The Question: How to be a Good Teaching Assistant?

Sage D’Vice
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Dear Sage D’Vice,

I’m about to be a teaching assistant for the very first time. I’m excited. I’m nervous. I’m not sure what to do. Any tips?

Thanks,

Assist for the Teaching Assistant

Dear Assist for the Teaching Assistant,

That you’re savvy enough to ask this question means you are headed in the right direction. Well at least you’re not headed in a catastrophically wrong direction. I say this because I believe in tempering expectations. Teaching is as inspiring and joyful as you’ve dreamed. But where I think things go south for some TAs (and frankly, professors) is that they don’t realize the work that the rainbow portrait of the classroom entails. And I’m not sure you can just stumble your way into a good time. You’ve got to make it. Here’s my take on how you do that.

Understand that teaching is an expectations game. You have expectations. The instructor of record has expectations. The students have expectations. And the institution has some modicum of expectations—a bottom line that needs to be met and some other lines that need to not be crossed. Successful teaching is about expectations being met. And you have a place in making sure that happens.

But there’s an overlooked caveat that all but leads to failure. Outside of meeting the institution’s minimum expectations that will allow you to have a second teaching assistant experience, a successful classroom is actually not about TAs, instructors, and students having their own expectations met. It’s about creating a setting where all participants in the classroom can develop a new set of corporately amenable expectations. The expectation game changes once you’re all in the same room.

It is the instructor’s job to lead the process of developing corporately amenable expectations. Some do this explicitly by leading a class conference where all the participants come up with a class constitution about what the course is going to be about and the rules all will follow to get there. Others lead by feel, modeling, prompting, and responding to the kind of exchanges that build a classroom community.

As a TA, your role is in aiding the instructor in carrying out this strategy. And it is your job to figure out how the instructor needs you to do this. This is not to be confused with how you think you need to do this. Remember that the instructor has the game plan, so enjoy that freedom. However, you do need to find out what your role is in carrying out that plan, so ask and study their answer. Where there’s ambiguity, ask for clarity. The better you understand the instructor here, the better you can aid them which means the better you can do your job.

Now I know that instructors of record can be cagey or downright puzzling. This can lead to all sorts of insecurities on the part of TAs. My best advice for setting yourself up for success is to make sure your job performance is centered around being competent—not being liked, not good evaluations, not how many compliments you get from students or instructors. Make it about competence. And while every TA sessional appointment is different, here are a few tips for establishing competency.

1. Create a “syllabus +.” The syllabus + is your annotated version of the syllabus that you use as a worksheet to make sense of the class. How do assignments and readings fit together? What announcements do you need to make—and
when—so that students have ample time to prepare for coming class meetings? And as the class goes forward, what news items or directions might a student miss were they to have missed class? This goes a long way in helping you figure out the logic of the class.

2. *Keep a diary of each class session.* Take a few minutes to write down vocabulary words, learning objectives, key concepts, and board work that are integral to the class session. If you are in charge of teaching class sessions, it’s important to remember that the diary may be different then your preparatory notes. And even if they aren’t, having the discipline of doing a post-game diary entry will help you master the content of the course. It also gives you a base to work with in tutoring students.

3. *Be the best student.* This should go without saying, but you should be the best student in the class. This doesn’t mean you have to be the smartest (whatever that means). But you have access to time and resources pertaining to the class that the students don’t. So, use those to help you in being ahead of the class, even in a subject in which you are unfamiliar. Prepare accordingly. If you have access to exams, use backward design to help you focus on what’s most important in your teaching and studying.

4. *Create Processes for Progress.* Where a lot of TAs get in trouble is in recreating the wheel. Every tutoring session and class meeting, the TA starts from square one with the intent of being brilliant. Come up with a system or a checklist that you can use to maintain your focus and have a more concrete plan for how you intend to improve students’ understanding. Maybe you start with a check-in of what they learned last time, then have them write a list of questions of things where they are unclear. Look at the questions with them and choose one together based on what they clearly know, what they don’t know they know, and what they know they don’t know. (Remember, corporately amenable expectations). Then work on that one issue and then come up with tips to help them work on the rest at home. There are lots of these kinds of checklists online, but that’s one that I think will help you help them be more competent, which really is the name of the game when you’re a TA.

Assist well,

Sage D’Vice