



Faculty/TA Teaching Partnerships

Faculty and graduate students approach the challenge of teaching together from a diverse range of experiences and levels of development as teachers and mentors. Of course, whenever possible, open communication on a regular basis between faculty and TAs is the best way to bring those many levels and ranges of experience into a successful collaboration. But there are also several different roles that faculty may want to be aware of and willing to play in order to most effectively supervise their TAs and assist them in the dual process of becoming teachers and responsible representatives of their disciplines.

Several different stages of TA development and accompanying faculty roles have been identified by Jody Nyquist and Donald Wulff in their book *Working Effectively With Graduate Assistants* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996). While it is possible for a TA to be at any stage, regardless of experience, it is important to note that as TAs advance in their development, they become less concerned with their own issues of performance or authority and more interested in how and what their students are learning.

One easy way for faculty to find out a TA's stage of development is to meet with their TAs before the term begins and talk with them about their role in the class. A few well-selected questions can give a great deal of insight. Nyquist and Wulff have designed a questionnaire for this purpose that faculty might find useful and which we have reproduced as a separate sheet enclosed in this newsletter. We also have a copy of this questionnaire on our web site (<http://ctl.stanford.edu>) to allow convenient re-formatting. If faculty use this questionnaire or another means to gather essential information from their TAs, not only will faculty find it easier to identify the level of guidance their TAs need, they will know their TAs better, and will be able to teach with them more effectively.

TAs on the first level of pedagogical development can be seen as "Senior Learners" since their competence up to that point has been demonstrated more by their excellence as students, rather than by their experience as teachers. The second level, "Colleague-in-Training," is the stage when TAs gain experience and confidence in their authority as teachers by emulating

their faculty role models. The most experienced TAs are considered "Junior Colleagues" who need less supervision but more peer level dialogue, and might be ready for the chance to lecture and assist in course design (p. 5). The corresponding faculty roles for these developmental stages of the TA are "Manager" for the first stage, "Model" for the second, and "Mentor" for the third (p. 6). The nuances of these roles will be discussed in the following paragraphs. When faced with the prospect of teaching with TAs on the first level of development, faculty may have to cultivate and draw upon management skills that are not generally part of the preparation of university professors. How best to motivate, coordinate, and monitor a TA's progress and performance are skills that require advance planning and conscientious follow through. If faculty can establish a relationship with and expectations for their TAs early—well before the beginning of the term—the TAs will be able to rise to the occasion much more willingly and responsibly. With enough advance notice, the TAs will have the chance to coordinate the needs of the faculty with the demands of their other commitments (p.7). In this "Manager" role, faculty should try to make their expectations as clear and detailed as possible, while remaining aware of the needs of the TAs (p. 8). In general, TAs are appreciative of faculty interest in their development and will gladly tell faculty what would be helpful to them in their process of learning about teaching.

As TAs enter the "Colleague in Training" stage of development, they are ready for new ideas and creative approaches to teaching (p. 11). *(continued on page 6)*

TA Orientation Winter Quarter 2002

Thursday, January 10
1-4:30pm

Hartley Conference Center
Mitchell Earth Sciences Bldg.
Refreshments will be served

Tips for Faculty/TA Teaching Partnership Success

The Center for Teaching and Learning conducted an informal survey among selected Faculty and Graduate Students this Fall, asking them, “What advice do you have for faculty or TAs to help make the Faculty/TA teaching partnership work more effectively?” Here are the responses we received. All of the tips on the following three pages are direct quotations, with names withheld by popular request.

Thanks to all who responded.

General Tips from Faculty:

“I want my TAs to feel a bit of ownership of the course. To achieve this I try to get them actively involved in setting assignments, creating assignment grading sheets, thinking about the course design and structure, and ways to make the lectures more attractive. I discuss problems they encountered in office hours. I don’t want my TAs to feel they are my little slaves, so we split grading and other less interesting jobs equally, or at least I help out as much as I can. I also give my TAs the opportunity to teach one or two (part) lectures. I help them prepare and I evaluate their performance in class.”

“Perhaps one of the most useful conversations I have with teaching assistants is to describe my goals for the class. Specifically, having the TAs understand and identify with my own pedagogical and intellectual goals makes our collaboration much more effective.”

Tips from Faculty to TAs:

“Know what role the professor wants you to take. Is it to lecture on new material, present existing material in a new way, answer questions, lead discussions, create illustrative projects, simply be another participant in the discussion, etc.? Different faculty have different expectations.”

“To fulfill the tasks both of section leader and of grader, the TA needs above all the assurance of the faculty member’s support. It is important, then, that attendance at section be obligatory and that it count for at least 10% of the course grade. That fairly easily resolves the first area of difficulty. Talking together about evaluation standards and an initial shared look at a spectrum of papers will help with the second.”

Tips from Faculty to Faculty:

“Interview multiple candidates, let them know your performance expectations are high. Pick highly motivated people with the best mixes of specialist knowledge and critical-analytical skills. Be available to help with problems, treat them as colleagues, and give them the autonomy to do the job responsibly and creatively within specified parameters.”

“Unanimity between professor and TA in procedural matters is vital; unanimity in intellectual matters is not necessary—indeed it can be stimulating for students when Professor and TA have slightly divergent points of view.”

Award Winning Teachers on Teaching Series Winter Quarter 2002

Professor Patricia Burchat
Department of Physics

January 24, 12 noon - 1:00 pm
Hartley Conference Center
Mitchell Earth Sciences Building

Professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht
Department of French and Italian
Department of Comparative Literature

January 31, 12 noon - 1:00 pm
English Department Terrace Room
Building 460 room 426

Tips for Faculty/TA Teaching Partnership Success

Tips from TAs to Faculty:

“Get in touch with your TAs before the quarter begins, and discuss the nature and structure of the course, TA responsibilities, what’s expected in sections, grading policies, etc. If there’s more than one TA for the course, try to have at least one physical meeting with everyone present.”

“For seminar-style courses which may not require weekly planning meetings, TAs would still appreciate a conversation perhaps midway through the quarter to receive specific constructive feedback on their performance.”

“Faculty can show the TAs that they care. It would be nice if faculty took a personal interest in the TAs, in ways as simple as knowing their names, asking them how they are, looking them in the eye, and not using them solely for chores.”

“Professors should plan ahead, and discuss with future TAs any pre-assignment responsibilities so that the TA can adapt his or her end-of-quarter schedule to accommodate any additional work needed.”

“Faculty should be involved and interested. Of course they’re busy. Of course they have research labs to run and committee work to do, but having a hand in (or at least an awareness of) the nuts and bolts like designing/writing exams, grading, and the content of sections and review sessions keeps all the teaching staff on the same mission with the same information and expectations. It also sends a very important message (to the graduate TAs and the undergrad students) about the value and importance the professor places on his or her teaching.”

“Give clear instructions of what the goals are in the course, have a list of “TAs duties” to be discussed with the TAs both in terms of course format and content.”

“While many professors will be unwilling to go this extra mile, when a professor volunteers to a) lead one section and b) grade a portion of each exam, it pays off in the end when the professor knows what material the students are retaining, what questions they have, and how they are doing on the tests.”

“Faculty can hold up their end of working arrangements by not creating last-minute work for the TAs and then treating the TAs as if they were not prepared. Faculty could show up for meetings, edit the exam questions on time, and give the TA the hand-outs to be photocopied *before* lecture starts.”

“Students pick up on the professor’s attitude to the TA. Professors who are genuinely respectful of their TA as a team partner and future colleague make their TA’s job a lot easier.”

“If the professor plans the course in such a way that sections are an integral component of both learning and assessment, students will take sections more seriously. Also, optional sections do not work well. It helps to have section performance count for part of the grade.”

“Including TAs in course planning is vital. TAs feel exposed if they turn out to have given students misleading advice about papers or exams. In essence, having TAs means foregoing last-minute improvisation about grading standards and exam content.”

CTL Workshop Series Winter 2002

Please check our web site for locations: <http://ctl.stanford.edu>

For Faculty:

Assessing Student Learning: Thursday, February 14, 12-2pm

Critical Skills/Active Learning: Friday, March 1, 12:15-1:45

For Teaching Assistants:

Microteaching: Friday, January 11, 4:15-6:15; and Tuesday, January 15, 4:15-6:15

Helping Students Build Critical Skills: Thursday, Jan. 17, 12:15-1:05

Teaching Portfolios: Wednesday, February 6, 12:15-1:05

Getting Feedback: Thursday, February 21, 12:15-1:05

Tips for Faculty/TA Teaching Partnership Success

Tips from TAs to TAs:

“Meet well in advance of the onset of teaching responsibilities in order to clarify expectations and mentor support. Be respectful of a mentor’s experience, while insisting on your own creative space. Draw on the advice and ideas of many people to enrich your teaching.”

“Communicate about mutual expectations very early in the term. Be clear about how student evaluation will take place. Send a short summary of weekly sections to the professor when it is fresh in your mind. This is helpful for you and your development and for them.”

“Never assume that, as a TA, you have the ultimate power to make decisions. Always consult first with a professor, even if you have been told that ‘sections are your class.’”

“If the professor you TA for is not giving students what they need, it is your responsibility to let this faculty member know this. If the politics of the situation necessitate outside advocates, figure out who to contact as your representative.”

“Always ask questions, never take anything as ‘given’ unless it has been voiced or written down in clear terms for all TAs in a course.”

“Make sure that you and the faculty member are on the same page with grading policies. If he or she can give you a write-up of what constitutes an A or B or C this is ideal. This will also give you a sheet for students who want to argue about grades to refer to in these arguments.”

“Know your limits. If what a professor is asking you to do in a particular time frame is beyond human limits, you have every right to express this. Again, if outside advice or counsel is needed, use it.”

“Know what your faculty expect, both from you and from the students. If you don’t know, ask.”

“Before the course begins, consult with veteran TAs who have TAed that particular course before with that particular faculty member.”

“If regular meetings are impossible (or not scheduled by the professor), try to make a point to keep an open line of communication and give them an opportunity to let you know if there is anything else that you could/should be doing. Even a weekly ‘drop by the office’ could suffice.”

“There should be some continuity of wisdom from previous iterations of the course. Most likely, this wisdom lives in the mind of the professor and appears on the first day of class in the form of class policies on a syllabus. In some cases, a head TA with previous experience with the course will be present as a resource. What is needed is wisdom from the trenches. From “what are the topics students have the hardest time with,” to “what can go wrong in this lab,” to “this set of supplementary problems can be given out as optional extra practice,” much wheel-reinventing could be prevented by writing down what worked and what failed. Perhaps the best way is a TA manual for a given course, put together and revised over several years by the teaching staff. Barring that (which requires time, effort, and unity of opinion maybe impossible among grad students), having the head TA or members of the staff note some reflections or suggestions for future staff and get this information to future generations of staff would keep the continuity of hard-won expertise.”

CTL invites you to visit the
Speaking Center
430 Sweet Hall



Enhance your next presentation or improve the quality of your students’ presentations by encouraging them to visit us for an individual consultation.

Contact speakinghelp@stanford.edu
Or doree.allen@stanford.edu

From the Linguistics Department: What TAs Like

The list “What TAs like” was originally compiled in 1999 by Linguistics graduate student advisor Professor Peter Sells and two veteran linguistics TAs: Ida Toivonen and Dave McKercher. Since its composition, the list has been discussed by faculty and has been incorporated into the curriculum of our TA Training Course. The list has been particularly useful for new TAs as they begin to think about their relationship with faculty. Faculty have also considered it to be a useful reminder.

— *Brady Zack Clark, Ph.D. Candidate, Linguistics*

What TAs Like

- TAs like it when the professors do part of the grading. It makes it easier to discuss whether or not the workload for the class is appropriate. It also gives guidelines as to how harsh/easy we should be when grading the students.
- TAs like having weekly meetings with the professor(s) and the other TAs. This helps us see what needs to get done within the near future, so that we can plan our time around it. The meetings are also a good forum to ask how the grading should be done (point break-down, etc.), what should be covered in section, etc.
- TAs like getting solution sheets for the problems. This makes grading easier, and it might help avoid misunderstandings. Also, if there is disagreement as to what the best solution is, it is better for this to become clear earlier rather than later.
- TAs like it if they know well beforehand what they are supposed to do. If the professor wants the TAs to be available a couple of hours before class to photocopy, proof-read handouts, etc., it's nice if this is made explicit early on in the quarter.
- TAs really like it when the professor comes and visits their section once or twice over the quarter. In fact, any kind of feedback is highly appreciated.
- TAs like to get the chance to give one (or more) of the “real” lectures, with the professor present to give feedback.
- TAs (and students) like it when the classes begin and end on time.

From Ida Toivonen, Mentor TA in Linguistics, 1998-99:

By the end of my Mentor TA year, it had become clear that there were certain recurrent themes in the TAs complaints and praise about the professors and dynamics in the classes. There are some simple ways in which professors can make things easier on the TAs, and there are also ways in which the professors can make TAing a more fruitful learning experience. I decided to discuss these issues at a “closed” meeting with TAs only, no professors allowed. The meetings had previously been open-for-all, and we had in fact invited different professors to give presentations on different topics relevant to teaching. In the “TAs only” meeting, I read a list of issues that had come up over the year and asked for everybody’s opinions, comments and objections. We had a lively discussion where my list got modified quite a bit until most people seemed to pretty much agree.

Now, the list turned out to be quite negative at first, with statements like “It is really annoying when professors give you 200 pages to photocopy five minutes before class.” I think most TAs agree—this IS annoying. However, all the TAs in the meeting realize how much pressure most professors are under and how much time goes into teaching a good class. Teaching Assistants are supposed to help the professor, not burden them more. The idea is that the TA helps the professor while s/he at the same time learns about teaching. If the professor can put a bit of time into helping and training the TA, the TA will be able to do a better job and thus help with the class more. So, the list was intended as something positive, and we therefore decided that I should change all the “TAs don’t like it when...” to “TAs like it when...” the result was slightly comical perhaps, but, I think, sincere.

From Dave McKercher, Mentor TA in Linguistics, 1999-2000:

The “What TAs Like” list passed to me the next year, when I became Mentor TA. By this time, there was a 1-unit TA training course in the department for all first time TAs at Stanford. At our first meeting, we discussed the role of the TA and how to establish a good working relationship with the course instructor. We used the “What TAs Like” list to guide the discussion, with professors and seasoned TAs addressing the guidelines. We talked about possible changes and additions, but in the end, we adopted it with little change, and appreciated that it was a list of “Dos” rather than a list of “Don’ts.”

I think a major reason that the list has become an institution in the Linguistics Department is because Professor Peter Sells distributes it to faculty at the start of each quarter. The items on the list make good sense, but they’re worth saying again and again, and they contribute to a culture of good teaching and ideal working relationships between TAs and course instructors.

New CTL Associate Director for the Social Sciences

The Center for Teaching and Learning is pleased to announce that Marcelo Clerici-Arias is our new Associate Director for Social Sciences and Technology. Marcelo primarily works with professors and teaching assistants in the social sciences, consulting with individuals and presenting a variety of teaching and training workshops. Marcelo also works with faculty and teaching assistants from all disciplines helping them make the most effective use of technology in teaching and learning through workshops, special projects, and individual consultations.

Marcelo, who officially joined the CTL staff in July, comes to us from the Introductory Economics Center at the Department of Economics, where he was Associate Director for over three years. Marcelo's background is in economics, focused on game theory and computational economics, and he has been teaching undergraduate courses at Stanford since 1997.

Please feel free to contact Marcelo to set up a meeting to talk about your own thoughts about teaching in the social sciences, or the use of technology in teaching and learning. Marcelo can be reached through email at marcelo@stanford.edu, by phone at 725-0127, or by just dropping by his office on the fourth floor of Sweet Hall, room 429.

(continued from page 1)

TAs can best learn these skills by watching faculty model effective and innovative teaching practices along with their overall approach and attitude towards teaching in their discipline. Nyquist and Wulff suggest that faculty should try to model behavior that they want their TAs to emulate, and use a variety of teaching methods to reflect a "broader conceptualization" of the material (p. 12). It is also particularly helpful if faculty can take the time to demonstrate their methodology to TAs: share with them the ways they think about teaching certain material, designing assignments, and planning lectures or demonstrations (p. 13). This way the TAs can reflect on their own teaching choices and understand those of the faculty more clearly.

At the third stage of development, a TA is ready to be treated more like a peer, to learn about collegial roles and collaboration, and to contribute their own insights to the structuring of the course (p. 13). These "Junior Colleagues" are more in need of professional mentoring than managerial supervision. Rather than telling them what the course policies are, faculty can ask these advanced TAs to help design the policies themselves. This stage of development calls for TAs to be

treated as "decision makers" who have their own style of teaching and views on pedagogical methodology (p. 14). If faculty convey their openness for dialogues on such subjects with their Junior Colleagues, the TAs will benefit immeasurably from this respectful treatment, and both sides will gain knowledge and understanding.

By taking these several developmental stages and the accompanying roles for faculty into account, TAs and faculty alike can take more conscious and supportive roles in making the Faculty/TA teaching partnership as effective and mutually beneficial as possible. ♦

✦ *If you are a faculty member and did not receive a recent CTL mailing with our brochure and list of Award Winning Teachers on Teaching talks, please let us know and we will send them to you. Also, if you would like to be on our newsletter mailing list or our email list of upcoming CTL events and workshops, please send an email to CTL Associate Director Valerie Ross at varlet@stanford.edu.*

Speaking of Teaching is compiled and edited by CTL Associate Director Valerie Ross. Please feel free to contact Dr. Ross at varlet@stanford.edu with any questions, suggestions, or comments; thank you!