Prior to hiring a foundations coordinator, a faculty committee revised the foundations courses and created curricular templates with clearly defined goals and objectives. The group selected foundations-level textbooks for use across the curriculum to develop a common vocabulary and understanding of basic art principles among both the graduate instructors and their students. The foundations coordinator, supervising up to thirty graduate assistants teaching sixteen different foundations courses, focuses on two interconnected goals: mentoring the new instructors to improve their quality of teaching, and overseeing their instruction of undergraduate foundations curriculum.

To complete the two-year foundations curriculum, students take a selection of courses exploring the principles and elements of art in sixteen foundations courses in any medium. For example, color theory is taught as either a beginning color painting course or a beginning color printmaking course, and while each course provides introductory skills appropriate to the specific medium, both cover the same color-theory content.

Supervision of graduate teaching assistants occurs through regular group meetings, teaching observations, and individual meetings with the foundations coordinator. Group meetings bring together new as well as experienced teaching assistants from all studio disciplines in the school to discuss common classroom issues such as managing the classroom, crafting assignments, teaching with technology, grading, and critique strategies. These facilitated meetings provide an open forum for graduate students to discuss concerns related to their teaching. They lead to the development of peer relationships between experienced teaching assistants and new graduate instructors, as well as among instructors across media.

Providing this focus on teaching as part of the MFA curriculum opens the

door for graduate instructors to collaborate among classrooms, build cohort assignments, and serve as guest lecturers for one another. Faculty also contribute to a rich dialogue about studio-art teaching and learning in higher education. In the process, graduate teaching assistants build a network of mentoring that extends beyond graduate school.

The foundations coordinator conducts teaching observations of teaching assistants each semester to provide feedback. He or she meets with each instructor to review the observation, provide a written evaluation, and explore strategies for improvement.

A significant marker of the graduate teaching assistant's success in the classroom is the quality of student class work. Class work is displayed in hallway exhibits, exhibition cases, and outdoor installations, and on video monitors and course blogs. The ongoing evidence of these projects enables area faculty, the foundations coordinator, and the teaching assistants an opportunity to assess the class progress and make instructional or curricular adjustments when necessary. Undergraduate portfolio reviews, which occur in the second semester of the sophomore year, provide another avenue for evaluating student progress as well as instructional success. We also measure the effectiveness of instruction in our foundations program by the quality of BFA exhibitions and by the number of BFA graduates entering upper-tier MFA programs.

What We Have Learned

The integration of pedagogy into the preparation of MFA graduates in our school has spurred a continuing dialogue among faculty and graduate instructors about teaching effectiveness and its impact on student learning and artwork. From these conversations and our own observations, we have learned that entering graduate students are often eager to learn how to teach and improve their pedagogical skills, that we may need to dispel students' preconceived notions of what constitutes effective studio teaching, and that what we teach in our foundations program may conflict with the graduate students' preconceptions of how to educate artists. In addition, some graduate students have difficulty shifting into the role of the teacher and recognizing various teaching methods modeled in the courses they observe. Graduate students must be taught that a teaching method is a choice and that content can be taught in different ways. Finally, we have learned that the rationale and design of a curriculum must be made more transparent, and providing graduate students with a curriculum overview improves their effectiveness as teachers.

In the end, teaching assistants are teachers in training. Recognizing that fact, we teach them in a collaborative manner, providing mentoring, support, and common pedagogical strategies, while recognizing, too, that teaching is an individual activity and that every artist needs to develop her or his own teaching voice.

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