

# Tips for Teachers

From the 2010 College of Letters and Science Teaching Fellows



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*The Heart of a Great University*

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT

PHILOSOPHY 101

## Overcoming First-Day Fears

*Brent Berger, Department of Botany*

Walking into a new classroom or lab where you probably do not know anyone and all eyes are on you as *the* “expert” can be quite an intimidating experience...if you let it get to that point. To better prepare you for that pivotal first day, this workshop explores a variety of helpful tips that you can use to walk in confidently and prepared to make the experience fulfilling for both you and your students.

To start with, don't wait until the last minute to get organized. There are several things that you can do to better prepare yourself well ahead of time for the first day, including:

- Write, proofread (have a colleague or two help) *and* copy YOUR syllabus.
- Organize 1<sup>st</sup> day assignment(s), student info sheets & classlist(s) from Learn@UW (usually wait on this until a day or two before your class begins).
- Design your lesson plan for the 1<sup>st</sup> day, including a list of things that you will need to accomplish all tasks at hand. Include nametags in the list (e.g. stick on tags, nametag tents made from paper, pre-made Martha-esque name tags, etc.).
- Go over the material you are going to teach, especially if you will be solving problems. This will allow you to be thoroughly familiar with the material, and it will provide an idea of how much time you should allot to different activities.

Having prepared ahead of time is a must, but the fun really doesn't start until the first class begins. A few things to consider when the time has arrived:

- Dress professionally for the first day.
- Write your objectives for the day on the board.
- Have students fill out information forms as they arrive and make nametags.
- Strike up small talk conversations with students before class starts. You might read the news that day or check out the Herald/Daily Cardinal as a starter.

Once class has started, be ENGAGING. Have students introduce themselves to their neighbors, and then do an icebreaker to introduce the entire class to each other. Be sure to emphasize the point of the icebreaker—you want them to feel comfortable interacting with each other. The most important thing you can do as a TA is *learn students names as quickly as possible*, and little gimmicks like icebreakers definitely help! You might also consider doing picture rolls or arranging 5-minute visits with your students to help learn names. I tend to introduce myself after the students to transition into my syllabus.

A key component of the first day is YOUR syllabus. You can pick when to discuss it, but be sure to include it. Within the syllabus you want to provide pertinent information, establish the goals for the semester in a general, big picture way, and lay out the expectations you have of your students *and* what they can expect of you. Remind them you are human and you may not know everything, but when questions are posed that you don't know, you will find the answer by the next class.

Now you are ready to dive headfirst into the material for your first day. You have prepared for this moment, clearly established your role as a facilitator of knowledge and are ready to begin a wonderful semester. Have a great time and enjoy yourself...it makes teaching worth it!

## **Embracing Diversity – Some Thoughts on Being an International TA**

*Camila Casas, Department of Economics*

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!

## **I ♥ My German Class: Creating a Positive and Comfortable Environment in your Foreign Language Classroom**

*Katie Chapman, Department of German*

**-Consider the Physical Environment:** Rather than simply going along with whatever seating arrangement the class before yours has used, consider whether or not another arrangement might be more beneficial for your students. I have found that placing all the desks along the walls to leave a large open space in the middle has several benefits. Every student can clearly see every other student, building communication and solidarity, avoiding cliques, and helping students get the most out of what their peers contribute in class. When it comes time for students to get up out of their seats for milling activities and the like, the open space in the middle is extremely helpful. Be mindful also of *your*

position in the room. Are you often writing on the board with your back to your students? Do you subconsciously gravitate towards looking at one half of the room, causing your students seated in the other half to feel left out?

**-R-A-P-P-O-R-T, Find Out What it Means to Me:** Establishing positive regard and mutual respect between yourself and your students as well as encouraging the same amongst your students as a group is extremely important in the classroom. Your students are real people like yourself and your friends-- take a genuine interest in them! Show this by following up on stories they've told you, by chatting with them before the bell rings in whichever language you like (I find English better before the bell, but that's a personal choice and depends also on what you perceive to be each student's preference), and by really listening to them. Fun things you learn about students can be great resources for activities that you create, and students appreciate that you remember things about them. Your students have all sorts of different majors and specializations-- show them your respect by entreating their expertise on matters where they know just as well or better than you. Give them choices now and then, between two or three equally useful assignments, for example. And whatever you do, don't forget the most simple and intuitive way to form a positive connection with another person-- smile! :- )

**-Your Classroom is a Community:** Your classroom will possibly be the only place where your students have the opportunity to speak the language they are learning, so it's critical that they feel comfortable enough with you and especially with one another to put themselves out there and *say something*. Promote a sense of equality by calling on everyone regularly rather than waiting for volunteers and letting the most confident among them dominate the group's attention. Help your students daily (really, daily) to get to know one another. Provide activities that invite them to share anecdotes, memories, information about their interests, aspirations, what they like and don't like, etc. Your students will be much more comfortable participating in class if they know their classmates and believe that they aren't being judged for what they contribute. Frequently (=several times per class period) assign them to different partners in pair and group work. While friendships are likely to develop and are obviously a wonderful thing, do avoid cliques. You as the teacher wield a surprising amount of power in this area-- even just by arranging the desks as described above you can create a strong sense of togetherness.

## **Getting the Best (and Avoiding the Worst) Out of Group Work**

*Brian Ekdale, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication*

*Why have group projects anyway?*

- **You want to.** Your students can actually learn a lot from each other.
- **You have to.** Group projects are a necessity when you are dealing with limited resources.

*How should I assemble my groups?*

- **Randomly.** Not only is this the easiest option, but it also ensures students have no one to blame but chance if the partnership doesn't work out.

- **Strategically.** Late in the semester or for large projects, be intentional in constructing your groups. If you have “trouble” students, you might want to put them together. This way they can’t ride the coattails of a more ambitious partner.
- **By role.** Ask students to state their preferences for group roles, and then construct the groups accordingly. This way, each individual is responsible for a particular task. If that task suffers, you know who is to blame or if it’s exceptional, you know who deserves credit.
- **Varied.** If you have multiple group projects throughout the semester, don’t put the same students together more than once. This avoids any potential disadvantages (if the group didn’t work well the first time) or advantages (if it worked really well) that group might have.
- **In Advance.** Don’t “count off” in class. Even if your groups are randomly selected, figure them out outside of class. You may be able to anticipate troubled partnerships once you see names listed side by side. Then you can still “re-randomize” the groups before it’s too late.

*How do I avoid group conflicts?*

- **Set clear rules ahead of time.** Decide if you want to grade everyone individually or give one grade to all group members. Then stick to it (barring extreme circumstances).
- **Inform the students.** Everyone should know the rules. Then if there are conflicts after the fact, refer to the syllabus or assignment where the grading procedure is clearly detailed.
- **Allow for mingle time in class.** After assigning groups, make sure they get together to start taking about ideas for the assignment and to exchange email addresses AND cell phone numbers (students are very clever at coming up with excuses for not receiving emails).
- **Make yourself available.** Your students should feel comfortable telling you there is a problem with their group before they turn in their assignment.
- **Allow students to grade partners.** After the assignment, they can confidentially grade the work done by themselves and their partners. Use that to help you determine final grades.

*If conflicts arise, how should I handle them?*

- **Before grading.** Don’t entertain students who only complain about their group after they have received an unsatisfactory grade. Make sure they know that if there is truly a conflict, it is their responsibility to make that known to you before you start grading.
- **Outside of class.** No one wants their grievances aired in front of their peers. Also, sometimes conflict arises from sensitive personal issues. Be respectful of that possibility.
- **First is not necessarily fact.** The tendency is to believe the account given by the first person to tell you about the conflict. Be aware that some students are crafty when it comes to preemptive strikes. Make sure you listen to both sides before rendering judgment.
- **Be fair, move on.** You’ll probably never know exactly what happened. But don’t lose sleep over it. If you’ve listened to both sides and tried to act fairly, then you’ve done your best.

## **When You Least Expect It: Tips for Approaching Controversy in the Classroom**

*Elizabeth Foster-Shaner, Department of Theatre Research*

Although there is no set formula for approaching controversial subject matter, or for handling controversy in the classroom, there are a number of tips that can help you prepare for these moments.

By being honest about one's background, the instructor can begin to acknowledge when their personal opinions might affect the way in which controversy is approached. This also enables the instructor to better understand and empathize with viewpoints outside of their own. Furthermore, implicit to fostering respectful and constructive discussions is the need to set the foundation for a safe and positive learning community. And lastly, creating a repertoire of tactics and approaches for facilitating in-the-moment controversy creates an opportunity for teaching moments rather than awkward silences.

### **Owning your own experiences, biases and opinions:**

In courses that deal specifically with potentially controversial subject matter it is important for the instructor and students to self-evaluate their own socio-cultural-political positions. These evaluations can be done privately, though I recommend discussing the process in the large group so that students can benefit from each others experience. In the workshop I provided a social profile handout for you and your students to fill out. This can be useful, but it can also be frustrating. If you choose to share these with your students you should first recognize the arbitrary nature of some of the categories and ask them to fill them out as best they can. Don't provide clear definitions, ask them to think of their own.

It is also important to recognize your own personality traits, as these greatly affect your personal teaching style. How do you personally handle awkward moments? Do you deal with them straight away, brush them off with a joke, or, allow yourself time to come up with a response? Know that, while there may not be a "right" response, there will always be a more appropriate response for you as an individual. Becoming familiar with your personal teaching style prepares you for the many responses that students might have to you as an individual, allowing for a more inclusive and open learning environment.

### **Creating a positive, respectful and safe learning environment:**

Setting the foundation for a positive, respectful and safe learning environment is probably the most useful tactic in approaching controversial subject matter. When your students feel comfortable around each and you they are more likely to listen and be open to each other's opinions, or to come to you early if they have problems. Make yourself available as best you can, but remember that you have a life as well.

As a theatre TA, I like to play cheesy name games and getting-to-know-you activities, but that's just me. A positive learning environment can develop from something as simple as an informal discussion on the first day, or asking everyone to introduce themselves.

If you are teaching a class expressly dealing with controversial subject matter it is a good idea to discuss guidelines for respectful conversations. You can ask students to come up with some on their own, or, include them in your syllabus. At the beginning of the semester I always stress the importance of real listening, keeping an open mind and arguing with ideas rather than people.

### **What to do in the moment:**

First off, never be afraid to take a moment to collect your thoughts. Reacting to a comment while you personally are still offended, or before you have given the student a chance to explain themselves might set up a power dynamic that will shut your students up in the future. Even if you do not address something during that specific class, you can always return to the subject, without pointing out the particular student, and turn it into a "teaching moment."

While remaining as objective as possible, ask the student to *clarify* what they are trying to say. We all have those foot-in-mouth moments in which we say something that we do not truly believe or intend. By being respectful of the student they will be more likely to keep an open mind with your own awkward moments. This will be a lot easier to accomplish if you have first set the foundation for a safe, respectful learning environment.

Allow the students to police themselves. Try not to abuse your position as the authority figure to constantly assert your own views and values. Oftentimes, if you have a problem with a comment, someone else does as well and it is usually better to let the students argue as peers than to receive the "correct" response from the instructor.

## **Efficient and Fair Evaluation of Student Performance**

*Beth Godbee, Department of English*

How do we make evaluation efficient and manageable within our busy lives, and how do we make it more authentic and equitable for all students?

These are particularly large questions, so the following teaching tips are intended as starting points, not ultimate answers. I cannot stress enough the importance of campus teaching resources, not only as to develop initial teaching knowledge, but also for ongoing professional development and collaboration. If I could impart just one tip, it's definitely:

**\*\*Learn about campus teaching resources, and use them!\*\***

**Take advantage of campus resources.** Be sure you know about the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program <<http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/>> and the Writing Center <<http://writing.wisc.edu/>>. Every semester, the writing center offers a number of workshops for instructors, including (1) designing effective writing assignments, (2) conferencing with students about papers in progress, and (3) responding to and evaluating student writing. These one-time classes are a great way to continue thinking about

evaluation. There are also a number of other great teaching resources on campus, including L&S Learning Support Services, the Teaching Academy, Delta Program, and the Center for the First Year Experience.

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In addition this primary tip, here are few others to consider in evaluating student performance:

**Design evaluation to match what you hope students learn.** Our philosophies of teaching, learning, and knowledge all very much influence our varied approaches to evaluation, so developing evaluation criteria should begin with an understanding of what you value and what you hope students will learn and achieve over the course of the semester. Knowing these goals, you can work backward to develop evaluation criteria (descriptions of expectations, tools for assessments, or rubrics) that you share with students so they know what to expect and how to succeed in the course. Oftentimes, early in our teaching careers, we aren't developing evaluation criteria on our own, but inheriting them from other instructors. You might begin by asking: How can I adapt this evaluation tool to meet the goals I hold for my students?

**Frontload your efforts.** Even before the semester begins, it's important to plan for evaluation. Write your plan into the syllabus, talk about expectations early and throughout the course, give students evaluation criteria as part of the assignments, plan formative or in-process check-ins, and remind students of your expectations before time rolls around for final assessment.

**Consider response in terms of early, mid, and late.** Not all evaluation is equal—not only in terms of the weight (% of grade), but also in terms of the purpose. When responding to students' performance in the course, it's good to frontload: to give more of your feedback, especially descriptive, formative assessments, early in the semester. Mid-way through the course, you might be tracking progress and helping students work toward final projects or exams. At the end, it's a good idea to back off and assign grades more than give feedback. (You might think of stacks of papers left in hallways unclaimed at semester break.) In terms of time: invest more up front and back off as the semester goes along.

**Separate response from evaluation.** Part of our jobs as instructors—an important part!—is to communicate with students about their performance and learning in the course. Most of this communication happens through feedback and response, which can be given in a variety of ways: written or oral, through email, in-person, in end comments on papers, etc. This feedback is essential to building relationships with students and communicating your expectations so that final assessment is not a surprise. The rule of thumb here is to think of this response as separate from evaluation so that your feedback is truly supportive, specific, and not defensive. Rather than giving responses to defend grades, give responses to continue teaching.

**Involve students in evaluation.** One of the best ways to save time in evaluation is to ask students to evaluate themselves. As students, we often have good insight into where we are struggling, what risks we're taking, and what successes we've achieved. We're also frequently more critical of ourselves than are our instructors. Undergraduates are no different, and asking students to write self-evaluations can save your time in writing responses (you can jump into a conversation where students leave off) and save time in grading (you can follow the students' lead in assigning grades, while providing your additional insight and potentially lowering or raising grades). This process helps us avoid writing comments to simply defend grades and instead helps us cultivate dialogue with students.

**Cultivate a kind attitude.** If you're enjoying your work and liking your students, you're likely to give more constructive and fair evaluation than if you're spiraling into complaints or feeling frustrated about the time it takes to evaluate student performance. Cultivate a positive attitude, and you'll be happier evaluating and likely find that you're giving more kind and generous assessments as well.

**Prioritize!** Here's an important rule of thumb: If you're overwhelming yourself, then you're likely overwhelming students as well. It is possible to write too many comments, to stay up too late re-reading student exams. Instead, prioritize what really matters in your feedback and in your evaluation. What do you value, and is this reflected in your approach to student assessment? Stick to your priorities, and you'll save time, communicate your goals clearly, and help students succeed to working toward clear expectations.

**Evaluate your evaluation.** Self-reflection and inquiry are essential to good teaching, and it's important to think critically, openly, and honestly about evaluation—what's working and what's not. Consider asking yourself (and asking your colleagues and students too!) a few questions throughout the semester, such as:

- Am I evaluating what I care about most, what I hope students learn this semester?
- Is my evaluation fair to all students? Am I aware of my own biases? Am I acting on bias or guarding against it?
- Am I overwhelming myself (and students) with extensive feedback? If so, am I commenting on the priorities or attending to every little thing?
- How does my grade distribution stack up against the achievement gap here at UW-Madison? What might account for grade gaps, and what can I do about it?

## Teaching a Class with a Stigma: Students' Innate Fears and the Ever Popular "...But (this subject) is HARD!" Mentality

Mandy Musch Long, Department of Chemistry

### 1. Before classes start:

- (a) Prepare a syllabus of your own, including: course information, your pertinent information, the best mode of communication with you (email, office in person, etc), office hours, a brief summary of course content, your policies regarding late work, tardiness and absences, and your expectations for the class.
- (b) In the connected world of the internet and readily available information, many students are not familiar with what constitutes plagiarism. For your own preparation, see: <http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/facstaff.html>, directed toward faculty and staff.
- (c) Know your classroom/lecture hall/laboratory (floor plan, evacuation procedures, closest water fountains/restrooms/etc, safety equipment/first aid, etc). Being familiar with your territory will make you more comfortable and approachable when the students arrive.

***Students observing your preparation & enthusiasm will translate into their confidence!***

### 2. Hit the ground running on the first day:

- (a) Greet students as they enter – be awake and be attentive, even if you have a four hour lab beginning at 7:45 in the morning. Your positive attitude *might* be mirrored by your students, but a non-positive attitude will *most certainly* be reflected!
- (b) Briefly introduce yourself and review essential points on your syllabus. Show them that you are a person who was once in their shoes, and now get to expose them to new material. It's exciting!
- (c) Take attendance, ask them how they wish to be addressed in class. This promotes relaxed and immediate interaction on a very basic level. Even if you don't plan on or need to take attendance in the future, this will help each person to speak up on Day 1 in a low pressure environment.
- (d) Every class involves some level of collaboration... explain the difference between legitimate collaboration and what is considered academic dishonesty. Be clear in your expectations, and encourage them to discuss any confusion with you *before* it becomes an issue. Direct them to: <http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/misconduct.html>
- (e) Jump right into a lesson plan that will fit into the time allotted (perhaps half of the meeting time at most), culminating with an appropriate assignment due the next time you meet. This illustrates that you're there to present information and their role is to question and learn, right from the start.

***Immediate attention to material in an approachable manner will set the tone for the semester!***

### 3. After Day 1, be available, be prepared, be informative:

- (a) Many students will immediately begin asking questions about assignments, quizzes, and exams. Know what your advisor/professor/director/etc. is expecting from students and from you as their instructor (frequency of

quizzes/exams/progress checks, method of grading, availability of regrades and the requirements, etc. so that you can answer their questions and redirect their apprehension appropriately.

- (b) Draw attention to good study habits, lab practice, procedures, etc. Being a "good citizen" is a message to enforce with students consistently, and right from the beginning of the semester.
- (c) Pay attention to students that might be struggling for individual reasons. The UW has many resources, and you are free to present them as they apply.
- (d) Hold your Office Hours regularly and reliably.
- (e) Introduce students to practice questions and methods for problem solving from the beginning of the course. As evaluation periods approach, provide appropriate sample quizzes or exams and be prepared to teach the "method," not only the "answer."
- (f) Prepare study guides for the material, which further emphasizes to the students that you are involved and you expect their efforts to be genuine, and that you want to see them succeed.

***Let your students witness YOUR enthusiasm for the subject and for learning!***

## **Teaching students who are not majoring in your field**

*Seth Meyer, Department of Mathematics*

1. Plan your lessons a day in advance. Have something to talk about everyday even if they don't generate very much discussion.
2. If you are covering a difficult or subtle concept, let the students know that you know it's difficult so they don't become discouraged. Be upfront about the material with them, don't present prerequisite material the same way you present the most difficult concept in your course.
3. Have your policies prepared before the first day { Late work, attendance, make-up timed assessments, etc. I don't allow late work or make-ups except in extreme circumstances (serious medical problems spanning several weeks, etc.) but I allow them to drop their lowest several quiz scores to compensate.
4. Know what the McBurney Center does and know how to read a "visa". Asking students if any of them have a visa on the first day can save you considerable hassle later.
5. Learn all of your students' names { have them introduce themselves to you every time they want to ask a question and say their name back to them, it's amazing how much this will cement names in your head. The students will respect you more if you show them respect as well; this will save you headaches later when they are less likely to contest

grades, complain to your professor about you, etc.

6. If paid to do so, attend lecture. I do my grading in the back and check in every 5 minutes or so. It gives you a feel for what they get out of class, lets you provide additional explanations for confusing concepts, gives them a chance to ask quick questions (before and afterwards), and doesn't take any time since you had to do the grading anyway. The students really appreciate it!

7. Finally, talk to more experienced TAs in your program about how they run their classes. They will likely either be happy to talk to you about teaching themselves or point you to someone in the program who would be.

### **Generating Discussion:**

#### **How to get students talking, and what to do when they won't**

*Naya Mukherji, Department of Political Science*

Whether it's your first time in the classroom or you've been teaching for years, one big question on a lot of TAs' minds is: "how do I get them to talk?" Whether or not participation is a portion of your students' grade, active participation in section is essential to their overall understanding of and engagement with the course material. Luckily, creating an active classroom environment is as much of a science as it is an art. The following tips address long, medium and short-term strategies for creating a vibrant classroom.

#### **Long-term strategies: Creating a positive classroom environment:**

This is perhaps the most important factor when it comes to generating participation in the classroom. Aim to create a space where students simultaneously feel intellectually challenged and comfortable enough with their peers to share their ideas respectfully. The key is to get your students to participate *not* because it's part of their grade, but because they want to!

- **Outline clear expectations** for your students and for yourself. Encourage them to ask questions: of you, of the professor, of each other, of the readings—give them the freedom to think critically about the course material. Expect them to engage (respectfully) with each other, and facilitate this engagement.
- **Follow through on these expectations.** After you ask a question, wait as long as necessary for a response. If it's clear that they honestly do not have an answer, acknowledge that it's been a while since they last saw the material (i.e.: don't blame them or accuse them of being lazy!) and ask them to go through their notes/discuss with their partner to find the answer.
- **Don't let them get away with disrespectful behavior**—call them out on it early on.

- **Don't let a few students dominate the class.** If one student is dominating the discussion, it's ok to say that you want to hear from someone else. Make sure you're not making the dominating student feel uncomfortable. If one student dominates, it makes other students feel like they have permission to check out mentally or that their TA is not really interested in their ideas.
- **Think about the kinds of questions you're asking**—are you using a mix of unfair questions (questions with only one correct answer) and fair questions (questions with multiple answers)?
- **Think about how you're responding** to students. Encourage them to participate regardless of whether they have the “correct” answer. Validate correct answers, but don't humiliate wrong answers. Create a space where students feel comfortable participating even if their answers may be wrong.

### **Over the course of the semester: Keeping them engaged:**

As you get into the semester and students start getting bogged down with homework, tests and exams, participation may wane. You may find yourself needing to put a little extra effort into keeping discussion alive and participation lively.

- **Stay engaged with and excited about the material** yourself. Enthusiasm and passion are contagious. If it's clear you're excited about the material, chances are they will be too.
- **Look for areas of debate and disagreement** within the course material while you're preparing for section. Use these as a springboard for spurring discussion.
- **Get them talking right away.** Start class off with an easy question about anything (not necessarily class material) that will get them talking to each other.
- **Encourage regular participants.** After the first couple of weeks of class, send out emails to the students that you think have done a particularly spectacular job participating in section and let them know. Do this every 2 – 3 weeks.
- **Check-up on students** that seem to be checking out (consistently absent, sleeping in class, etc.). Send them an email to make sure they're ok. Let them know you're worried about them, and to let you know if you can do anything to help. It will signal that you care, but will also indirectly reemphasize the importance of class participation.
- **Have them work in smaller groups.** Make sure to set very clear expectations for what you want them to achieve in their small groups and how, or you may just end up squandering time.
- **Have students bring in questions** and comments to every class. That way, you can start class off with their questions instead of your own.

### **In the short-term: What to do when a good class is having a bad day:**

Once in a while, a normally energetic class will be unusually taciturn. This often happens around mid-terms season. The following are some short-term solutions you use to get them going:

- **Acknowledge that they're quiet** and ask them why. This is a good way to get them talking, but also gently reminds them that you expect them to participate.
- **Be particularly outrageous or controversial** that day. If nothing else, it will raise the energy-level in the room.

- **Call on students in some non-biased way**—i.e.: don't pick what students to call on yourself. For example, have a set of note-cards, with a student's name on each one. Have a random student pick a card out of the deck to determine who will be called on.
- **Use the “think-pair-share” tactic.** Here, you ask a question, have all the students think about the answer for a minute (think), then turn to the person next to them and discuss the answer (pair). Finally, you ask some students to tell the class what they learned from their partner (share). This works especially well for quieter students who feel uncomfortable sharing their own ideas in a large group setting.
- **Encourage them to bring food to class** if your class is over breakfast or lunchtime. You may find them particularly listless if they're hungry.

## **There is no “I” in Teach: Developing a Strong Working Relationship with the Professor and Other TAs of the Course**

*Peter Newberry, Department of Economics*

Although a TA often feels like they are on an island, being a TA is not a solo job: you will be working for a professor and usually working with other TAs. In my experience, a strong working relationship with these “coworkers” has been a very important factor in the success of a course.

### **What can a strong TA/Professor relationship do for a course?**

- Having a good understanding of what the professor wants with your section is important. The section won't be beneficial to the students if you are teaching them material that isn't relevant to what the professor talked about. It is also much easier planning a section if someone tells you what to teach!
- Different professors have different teaching styles and emphasize different topics. It can be very helpful to know what makes your professor's teaching style different from ones you have TAed for in the past. That way you can cater your material in a way that will help the students the most, whether that means presenting it again in the same way or presenting in a completely different way.
- If you have a non-existent or negative relationship with the professor it can hurt your credibility as a TA. Often times you are asked questions about how the class is run and why it is run the way it is. If you say “I don't know” or something similar, you inevitably lose some credibility.
- As will surely happen in your TA career, you will find yourself being an ambassador for the students. If you have established good communication with the professor, it will be much easier for you to approach them with the students' problems.
- It may be useful for you as a graduate student! Getting to know the faculty can be a very challenging thing to do, and this is an easy way to do it.

### **What can strong TA/TA relationships do for a course?**

- Having continuity between sections with other TAs is important. It can be unfair if one class is learning material that the other class isn't. Also, sharing the workload with other TAs saves time!

### **Challenges associated with developing a relationship:**

- You feel very independent as a TA, but for the betterment of the course (and your workload) it is better to try to work with others.
- Often you change professors and other TAs every semester, so there isn't much time to establish a relationship.
- Some professors can be standoffish, stubborn, or might not even care about teaching the course all that much.
- People all have their own teaching styles and often collaborating with others can prove to be difficult.

### **Tips for establishing relationships with the professor and other TAs:**

- Communication is KEY! When you first find out you're a TA for a professor, go introduce yourself to the professor. Ask them what they are working on and tell them what you are interested in. After that, make sure you communicate often. I would say stop by their office at least once a week to talk about how things are going in the course, or even just to say hi.
- Ask the professor what they expect of you and what they expect of the students.
- Suggest weekly meetings to prepare for section. Ideally these meetings would include the professor, but if not surely with the other TAs. If there is a head TA, suggest this to them. This will establish what is going to be done in section that week and TAs can split up duties.
- Attend lecture. Although this is part of your duties, some professors give you permission to skip lectures. I think it is a good idea to attend the lectures because then you know exactly what is going on in the course and how the material was presented in class. This also gives you a better idea how to answer a question a student has from lecture.

## **A Thoughtful Use of Technology**

*Chad Shorter, Department of French and Italian and Learning Support Services*

Higher education demands competence in instructional technology. As the newest generation of scholars and teachers, you will be counted on by your senior colleagues to be technically savvy. However, your department probably will not provide adequate training on how to implement technology effectively in your classes. Furthermore, using technology just to use it may come across as phony and could potentially frustrate your students. The following suggestions are some basic tips to get started as you seek out ways to thoughtfully use technology to reach your learning goals.

### *Avoiding problems:*

- Consider why you are using a technology:
  - How does it help you reach your learning goals for a particular activity?
  - Is it an effective use of class time?
  - Is it an effective use of preparation time? (Even if it requires a little more time now, could it pay off in the future?)
- Explain to your students the learning goals associated with the task and how the technology helps meet them.
- Take the time to practice and become familiar with the technology you would like to use.
- Communicate your expectations to your students for each task and provide any necessary training.
- Have a back up plan.

### *Teaching more effectively:*

- Leverage a technology for improved tasks:
  - Can you take advantage of a particular tool in order to have your students work on crucial tasks that would not be possible or that would be inefficient otherwise?
  - Try not to let the use of technology be a stand-alone or foreign element of your course. Build it into your activities or have other activities build off of it.
- Using technology should not create too much more work for you. (E.g. You were going to read and grade all of the reading responses, anyway. Having the students submit them in an online collaborative environment provides extra benefits of peer learning and enhanced class discussion.)
- Take an iterative approach. Reflect on each activity or how you have used a particular tool and how you could make it better for next time.

You may notice that these suggestions are basic guidelines for effective teaching in general. That's the point – concentrate on the teaching and learning. Technology is a means, not an end. However, since you will be expected to incorporate some technology in your teaching here and beyond, challenge yourself to adopt tools that are new to you and use them in a thoughtful way.

## **What is a “Discussion Section,” and why do we have them?**

*Scott Trigg, Department of the History of Science*

Discussion sections of large lecture courses play an essential role in undergraduate education at UW-Madison, and serve multiple purposes depending on the discipline. This is the time when students raise questions, discuss concepts from lecture and assigned readings, and prepare for exams. In the humanities, the focus tends to be on discussion or critical analysis of texts or other sources that illuminate the broader points raised in lecture. In the sciences, this time is typically used for going over problem sets or

laboratory techniques. The common goal uniting the disciplines is that discussion section serves as a space for students to master course content and develop skills necessary to succeed in the course.

The TA position, as intermediary between the professor and students, carries unique challenges. You and fellow TAs should meet with the professor before the class begins to clarify their expectations. How much freedom will you have in choosing discussion topics, designing activities, and assigning homework or quizzes? Even if the professor does not require it, I urge you to attend lecture so you know what the students have (or have not) heard and you can pick up on parts of lecture that may have been unclear. Often the professor will rely on you to convey feedback from the students, as well as assist in writing exams.

Students mistakenly assume that the TA's job is to "tell them what they need to know" in order to pass the class. This does not necessarily mean that they are lazy or unmotivated, in fact many UW students work part-time in addition to carrying a full course load. Make it clear right from the beginning that you are there to guide, focus, and facilitate their discussions! It is up to them to arrive at each section meeting prepared to participate fully in the conversation. It is up to you, however, to facilitate those conversations through careful planning, a great deal of energy and enthusiasm, and frankly a bit of luck.

My advice is to think of yourself as a "guide" who leads the students by example, rather than simply giving information. Your goal is to teach them through demonstrations of how to approach the material in a more effective manner, to ask interesting questions, and to avoid conceptual pitfalls. If you are covering problem sets, you could begin by walking them through your own thought process as you analyze a problem and reach the solution. In my own courses, one of my goals is to train the students to think like a historian - so instead of merely reviewing facts from lecture I get them thinking about how the documents relate to ideas from lecture, and how we could use them as evidence to generate, support, or criticize historical claims.

Here are a few proven techniques for generating active participation and keeping the discussion focused on the students' ideas. A good way to encourage an open, conversational classroom is to sit in a circle. You are still the "authority" but no longer the center of attention, and forcing the students to make eye contact with one another instead of staring ahead at the board creates a sense of community and interaction. From there, your goal should be to avoid falling into mini-lectures or "quiz mode" - asking factual question - since the unprepared students will not volunteer and even those who are prepared will tend to hold back for fear of getting the question wrong. Instead, ask open-ended questions that allow the students to say something substantive. Always wait longer than you think is necessary after asking a question - the students need time to formulate an answer and overcome the fear of presenting their own ideas in front of a group.

One way to kick off discussion is to present a concise, debatable statement about the week's material, and then give the students a minute to think and write down whether they agree or disagree (and why!) before asking them to comment. This gives them something concrete to build on and can open up multiple avenues of approaching the material. A second method that is particularly effective is close reading of a text. Before section, identify key passages in the reading that get at the heart of the issues for that lecture and/or are particularly difficult, and come to section with some open-ended

questions about them. This puts all students, whether they read carefully ahead of time or blew off the assignment, literally on the same page. It also encourages the students to explore the connection between lecture and their own understanding and analysis of the readings. A third approach is to split the section into smaller groups of up to 3-6 and have each group discuss different topics, questions, or excerpts from the readings for the first 15-20 minutes as you move from group to group to check in. For the second half of section, bring the students back to the large group and have them report on their findings. This can be very effective in sections that are particularly quiet, since there is much less pressure speaking with just a handful of other classmates.

Finally, be yourself and have fun! Section can be painful when the students are unprepared, but an aloof, dispassionate, or uptight TA can have an equally stifling effect. Let your own enthusiasm and interest in the subject matter shine through and it will spark student interest.

## **The Clockwork Muse: Graduate School, How It Works, and How to Work It**

*Matthew Vieron, Department of Classics*

### **Graduate School: The Demands and Expectations**

The graduate school experience is one of the greatest journeys you will take in your life. We exist in a unique state of both seasoned student and new teacher. We constantly shift between feelings of life-fulfilling joy and crushing uncertainty. Unfortunately, there is no secret recipe for coping with the demands and expectations of becoming successful in this multi-faceted field of academia, whether you are in the sciences or the humanities. However, there are time-tested ways of handling such issues as the anxiety of walking into a classroom full of students expecting you to know exactly what you are talking about, dealing with the contagious plague of writer's block, the pressure from deadlines and advisors who seem to have repressed what it was like to be a graduate student, and the insane thinking that, "I work better when I procrastinate." These issues and many others will be addressed in the workshop. For now, the short answer is to regard these as *technical* rather than psychological problems. The more complex approach is a critical analysis of time and its many components: simple scheduling, knowing your mental capacity at any given moment, and, most importantly, balancing your life as a student, a teacher, and a human being.

### **The Skill of Scheduling: Being a Student, a Teacher, and a Human Being**

Let's get to it. Setting a schedule is something you might have tried before with various degrees of success. We've all tried to come up with that perfect schedule at the beginning of every semester. However, graduate school requires a little more finesse. You'll want to schedule time for yourself as a student: your research, taking classes, completing requirements for your degree, involving yourself in departmental service, finding time to acquire funding for next semester, engaging in interdisciplinary activities, attending talks and conferences, and, of course, one day getting a job! Then, there are your teaching responsibilities: reviewing and knowing the material well, experimenting

with various methods of teaching, considering fair methods of evaluation, working with students who need extra help, working with problematic students, as well as meeting with your professors and advisors. Finally, you'll want to make time for eating, sleeping, exercising, socializing, being a family member, and/or participating in personal commitments such as spirituality, forms of activism, or even reading for fun. You are now a student, a teacher, as well as a human being living in a social world. Graduate students agree: all three must be addressed.

### **The Art of Understanding Your Mental Capacity: A, B, and C-Time**

Aristotle makes a sharp distinction between "skill," on the one hand, and "art," on the other. It is one thing for poets to know what poetry is, i.e. the skill; but it is another to engage in the art which lies below its surface. Just making a schedule is all well and good, but knowing how your mind works within that system is crucial to making it happen. Here is one way which scholars have found success in engaging with this art: divide your time into A-Time, B-Time, and C-Time (Zerubavel, 1999). "A-Time" is when you work best. Many experience A-Time in the early morning when they are fresh, some in the evening when they are less distracted, while others seem to work best right before lunch on the second cup of coffee. Reserve this time for your most strenuous tasks, whatever they may be, e.g. writing, preparing for seminars, etc. "B-Time" is when your mind is functioning, but not quite at its best. This may be after lunch or just after you teach. Use this time for less stressful activities such as catching up on some reading, planning classroom activities, or spending time with family and friends. "C-Time" is when you are tired and have little energy to devote to anything. Many experience this time at the end of a long day and reserve it for daily grading, eating out with friends, etc. The idea is that you avoid cornering yourself into doing extremely demanding tasks in C-Time. On the other hand, you do not want to waste your precious A-Time running to the grocery store. Getting to know when you are at your best as well as your limits, then scheduling your new lifestyle according to the mental requirements of each task in relation to the mental capacity of your mind, is an essential art in your arsenal which you will use to combat the demands and expectations of graduate school.

### **The Clockwork Muse**

What I've discovered in the past four years is that graduate school is an ongoing refining process, but not so much of what you know. Yes, you will learn and teach quite a bit of content relative to your field. However, it's not simply a download of information to be later uploaded by paying undergrads. When you go home at night, when you're out at the bars with friends, when you spend time with your family, go on vacation, take a bike ride, try to fall to sleep, fall in love, raise kids.... the deadlines, expectations, teaching preparations, grading, responding to countless daily e-mails, all will be somewhere on your mind. The art of time management is a key element in this way of life. Enjoy getting to know yourself, good luck with your graduate endeavors, and embrace the Clockwork Muse!

# The Grading Game: How to Play it, and How to Handle Post-Game Haggling

*Brynn Welch, Philosophy Department*

## How to Begin:

Two strategies are very helpful for beginning the process of grading:

1. Take the assignment of a student who you expect will do very well and read through it without grading it. This will help set your expectations.
2. If you are uncomfortable with (1), take 3-4 assignments at once, and reach each of them without putting a grade on any until you have read them all. Put a grade on each *with a pencil*. Re-adjust as necessary once you've graded more assignments.

*Finally*, glance back over your comments on the first 8-10 assignments, re-adjust those grades if you were harsher/easier in those assignments than you were on later ones.

**Tip: Grade with a pencil. You can go back and put final grades in pen if necessary.**

## Staying Fair:

**TAKE BREAKS!!** You will likely be asked to grade many assignments during a short period, so give yourself plenty of break-time or they will all start to look alike. 10-12 papers/day is a good limit to set for yourself.

## To Comment, or Not to Comment? That is the question:

Students will expect to have their grades justified to them...sort of. Too many comments will overwhelm the student, and they will think that the misplaced comma you pointed out is the reason they received a C rather than the fact that their last page didn't make any sense.

Every comment you make should be one that will either a) explain the grade, or b) help the student do better on future assignments. This will give a general guideline for how important something should be before you comment on it. As an added bonus, it will cut down on your grading time.

Always – *always* – put a brief (one paragraph) overall explanation of the grade with the grade. This will help them look past misplaced commas and understand what you were thinking when you assigned that particular grade. It also gives a starting point if the student comes to talk with you about the assignment.

## Haggling about the Grade

Ideally, you'll avoid haggling altogether. Here are a few ways to avoid haggling:

1. Explain your grading well, both in written comments and, if possible, in class when you give back graded assignments. It's helpful to say "This was a

common and serious mistake: \_\_\_\_\_.” It helps them to a) understand why *that* error cost them *that* many points/letter grades, and b) feel less stupid when they recognize they were not the only ones who made that mistake.

2. Explain up-front that assignments do not all start out as A-worthy and lose points from there. Instead, a student must earn the points s/he receives. This will cut down on haggling over every single point deduction.
3. Require that students wait 24 hours before speaking to you about an assignment, and require that they speak with you *only* if they have read through your comments carefully. This will cut down on emotional reactions, both from the student and from you. The student will have time to process what you’ve said, how this affects their overall grade, and s/he will have time to calm down a bit before speaking with you. *You* will have a small break from thinking about the assignments and come back to think about them with a clearer mind.

You won’t be able to avoid haggling altogether. Here are some responses to common challenges from students:

**Challenge:** I am not a \_\_\_\_\_ major, so you can’t expect me to know all of this.

**Response:** You are in a \_\_\_\_\_ class, so I can expect you to know the class material. (It can also be helpful to point out that students wouldn’t say this to a Math TA, so they shouldn’t say it to a Philosophy, English, or Poli. Sci. TA, either.

**Challenge:** It’s only one point away from an A (or B, or C, etc.)

**Response:** By that logic, a D is basically equivalent to an A. Surely that can’t be right. Points matter, and I can’t give you a point simply because it puts you in a higher grade range.

**Challenge:** OK, I see what I said was wrong. But what I meant to say was \_\_\_\_\_.

**Response:** Yes, I assume you *meant* to say the right thing.

### **Changing Grades:**

Remember that you have graded up to 100 assignments in a short time period, and you might have made mistakes. Never refuse to re-examine your grading, and be willing to change a grade if you think that is necessary.

**HOWEVER**, unless you’ve made a simple mistake in adding up points, *never* change the grade in front of the student. Always wait a day. This will help avoid the perception that you’re a pushover.

