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Research Article

Managing Graduate Teaching Assistant Misbehaviors: Perspectives of Basic Course Directors from the Front Porch

Michelle Hershberger, West Virginia University

Abstract

This study explores basic course directors' (BCDs) perceptions of graduate teaching assistant (GTA) misbehaviors in introductory communication courses. BCDs (N = 30) responded to questions about GTA misbehaviors observed in their roles. BCDs were asked why they perceived communicative acts as misbehaviors, how they managed them, and what they did to proactively address them. Utilizing thematic analysis, participants indicated indolence as the most frequently occurring misbehavior, followed by incompetence and offensiveness. Six categories emerged for why behaviors and actions were perceived as misbehaviors. In response to how GTA misbehaviors were managed, six categories emerged. Five categories emerged for how misbehaviors were proactively addressed by BCDs. The findings offer practical and pedagogical solutions for BCDs overseeing and training GTAs.

Keywords: teacher misbehaviors, basic course directors, introductory communication course, teacher efficacy, graduate teaching assistants

Introduction

Over one million undergraduate students learn communication skills in the basic course every year (Beebe, 2013). The oral communication skills learned in the basic course are both valuable to employers and essential to students' success after graduation (Hart Research Associates, 2016; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2018). Effective management of the basic course, then, is essential both to the education of students enrolled and the overall health of the course. In communication departments, the task of ensuring a systematically coordinated and appropriately managed basic course is the responsibility of basic course directors (BCDs) (Broeckelman-Post & Simonds, 2020).

Oftentimes overseeing numerous sections of the basic course taught by multiple instructors, BCDs play a pivotal role in communicating the standards and expectations associated with the course (Fassett & Warren, 2012). Training and developing the teaching abilities of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs), often novice instructors who work with the BCD to staff sections of the course, is a time intensive and crucial responsibility (Simonds, 2014). How BCDs communicate course standards, expectations for classroom communication, and professional conduct for GTAs is paramount to effectiveness of the basic course (Frey et al., 2015).

Articulating expectations for instructors of the basic course is particularly important when considering the increased level of teaching responsibility given to GTAs in the communication discipline (LeFebvre & Allen, 2014). Regardless of the training and support efforts of the BCD, GTAs are inexperienced and may still misstep as teachers. Missteps made by GTAs may take the form of teacher misbehaviors which interfere with instruction and student learning (Kearney et al., 1991). These misbehaviors must be managed by the BCD and have consequences not only for the GTA, but most importantly, the student learners at the center of the course.

The purpose of this study was to explore GTA misbehaviors in the basic communication course from the perspective of BCDs. This study explored teacher misbehaviors via an inductive analysis of behaviors GTAs perform which disrupt standardization and student learning in multi-section basic communication courses. Results illustrate the variety of misbehaviors BCDs encounter in the course and how BCDs managed GTAs' misbehaviors.

Basic Course Directors and the 'Front Porch'

In a message addressed to members of the National Communication Association (NCA), former NCA president Steven Beebe (2013) called the basic course the “front porch” of the discipline. Frequently cited in literature surrounding the basic course, the front porch moniker is used to describe how the basic communication course welcomes students across campus to the study of communication and provides learners with a glimpse of the work done in the discipline (e.g., Jones-Bodie et al., 2020; Strawser & McCormick, 2017; Valenzano et al., 2014). As the curator of the front porch, BCDs play a crucial role in facilitating this experience for students as they oversee the instruction of foundational disciplinary content with the assistance of GTAs. Though GTAs are limited term workers, they are instrumental in maintaining a usable, stable, and functioning front porch. While each of these roles cannot be fulfilled without the other, issues with maintaining the front porch are the responsibility of the curator.

With the primary concern of providing quality learning experiences to undergraduate students, BCDs execute a variety of duties and responsibilities to ensure the learning outcomes of the course are met (Simonds, 2014). Though the specific duties and responsibilities of a BCD differ based on the institution, a defining characteristic of the role is maintaining a coherent and consistent quality across course sections. Consistency and coordination establish anchors for BCDs to manage the quality of instruction (Fassett & Warren, 2012). In many cases, all sections of the course must adhere to the same outcomes since the multi-section basic course is subject to particular requirements as part of general education curriculum (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018).

To ensure uniformity across course sections, the basic communication course is often standardized to prescribe specific codes of behavior for what and how GTAs should teach (Morreale et al., 2016). The level of standardization adopted by a BCD varies by program; however, standardizing the course can provide the structure needed for inexperienced instructors to be successful in the classroom (Payne & Hastings, 2008). Though this structure can be beneficial, instructional autonomy is also beneficial to GTAs as they develop and build upon their teaching skills and adapt to the needs of their students (Fassett & Warren, 2008). In preparing GTAs for the classroom, BCDs are tasked with finding the balance of consistency and instructor freedom appropriate for their basic course (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018).

Oftentimes, the decision for how a BCD chooses to balance consistency and instructor freedom is communicated during mandatory pre-teacher training as BCDs articulate the professional, pedagogical, and procedural expectations of the GTA role, along with the standards and policies of the course (Fassett & Warren, 2012; Meyer et al., 2008). Training is essential to educating GTAs about policy while fostering a sense of confidence before beginning teaching tasks and assessment of students (Frey et al., 2015; Young & Bippus, 2008). By providing comprehensive training, BCDs can articulate their expectations to ensure a quality educational experience for students in the course while helping GTAs feel prepared for teaching (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). BCDs continue to be a source of information and support as they manage issues that occur in relation to the basic course, including those involving GTAs.

Graduate Teaching Assistants

GTAs play an essential role in communication departments as many programs could not afford to staff basic courses without them (Weidert et al., 2012). Additionally, GTAs are often the primary initial contact students will have with the communication discipline. Furthermore, basic course GTAs have a major responsibility in facilitating effective classroom instruction and might teach upwards of two-thirds of course content (LeFebvre & Allen, 2014).

By fulfilling the roles of instructor and graduate student simultaneously, GTAs might feel as if they are pulled in many directions at once as they learn to balance their workload (Hogan et al., 2007). Entering the classroom with variable levels of experience, GTAs are expected to immediately transition from a newly trained teacher to a capable instructor and might feel unprepared for the scope of their duties (Hendrix, 2000). Further, GTAs must develop the appropriate level of knowledge and confidence in the material they are teaching and might feel insecure in their abilities as they initially enter the classroom (Weidert et al., 2012).

Under the dual pressure of academic and professional responsibilities, GTAs may make mistakes as they develop the professional, pedagogical, and procedural skills required in their role. Mistakes made by GTAs, whether intentional or unintentional, may disrupt quality and consistent instruction in the course overall. As the individual responsible for all matters related to the basic course, the BCD is put in the position of handling student complaints related to mistakes made by GTAs, as well as addressing inequalities that may emerge in students' learning experiences

(Fassett & Warren, 2012). Inevitably, BCDs will encounter issues as the curators of the front porch and must manage classroom issues related to teacher misbehaviors.

Teacher Misbehaviors

In their original conceptualization, Kearney et al. (1991) identified the three types of teacher misbehaviors as incompetence, offensiveness, and indolence.

Incompetent teacher behaviors indicate a lack of basic teaching skills and might suggest that the instructor does not care about the students or the course (Plax & Kearney, 1999). Instructors might be viewed as incompetent if they make the course overly difficult, appear unenthusiastic, or seem unwilling to help students. Further, incompetent instructors can come across as ignorant and confused to students (Kearney et al., 1991). Students report perceiving instructors as incompetent when they teach incorrect information, are unable to answer questions, and contradict themselves in front of the class.

Offensive teacher behaviors suggest a lack of concern for student learners. Instructors might be perceived as offensive if they are intimidating, humiliating, and condescending toward students (Semlak & Pearson, 2008). Further, teacher offensiveness may also take form in sexual harassment and prejudice toward certain groups or individuals. Offensive instructors may be perceived as authoritarian, rigid, and cruel.

Indolent teacher behaviors are characterized by a disorganized and chaotic classroom environment. Instructors exhibiting this type of behavior might be late to class, forget to collect assignments, frequently adjust their syllabi, fail to grade assignments in a timely manner, and underwhelm students with course content by making the class too easy (Vallade & Kaufmann, 2018). Each of the three misbehavior types has the potential to interfere with student learning, creating problems in the classroom (Kearney et al., 2002).

A study by Goodboy and Myers (2015) replicated and updated Kearney et al.'s piece to confirm many of the misbehaviors originally found while adding misbehaviors relevant to students' experiences in the evolving college classroom, such as an instructor's use of technology and email. This study, as well as others exploring misbehaviors, suggests instructor misbehaviors account for a significant amount of variance in students' learning experiences (Goodboy & Myers, 2015).

Specifically, issues related to teacher misbehaviors may have a negative impact on course learning outcomes and student engagement (Broeckelman-Post et al., 2016). Students who perceive misbehaviors are less likely to participate in class, experience

less cognitive and/or affective learning, and may limit communication with their instructors (Goodboy & Bolkan, 2009; Goodboy et al., 2010).

Instructors who are perceived to be misbehaving are thought of as less assertive and credible by student learners (Banfield et al., 2006). Misbehaviors may negatively impact various dimensions of teacher effectiveness, including immediacy, student affect for the instructor, and credibility (Willer, 1993).

The perception of teacher misbehaviors by students, as well as the impact on learners, is well-documented. The variety of negative outcomes from such misbehaviors is useful in informing the teaching and classroom management of instructors. However, teacher misbehaviors as perceived by BCDs have not been explored and provide valuable insight into how to more effectively train and supervise GTAs. Further, exploring the ways BCDs communicate about teacher misbehaviors to GTAs proactively and retroactively may offer understanding into how to mitigate such behaviors. This insight is useful in maintaining the functionality of the course and its learning outcomes. Therefore, the following research questions were posited:

RQ1: What are perceived misbehaviors that GTAs communicate that BCDs must manage?

RQ2: Why are these perceived as misbehaviors by BCDs?

RQ3: How are these perceived misbehaviors managed by BCDs?

RQ4: How are misbehaviors proactively addressed by BCDs?

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 30$) were current and former BCDs overseeing GTAs in multi-section formats of introductory communication courses. BCDs identified as 63.3% female and 36.7% male. Ages of participants ($N = 28$) ranged from 30 to 76 years old ($M = 47.32$, $SD = 12.04$, $Med = 41.5$). Ethnicities of participants ($N = 28$) were 93.1% Caucasian, 3.45% Native American, and 3.45% other. All participants ($N = 30$) were from North America with 96.7% from the United States and 3.3% from

Canada. The highest degree earned by participants ($N = 30$) was 93.3% doctorate and 6.7% master's degree.

The amount of experience of BCDs ranged from 2 to 45 years ($M = 10.4$, $SD = 8.7$, $Med = 9$). On average, participants ($N = 30$) had been at their current institution for 13.4 years ($SD = 10.2$, $Med = 10$). The courses they oversaw included public speaking (53.3%), hybrid course (interpersonal, public speaking, and/or small group) (20%), interpersonal (11.1%), other (i.e., communication research methods, journalism, introduction to communication theory, science communication, or mass communication) (8.9%), and business and professional communication (6.7%).

BCDs indicated using standardized common learning objectives, common major assignments, and common textbook(s). A common syllabus was used by 96.7% of participants and a common daily schedule was used by 63.3% of participants. In an open-response section, participants also noted using common attendance policies, common protocol for grievances, common assessment protocol, and common slide decks.

The number of GTAs overseen by a BCD in a given semester ranged from 6 to 80 ($M = 18.7$, $SD = 14.8$, $Med = 15$). BCDs ($N = 29$) reported GTAs were responsible for teaching a range of one to six course sections ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 1$, $Med = 2$). BCDs reported overseeing a range from 15-180 course sections in a given semester ($M = 39.2$, $SD = 17.7$, $Med = 35$).

Procedures

Following IRB approval, participants were recruited from the Communication, Research, and Theory Network (CRTNET), the Basic Communication Course listserv, and through individually emailing BCDs included on the National Communication Association directory. Participants were provided a brief explanation indicating the purpose of the study was to explore GTA misbehaviors from the perspective of basic course directors supervising the introductory communication course. To be eligible, participants had to be a current or former BCD who oversaw GTAs in a standardized introductory communication course. The definition of standardization provided to participants was “the textbook and assignments students complete are identical across all course sections.”

Participants ($N = 30$) then completed an online questionnaire and were asked questions about their experience overseeing the basic course and working with GTAs. Next, participants were shown a prompt about teacher misbehaviors adapted

from Kearney et al. (1991). The original language in the prompt was adapted slightly to more directly address how GTAs communicate misbehaviors to students. The original prompt asked participants to recall when a misbehavior was “enacted.” For the purpose of this survey, “enacted” was adapted to “communicated.” Additionally, the language in the original prompt was adapted to address BCDs’ experiences with GTAs. The prompt read: “Think back over your career as a basic course director and recall memorable instances where graduate teaching assistants [communicated in a problematic or troubling manner] and/or demonstrated misbehaviors in teaching the standardized introductory communication course. These misbehaviors may include something said or done you believe had an adverse effect on the student learners enrolled in the course. Please provide a brief description of the graduate teaching assistant misbehavior(s) and a specific example(s) that illustrates the misbehavior(s).” Participants had space to provide examples of GTA misbehaviors.

Next, participants completed four separate follow-up open-ended questions: (1) Why did you perceive these statements or actions as misbehavior(s)?; (2) How did you manage the misbehavior(s)?; (3) How did you find out about the misbehavior(s)?; (4) How have you attempted to proactively address teacher misbehaviors in pre-teaching or training GTAs? Then, participants completed exploratory scales to assess associated variables as part of a larger study (not reported here).

Analysis

To answer the research questions, this study employed thematic analysis through analytic induction, which involves abstracting categories and allows for interplay between the data and coding scheme (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2006). The author first read through the open-ended responses addressing GTA misbehaviors, perception of the misbehaviors, handling and reporting misbehaviors, and methods for proactively addressing misbehaviors. Because many BCDs responded by writing about numerous misbehaviors, responses were unitized by the author allowing for the number of units to exceed the number of participants.

To analyze responses, coding schemes were developed by the author using categories and subcategories established in previous research with a small number clarified or updated with new terminology or definitions (Goodboy & Myers, 2015; Kearney et al., 1991; LeFebvre et al., 2020). Responses were organized through the misbehaviors coding scheme while still allowing for unique emergent concepts

(Strauss & Corbin, 1990). To analyze the responses given in relation to RQ4 about how BCDs proactively addressed misbehaviors, an original coding scheme was developed by the author using open coding to provide a concrete analytic interpretation from statements supplied by participants (Charmaz, 2008).

Following multiple iterative reading sessions and open coding, the author then reviewed responses to collapse, integrate, and finalize the coding scheme. To establish reliability among the generated coding scheme, two coders were trained then independently coded 20% of randomly selected data at the subcategory level. This process was repeated to analyze data in relation to each of the four research questions.

Satisfactory reliability was obtained in the first round of coding for responses corresponding to RQ1 (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .89$), RQ2 (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.91$), and RQ3 (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.8$). In relation to RQ4, reliability was not initially reached and further discussion took place with the author acting as an arbitrator for coding clarity. Satisfactory reliability was obtained in the second round of coding (Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.89$).

Results

Research Question 1

To address RQ1, participants ($N = 30$) were asked to identify GTA misbehaviors. A total of 98 misbehavior descriptions were generated by participants and the average number of misbehaviors described per participant was 3.36 ($SD = 1.38$, $Med = 2$). Three categories of BCD perceived misbehaviors emerged: *incompetence*, *offensiveness*, and *indolence*. The categories, as well as the associated subcategories, are defined and accompanied by participant exemplars.⁵ See Table 1.

⁵ Misspellings and grammatical errors have been corrected in participants' responses. To maintain consistency, "GTA" was used in all references to teaching assistants.

Table 1
Multi-section Introductory Communication Course Graduate Teaching Assistant Misbehaviors

| Categories and Subcategories | n | Definitions | Examples |
|------------------------------------------|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Indolence | 53 | Characterized by an absent-mindedness and perceived as apathetic about their teaching. | |
| Absent | 18 | Does not show up for class, cancels without notification, and/or offers poor excuses. | GTAs cancelling class for personal reasons such as vacation, hangover, or working for another institution's debate team. |
| Deviated from Syllabus / Course Policies | 17 | Modifies course policies or changes due dates for assignments, behind schedule does not follow the syllabus, changes assignments, inappropriate use of extra credit, and/or assigns books but does not use them. | This often includes thinking they can do different assignments, give points that aren't part of the course, excuse speeches when they are not permitted to do so if it doesn't follow with our missed speeches policy. |
| Unprepared / Disorganized | 8 | Is not prepared for class, unorganized, forgets test dates, and/or makes assignments but does not collect them. | GTA did not prepare for class and read from book to students. |
| Late Returning Work | 7 | Late in returning papers, late in grading and turning back exams, and/or forgets to bring graded papers to class. | The GTA took the entire semester to grade speeches. |
| Tardy | 3 | Is late for class or tardy. | Being late to teach their own classes. |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Incompetence | 24 | Demonstrate a lack of fundamental skill or suggest an instructor is not concerned about the students or the course. | |
| Apathetic to Students | 9 | Does not seem to care about the course or show concern for students, does not know the students' names, rejects students' opinions, and/or does not allow for class discussion. | Dismissive of student comments and ideas in the course. |
| Did Not Know Subject Matter | 5 | Does not know the material, low-confidence, unable to answer questions, provides incorrect information, and/or is not current. | Students did not believe the GTA was knowledgeable or organized based on a lack of ability to confidently communicate information to the class. |
| Unfair Testing / Unfair Grading | 5 | Asks trick questions on tests, exams do not relate to the lectures, tests are too difficult, and/or teacher does not review. | GTAs got lazy and just gave students full credit without grading the assignments. |
| Coolness / Peer Affirmation | 2 | Seeks peer affirmation or liking over professional responsibilities. | Not adhering to course policies because the GTAs wanted to come off as nice and their students' friends. |
| Third-Party | 2 | Blames another agent (i.e., course director) for given course policies, class format, particular assignments. | Not taking responsibility for the course as the instructor of record because it was standardized. Blamed anything students didn't like on the course. |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Confusing / Unclear Lectures | 1 | Unclear about what is expected, lectures are confusing and vague, contradicts himself or herself, jumps from one subject to another and/or lectures are inconsistent with assigned readings. | Examples in lecture that got into "grey" area of content. |
| Offensiveness | 21 | Perceived as mean, cruel, or insulting toward students. | |
| Negative / Personality | 8 | Teacher is impatient, self-centered, complains, acts superior, and/or moody. | Criticizing other GTAs in front of their students. |
| Verbally Abusive | 4 | Uses profanity, is angry and mean, yells and screams, interrupts and/or intimidates students. | GTA yelled at students, called them incompetent, and said they "didn't understand real life." |
| Sexual Harassment / Fraternizing | 3 | Makes sexual remarks to students, makes sexual innuendos, dates or flirts with students and/or is chauvinistic. | I had one GTA who began an inappropriate relationship with one of his basic course students. He began communicating with her via social media and one day convinced her, by misleading her about his mental state, to come to his apartment. While there, he supplied the underage student with alcohol and kissed her. |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Shown Favoritism / Prejudice | 3 | Plays favorites with students or acts prejudiced against others, is narrow-minded or close-minded, and/or makes prejudicial remarks. | The GTA seemed over-committed to a student—went way beyond the call of duty. |
| Inappropriate Use of Social Media | 1 | Inappropriate mediated communication with students beyond the scope of course and content. | Too casual or familiar communication with undergraduate students (texting with, partying with). |
| Sarcasm / Putdowns | 1 | Is sarcastic and rude, humiliates students, picks on students, and/or insults and embarrasses students. | Telling off color jokes in class. |
| Unreasonable / Arbitrary Rules / Lacked Discipline | 1 | Refuses to accept late work, gives no breaks in three-hour classes, punishes entire class for one student's misbehavior, and/or is rigid, inflexible, and authoritarian. | Lack of flexibility with legitimate challenging situations. One GTA refused to accept a student's excuse for a hospitalization and subsequent doctor's appointment. |

The *indolence* category (54.1%) accounted for the majority of GTA misbehaviors observed by BCDs across the multi-section introductory communication courses. Five subcategories related to indolence appeared in the data set. The most observed misbehavior subcategory was *absent* (18.4%). One BCD shared, “My most common misbehavior is GTAs cancelling classes without trying to find a sub and also trying to hide it from me.” Another BCD stated, “We once had a group of GTAs who consistently cancelled classes on Friday due to planned hangovers.”

The second most observed GTA misbehavior subcategory was *deviated from syllabus/course policies* (17.4%). One BCD wrote, “A common misbehavior I’ve dealt with is GTAs going against the standardized elements of the course.” Participants listed “not requiring students to do the assignments in discussion sections,” “not administering a test on designated dates,” “extending deadlines for outlines or speeches,” “not teaching the content of the course consistent with our general

education goals and outcomes,” and “refusing to grade according to our rubric” as specific examples of GTAs deviating from the syllabus or course policies.

The third most observed misbehavior subcategory was *unprepared/disorganized* (8.2%). For example, a number of BCDs noted, “GTAs have not posted materials for students,” “not maintaining an updated and complete grade book,” and “missing feedback on individual assignments.”

The *incompetence* category (24.5%) accounted for the second most frequent type of GTA misbehavior observed by BCDs. Six related subcategories were observed. The most commonly observed incompetent misbehavior was being apathetic to students (9.2%). These behaviors included “GTAs silencing ‘free speech,’ even when well-intended,” and “not responding to student messages in a timely manner.”

The next most frequently observed subcategories were *did not know subject matter* (5.1%) and *unfair testing/unfair grading* (5.1%). One BCD wrote an example in the *did not know subject matter* subcategory as “telling students incorrect information.” Misbehaviors in the *unfair testing/unfair grading* subcategory included “curved exam and speech grades,” “GTAs just gave students full credit without grading the assignments,” and “giving almost all As to a class that was not justified.”

The *offensive* category (21.4%) accounted for the third most frequent type of GTA misbehavior observed by participants. Seven subcategories related to offensiveness were observed. The most frequently observed offensive misbehavior was *negative/personality* (8.2%). One BCD reported, “Using the GTA position as a ‘power trip’ to boss and threaten students.” Another BCD noted, “GTA was complaining about students (in a shared office space) and students heard.”

The second most frequently observed subcategory related to offensive misbehaviors was *verbally abusive* (4.1%). Behaviors in this category included, “GTA swore at students” and “GTA was angry and yelling.” The subcategories *showed favoritism/prejudice* (3.2%) and *sexual harassment/fraternizing* (3.2%) also accounted for offensive misbehaviors. From the *showed favoritism/prejudice* subcategory, one BCD shared, “I had a graduate teaching assistant who refused to address a transgender student by their preferred gender. In the class, he consistently used the wrong gendered pronouns (her instead of him).”

Research Question 2

To address RQ2, participants ($N = 30$) were asked why they considered these reported behaviors as GTA misbehaviors. Responses were unitized to account for

respondents who addressed more than one misbehavior in their responses ($N = 41$). Six categories emerged: *course policies* (41.5%), *collective self-image* (14.6%), *disruption to student learning* (14.6%), *credibility of my role* (12.2%), *university/institutional policy* (12.2%), and *personal value* (4.9%).

Course policies pertains to GTA training, policies, or class cancelation. For example, a BCD noted, “These are misbehaviors since the standardized elements of the course are essential to the students meeting the learning outcomes in the course.” Another responded, “I perceived this as a misbehavior because students did not receive the education they paid for due to multiple GTA absences.”

Collective self-image refers to comparison across sections of the course and accounts for the impact one GTA’s decision may have on the collective group or course as a whole. In the words of a BCD, “They are not following policy which is disrespectful to their fellow GTAs who do follow the policies. It makes it unfair and this has an impact on the entire program if they don’t trust each other.”

Disruption to student learning speaks to how misbehaviors impact student learning outcomes, student motivation, and classroom trust. For example, one BCD stated, “Students usually brought these issues to my attention informing that this was hurting their ability to learn and their course satisfaction.”

Credibility of my role applies to the duties and responsibilities of being a BCD, as well as a standard of professionalism associated with the role, rather than demeaning the importance of the instruction provided. In the words of one BCD, “There needs to be a boundary between instructors and students, and when that boundary is broken, it can lead to misperceptions on both sides.”

University/Institutional policy emphasizes policies and universal syllabus mandates required by the university, including confidentiality, FERPA, racism, or sexual harassment. A BCD noted, “A GTA should never have any kind of personal relationship with a student currently enrolled in their section. This is a violation of my university’s policy.”

Personal value deals with value-laden assumptions and modeling appropriate behavior. As stated by a BCD, “While students may think of public speaking as just a box to check by getting a grade, I think of public speaking as a vital life skill. Getting feedback on trial efforts is an important part of learning any skill.”

In addition to exploring why participants qualified certain actions as misbehaviors, BCDs were also asked how they learned about GTA misbehaviors. Responses were again unitized to account for respondents who addressed more than one misbehavior in their responses ($N = 55$). In most cases (45.5%), BCDs learned

about the misbehavior directly from undergraduate students. One participant noted, “For not following policies, I find out from students who complain about their GTA not being as easy as their friend’s GTA.” BCDs also learned about misbehaviors from other GTAs (21.8%) or through direct observation (20%). Direct observation included walking by classrooms, formal teaching observations, grade rosters, and end-of-semester evaluations. GTAs also directly reported misbehaviors to BCDs (7.3%). One BCD shared, “The GTA mentioned it to me by mistake in the course of a conversation about his poor performance.” In other instances, GTAs told the BCD intentionally, as noted by a BCD who wrote, “For refusing to do work, the GTAs blatantly tell me.” Participants also indicated learning about misbehaviors from assistant directors (1.8%), administrators (1.8%), and social media (1.8%). As one BCD wrote, “I’ve seen Facebook posts referencing the event the GTA is attending that directly conflicts with their class time.”

Research Question 3

To address RQ3, participants ($N = 30$) were asked how they managed the GTA misbehavior. Responses were unitized to account for respondents who addressed more than one misbehavior in their replies ($N = 59$). Six categories emerged: *direct discussion* (39%), *reported to authorities* (13.6%), *increased supervision* (11.9%), *corrective action* (10.2%), *training/policy updates* (8.6%), *probation/formal reprimand* (6.8%), *termination* (5.1%), *no action taken* (3.4%), and *miscellaneous* (1.7%).

Direct discussion with misbehaving GTA signifies that an interpersonal confrontation or conversation occurred with the GTA responsible for the misbehavior. In the case of the GTA who continually misgendered a student, the BCD wrote, “I discussed the issue with the student and told them they must use the proper address per our university’s policies. The GTA complied after we discussed the problem.” These discussions were also reported as happening in a conversational manner, such as the response of a BCD who spoke with a GTA who repeatedly canceled class. This BCD stated, “I scheduled a meeting with the GTA. At my department manager’s behest, I framed our conversation as a situation in which the GTA needed assistance: ‘I have discovered that you have had to cancel class several times. How can I help?’”

Reported to authorities pertains to providing an account of what happened to someone with authority or responsibility (e.g., department chair, graduate college etc.). A BCD reported handling a situation where a GTA sexually harassed a student

in his class, writing, “In the case of the inappropriate relationship, there was an investigation by myself, the graduate coordinator, and the graduate college. When the GTA admitted wrongdoing, he was removed from the classroom and lost his funding.”

Increased supervision involves a BCD managing GTAs more directly through regularly observing their teaching, grade books, or course management systems. A BCD who handled a situation in which a GTA yelled at students and was generally dismissive of student contributions, acted by “ultimately live-recording the GTA’s class sessions to observe.”

Corrective action refers to situations in which the BCD intervened to create direct change. One BCD shared her experiences working with GTAs who distributed weekly quizzes to students early to be more likable. She wrote, “I made sure they didn’t have early access to quizzes. Only after the quizzes were given were they allowed to have the key to go over the returned quizzes in the next lab.”

Training/policy updates includes cases in which the BCD updates training practices, course policies, and/or resources provided to GTAs. One BCD shared about handling a GTA who blamed the BCD for policies students did not like, writing, “We adapted training and discussed why it is so important for the instructor to own policies in order to appear in control of the course. To do otherwise diminished their perceived competence.”

Probation/formal reprimand refers to instances of disciplinary action. One BCD wrote about one such incident when GTAs canceled classes to work for another institution’s debate team, noting, “They received an official letter of censure in their personnel file.”

Termination refers to incidences when GTAs were fired or lost their funding. One BCD shared, “We once fired a GTA for videotaping another instructor (who volunteered to substitute the GTA’s class) without his consent or the consent of the students. He was trying to get the other instructor ‘in trouble.’”

No action taken indicates nothing was done related to the misbehavior. For example, a participant who shared about a GTA who turned a face-to-face section of the course into an online section to accommodate their own schedule wrote, “The incident happened the last semester of the GTA’s career, so there wasn’t anything I could do.”

Research Question 4

Participants were also asked how they proactively address misbehaviors in pre-teaching or training GTAs. Responses were unitized to account for respondents who addressed more than one misbehavior in their replies ($N = 38$). Five subcategories were observed: *explicit instruction on course policies* (36.8%), *additional resources* (26.3%), *open discussion* (26.3%), *additional course policies/ additions to handbook* (5.3%), and *miscellaneous* (5.3%).

Explicit instruction on course policies pertains to a BCD reviewing specific course policies, procedures, and expectations for course standardization. One participant wrote, “We have a clear set of expectations that we review with every cohort of GTAs every year, including a description of potential penalties for misbehaviors, up to and including the non-renewal of a GTA’s contract.”

Additional resources accounts for materials, sessions, meetings, and classes created for additional support. One BCD responded, “We created a DVD with acted out scenes depicting various student behaviors and how to deal with them appropriately.” Another BCD wrote, “I do a weekly training for GTAs to cover issues and info they will need. Also, we discuss any problems that are occurring in lab during the weekly staff meeting and I will meet with a GTA if I sense that there are any issues going on in the classroom.”

Open discussion includes direct communication about misbehaviors, including using examples from previous experiences. One BCD wrote, “In our GTA training, we have several sessions that address actual scenarios that others have encountered.” Another BCD noted, “I have tried to ask them to text me and shown them that I am often able to find a sub for them. I have also talked about consequences more openly.”

Additional course policies/ additions to handbook refers to instances when course policies and procedures are reassessed or added to GTA handbooks or trainings. A participant wrote, “Our GTA handbook gets more detailed each year as we address misbehaviors.”

Discussion

BCDs take on a complex task as they work with GTAs, often the communication department’s least experienced teachers, to instruct the discipline’s most foundational course. As BCDs support GTAs throughout their maturation in the program and facilitate the instruction of student learners, they will inevitably encounter GTA misbehaviors. Findings from this study illuminate specific

misbehaviors BCDs experience while working with GTAs which may inform communication surrounding course policies as well as training efforts.

Results from this study confirm the categories of teacher misbehaviors, established in Kearney et al.'s (1991) seminal study, apply to GTA misbehaviors managed by BCDs with indolent, incompetent and offensive misbehaviors as well as many of the previously occurring subcategories, present in the sample. A study by Meyer et al. (2007) suggests the limited classroom management experience of GTAs may contribute to a greater frequency and severity of student misbehaviors which might in turn impact the quality of instruction and learning in the basic course specifically. This study uniquely contributes to literature surrounding teacher misbehaviors in the basic communication course by providing further insight into how GTA misbehaviors were handled and proactively addressed by BCDs to better inform best practices for training and mentoring instructors.

Further, findings from this study contribute to a larger conversation concerning the unique challenges faced by GTAs in the basic communication course and how BCDs can best communicate with them regarding these issues.

Keeping in mind the support given to BCDs is interrelated to the support given to GTAs, departments should work to provide BCDs with the resources they need (Beebe, 2013). One BCD framed the importance of departmental support in proactively addressing GTA misbehaviors, writing, "My answers to the previous questions are mostly based on the fact that I have good support from department chairs." Support might be offered in substantial ways, such as adding assistant director positions to address immediate needs for the basic course and provide additional resources to deal with teaching concerns that may arise with GTAs (Huber, 2020). Though it might not be possible to extend assistance to the BCD through a support staff, departments and BCDs can work together to shape the program to be consistent with the values and mission of the course (Fassett & Warren, 2012). This departmental support can help BCDs to develop additional resources, mentioned by participants as an important factor in proactively addressing misbehaviors, for training, workshops, and mentoring programs to further improve GTAs' pedagogical and procedural competency.

Departmental resources given to BCDs to create and facilitate high quality GTA training is an investment in the education of both undergraduate students and GTAs (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). Further, GTA training offers BCDs the opportunity to implement strategies, such as explicitly addressing and openly discussing course policies which can be an avenue to proactively deal with GTA

misbehaviors. In addition to clearly articulating policies, BCDs reported benefitting from explaining why consistency across the course impacts the student experience. As stated by a BCD, “During pre-semester orientation, I provide standardized course materials, provide a rationale for standardization, and provide examples of when lack of standardization causes problems for both instructors and students.”

In addition to openly discussing matters related to the course, BCDs reported benefitting from formalizing GTA expectations related to professional conduct, role responsibility, and adherence to course policies by signing a written contract. This strategy might help mitigate misbehaviors related to absenteeism, deviations from the syllabus and policy, and lack of preparedness by emphasizing the GTA assistantship as a professional role. One BCD reported minimizing misbehaviors related to a lack of professionalism, noting, “I have cut down on many of these misbehaviors by asking GTAs to sign an expectations and conduct agreement at the beginning of each school year.” As this example demonstrates, creating a contract outlining specific standards of behavior can be a valuable resource in communicating the expectation of professionalism on behalf of the BCD and department.

Further discussion about course policies during GTA training might be facilitated through role-playing scenarios from previous semesters when teacher misbehaviors occurred. Role-playing scenarios provide GTAs a chance to practice and gain confidence in how they might handle certain situations (Young & Bippus, 2008). Activities of this nature have the potential to reduce actual occurrences of misbehaviors by allowing BCDs to facilitate discussions on why certain misbehaviors are harmful and guide GTAs to appropriate responses. Additionally, this provides BCDs the opportunity to open up a conversation about misbehaviors and inform instructors about the specific ways adverse teaching behaviors undermine student learning.

Strategies to prompt discussion among GTAs and BCDs are valuable and should be implemented in addition to laying a strong foundation in communication pedagogy in training and throughout the semester (Broeckelman-Post & Ruiz-Mesa, 2018). BCDs should take special care in articulating their teaching philosophy and vision for student learning in the course. As professional faculty members, BCDs are focused on effective teaching to meet course learning objectives and facilitate student learning. GTAs, in contrast, begin by navigating the gap between student and teacher as senior learners, then progress to colleagues-in-training as they master teaching methods, and finally develop into junior colleagues concerned with students’ learning and how they can facilitate it most effectively (Nyquist & Sprague,

1998; Sprague & Nyquist, 1991). The distinction between GTAs' and BCDs' approaches to student learning is supported by the finding of apathy toward students as a commonly occurring misbehavior and disruption to student learning as a frequently occurring subcategory in reference to why BCDs considered certain actions misbehaviors. Whereas BCDs recognize care and concern for student learning as a principle part of their role as colleagues, this realization arises later in the development of GTAs. BCDs can respond to this discrepancy by clearly communicating the value of student learning in the course during GTA training.

In communicating standards of behavior and their value, BCDs build a community surrounding the basic course. By creating educational opportunities that inform and influence new cohorts of GTAs, BCDs can both proactively mitigate teacher misbehaviors and establish the course as a unified front committed to student learning. Encouraging community among instructors who can empathize with each other as they share similar experiences can have a positive impact on the health of the course overall as GTAs feel support from both their peers and the BCD (Huber, 2019). With high rates of anxiety and depression among graduate students, BCDs may consider workshops and resources related to mental health as they look to build a supportive community in the basic course (Evans et al., 2018). To further facilitate a supportive environment, BCDs may also consider a peer mentoring program as another means of creating connection among GTAs while minimizing misbehaviors (Hendrix, 2000). In creating a community around those who work together to facilitate the basic course, BCDs can communicate the importance of the GTA role and how misbehaviors impact the BCD, other GTAs, and student learners served through the course. By creating such a place on the front porch, BCDs might mitigate teacher misbehaviors and have a support system in place for when misbehaviors do arise.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study explored BCDs' experiences in managing GTAs as part of multi-section introductory communication courses. BCDs' reports were isolated to explore their perceptions of perceived misbehaviors of GTAs. However, this sample did not investigate how BCDs across different introductory courses discussed GTA conduct and expectations or the specifics of how these courses were designed. Future studies should explore nuances in particular introductory multi-section course designs to

determine if specific misbehaviors occur more frequently by novice GTAs and recommendations for how they might be reduced.

A future study should expand misbehavior perceptions using triangulation. For instance, exploring the results of this study alongside GTAs' perceptions of peers' misbehaviors would help to further understand GTA misbehaviors and the impact they have on the course as a whole. Using the approach of triangulation may offer the ability to highlight gaps or common pitfalls to avoid in an effort to improve instruction and enhance student learning across multi-section courses.

Conclusion

In acting as the curators of the discipline's front porch course, BCDs are in indispensable positions for communication departments. Like the front porch, the basic communication course exists as one foundational piece of a larger structure. To ensure our front porch is not only serviceable but appealing, departments and programs should invest in BCDs through support and resources to fortify the pedagogy that builds a strong community for basic course stability. Communication is central to the work of BCDs, not only as members of communication departments, but also in the work they do teaching and managing GTAs. The role requires BCDs to be competent, patient, and proactive communicators as they work with novice teachers. As BCDs communicate with GTAs about expectations for their role and the importance of their competency to the success of the basic course, they build communities. The communities established by BCDs emphasize the interconnected nature of the basic course where student learners, GTAs, communication departments, and general education meet on the front porch.

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