

The Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning

Working with Undergraduate and Graduate TAs

Prof. Kenneth Miller
Bio-MCB

At one time I actually believed that in a perfect world - a perfect University - there would be no teaching assistants. That our faculty would do all of the teaching and that student-faculty contact would be the only kind of interaction in classrooms and labs. I no longer believe that is true. My beliefs changed after years of working with teaching assistants in large courses. Part of that is necessity ... and I suppose that it's possible that everything I'm about to tell you is a rationalization. But it's also possible that there really is something there, something of value, something that we as a university can use to improve education.

This is not the result of systematic research. It is not a generalized model that can be applied to all courses. It is colored by the specifics of my own courses in the sciences, and therefore has a bias towards TAs a laboratory leaders. And it is very much the result of my own biases, prejudices, and views of the educational process. Nonetheless, I hope you will find something in it to use, to adapt, to emulate, or to criticize. The purpose of these Teaching Tips is how to best achieve those goals in a large course where **the use of TAs is essential to the conduct of the class.**

A. Student / TA / Faculty Goals

And I'm going to suggest that the best way to organize a large course is to do your level best to think about every decision from the point of view of each of the three groups. **The central premise for the Instructor - the TA is not an employee but an apprentice who hopes to learn and practice a skill**

A Faculty Member's Goals for his TAs

- 1) To multiply the presence of the instructor
- 2) To permit increased student-instructor interaction
- 3) To free the instructor to focus on course's intellectual conduct
- 4) To bring alternate views and interpretations to the class
- 5) To present alternate teaching styles
- 6) To serve as advocates for students to the instructor
- 7) To serve as apprentice teachers

Student Goals for their TAs

- 1) Competent, well-informed help with the subject matter
- 2) Direct personal contact with member of the course staff
- 3) A chance to ask questions and exchange ideas
- 4) A person who supplements, but does not replace the course instructor

The Goals of Teaching Assistants

- 1) Support while working for degree (Grad)
- 2) Chance to work closely with faculty member (Ugrad)

- 3) Chance to learn subject in greater depth (Ugrad)
- 4) Opportunity to explore teaching as career (Both)
- 5) Position of Trust and Responsibility (Both)

B. Working with Undergraduate and Graduate TAs

With a large course and an inadequate supply of graduate TAs available, I realized that I was going to have to use undergraduate TAs along with the graduate ones. An instructor should never underestimate the uncertainty that TAs feel, or the degree to which they are placed in the middle of expectations between students and faculty.

1. Pre-Semester Preparations: Hiring, Expectations & Training

Hiring

- Cast a Wide Net for Undergrad TAs - advertise the semester ahead
- Make current students aware of this to spread the word
- Interview students
- Cultivate the pool of “rejected” applicants (Grad TAs)
- Make Dept aware of course needs
- Contact TAs early in previous semester

Expectations

- Make expectations known early
- Spell them out specifically
- Clarify the 2-way relationships of TAs

Training

- Meet with TAs well before course
- Draft syllabus provided to all TAs, along with textbooks & readings
- Train in special skills (continuing) @ training meeting (all day)
- Provide TAs with resource material -handbook

2. Conduct of the Semester

TAs as a team

- Meet regularly as a group - weekly to encourage suggestions
- Perform labwork together
- Develop group cohesion
- “Pair” experienced with ‘new’ TAs
- Arrange some projects as group efforts
- Encourage TAs to view each other as resources

Individual Initiative

- Allow TAs to organize & run activities, e.g. study groups/reviews
- Allow complete TA control
- Encourage alternate views of material

The Instructor

- Teach a section yourself
- Solicit feedback on TAs with mid-semester review sheets
- Regard work with TAs as a class itself
- Never place TAs between self & students

C. How do we know what works and what does not?

The End results: Under Ideal Conditions...

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|----------------|---|
| Grad TAs have | - learned subject matter
- honed their teaching skills
- experienced satisfactions of teaching |
| Ugrad TAs have | - been exposed to teaching as career
- earned respect of peers & classmates
- worked with faculty member |
| Students have | - expanded contacts with more senior students
- been given appropriate personal attention
- see TAs as conduits (not barriers) to faculty |