

The Teaching Assistantship: A Preparation for Multiple Roles

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A part of graduate training of an ever-increasing number of students is the teaching assistantship. For some it is viewed as simply a way to get financial support; for others it is just a job, one which takes them away from their "real" studies; for others it is the first try at what might be their future careers. Whatever your personal feelings at this time, let me try to convince you that this is an opportunity to learn some really important lessons, no matter what your ultimate professional goals may be. The skills involved in teaching can be generalized to just about every other position of responsibility to which you might aspire.

Teaching requires that you be able to communicate technical material to specialists and non-specialists alike in both oral and written form, an important component of both business and research. Teaching requires that you be able to guide the learning of others and to establish and maintain good interpersonal relationships with those "below" and "above" you in the hierarchy, which is essentially what management positions require. Teaching requires you to evaluate the performance of others, one of the most critical and difficult skills for anyone in a management position. Teaching requires you to be able to listen to someone else struggling with a problem and help them solve it, the basis of consultation in most fields.

Of course, what you learn as a TA will be directly relevant to any academic position you assume. Not only will you learn about teaching, but teaching is one of the best ways to learn what you know and don't know about the content. There is no better review for comprehensive exams than serving as a teaching assistant in lower division courses. Being a TA also gives you a glimpse of things from the other side of the desk. Up until now you saw only the end result of the planning and problems that are an integral part of teaching. As the TA you'll see all the other aspects of running a course that students are never allowed to know. It is hoped that it will give you a better appreciation for your own classes. One thing is guaranteed: You'll never look at your own classes the same way again.

So instead of looking at the teaching assistantship as just a job or something that takes you away from your real vocation, you'll get a lot more out of the time you spend if you approach the opportunity in the same spirit of learning you approach your own courses. What follows are some suggestions for ways to learn as much as you can from the experience.

Different Responsibilities and Skills Needed of TAs

Just what do TAs do?

There is no one answer to that question. The range of activities that are possible is enormous. Here are some examples.

Graders

Some TAs are only given the task of grading papers, homework, exams and such. This is not as easy a task as it might appear. Graders need a good grasp of the content, not in just a general sense but in the way the content is presented and analyzed in the course for which they are grading. They need to be able to follow a student's thinking in order to interpret answers that might not be complete. They need to be able to set and maintain consistent standards as laid out by the instructor so that grading will be fair and reliable. In some cases they need to be able to communicate with students about the grading procedures, answering questions and even tutoring those whose performance is not up to par.

Laboratory Assistants

In science classes the TAs serve as laboratory assistants, something that on the surface might seem fairly straightforward but on closer inspection requires quite a bit of teaching. Most laboratory assistants have to be familiar with the equipment so they can set up demonstrations and student stations. But beyond that they also usually need to be able to fix things on the spur of the moment when a student complains about malfunctioning equipment. They often have to demonstrate the lab procedures clearly enough so the students will be able to repeat what they have observed; this requires great skill at explaining and breaking down procedures into simple enough steps to be understood by a novice. Lab assistants have to circulate and provide assistance to students as they work on their tasks. This requires sensitivity about when and how to help and when to let the student work it out alone. Some lab assistants also grade lab performance and lab reports, a task requiring good observation and evaluation skills.

Tutors

Occasionally TAs are assigned primarily as tutors or helpers for individual student problems. Their primary responsibility is to hold office hours for students who need help. This is an especially challenging assignment because you are working with one student on his or her most pressing need. The difficulty is that you are working with students who are having problems understanding, and the TA must be able to listen carefully to what is troubling the student and then help the student find the way out of his or her difficulty. It is very tempting in this situation to solve the problem yourself and send them on their merry way, possibly more confused and frustrated than before. The good tutor doesn't answer the question directly, but rather helps the student find the answer. That way the student will know where or how to look the next time a similar problem arises.

Discussion or Review Section Leaders

Another group of TAs is responsible for heading up class sessions to allow the students to discuss what they have heard in lecture or read in the text or tried on the homework. In my opinion this is one of the most demanding tasks in teaching, far more difficult than giving a lecture. In a lecture the instructor has planned out what is going to be said when and how with very little fear of interruption or deviation from the script. In the discussion or review section the whole idea is to allow the students to participate; there is no way to predict where that participation will lead or what form it will take. The section leader has to be ready for anything. In addition to that you are usually working mostly on those things that the

students didn't understand in the first place, and now you are trying to explain the most difficult concepts to them. So the TAs who serve as discussion or review section leaders have a particularly difficult assignment

What Are TAs Most Worried About?

Being a TA is not always an easy assignment. You're halfway between being a student and a teacher yourself and halfway between the students and the teacher of your course. It's normal to feel a bit confused and apprehensive, so here are some of the common concerns that TAs voice.

Do I Know Enough?

First, you know a lot more than most of the students in your class so you've got a good head start on them. Second, you're not expected to know everything all the time. It's perfectly acceptable to say, "I don't know," as long as you try to figure it out or find the answer eventually. Third, you can go a long way toward avoiding problems in this area by being well prepared for class. Know the assignment, the equipment, what was said in lectures, how the grading was done, whatever you will be expected to respond to in class. It just doesn't pay to try to slide by.

Will They Respect Me and Accept My Authority?

A lot of this will depend on how you view yourself. The students will see you as part of the teaching staff, and that alone will give you authority. But it's how you use that authority that is important. The best way to handle problems is to avoid them in the first place by being very clear about your expectations. The next component to authority is to think of yourself as responsible for the class not in a dictatorial way but in a senior scholar way. You're there as a coach to help them. If you expect them to listen to you, they will, without having to be very forceful about it.

Will I Be Able to Balance My Teaching Responsibilities with My Own Work?

This is a key worry, and one you should be attentive to. It will be important early on in the semester to establish your time ground rules, both with the students and with the supervising professor. Be sure to have a conference with your supervisor about what is expected of you and what support you can expect. A little prevention can go a long way. Later, if you see yourself starting to get into trouble, talk to your supervisor before it gets too bad. Maybe there's a way of working things out or shifting them around. Just don't suffer in silence.

How to Get the Most Out of Being a TA

Think About How Your TA Assignment Is Related to Your Future Work

Earlier in this chapter I described how the tasks which are associated with teaching correlate in other professional activities. The examples given at that point were just a hint of the possibilities. Some careful thinking about what is involved in the future you see for yourself and the responsibilities of your TA assignment could result in a whole array of similar tasks. When you identify these similarities, concentrate a little more closely on what you are doing and how you are doing it. Adopt the view that

your teaching assistantship is more than just a job; it is a chance to practice some of those future responsibilities in a fairly non-threatening environment.

Be Observant About the Practices of Those for Whom You Work

Another way to benefit from the time you spend as a TA is to become an observer of those who are already teaching, both good and bad models. Think of this as an apprenticeship, an opportunity to watch someone else engage in the tasks of teaching and to learn from them. Take an active interest in the how and why of the teaching that is occurring. Ask friendly questions. Why was this particular teaching method chosen? What is the thinking behind the objectives of this course? How does the instructor deal with the various in-class situations that could be a problem, such as student questions, challenges to authority, or lack of understanding? If you have the chance to assist more than one instructor in your tenure as a TA, you have an even better array of examples from which to learn. Make comparisons between the various instructors as they handle similar situations. Ask questions about their choices and practices. How do they prepare for class? What do they look for in a student's work? Most instructors will welcome the opportunity to talk about their classes, provided the questions are offered in the spirit of learning rather than as a challenge.

Take Advantage of Opportunities for Increasing Responsibilities

Related to the advice above is the idea that you should welcome the opportunity to take part in as many aspects of the course for which you are the TA as possible. Not only is this a good way to be sure that you know all you need to know to fulfill your responsibilities to that particular course, but it gives you a chance to observe firsthand much of the day to day decision-making and fine-tuning that is involved in teaching. For example, offer to assist the Instructor in gathering information for lectures or in preparing exams. You'll probably already be involved in the grading of exams, but it is a good experience to see how the exam was developed from the beginning. Why were certain concepts included and others excluded? How are questions generated and revised? How is the grading scheme developed? If you are given the opportunity to occasionally lead the class or give a short lecture, take it, especially if the Instructor will be present. The feedback you can get from this experience will help you build your confidence and skills as a presenter. It may seem like extra work or a frightening situation, but the learning that can result is worth the extra discomfort.

Be Reflective About Your Practice

One of the current movements in professional development these days is the concept of the reflective practitioner. It means that a professional's actions and decisions are not made at random, but reflect an underlying set of theories and assumptions. To improve, the professional constantly reflects on those theories and assumptions and how they relate to behavior. Therefore, to be professional as a teacher means getting in the habit of examining what you do and why you do it. One useful aid in this is keeping a journal on your teaching experiences. When things go well, note what was good about it. When things go wrong, try to think about what happened and why. Just the act of noting the successes and problems will increase your awareness of what it is that guides you as a teacher and that awareness will serve as the first step toward improvement.

Learn from Reading as Well as Practice

I know that it feels like there is already too much work to do in graduate school without adding more, but getting in the habit of reading about all aspects of your profession is a good tradition to develop early on. The fact that you are reading this book is a good start. There are many books on teaching by philosophers and practitioners alike. In addition, most disciplines have journals that are devoted to the teaching of the discipline. Alternatively, there may be special issues of the disciplinary research journals that once a year focus on teaching. There are other more general periodicals that discuss teaching in general or issues in higher education. These would be of special interest to those planning a career in teaching.

If you don't have time for that kind of reading, you might try a different tack. Read your regular reading from a different perspective; look at your own textbooks and reading assignments from the perspective of a teacher. If you were the instructor of the class using this material, what would you do to make the material comprehensible to students? How do the different textbooks you encounter handle that task? What is the difference between reading textbooks and primary sources? And what is the significance of that difference for teaching? By developing a "second eye" when reading the printed matter of your discipline you can accomplish two tasks at once: You can digest the content of the reading and you think about ways to teach using that particular type of material.

Documentation of Activities with the Teaching Portfolio

Another way to learn and profit from being a teaching assistant is to be on the lookout for things that will make you more marketable when you enter the job market. If you can document these activities to show potential employers the degree of sophistication about teaching (or even other activities) you have developed during your graduate years, you could make yourself stand out among a large field of candidates, all of whom have very similar credentials. The name given this documentation is the "teaching portfolio."

What might you include in such a portfolio? As you work with various typical undergraduate courses, particularly those that are taught in nearly every institution, create sample course descriptions for the courses as you might teach them under various conditions. What textbooks or types of textbooks would you use? What objectives and activities would you include? Have you had experience with those activities? What is your analysis of their effectiveness? Can you give examples of the work of students with whom you have worked and how you evaluated their efforts?

As you begin to develop a philosophy of teaching and learning, creating a series of descriptions of that philosophy and what has shaped it could tell potential employers whether or not you would fit with their departments. Just as employing departments will expect you to have a coherent research program focusing on a few relevant themes or contributions, you can provide them with a similar coherent description of the contributions you would make to their educational mission as well.

Create descriptions of the different types of activities you were required to perform in your various TA positions. Not every TA position has the same responsibilities or means the same thing to every person. You need to illustrate what you have learned and what your strengths are. Just as you strive to document your research experiences through papers and presentations, you should document your teaching experience.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

J. D. Nyquist, R. D. Abbott, D. H. Wulff, and L Sprague (eds.), *Preparing the Professoriate of Tomorrow to Teach* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1991).

J. D. Nyquist, R. D. Abbott, and D. H. Wuiff(eds.), *Teaching Assistant Training in the 1990s*, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 39 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989).

J. Janes and D. Hauer, *Now what? Readings on surviving (and even enjoying) your first experience at college teaching*, 2nd ed. (Acton, MA: Copley, 1988).