

Many of my ex-students and friends are going to become TAs for the very first time tomorrow (Monday, June 20). If you are one of them, let me first congratulate you: being a teaching assistant is a large responsibility, but an exciting one, and (corny as it may sound) potentially life-changing. Also, I'm doing a little jig for you. You can't see it, but I'm doing it. Actually, I'm glad you can't see it.

I thought I would put down some thoughts and tips for your very first day and other general advice for the rest of the semester. These tips are not exhaustive, they are not going to be enforced, and they are also not accredited by a Higher Teaching Organization. These are some ideas and suggestions that have worked for me in previous semesters, but every teacher has their own style: I encourage you to find yours, as it could be vastly different from mine. I also encourage my fellow educators to pour their thoughts into the comments, so that the new generation of TAs can reap and benefit.

- **It is okay to be nervous.** You may be sitting up in your bed the night before your first section, dreading the next day, wondering how the heck you're going to teach the next day when you're shivering so. *That is totally normal.* Every semester I teach, I also get really nervous the day before my first class, though as semesters pass, the nervousness decreases. The key is to direct some of the nervous energy away and instead...
- **Be excited.** You took on the job (hopefully) because you want to share your passion for the subject that you are about to teach. Remember how excited you were when you first saw that material: did you keep reading? Did you find more problems to work on? Did you babble on to your friends/acquaintances/pet Domokun about the topic? Bring that excitement back to the fore: you are going to share it with a bunch of incredible people. And, by the way, ...
- **They are nervous too.** But they are eager to learn (whatever they may say). You used to be where they are, and the mark of a great TA is to understand what they are going through, because you once went through it yourself. This is a tall order, but it's something that grows through experiences: both their new and your old. Don't lose sight of that important point: you used to be where they are, and so you are fully qualified and armed to help them get through it happily. Use that to everyone's advantage.
- **Be as you would among friends.** Sure, University law defines some restrictions, but within those restrictions, you should strive to be as close to a good and knowledgeable friend as you can be. This means that you shouldn't have to talk about the subject matter every time: segue into random discussions about sports, StarCraft, and other interesting ideas. And sometimes, they don't have to be random: they can be totally related to what you're teaching. ("You know, I'm quite certain they used hashmaps in StarCraft 2.")
- **You don't know everything.** And make that clear. Do not pretend to know everything. I fall to that vice often. You are there to learn too, and if a question is asked for which you do not have the answer, say you are not sure, but you will get back to them. And please get back to them. Nothing is more annoying than a TA who reneges on his promises to answer questions. Plus, it builds faith if you *do* get back to them. *And* you learn something new along the way.
- **First impressions are important, but not *that* important.** Don't worry if you don't have a stellar first day. No one really expects you to, and the relationship between a teacher and a student is strengthened over the course of a semester anyway. Just give it your best shot. Oh, by the way...
- **Have an icebreaker on the first day.** It's true: it's a great way to get to know the people you

will be spending the next 8 or so weeks of your life with. Personally, I go with the simple icebreaker of "name, major, year, and something interesting". The "something interesting" bit always allows me to come up with a relevant (and jovial) comment. Examples from the past: So you're from the East Bay? Did you know that was Pig Latin for 'beast'?

Oh, you're a mechanical engineer. Well, you're born to be here: "MECHES" is an anagram for "SCHEME".

Aw man, I'm so jealous: I always wanted to go skydiving.

That's just me though. You don't have to comment, you can just listen. In fact, you don't even have to go for this particular icebreaker: I choose it because I have found myself to be bad at organizing larger, more involved icebreakers, which seem to take away a lot of time from the lab/discussion. A particular, mildly successful one I've tried in the past is to have the class break up into pairs and introduce each other to the class, or break up into groups and play "Two Truths One Lie". Anything goes so long as you get to know their names.

- **Learn their names.** You get massive TA cool points if you learn their names ASAP. One way I like to approach this, during the first days, is to randomly pick students while working on a problem in lab/discussion and say "Wait, wait, let me guess... Is your name ... Jon?" and then ask them how they're doing on the problem. That way, you're also checking up on the progress of your students.
- **Practice, especially for the first ten minutes of the first day.** Sure, no one really expects you to have a stellar first day, as I noted above, but you can dang well try. :) The day before my very first section, I pretended to have an introductory section and icebreaker for an empty lounge. You could do the same: to an empty room, to your stuffed animals, to your stuffed ... friends, anything that will help you get rolling for at least the first ten minutes. Because once you have the first ten minutes down, everything flows relatively smoothly from there, because you have garnered enough confidence from those first ten minutes. Plus, Babak posits that the students have peak attention in those first ten minutes. Win-win.
- **The time in lab/discussion is devoted to your students.** Believe me, I have tried to get some of my own work done during lab/discussion, but it's incredibly hard, and frankly, you're much better off going around seeing how everyone's doing. There's almost always something going on: a student asking a question, a problem that needs clarification, and so on. Don't expect to get any significant (if at all) work done.
- **Try not to touch their mice.** This tip comes from Colleen Lewis, and is especially relevant and true in lab-based settings. Unless you absolutely have to do something complicated, help the student figure out where to go and what must be done. Be the backseat driver essentially. They're going to have to do this on their own once they finish class, and anyway, you also somehow figured it out yourself, the first time you saw it way back when.
- **Maintain eye-level contact.** Another tip from Colleen: do not tower over them when you talk to them. Sit on a chair or bend down: don't force them to look up. This is ergonomically beneficial for all involved, and also ensures that everyone's talking eye-to-eye. (Yes, that was a pun.)

- **Be loud, be clear.** Some of us were blessed with clear and loud voices, but not all of us. I mumble a lot and I tend to speak fast. A lot of it, I have found, has to do with confidence, so the more confident you feel, the clearer you will speak. But that's a tall order on the first day, so tell your students what might happen. "I might speak fast, and I might mumble. If I do that, please let me know." That way, there is constant, valuable feedback on your teaching style and speed from the people that matter most.
- **Take a personal interest.** Not everyone is going to be learning the material at the same speed: there will be students who don't seem to understand the material as quickly as the rest. Don't let this dishearten you. Identify these students and see how you can help: maybe have a one-on-one conversation during office hours, maybe supply suggested reading or questions through e-mail. Don't single them out in public though: that can be embarrassing. Also, and this is tough but doable, maintain a fine balance between helping them more than the rest, and helping them completely above everyone. Don't make your students depend on you: be Socratic. It's a fine balance -- you will make a few mistakes.
- **Keep up with what is happening.** If you cannot make it to lectures regularly, make sure you have some way of catching up, so that you don't contradict the lecturer. Also, do the labs and discussion problems ahead of time. This has many advantages: you learn the material better; you know of potential questions and pitfalls that your students may encounter; you figure out how to teach the material.
- **Make notes.** This tip comes from Tom Magrino. As you work through the labs and discussion problems *before* section, you should keep track of what stumped you, or what you think may stump your students. Summarize important points that you will want to cover during discussion and lab, and explore different ways that a problem could be solved. *After* section, you may find it useful to add to these notes, especially if it's a course you might be teaching again in the future; it could also be useful to your fellow TAs, especially if your discussion or lab sections come earlier in the week. If well-written, these notes could also help your students! Also, make note of any mistakes or typos you may find, because then you can...
- **Change and fix.** I'm not going to deny: there are many things that need fixing with any curriculum. If you find something that may need clarification -- say, in the discussion notes, in the syllabus, in the lab material -- bring it up with the instructor as soon as possible. And, if you can, go beyond: hold extra discussion sections devoted to teaching something that you think needs more coverage, or to something entirely new that the class may not have time to cover. Interested students will stop by, and will thank you for it.
- **HAVE FUN.** Don't look at TAing as a job that must be done for the sake of it: do *not* let it be a source of stress. Do it because you want to communicate your excitement for the material to other people who may just share that excitement. Do it because eventually, you'll see some of your students master the topic and converse with you regarding advanced topics. Do it because you're basically the ambassador for the field. Do it because you want to and love to.

Best of luck! :) I know you'll be great.

(Oh, and just for kicks, I will show up as a helpless student to some of your sections. Just kidding. Maybe.)

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