



Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation: A Study on the Program for Improving Graduate Students' Teaching Ability

Name: YI Wanxian
Ritsumeikan University
 Email: yiwanyan09@gmail.com

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Cornell University; Center for Teaching Innovation; Graduate Students; Teaching Ability	University teachers are the primary resource in higher education, and their quality directly determines the quality of higher education, which in turn affects the talent level of a country. The United States has more than one hundred years of experience in cultivating the teaching ability of future university teachers at the graduate level, and now has a relatively complete training system. By learning from the advanced experience of the Teaching Innovation Center at Cornell University in its program to improve graduate students' teaching ability, China should update its concepts in cultivating graduate students' teaching ability. It is important to value the formulation of plans for cultivating university teachers' teaching ability, ensure funding, and provide incentives and support for related programs. At the same time, diverse projects should be carried out to improve graduate students' teaching ability, and cooperation and exchanges between internal and external universities should be strengthened, forming inter-university partnerships.
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1. Research Background

In his speech at the symposium with teachers and students of Peking University in 2018, Xi Jinping pointed out that the key to talent cultivation lies in teachers. The quality of the teaching faculty directly determines the ability and level of universities. Building a modern socialist country requires a large number of outstanding talents in various fields. This has put forward new and higher requirements for the ability and quality of the teaching faculty (Xi, 2018).

At present, the teaching staff of Chinese universities mainly come from doctoral graduates of domestic and international universities. According to statistics, in a sample survey of doctoral graduates in 2016, 90.5% of them intended to work in universities after graduation. More than 50% of doctoral graduates chose to work in universities,



and among them, 41% were engaged in teaching. This shows that doctoral graduates cultivated by universities have become the main source of future university teachers (Chen, 2017).

Teaching ability is the core link in teacher training, and its strength directly affects the quality of teaching. Research on the development of teachers' teaching ability in China started relatively late. Professor Pan (2007) pointed out: "In a broad sense, the development of university teachers refers to all in-service teachers, who continuously improve themselves through theoretical learning and practice in various ways. In a narrow sense, the development of university teachers emphasizes their development and improvement as educators, that is, the improvement of teaching ability." Zheng, Li, and Pan (2010) believed that "the connotation of the teaching development of university teachers in China refers to the improvement of academic level, professional knowledge and skills, and the enhancement of emotions and professional ethics." Currently, while the academic qualifications of Chinese university faculty are continuously improving, problems such as uneven distribution of teaching staff remain, and a gap exists between high academic and research levels and relatively weak teaching ability (Lou, 2018).

In recent years, the teaching ability of university teachers has received increasing attention, which has had a profound impact on graduate education as a reserve force for future university teachers. Graduate education, both in China and abroad, has begun to pay attention to the cultivation of graduate students' teaching ability. The United States has long attached great importance to training future university teachers, offering rich training activities for graduate students who intend to pursue academic careers. These activities provide opportunities to receive basic skills training required for university teaching during their graduate studies, preparing them for future teaching positions. Such programs shorten the growth period of new teachers to a certain extent and contribute to improving the teaching ability of new faculty members in the U.S. By examining the graduate and doctoral training programs of the Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, valuable insights can be drawn for the development of future teacher training in Chinese universities (Lai, n.d.).

1.1 A Study on Cornell University's Program for Improving Graduate Students' Teaching Ability

Cornell University, founded in 1865, is one of the eight members of the Ivy League. Its founding principle emphasized equal access to education for everyone. It was the first Ivy League institution to implement gender equality by admitting both men and women. Moreover, it was also one of the earliest to adopt admissions policies that did not consider social class, religion, or race, with the goal of establishing a comprehensive university that embraced a wide range of disciplines.

The Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation (CTI), established in 2017, provides support to members of the Cornell teaching community—from teaching

assistants and postdoctoral fellows to lecturers and professors—through a full range of personalized services, programs, initiatives, and campus projects. In addition to working directly with faculty, the CTI collaborates with departments, colleges, and other related units to build and sustain a diverse, rigorous, and dynamic learning environment (Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.-a). The center promotes best practices in teaching to support undergraduate learning at Cornell and beyond. Its graduate and postdoctoral programs aim to accelerate students' preparation as instructors and equip them for future teaching-related efforts (Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, n.d.-b).

(1) The GET SET Program

The main components of the GET SET program include teaching courses, workshops, institutes, and a university-wide teaching conference. These opportunities allow students to explore specific topics in greater depth and to apply these concepts and practices to their teaching. In addition, the program hosts an annual teaching celebration for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, offering a full day of sessions to explore a wide range of themes.

Teaching Courses

To become a qualified teacher, one needs not only subject knowledge but also a foundation in educational theory. Before cultivating teaching ability, it is essential to strengthen knowledge of educational theory, which directly shapes teachers' classroom decisions and interactions. A solid grasp of educational theory is therefore the prerequisite for improving teaching ability (Li, 2016).

The program offers several courses for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, aiming to accelerate their preparation for effective teaching in higher education. Students devote significant time to studying a variety of teaching theories, practices, and applications. These courses include *Higher Education Teaching*, *Teaching in a Diverse Classroom*, *Improvisation for Teaching*, and the *International Teaching Assistant Program*.

- **ALS 5780: International Teaching Assistant Program Course**
ALS 5780 supports international students who serve as teaching assistants by helping them improve their spoken English to meet university expectations. Support strategies include group discussions, bi-monthly meetings with instructors, audio resources, and teaching practice. The course emphasizes oral communication while engaging students in cross-cultural classroom exchanges and teaching skill discussions.
- **Graduate Courses in Higher Education**
Current offerings include *Theatre Techniques* and *Higher Education Pedagogy*.

The *Theatre Techniques* course lasts seven weeks and is designed to strengthen teaching and presentation skills by applying theatre-based strategies, thereby enhancing both classroom instruction and public speaking. The *Higher Education Pedagogy* course prepares graduate students for faculty positions, addressing topics such as faculty roles and responsibilities, educational philosophy, learning theories, teaching methods, course design, and assessment.

- **Online Course: Teaching and Learning in a Diverse Classroom**
This non-credit, four-week online self-study course is open to anyone at Cornell with teaching responsibilities, regardless of discipline or experience level. The modules address inclusive course design, social identity and self-reflection, as well as teaching strategies that foster student engagement and a sense of belonging across diverse backgrounds.

(2) The GET SET Workshop Series

Workshops are generally organized in the form of seminars, which are the main type of faculty development activity in American universities. These are organized by centers for faculty development or professional developers and are typically designed around predetermined themes or specific issues encountered by young faculty members. Senior professors and young faculty are invited to participate in these discussions (Wu, 2014). The GET SET workshop series consists of 75-minute weekly sessions, offering graduate students, teaching assistants, and postdoctoral fellows opportunities to engage in teaching-focused seminars in higher education.

Institutes

The institutes include the Inclusive Teaching Institute, the Teaching Portfolio Institute, the Active Learning Institute, and the Course Design Institute. These are conducted as one- to two-day workshops. The Inclusive Teaching Institute, held each spring, is a two-day workshop designed for graduate students and postdoctoral fellows to explore strategies for promoting diversity and inclusion in teaching and learning. The Teaching Portfolio Institute is a one-day workshop that guides participants in creating and completing electronic teaching portfolios. The Active Learning Institute, also one day, explores active learning strategies and how they can improve student learning based on current educational and cognitive research. The Course Design Institute is a one-day workshop that walks students step by step through the course design process.

University-wide GET SET Teaching Conference

Held each fall, the university-wide GET SET Teaching Conference provides graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and teaching assistants with opportunities to network with faculty and peers from across colleges and to engage in interdisciplinary teaching discussions.

International Teaching Assistant Program

The International Teaching Assistant Program is a professional development initiative designed to support international teaching assistants (TAs) in achieving the level of spoken English proficiency required for their teaching duties. The program consists of three major components: a language assessment, the ALS 5780 course, and the International Teaching Assistant Summer Program.

Language Assessment

All TAs from countries where English is not the first language must take a 30-minute language assessment. This assessment is an oral proficiency interview divided into two parts. In the first part, students are asked to speak about topics they listed on their registration form, usually related to their experiences, background, and interests. In the second part, students are required to briefly introduce concepts from their field of study to a group of incoming students. Graduate TAs whose native language is not English must successfully pass the assessment before they can be officially appointed as teaching assistants.

ALS 5780 International Teaching Assistant Course

This course consists mainly of two 75-minute interactive class sessions each week, in addition to meetings held every two months. It aims to help students improve their spoken English by practicing communication skills in real or simulated teaching contexts. Activities include role-playing, discussions, peer feedback, teaching practice, and individual consultation.

Summer Program

The International Teaching Assistant Summer Program is a required training program for international students who speak English as an additional language and are expected to take on teaching assistant duties in the fall semester. The program provides high-level individual coaching, group sessions, and activities that help students adapt to the Cornell campus and culture.

(3) Teaching Portfolio Program

The establishment of a teaching portfolio is an important activity in the development of university faculty in the United States. By the 1990s, more than 500 American universities had adopted teaching portfolios as a form of faculty development. Today, the creation of teaching portfolios has become an indispensable practice in many universities to improve teaching quality. However, different universities and departments have varying understandings and approaches to teaching portfolios, which results in differences in their content (Wu, 2014).

In general, a teaching portfolio consists of three parts: a statement of teaching philosophy, a syllabus that the individual has developed or adapted, and a record of teaching evaluations. The primary function of a teaching portfolio is to assess the teaching of graduate teaching assistants. It serves as an important basis for formative evaluation, with the purpose of monitoring and improving teaching practice.

(4) Scholarships

The Center for Teaching Innovation provides a series of grants and awards for graduate students to support the implementation of innovative and evidence-based teaching practices. The main opportunities include the Cornelia Ye Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award and the CTI Graduate Teaching Fellowship.

Cornelia Ye Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award

The Cornelia Ye Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award is given to two teaching assistants who demonstrate dedication and excellence in their teaching. Applicants must have received outstanding teaching evaluations and have at least two semesters of teaching assistant experience at Cornell University. Each awardee receives a \$500 prize in recognition of their teaching achievements.

CTI Graduate Teaching Fellowship

This fellowship is open to graduate students who are currently enrolled at Cornell University, making satisfactory progress toward their degree, and have at least two semesters of teaching experience at the university. Applicants are required to complete the following tasks: participate in CTI fellow training in August and January; assist in or co-facilitate two GET SET workshops; and collaborate with the CTI fellows team to develop and coordinate one event. Participants who successfully complete all requirements will receive a certificate and a \$1,000 award.

2. Implications of U.S. Graduate Teaching Ability Programs for Chinese Graduate Education

(1) Current Situation of Graduate Teaching Ability Training in Chinese Universities

At present, teaching and learning centers in Chinese universities have not fully implemented programs specifically aimed at enhancing graduate students' teaching ability. Some universities have begun training graduate teaching assistants (TAs), but these efforts often focus on explaining policies and regulations rather than providing practical training in teaching methods. With the implementation of the graduate TA system in China and the increasing proportion of young faculty members, it is especially important to enhance the teaching ability of graduate students who intend to pursue academic careers (Chen, 2017).

Compared with the relatively mature systems and diverse projects in the United States for cultivating the teaching ability of future university faculty, China started later in this field. Currently, graduate students in China mainly engage in teaching or administrative work through the “Three Assistances” system (*assistantships in teaching, research, and administration*). Although this system has achieved some results during its development, China has not yet established a systematic training program for graduate TAs, nor has it developed other projects to prepare future university teachers. Therefore, certain gaps still exist in cultivating graduate students’ teaching ability (Qu, 2019).

(2) Insights from U.S. Graduate Teaching Ability Programs

Updating Concepts and Emphasizing the Design of Graduate Teaching Ability Training Programs

Traditionally, graduate education in China has emphasized research training while neglecting teaching preparation. As a result, most graduate students devote much of their energy to publishing papers and completing dissertations, often overlooking the essential qualities required for future teaching roles. This orientation tends to highlight utilitarian outcomes while underestimating the developmental function of graduate education. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen awareness of pre-service teaching preparation for graduate students, giving greater weight to teaching ability in the overall objectives of graduate education (Li, 2016).

Chinese graduate programs should update their perspectives by paying attention to graduate students’ needs and career goals, and by building diverse systems that support the improvement of future faculty teaching ability. Drawing on the experience of the Cornell University Center for Teaching Innovation, projects can provide clear application procedures, structured courses, and portfolio development. Such detailed and diversified training allows graduate students who aspire to become faculty members to gain direct teaching experience and a broader vision of academic work.

Ensuring Funding and Providing Incentives for Graduate Teaching Ability Programs

Graduate students and doctoral candidates who intend to pursue teaching careers in universities represent a major force in the teaching workforce and bear significant responsibility for higher education. Their professional quality and overall competence directly influence the future development of universities and the advancement of education as a whole (Han, Sun, & Dong, 2020). Therefore, from the government perspective, greater support and oversight should be provided for graduate teaching ability programs to ensure effective implementation. From the institutional perspective, universities should allocate sufficient funding in line with government policies to sustain and expand these programs, and where possible, seek external sponsorship to supplement resources.

Developing Diverse Graduate Teaching Ability Training Programs

At present, graduate teaching ability training in China relies mainly on TA responsibilities within the “Three Assistances” system. However, a comprehensive training system for graduate TAs has not yet been established, and few other related projects exist. Moreover, TA assignments are often limited to routine tasks rather than meaningful teaching practice. As future faculty members, graduate students need strong teaching ability as a core competency. Thus, universities should strengthen the connection between the TA system and the broader development of future faculty (Yan, 2014).

One approach is to incorporate one or two credit-bearing courses related to teaching preparation into graduate programs, such as higher education pedagogy or educational psychology. These courses would provide both theoretical and practical training, equipping students with fundamental teaching competencies. For doctoral students, teaching and learning centers could open up their resources, encourage participation in activities, and record engagement through mechanisms such as a “doctoral student teaching development record.” Centers could also conduct assessments of doctoral students’ participation (Wei, 2019).

Another approach is to design multiple forms of TA training programs. During training, graduate TAs could watch videos of both exemplary and flawed lectures to compare teaching strategies, and they should also practice delivering lessons themselves to build confidence and professionalism. A mentoring system could also be introduced, where senior faculty members meet weekly with TAs to discuss teaching challenges and provide practical solutions. Such mentorship would enhance TAs’ teaching literacy, problem-solving skills, and overall competence (Dong & Yu, 2016).

Strengthening Inter-university Collaboration and Building Shared Teaching Resources

Beyond TA training and internal institutional programs, universities authorized to train graduate students should leverage their service functions by establishing cooperative relationships with other departments, institutes, and universities. Such collaboration could involve joint teaching workshops, seminars, academic conferences, or research projects. Exposure to different institutional cultures and exchanges with diverse teaching professionals would not only strengthen graduate students’ teaching ability but also help universities integrate resources needed for program development. Ultimately, these collaborative efforts can promote the professional growth of future faculty and improve the overall quality of higher education (Liu, 2014).

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Researcher profile: Yi Wanxian is a graduate student at Ritsumeikan University. Her email address is yiwanxian09@gmail.com. Her interest lies in comparative education and well-being.

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