

Techniques for TAs in Large Enrollment Classes

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Those who assume the position of a Graduate Teaching Associate (hereafter referred to as a TA) can find themselves in a number of different settings, each unique in its requirements and mechanics. The TA may be watching over students on a field trip to collect samples, or act much like a tour guide, helping students to understand their experiences through the lens of the course objectives and the world outside the classroom. The TA can supervise laboratory classes as students conduct a variety of tests and experiments. The TA may lead a recitation section, either large or small. The recitation itself may be supplemental to the lecture section of a course, or be more “stand alone,” covering topics and materials with students which are independent of other learning activities in the same course. Finally, the TA can assist the instructor of record in a large enrollment course, with 100 or more students that includes no recitation groups, handling the mechanics of the course (grading etc.) and responding to various requests from individual students who require more attention.

Almost regardless of the context in which TA's find themselves, they must meet the challenges of clearly answering questions from students about course content and core concepts of the discipline. Hence, what may appear to be a continuous parade of humdrum tasks are in fact an endless supply of opportunities to express the scholarship of teaching and learning.

In each of these situations, the division of labor between the professor and the TA will vary. In a large lecture section class with no recitation, for example, the professor is primarily in charge of the lectures while the TA does more background work by helping students, grading, etc. In smaller sections, however, the TA may play a more primary role in the transference of information for the course to students as they lead them in group exercises, field trips, laboratory tests/experiments, and recitation.

As undergraduate students move through the stages of fulfilling degree requirements, graduating, and later attending alumni meetings, they often pause to reflect upon and discuss the classes in which they were enrolled and the experiences they had in them, and reflect on these with their former college friends, family, and alumni. Often, it is the TA, not the professor, who becomes the major focal point of these reminiscences. Because they frequently play a large part in the course and in helping students, the quality of the TA experience a student has is important. The focus of this article is on the roles of TAs for large lecture courses with no recitation. This article is based on my own experiences as an undergraduate student in this kind of course, and later as a TA in this exact same setting. In addition to my own experiences, I incorporate the observations and experiences of other TAs I have come to know and with whom I have discussed this topic.

The context of and activities associated with a college level course directly influence the relationship the TA will have with students and result in unique situations and problems. First, in a smaller setting, the atmosphere is more personal as TAs have more time to spend with individual or small groups of students, learning their names, their strengths, and their weaknesses, etc. This makes the TA in a smaller section increasingly more visible. Additionally, getting quizzes, tests, etc. graded is a quicker task. The type of testing also becomes more personal with students doing projects, papers, lab reports, essays, etc.

For each of these activities, TAs and students often find the opposite to be true in large lecture sections without recitations. With the volume of students enrolled in large lecture courses, the experience becomes much less personal, with less time to spend with students individually or in small groups. Because of decreased opportunities for interpersonal communication between TAs and students, as well as the instructor of record presenting the majority of the material to students, TAs in a large lecture course have more of a tendency to fade into the background and be less visible. Grading for such large groups is often slower due to the high volume of students. Testing methods become less personal in that students' knowledge is tested primarily, if not solely, in the form of the multiple choice question.

There are a number of techniques, tricks, and informational tidbits the TA for a large lecture section can use to overcome these challenges. Perhaps

the most important point to note, and one that underlies all the other pieces of advice found throughout this essay, is that TAs are there not only to help the professor but to help students learn as well. As much as the professor, TAs in a large lecture course should consider themselves to be, first and foremost, “educators” rather than mere “waterboys” for the instructor. Hence, the question “What can I do for the students?” should apply to everything a TA does. As students, we’ve all had our own experiences with the unhelpful, unprepared, unreachable, or unapproachable TA that crippled our learning experiences. I always remember the experiences I had with TAs of this ilk as I do my own work, and I strive to be the exact opposite of them. Indeed, they are my role models – that is, they are my “negative role models.” With this being said, my intention in this essay is to describe five techniques for TAs that I believe improve learning for students and that have helped me to develop as an educator.

Technique #1: Office Hours

The first technique centers on a TA’s office hours. This is one of the few key opportunities a TA for a large lecture course has to build a relationship with students. Location and time of the office hours are a large factor in this success. Convenience to the TA, as well as to the student, should be considered. For example, though it may be convenient for the TA to hold hours in their own office, it may be out of the way for students with jobs, busy schedules, and a major in a different degree program who seldom, if ever, are on the same part of campus, especially at giant universities like Ohio State. As such, holding office hours in a library, eatery, cafe, or lounging area near the classroom may be more convenient, since both parties must be in that location at the same general time. Also, holding office hours immediately before or after class increases student attendance. For those students unable to come to office hours due to scheduling conflicts, TAs should keep in mind blocks of time they would be willing to give up to meet with students by appointment. Additionally, if a TA finds themselves unable to attend their own office hours, as much notice as possible should be given to students via e-mail, in class announcements, or both.

I have found that no matter how many times I announce my office hours or send reminders about them, students often forget or are otherwise preoccupied at those times with other things. As such, students find it helpful to receive several reminders throughout the quarter/semester, such as an e-mail communication and an in-class announcement. Another opportunity to convey this message, especially for students who

are struggling to grasp the material and earn a decent grade, is to gently remind them of office hours when approached by students immediately before or after class. It is also helpful to suggest to the struggling student that he/she come to office hours on the back of a poorly done test or quiz, with a reminder of location and time.

Finally, it is also important for TAs to allocate their time in office hours equally if more than one student shows up. I find that there are three kinds of students who regularly consult a TA: (1) those who do not understand the course material, and truly need help; (2) those who want a quick review to solidify a point or two that may have been difficult to understand from the class lecture alone; and (3) those who feel they must achieve a perfect grade and are deeply concerned if they receive a mere B+ or A-, as opposed to an A. I have fondly come to call this last group the “needies.” For all three types, some will only consult with me once or twice throughout the entire school term, while others contact me once a week or more. Whatever category students fall into, it is important to remember that they must all be treated equally and receive their fair share of attention and time from the TA.

Technique #2: Take Good Notes in Class

A second technique the TA of a large lecture section course without recitation can use is to attend, whenever possible, ALL lectures, with absences discussed and approved in advance with the instructor. More importantly, while attending the lecture, the TA should take good notes of the content presented by the instructor, just as they would do if they were a student in the course. This advice is true even if it is the third, fourth, fifth time or more that the TA has sat through the lecture. This serves several purposes. First, the TA is acting as a role model for the students. When students see the TA engaged, it is more likely they will be too, as opposed to when the TA is nodding off, daydreaming, or completing an assignment for a graduate level course in which they are enrolled. Taking notes along with the students likely earns the TA several respect points, as they see the TA is working hard, right alongside of them. TAs will also find that they are able to answer students' questions more clearly and more fully because they have a better and deeper grasp of the material. It is less helpful to quote back *verbatim* to a student what the instructor said during lecture or what the student read in the textbook. If students have come to consult with the TAs during regular office hours, it is because they have specific questions and they need further explanation. Additionally, the TA's own notes will more precisely align with the professor's

lectures. In addition, note-taking serves to remind the TA about the core concepts of the discipline in which they are seeking an advanced degree, and it might even help with preparation for general exams or development and defense of the dissertation.

Attending lectures will also make the TA more familiar with class policies and procedures. Often, students will e-mail the TA rather than the professor about a question (“Are there bonus points?”, “Do I need a note from the doctor?”, “What do I need to do to catch up for missing class to go fishing?” – yes, I did receive this request). The instructor is busy already with the material for the course, and in many cases, students are shy about approaching a professor and would prefer a TA to answer these types of questions. TAs look unknowledgeable, unprepared, and just plain bad when they must refer a student to someone else for information about the class. It becomes inconvenient for the student, the TA, the instructor, and other TAs when one TA does not know the class policies; therefore, know them well. If a student does ask a question which the TA may not know, rather than referring the student to someone else, the TA should find out so they know for future reference, and so they can get back to the student in a timely manner.

Technique #3: Approachability

The third technique for TA success in a large enrollment course is simply to appear to be approachable by the students. It is true that in a large lecture section with dozens and maybe hundreds of students, it is impossible to get to know everyone, but you can make yourself known to them. It is important to not stay in the background and work behind the scenes; instead, TAs should show the students that they want to know their students, despite restrictions associated with the division of labor between them and instructors of record.

Approachability can be achieved in a number of ways. The first of these is through introductions. On the first day of class, TAs should give a 1-5 minute introduction of themselves to the class about who they are, what they study, etc. Also when a student approaches the TA to ask a question or make a comment, the TA should ask the student’s name and respond in kind with their own name. This personalizes the experience for both the TA and the student. If the TA can recall a student’s name at some future meeting of the two, the student will greatly appreciate it, and even if one’s memory fails, the attempt is generally appreciated to the same extent.

A second way TAs can make themselves known to students is through e-mail. E-mails can be sent regularly to the whole class with various updates, and also to individuals. TAs should include their contact information on each e-mail so that students have easy access to it. Though the “business” part of the e-mail is important, it is also important to be friendly and encouraging in the e-mails, thus making them more personal. Examples of this could include phrases such as “See you on {class date}” or acknowledgement for their hard work or good test grades. Additionally, a final end of the quarter, wrap-up e-mail that thanks them for taking the course, acknowledges their hard work, etc. is a good way to leave a final positive impression with students.

Making announcements before and/or after the class is an additional way for TAs to have positive experiences with students. Simple, clear communication will keep students’ attention as well as inform them of the particular content of the announcement. It also provides one more opportunity for the students to get to know their TA.

Technique #4: Positive, Confident Attitude

The fourth technique for being a good TA in a large enrollment course involves keeping in mind that no matter how hard TAs try, they can never please everyone. When TAs do their best, and students see they are making the attempt, it will be noticed and appreciated by most. Do not get discouraged by the rare dissenter who did not find these efforts helpful. Often, this kind of student simply dislikes the course, or the instructor, or the university, or something else that really has nothing to do with a TA’s performance.

Pleasing students is partially dependent on the “business” side of a large enrollment course. For example, despite a large class size, a fast return of grades on attendance checks, quizzes, exams and homework assignments will win favor with most students. Additionally, a willingness to compromise on meeting times, such as outside of office hours due to a scheduling conflict, will also be remembered. However, TAs must consider their own schedules and obligations (family, friends, personal) as well, and acknowledge that it is okay to sometimes say no. TAs should be sympathetic to the needs of students, explain why they are saying no for a good reason, and possibly suggest an alternative solution.

Technique #5: Student Assessments

The fifth and final technique TAs can use in a large lecture section is

to make sure that in addition to administration of a student evaluation for the course and the instructor, a TA evaluation is conducted. Student evaluations are a great tool for TAs wishing to improve their own skills as educators and it gives students an opportunity to express their opinion about the TA. Trends in opinions can be observed in their assessment of performance from one quarter to the next. Sometimes students mention things that may come as a surprise, such as that the TA was too stern, too absentminded, too softspoken, etc. Accordingly, TAs can then tweak their styles – that is, how they appear to students – which in turn improves their classroom presence and their communication skills when working with students outside the classroom. These evaluations can be conducted either informally by simply talking to students and asking their general opinions, or more formally with a standardized set of questions for students to fill out. The responses to these evaluations can also serve as part of the TA's dossier for later career applications. As well, on occasion, a student will send a thank you note, by regular mail or e-mail, and those also can be used as documentation of performance.

Final Words

These five techniques – holding office hours, attending class lectures, being approachable, keeping in mind that a TA cannot please everyone, and conducting student evaluations – have been discussed as ways to help TAs become better at their assignments in large lecture sections where they may experience less contact with each student than in courses with smaller enrollments or courses where there is more personal contact between students and TAs. They will improve the quality of exposure that a TA has with students as well as improve the TAs' personal styles. It should also be noted that these techniques are applicable to instructors, and that their application will better the relationships between students, the TAs, and course instructors.

Finally, I make the observation that although the context of a course for fulfilling TA duties varies widely, when TAs are serious about the value of higher education and care about students, then they are likely to make a difference as educators and will excel in their roles as educators in whatever teaching context they find themselves throughout their careers.