Embracing Diversity – Some Thoughts on Being an International TA
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*Intended for: International TAs*

Are you a first time TA? Have you taught before, but not in the US? For many incoming international TAs, teaching in a foreign language and/or in a different cultural background can be very intimidating and thwart their good intentions and aspirations. However, as international TAs we all have unique perspectives and abilities that can enrich our students’ (and our own!) learning experiences.

There are many aspects of diversity and all are relevant to good teaching. In particular we will address concerns including:

- Language
- Culture
- Ways of teaching the material
- Expectations
- Differences in class content

In this workshop we will share some thoughts on various ways to embrace our differences instead of being intimidated by them.
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As international TAs we may face some different challenges than the ones faced by our American colleagues. Linguistic, cultural, and even academic differences may become a barrier between us and our (mostly) American students. In my own personal experience I’ve found that these differences can be very intimidating and ruin the good intentions and aspirations of some excellent TAs. Following are some thoughts on how to face these challenges and how to embrace diversity (instead of being intimidated by it) to become a more effective teacher and enjoy the experience of being a TA.

Language

Some students may have trouble understanding you, especially at the beginning. Most of us international TAs, after all, speak English with an accent! But don’t be ashamed of it; as somebody once told me, we don’t THINK with an accent. However, be careful to articulate as clearly as possible, and encourage your students to ask you to repeat or rephrase whenever they don’t understand you as often as they need to. It is also useful to use a blackboard (or a projector or powerpoint, you name it) to write down key terms. Always prepare class ahead of time, and force yourself to do it in English. Stay in touch with your American classmates – they can become your most helpful source whenever you have language questions. And don’t be discouraged – you’ll probably become more fluent with each lesson you teach, and your English will improve as you spend more time in Madison.

Culture

Cultural diversity is a powerful tool we can use to enrich our lessons. A broader view of things can be very useful when you are trying to reach many students since it will allow you to present different angles of any topic. And, when relevant, your personal stories can serve as unique examples that will make their learning experience more profound.

However, coming from different cultures, we may say or do things that seem completely natural and appropriate but that may come out as aggressive or rude to our students. The tone you use, your gestures, how you react to their questions, or the way you refer to the professor in charge of the class are some examples of things you should be careful about. Once again, getting out of your own ethnic group every now and then and interacting with your American classmates (or more experienced TAs), can give you an idea of these differences. To get a more precise view, get to know your crowd. The demographics talk later today should be a good start. Introductions on the first day of class are useful too. Once you have identified potential cultural gaps, be aware of your body language (SMILE!), respect inter-personal space, try to maintain political correctness, and if you feel some disapproval from students after you say or do something, don’t hesitate to apologize.
Pedagogy

When I first taught a class at UW, I was shocked by the big differences between my own undergrad experience and what I found in my classroom. The difference in content was the most evident one, and (in my opinion) the easiest one to deal with. You must master the teaching material as it is presented by the particular professor teaching your class. If, in addition, you know additional related topics or different approaches to the subject, they may come handy later on if you want to give your students a broader look at the subject. I’ve found that attending the lectures (even if it is not required) is very useful to stay in synch with the professor and (maybe) learn a new thing or two. And prepare class consciously. You’ll find out that you are able to explain something clearly only if you understand it very well yourself. By preparing the material ahead of time you’ll have the opportunity to solve any problem you may find in your way.

The other big difference I found was in the way things are taught. The way in which you transmit information can be as important as concepts themselves. Culture and language are part of this, and the third source of differences I’ve found is what students expect of you as a TA. My impression is that American students interact with their instructors in a more informal way than many other students. They expect you to be approachable and open for questions, sometimes about topics broader than the ones covered in class. You will need to be creative to answer many of these fully. Despite their friendliness, remember to keep some distance. You will be grading their work and will need to be as objective as possible.

These are all very general thoughts that, I hope, can help you deal with some particular challenges that an international TA may face. But not all ideas fit everybody, so try to find out what works best in your own case. Don’t hesitate to look for help whenever you need it. And remember to have a life, try to stay sane, and enjoy the experience!