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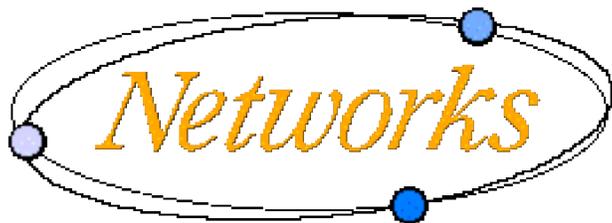


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Tips for First Time Teaching Assistants: A Personal Narrative

Maya El Shareef

"A teaching assistant (TA) is a junior scholar employed on a temporary contract by a college or university for the purpose of assisting a professor by teaching students in recitation or discussion sessions, holding office hours, grading homework or exams, supervising labs (in science and engineering courses), and sometimes teaching classes, among other duties." (Wikipedia, 2006) The TA experience may be something new to many graduate students. Sharing the experiences of one TA can assist others who are new to this responsibility. This paper provides broad guidelines for TAs based on my personal experience of being a teaching assistant for three different courses over one academic year. It provides TAs with tips on important topics such as: their relationships with course instructors, their relationships with students, grading of student papers, session evaluations, teaching methodology, as well as the proper ways of introducing change, particularly in the use of technology.

Few TAs have written about their experiences. The little that is written suggests that being a TA can be a complex undertaking (DeCesare, 2003). I am sharing my TA experience with other TAs in the hope that it helps to improve their experiences.

This paper is a product of my personal experiences as a teaching assistant. When I was first told that I was going to serve as a teaching assistant, I became anxious. The whole concept was new to me as I was still a novice graduate student. I felt that I was given a huge

responsibility; I was responsible for students' grades and I knew the importance of grades. Of course, this is not to underestimate the importance of having the student benefit from the course content that was also partially my responsibility.

Throughout the process of being a teaching assistant, I documented my experience. I constantly asked students for their comments on my TA skills and archived their responses for future reference. I felt that this documentation would help me improve my TA skills.

This paper is based on a personal report I wrote at the end of my service as a teaching assistant; it features students' comments on my TA skills and aims to provide broad guidelines for TAs. The paper presents a set of suggestions based on my TA experience at the American University of Beirut.

After graduating with a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in June 2003, I was appointed as a full-time research assistant whose responsibilities included working as a part-time TA for the academic year 2003/2004. During this year, I was responsible for 3 graduate courses which are part of the Master of Public Health program: 'Introduction to Health and Environment I' attended by 48 students, 'Design and Evaluation of Health Programs' attended by 18 students, and 'Theories of Health Behavior' attended by 9 students.

My responsibilities included (i) monitoring students' submission of weekly assignments,

taking note of absences and partial marking of students' papers (ii) assisting in designing course content and in the selection of course readings, (iii) acting as a liaison between the course instructor and the students and assisting guest speakers; and (iv) answering students' questions, and commenting on their ideas, and drafts while they are writing their assignments. In addition, I was responsible for administrating the Web Course Tools program - a course management software package (Barker, Winterstein, and Wright 2004) - used in two of the courses. Reflecting back on this experience has allowed me to identify particular experiences that were crucial to my learning.

Tips #1 and #2: Clarify responsibilities and meet regularly with the course instructor

Some TAs may face the problem of having minimal discussion about their duties (DeCesare, 2003). Professors may be immersed in their research and working on their publications. They may not provide enough time for discussion with their TA. As former or current students, TAs are trained as researchers rather than teachers (DeCesare, 2003); hence the transition to accomplishing the TA responsibilities becomes a difficult task.

My case was relatively easy. My supervisor, the primary instructor of the courses, defined my responsibilities early in each semester. While I did not understand all my responsibilities at the beginning, meeting with my supervisor whenever she wanted me to perform a new TA task allowed me to incorporate this task among my other TA responsibilities. The key point is to remember is that when a TA is not very experienced and has other responsibilities besides being a TA, the professor remains the major source of information and support.

Tip #3 : Learn from teaching

People tend to learn what they teach (Luo, 1999 as cited by French and Rusell, 2002). When I was given the chance to teach proper referencing techniques, I made sure to learn as much as I could from the experience. The American University of Beirut has made a

serious commitment to academic integrity and has implemented a cheating prevention initiative. Students at the American University of Beirut receive free student handbooks which include the definition of plagiarism in addition to information on its serious penalties. Authorities at the University stress the importance of discussing plagiarism early in each course. The issue of plagiarism – what it is, what it is not, and how to properly cite references in the texts and on reference lists - was tackled in the introductory course I was responsible for as a TA. I presented the session on plagiarism and how to avoid it through proper referencing. As a follow-up, I was responsible for correcting the reference sections of assignments. This whole experience provided me a valuable skill in appropriate referencing practices.

Tip #4: Be available during all class sessions

My ability to effectively answer student questions was dependent on attending all class sessions. This helped me remain up-to-date with the material. It also provided students with a chance to get to know me, which enhanced their willingness to search me out for questions after class. Moreover, I was better able to assist students with issues that arose during class. If the course instructor needed me, I was available to assist her without disrupting the class.

Tips #5 and 6 : Connect with students and be available to them

When TAs have strong interpersonal communication with students, they appreciate their students more and become more interested in their students' learning processes (Nyquist and Wulff , 1996 as cited in Luo, Bellows and Grandy, 2000). In my interaction with students, I always applied an open-door policy. Some of the students approached me more than others. They approached me to request that I read drafts of their papers, to query about proper ways of referencing, or to inquire about the location of university libraries and their services. Frequent interaction with students enhanced my

communication skills and rendered me better prepared to answer their questions.

Tip #7 : Encourage the use of technology

Web Course Tools program is a course management software program. It allows for live chatting, online discussion, and other activities (Barker, Winterstein, and Wright 2004). In two of the courses, I was responsible for using Web Course Tools for the following activities: posting the course syllabus and updating it as needed, posting assignment requirements, receiving assignments online, uploading Power Point presentations in a printer friendly manner, posting an online calendar listing due dates, and creating an online discussion forum.

When students were first told that Web Course Tools program would be used, some of them did not like the idea. Some indicated that they preferred receiving Power Point presentations via email. Others wanted to be notified by email when something new was uploaded to Web Course Tools program. Students were not familiar with the new program and were uncomfortable using the program to monitor newly posted material.

I was responsible for encouraging students to use the Web Course Tools program and convincing them of its importance. I worked to make the program more appealing to students. In one course, students were encouraged to post their thoughts and opinions about an assigned topic on the discussion board. They actively participated in a theoretical discussion of stress and coping by describing the stress they faced as students and how this stress affected their health, and how they coped with it. Their stories were used to illustrate the concepts examined in class. Students liked the idea; one student posted the following message, “[this] Web Course Tools program is not as bad as I thought...let's have more discussions.”

On the other hand, in another course, students were asked to share their experience in writing a proposed evaluation of a health promotion program using the Web Course Tools Program. Unfortunately, none of the 18 students taking

this course participated. When I asked them why, students told me that they were busy preparing their projects. I realized that for technology to be feasible, it must be woven into the course expectations.

From my experience, I believe that the Web Course Tools Program helps the instructor, the TA, and most importantly the students by having most of the course materials readily available in one place. This material is available for people on or off campus. It also extends course discussions making discussions possible at times when members are not physically present. As students become more comfortable with the Web Course Tools program, it can be used for other purposes including online chat rooms. Student should always be encouraged to make use of technology and become aware of its benefits (Barker et al, 2004). Being responsible for Web Course Tools program as a TA, helped me explore different ways of communicating with students.

Tip #8 : Requesting self-evaluation

Student evaluation of teaching is important so that teachers can improve their teaching skills (Luo et al. 2000). At the end of the course, my supervisor and I asked the students to complete an evaluation form. The questions on this form were drafted by me and edited by my supervisor. We used a likert scale format that ranged from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. Questions addressed the following topics: helping students keep track of their assignments, helping them in the process of writing their assignments, communicating their concerns to the course instructor when needed, and improving the overall quality of the course. The majority of the students responded with either “strongly agree” or “agree” to most of the questions.

The students were also asked an open-ended question about the most helpful aspect of having a TA for their course. Most of the students identified the TA's role as a liaison between them and the instructor. They also noted that it helpful to have the TA available when they needed assistance.

Student 1: “[I] feel comfortable that there is someone to help anytime”

Students 2: “[The TA is] a liaison between the students and the professor”

Student 3: “[the TA was] always available for questions [and] her emails are quite informative. Her help with Web Course Tools program [was] very important”

Student 4: “She was there when we had questions. Very helpful”

Student 5: “[The TA was] very effective at communicating and discussing points of contention”

When asked about what they thought could be improved, one student responded that the TA should be more involved in lecturing. The students’ evaluation of my work helped me to understand what students value in TA’s and enabled me to better meet their needs.

When TA’s start working, they worry about whether student will like them or not (Luo et al. 2000). This is normal and I worried about that myself. Hence, I asked the students to respond to the following comment, “The teaching assistant had a positive attitude towards students.” The majority of the students marked “strongly agree.” The rest marked “agree” and two students marked “neutral.” I believe that their positive responses were at least partially influenced by my accessibility.

I also asked the students to evaluate me on the class session I taught. The closed-ended questions addressed their overall impression of the session and my style as a presenter. The answers to both questions were good and average. On the open-ended questions, students were asked about what they liked most about the session and what needed improvement. In the session on “Stress and Coping,” which incorporated Web Course Tools program, the students reported that they liked being able to share examples from their own lives as students. They also commented that my presentation style needed improvement and that I should do less reading from the slides. This evaluation inspired me to continue to

refine my strengths and work on improving my presentation skills.

Tip #9 : Continuously strive for self improvement; build your own skills

Interacting with students is not always easy. Students sometimes ask difficult questions. Being a fresh graduate with no experience in teaching, I had to search for the correct answers to make sure that accurate information was conveyed to students. This meant always being up-to-date with the course readings and surfing the web for additional information. My supervisor and other faculty members were always available for consultation when needed.

Introducing the Web Course Tools program was a challenge. The whole concept was new for me, as well as for the students. I took four workshops on the Web Course Tools program in order to prepare for this challenge. As a result, I was comfortable with the program and was able to convince students of its value.

Based on comments on the evaluations, I decided that I needed to enhance my presentation skills. I am now a member of Toastmasters International, an organization that aims to improve people’s public speaking skills. I also attended a workshop on presenting and charismatic public speaking.

Tip #10 : Continuously reflect on teaching

Being a TA provided an opportunity to practice teaching techniques before becoming fully responsible for a course as an instructor. However, for this opportunity to be maximized, reflection is necessary. As I started correcting the reference sections in students’ papers, my challenge was to remain as fair and unbiased as possible. Hence, in the beginning, I asked my supervisor to review my corrections. I took note of the students’ mistakes and gave them a detailed explanation of the assessment criteria. Thus, both the students and I had a reference in case of a problem or misunderstanding. Correcting papers and comparing my attempts with the course instructor's grading and comments broadened my vision of correction.

“Helping TAs continuously reflect on teaching will enable them to identify what worked or did not work and why” (Luo et al., 2000, p 2).

In addition, as mentioned earlier attending class sessions allowed me to observe the teaching style of the course instructor and reflect on my own pedagogical practices. It is recommended that new TA’s observe their mentors (Turman 2001). Attending all class sessions habituated me to my supervisor’s teaching style and enabled me to identify effective teaching skills. This, in addition to my own teaching attempts, helped me define my own teaching style and philosophy.

As a teaching assistant, I gained a lot of experience. I now feel more at ease with correcting specific parts of papers, communicating with students, and acting as a liaison for professors and students. I am now more familiar with ways of introducing new concepts to students and convincing them of their importance. I know my strengths as a TA and where I need to improve.

I hope this paper serves as a guide to TAs, especially novices. Being a bit scared at the beginning is normal. It provides TAs with incentive to explore what students need and what is required to fulfill their needs. My advice to TAs is never to stop learning and asking. The literature on teaching, advice of the direct supervisors and other faculty members, comments and feedback from students, and training workshops are all resources that can help TA’s. The key point is to listen to comments and advice applying what is most relevant to the students and the situation.

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