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Navigating the Shoals at Home: Establishing a TA Training Course

The Classics department in the university of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign recently set up a semester-long TA training course for all of our graduate students, to be offered for the first time in the spring of 2002. To paraphrase Livy's *Praefatio*, our experiences in getting this course officially approved can yield some valuable lessons, both precedents and pitfalls, for other departments who might be considering doing the same thing.

We relied on the following three key assertions to sell the idea at various administrative levels:

1. The course will be **specifically tailored** to meet the needs of our particular discipline, so that it will not only deal with concepts from the most up-to-date scholarship on teaching and learning in general, but will also reflect the split-identity in our field between foreign language instruction on the one hand, where modern language methods must be judiciously retooled to work within the "dead language" context, and Classical Civilization courses in translation on the other, which emphasize a very different set of skills such as the leading of discussions, close reading of texts, and expository writing. Generic teacher-training programs cannot do that.
2. We have an **official mandate from the APA** that all Classics departments with graduate programs should seek to establish such courses as part of fostering the professional development of TA's for today's job market, which thus places us at (or at least near) the "cutting edge" of our field by doing it sooner rather than later.
3. The course will fit in with the increasing **campus-wide emphasis on responsible pedagogy**, allowing our department to draw on a wide variety of resources in pursuit of acknowledged goals, while participating in an ongoing dialogue that extends well beyond the boundaries of our field.

The course proposal received wide support overall, and many local institutional factors helped to smooth the way, but we also met with our share of controversy. The most stubborn obstacle came from a minority group within the department who insisted that those who have witnessed good teachers in action will somehow automatically learn to teach well themselves, simply by following the *exempla maiorum*. Even while upholding the venerable traditions of our field, however, we must learn to adapt and adjust to changing times, and let us make no mistake: times *have* changed.