

Teaching Through the Eyes of Doctoral Students

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Keywords: teaching, doctoral students, higher education

Introduction and Literature Review: Doctoral students have become the primary driving force of research activities in universities throughout the world. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, more than 190 thousand students received their doctoral degrees in the 2019-2020 academic sessions from US universities (NCES, 2021). Since the teaching and research responsibilities of the university faculty members have been increased (Pillar et al., 2008; Shannon et al., 1998), doctoral students have undertaken a critical role in helping academic departments with teaching undergraduate students (Austin, 2002). During the Ph.D. life, a graduate student often works as an assistant to a professor and helps in teaching, evaluating, and curriculum development (Conner & Rubenstein, 2014). Doctoral students also take the responsibility of teaching undergraduate classes independently. In those cases, doctoral students play a dual role in the universities. They are students, and at the same time, they are teachers at the same university. According to Luft et al. (2004), doctoral students, with their independent teaching roles, are expected to be knowledgeable in their subject area and to deliver effective education to undergraduate students by utilizing pedagogical strategies appropriately. Prior literature examined the training (Prieto & Altmaier., 1994; Zuo et al., 2018), the effects of teaching associates/assistants on student success (Bettinger & Long, 2004; Shoulders et al., 2013), and the implications of independent teaching by doctoral students (Armstrong et al., 2021; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2018).

Previous researchers did not focus on this dual role of doctoral students. This phenomenon is worth investigating as doctoral students with an independent teaching role are a vital part of the US university systems (Park, 2004). It is critical to understand what it is like to be an independent teacher during their Ph.D. life. It is important to understand the social, psychological, and economic aspects of independent teaching for doctoral students. Thus, this study aims to fill the literature gap by exploring doctoral students' perspectives on their independent teaching experience in universities. Specifically, the study includes two objectives: (1) to explore how doctoral students perceive their independent teaching experience in higher education and (2) to investigate their dual roles.

Methodology: A phenomenological approach was used to address the purpose of the study. Particularly, the lived experiences of doctoral students were examined in terms of how they assign meanings to their roles and their feelings about the independent teaching they perform. Phenomenology focuses on the structure or essence of an experience as well as the meanings of that experience that people understand through a particular phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). In this study, upon the IRB approval, a semi-structured in-depth interview was used for data collection. The participants were recruited from two universities in the Southeastern region of the USA. Ten doctoral students from different disciplines were interviewed, and all of them were working as independent instructors. The interviews lasted from 25 to 45 minutes and were conducted and recorded by Zoom software with participants' consent. Examples of the questions that were asked during the interviews include "*How do you perceive the profession of teaching in higher education?*", "*How do you balance teaching and your doctoral research/dissertation time?*" and "*Share your independent teaching experience during your*

Ph.D. life with us?" After the data collection, interviews were transcribed. Then the researchers read through the interview transcripts carefully and used an iterative and hermeneutic approach to identify the evolving themes (Iqbal & Su, 2021; Su et al., 2022, 2021) and interpret the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings, Discussion, and Conclusions: The themes identified are organized as the Figure 1. The perceptions of doctoral students about independent teaching are analyzed and categorized as the challenges, benefits, and the unique dual role. The challenges include initial teaching preparation, communication barriers, classroom management, acceptance by students, balancing the doctoral study and teaching. For example, the participants consistently mentioned the challenge of first-semester teaching preparation. One participant explained, *"I imagine the first semester teaching a course was probably the hardest because everything is new, like learning the material and learning ways to communicate to students. And that would probably be one of the most challenging times when the first time you teach a course"* (P5). Most of the participants stated the challenge of getting acceptance from students. One participant stated, *"In my first class, I noticed that the students were staring at me in a strange way, like, how he's teaching. I was thinking, like, a student is thinking of me like I'm from a third world country, and how will they react to me. Are they accepting me as a teacher? So, these were some philosophical things playing in my mind"* (P1). On the other hand, participants indicated several benefits of independent teaching, including learning and growth, feeling of independence, confidence and self-esteem, improving presentation skills, and enriching resume. Participants repeatedly expressed the feeling of improved self-confidence and self-esteem after independent teaching. One participant mentioned, *"More than anything, it gave me confidence. It has made my social life more interesting because I have this social interaction with my students"* (P2). Doctoral students who teach independently embrace a dual role as an instructor and a student during their Ph.D. studies at the same university. One participant said, *"When I go to class as a student, I learn new things, and I learn new teaching styles from the teacher. I don't hesitate to apply those things in my own class while I'm teaching. So, it's always like, a continuously evolving thing. So, simultaneously, I am learning and at the same time implementing those teaching skills"* (P9). This dual role at the same university is a unique phenomenon experienced by doctoral students. They can mentally feel that they are not the teacher at the university, but from a responsibility perspective, they are. Whatever they mentally feel, they perceive independent teaching as an engaging and rewarding experience. They all recognized the value of independent teaching for their future career and perceive it as an essential competence in getting a job in academia.

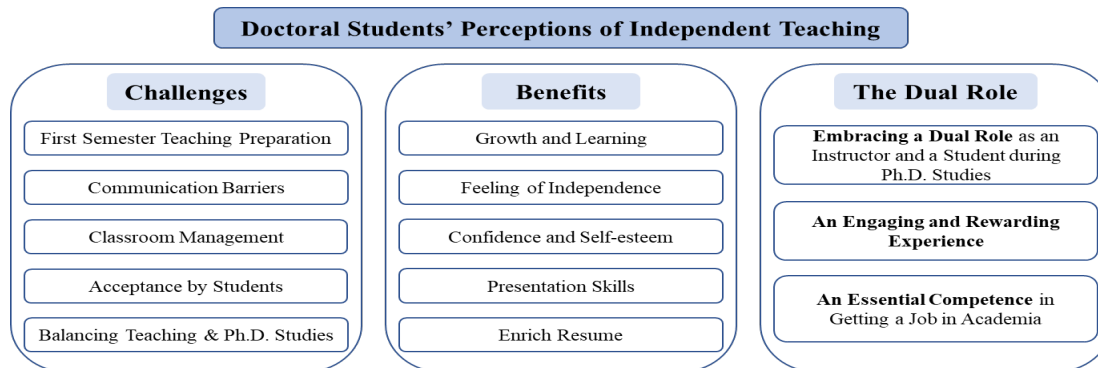


Figure 1. Identified Themes

The data of this study were collected from two US universities. Future studies can collect data from universities in other geographical areas and employ the quantitative approach to analyze the doctoral students' perspective of teaching.

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