A BRIEF SURVIVAL GUIDE
FOR NEW GRADUATE TEACHING
ASSISTANTS AT UNC CHARLOTTE
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Welcome to UNC Charlotte. To remove some of the "mystery" in your new role as a graduate teaching assistant, we have pulled together some information in this packet and in the orientation session that might be useful to you. This packet includes the following topics:

Part 1: Planning What You Are Going to Teach

Part 2: First Day Suggestions

Part 3: Contact With Students

Part 4: Your Voice in the Classroom

Part 5: Board Work

Part 6: Office Hours

Part 7: Lecturing and the TA

Part 8: Problem Students

Part 9: The Teaching Portfolio

Part 10: Brief Bibliography on College Teaching

Presentation and Handout on: Sample Assessment Techniques: The "Low Investment" Variety

THE FOLLOWING SECTION IS ADAPTED FROM THE T.A. HANDBOOK AT UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT S.B. IT IS AN OVERVIEW OF SOME OF THE "NUTS AND BOLTS OF BEING A TA
PART 1: PLANNING WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO TEACH

In any given course or section, there are so many possible goals that, unless you set priorities, time and resources can easily be wasted. General course goals may indicate what topics will be studied, but they don’t indicate how students are to demonstrate what they were to have learned. For these reasons, it is important to specify instructional objectives.

SPECIFYING INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Instructional objectives provide both you and your students with "section direction". Objectives may be thought of as explicit statements of what your students SHOULD BE ABLE TO DO when they’ve completed a given segment of instruction. Since objectives are designed for you as well as your students, you might want to hand your students a list of objectives at the beginning of the semester. Your objectives will provide students with an accurate picture of what’s expected of them and will likely help them focus their energies in studying for the course. In addition to aiding students in studying for the course, you will find that having taken the time to clearly state objectives will prove invaluable when it comes time for you to develop any sort of test (e.g., quiz, midterm, final) for your class.

Writing Objectives

Usually, there are three steps for producing a well-written objective:

1. Your first task in writing an objective is to specify exactly what it is that you want your students to do. Example: The student will be able TO MOUNT and STAIN a tissue section on a slide. Remember that you can’t peek into your students’ minds to evaluate what they know. You can only gauge what they know by observing what they do. Therefore, your objectives should be written in a manner which makes it clear just what behavior(s) you’re interested in. The following is adapted from Mager, Robert, F., Preparing Instructional Objectives, 2nd Edition Belmont, California: Fearon-Pitman Publishers, Inc., 1975.

In developing instructional objective, some words are open to many interpretations and their use might make it difficult to gauge whether or not students are learning what you want them to learn. When possible, avoid the use of these words in stating your objectives:
- to understand
- to really understand
- to appreciate
- to fully appreciate
- to enjoy
- to believe
- to have faith in

Other words have fewer interpretations, so their use is suggested when appropriate for your needs:
• to write
• to recite
• to identify
• to sort
• to solve
• to build
• to compare
• to contrast

2. Your second task involves STATING THE CONDITIONS under which the student should demonstrate what s/he has learned. CONDITIONS describe the given materials and resources provided to students in a particular learning situation.

Examples:
Given a list of...
Given a diagram of...
Given a problem involving...
Without any reference materials...

3. Your third task is to STATE THE CRITERIA you will use to judge whether or not your students have achieved the stated objectives. This means you need to specify how well the student should perform; i.e., the extent and/or level of expected performance. This may include considerations of student accuracy (number and kind of errors), speed, distance, direction, or quantity, etc. By adding this component you are indicating what you feel is the minimum acceptable performance for students' mastering your objectives.

The following are examples of criteria statements:
• to solve 7 out of 10 problems in a period of 30 minutes.
• to identify at least 75% of the items on the diagrams.

Now that you are aware of the components of a well-written objective, you might want to look at some finished products. The objectives below are specific enough that anyone reading them would have a clear idea of what the TA (or professor) had in mind, and what the student should be able to do.

3. Given the appropriate instruments, instructions, and a cadaver, the student will be able to dissect 4 out of 5 of the following organs before passing out: heart, lungs, liver, spleen, and stomach.

4. Given a course outline and a list of the components of a well-written objective, the reader of this manual will be able to write 10 instructional objectives, at least 9 of which encompass the necessary components.

If you are willing to spend the time to specify the performance expected, conditions, and criteria for minimum acceptable performance, you will discover that you have generated a
useful blueprint or plan of action for your classroom activities. Once you are clear about what and how much you expect of your students and you communicate those expectations to them, both your time and theirs can be spent in accomplishing those objectives. You may feel you can convey your purpose without including all of the components discussed here. While that choice is yours, remember that the more explicit your objectives, the more valuable they are to you and your students.

**SEQUENCING OBJECTIVES**

Once you have your objectives in hand, consider the types of behaviors that your students will need to acquire enroute to attaining these objectives. You can identify a series of PREREQUISITE BEHAVIORS or component tasks for each of your objectives by asking yourself the following question about each objective:

What do my students need to be able to do before they can successfully perform this objective? By repeatedly asking this question, you will undoubtedly generate many different and appropriate enroute behaviors for your students. For example, suppose a TA for English 1 writes the following objective: "Students will be able to write a paragraph that includes a topic sentence." If the TA then asks the question posed above, some of the prerequisite behaviors s/he might come up with could include:

- Students will be able to:
  - write sentences in English;
  - identify topic sentences in sample paragraphs;
  - distinguish between paragraphs and sentences;
  - use the standard rules of punctuation.

Not everyone will analyze a given objective into the same components. Your perception of behaviors for a given objective is likely to be unique—and as long as you’ve given them considerable thought, your chosen prerequisites should be appropriate to the objective at hand.

The next step would be to MAKE SOME CHOICES ABOUT THE RELEVANCE AND NECESSITY OF THE COMPONENT SKILLS that you were able to generate. Remember, you are not responsible for ALL prerequisites. At some point you will need to make some assumptions about what your students can already do by the time they’ve enrolled in your section. You can reasonably assume, for example, that our English 1 students (above) will have mastered the letters of the alphabet prior to reaching the University.

After deciding upon some prerequisite behaviors for attaining your objectives, your next task is DEVISING THE SEQUENCE in which your instruction will take place. Your instruction does proceed in some order and certain things will have to come first. But how can you decide what the order should be?

Educators have devised schemes for categorizing the tasks that students perform. Bloom’s taxonomy (3) and Gagne’s levels of learning (4) are two such classification systems.
Prerequisite behaviors to your objectives could be classified by one of these schemes and then presented so that the least complex prerequisites are taught first. If you want more information regarding these classification systems or the sequencing of your objectives, please refer to the references by Bloom or Gagne.

**SELECTING INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS AND STRATEGIES:**
The last part of planning what you’re going to teach involves SELECTING, i.e., choosing instructional materials and strategies to aid students in attaining the objectives that you’ve formulated and sequenced. Although not every teaching technique will work in every classroom setting, there are a variety of techniques and materials to help your students progress through a course of study. Matching instructional strategies to general objectives is an important part of planning. Below are a few suggestions about the types of techniques you might find useful in helping students accomplish certain types of objectives.

**To improve student skills, you might:**
- encourage lots of student involvement/practice (e.g., have them SPEAK the foreign language, USE the microscope, or DO whatever it is you want them to be able to do);
- provide them with FEEDBACK on what they’re practicing;
- encourage students to WORK TOGETHER to perfect the skill;
- MODEL THE SKILL YOURSELF; or
- SUGGEST WAYS TO APPLY THE SKILL outside of class.

**To ensure student understanding of lectures/reads, you might:**
- provide simplified explanatory handouts (especially good if you can illustrate the STRUCTURE of the lecture/reading);
- pose questions designed to elicit short factual answers from students. This will allow you to assess who’s keeping up with the reading and how well they’re understanding it;
- create relevant examples which serve to illuminate abstract points in the lecture/reading; or
- encourage students to offer their own examples to illuminate abstract points in the lecture/reading.

**To enrich lecture materials, you might do any of the following:**
- Use a wide variety of INTERESTING examples. Trade quantity for quality. A student is more likely to remember a single fascinating example than numerous dull ones.
- Encourage students to provide the enrichment examples (you may have to direct them to sources to get them started).
- Use available films or videos from the library or those that you tape at home on your VCR.
- Always discuss (or even better, have the students discuss) how the section material does, in fact, enrich the lecture material.

**To promote independent thinking, you might consider the following:**
1. Hold a student discussion. Discussions can range from closely TA-monitored to an open, non-directive exchange of viewpoints.
2. Pose "thought questions" that require students to apply, analyze or evaluate material.
3. Hand out the major topic(s) of discussion a week in advance. You might even have students prepare a few remarks in writing and submit them to you.

To plan your instructional strategies, you might ask yourself these questions:

2. When should I lecture and when should I hold a discussion?
3. When should I be showing students how to do something and when should I encourage them to try it themselves?
4. When should I respond to a student question (give information) and when should I encourage other students to respond (give opportunity for students to practice skills)?
5. If I see someone making a mistake in lab, when should I correct the mistake and when should I let the student discover it?
6. When should I review important concepts orally and when should I use handouts?
7. If I need to show students a lot of formulas or graphs, should I derive or draw them during class or prepare handouts/overheads and discuss them myself?
8. When should I rely on my own expertise, and when should I seek outside sources (films, slide-tape programs, guest speakers, etc.)?

By considering such questions, you can begin to formulate strategies/techniques which match the general objectives you have set for students.

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PART 2: FIRST DAY SUGGESTIONS

Realizing that your competence and self-concept is somewhat on the line, what follows are some suggestions to ease the pain and increase the excitement of your first day as TA.

REMEMBER, YOU WERE SELECTED TO BE A TA. Your department has some reason to believe in you, so believe in yourself.

BOTH YOU AND YOUR STUDENTS ARE PEOPLE. Try relating from the "human" angle. If you get nervous despite this, then...

PLAN AHEAD AND CONSIDER WHAT YOU WANT TO DO THE FIRST DAY. Prepare or have available the course syllabus. Know where and when you’ll be holding office hours. Attempt to obtain relevant information about assignments, tests, and grading for the semester before you enter class. Ask a friend to remind you of your name before you go into class, so that you can...
INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO THE CLASS and hand out the syllabus or any relevant materials you’ve prepared. The syllabus can include your name, office number, consultation hours, phone number (or you can write these on the board), the books for the course, topics you’ll be covering during the semester, etc. Discuss the syllabus and course organization with students and explain how your class fits in with lectures or other courses students are likely to be taking. If you are at all nervous about the class, the syllabus will give you and the students something to concentrate on and may serve as a springboard for discussion. In addition, it will show them that you are organized, have planned ahead, and think the course is important enough to warrant your time and effort.

TELL YOUR STUDENTS A LITTLE ABOUT YOURSELF on the first day. This will remind them that you’re human. (They may be nervous, too!). If you want to inform them that you’re a new TA, that’s fine—but don’t come across as helpless. Rather, let them know how they can help you and fulfill their responsibilities as students (e.g., "Stop me if you have a question", "Let me know if I make an obvious mistake.").

Your first experience as a teacher need not be disastrous. You know more than you think, and your students are likely to cooperate if given a chance. Let them know what you want to do and how. If it sounds at all reasonable, they’ll help you set the tone—up front, honest, and human—right from the start.

PART 3: CONTACT WITH STUDENTS

As the TA, you help to create the climate in your room. Students seem to learn best when they feel that, as students, they are as important to the TA as the material to be covered. (Of course, students contribute to the atmosphere, too.) What follows are some tips to help you create an atmosphere in which students know that you are aware of them and that you feel they are important.

- **LEARN YOUR STUDENTS’ NAMES**, preferably by the end of the first class. This may seem like a tall order, but calling your students by name goes a long way towards helping them feel at ease and included in the class.

- **MAKE EYE CONTACT WITH YOUR STUDENTS** when you are speaking to the group as a whole. Instead of speaking to the clock at the back of the room, look directly at different students in different parts of the room. Students then feel that you SEE them.

- **BE AWARE OF YOUR STUDENTS’ BODY LANGUAGE**. Slumped bodies, rustling papers, private conversations, etc., may all be signs that students are not paying attention, are bored, or don’t understand. You can try moving around the room, varying the speed of your speech, asking some questions, or whatever else seems appropriate to refocus students back on you. If, on the other hand, you see students leaning forward, waving
their hands in the air, looking directly at you, etc., chances are you’ve got them where you want them.

- **BE SENSITIVE TO STUDENT NOTE-TAKING NEEDS.** Whenever you can, use phrases like, "There are four applications of this theory... The first one is..." Your care in phrasing and pacing what you have to say lets students know you’re aware of their presence.

The above hints will help you make good contact with your students. There are, in addition, some errors that TAs frequently make:

- **THE END OF THE PERIOD TIME-CRUNCH.** There are five minutes left and you realize you will not finish the material so you race through what’s left in an effort to get it done. The difficulties here are that:
  a) the material becomes more important to you than the students when this occurs,
  b) your increased speed makes it difficult for students to absorb the material, and
  c) you’ll probably do an inadequate job of covering the material in a coherent manner. For all of these reasons, students may sense your loss of contact with them and may turn you off. Your haste will be wasted. Let your students know that you are running out of time and outline the unfinished material on the board. Refer students to relevant places in their textbook and begin the next section with a brief review of what you covered or should have covered at the last meeting.

- **THE HIDDEN TA.** You stand behind the teacher’s desk or lab table, with all your material on the lectern, and speak to your students from there, occasionally raising your eyes from your carefully prepared notes. If you continue from this position, all other hints for good student contact may be wasted since students may quickly feel your lack of involvement with them. Move around the room! Stand near various students! Look at different people! These (and other) techniques not only help you maintain contact with students and break the monotony, but also allow you to see the room from a student’s perspective.

- **THE PRIVATE CONVERSATION SYNDROME.** Student A asks you a question and you respond to that student, developing a three-minute, interesting (to the two of you) dialogue. The other students in the room may feel left out or bored since the question may not have been theirs. When answering a student’s question, respond not only to the asker but to the other students in the room as if they were equally interested in the response.

In general, to maintain excellent student contact, **DO THE THINGS THAT YOU WOULD HAVE LIKED YOUR TEACHERS TO DO.**
PART 4: YOUR VOICE IN THE CLASSROOM

A TA’s voice can play a large part in the generation or termination of students' interest in a subject. There are three major components to a good speaking voice: 1) volume (loudness or softness); 2) speed of words (pace); 3) modulation or pitch (highness and lowness). The idea is to speak LOUD ENOUGH to be heard, without forcing the students farthest away from you to strain their ears, and SOFTLY ENOUGH for people to understand what you are saying, and QUICKLY ENOUGH that people don’t doze off while waiting for your next word. Finally, MODULATE YOUR PITCH so that you neither drone people off to dreamland nor remind them of a theater performance. How do you know if your speaking voice is right for the room size and for your students? The following suggestions may help you decide if and where you need improvement.

• Ask your students if they can hear you, if you are going too fast, etc.

• Watch your students. Their occasional lack of attention may be caused by not being able to hear you, by being bored by your voice, or by literally not understanding your words.

• Tape yourself using a portable tape recorder placed in the back of the room. If you are speaking loudly enough, the tape will pick up your voice.

• Listen to your own speech for annoying habits like repeatedly saying, "Uh", or "Um", or "You know", or "Okay, okay?"

• Avoid dropping your voice at the end of your sentence or thought.

• In general, watch your students’ responses, ask for feedback, and if you have questions about the sound of your presentation, voice them.

PART 5: BOARD WORK

The guiding principle of board work is: LOOK AT YOUR WRITING AS THOUGH YOU WERE A STUDENT IN YOUR OWN CLASS. Probably, almost anything you put on the board will be clear to you. The task, however, is to make your presentation clear to your students. Here are some points to keep in mind while planning a board presentation.

STUDENTS MUST BE ABLE TO SEE AND TO READ WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN. Illegible or obscured work is valueless. Watch out if you have small handwriting, tend to scrawl, or write too lightly. Sit in one of the last rows and take a critical look at your board work. Unless the floor of the classroom is sloped, students in the middle of the room won’t be able to see the bottom of the board. Some TA’s like to mark the off the “bottom line of visibility” with a chalk line. If there is a desk at the front of the class, keep it clear of objects that might obstruct vision.
Additionally, try to keep your work visible for as long as possible. If you are right-handed, fill the right-hand panel first, then move to the panel on the left and continue your writing. In this way, YOU will not be blocking the view of students copying the writing that you have just completed.

YOUR BOARD WORK MUST BE ORGANIZED SO THAT STUDENTS WILL BE ABLE TO INTERPRET THEIR NOTES LATER. (a) First erase the board completely. This step is especially important in mathematics, where stray lines may be interpreted as symbols. (b) If you are to solve a problem or prove a theorem, write a complete statement of the problem or theorem on the board, or write a precise reference. (c) Fill in one panel at a time, always starting at the top and moving down. (d) Make your notation consistent with that in the textbook or the professor’s lecture, so that students do not have to translate from one system of symbols into another. (e) Underline, or in some other way mark the most important parts of you presentation—the major assumptions, conclusions, or intermediate steps that you plan to refer to later on. Colored chalk may help to clarify drawings.

ERASE ONLY WHEN YOU HAVE RUN OUT OF SPACE TO WRITE. Modifying board work in midstream can be a frustrating experience for students who are trying to transcribe your material into their notebooks. A physics TA may reach a crucial point in the derivation of an equation and then quickly erase and replace terms. A biology TA may draw a diagram and then rapidly change first one part of the diagram and then another to show a process. If you are modifying a drawing, use dotted lines or some other technique to show changes. Remember that students cannot make the same erasures that you do without losing their written record of intermediate steps: you can alter parts of a drawing much faster than they can reproduce the whole thing.

IF YOU FIND THAT YOU HAVE MADE A MISTAKE, STOP. Don’t go back over the last three panels madly erasing minus signs: first explain your error, then go back and make corrections, preferably with a different color of chalk.

IF YOU ARE PRESENTING MATERIAL THAT YOU WANT STUDENTS TO DUPLICATE IN THEIR NOTES, YOU NEED TO GIVE THEM TIME TO COPY WHAT YOU HAVE WRITTEN. They should not be asked to analyze while they are writing. When you want them to make or discuss a point, stop writing. Let people catch up to you (they may be lagging behind by two or three lines). THEN begin your discussion. Similarly, if you have engaged in a long discussion without writing very much on the board, allow them time to summarize the discussion in their own minds and to write their summary down in their notes before you again begin to use the board or to speak.

AVOID USING THE BOARD AS A LARGE DOODLING PAD. Students assume that what you write on the board is important. The board should serve to highlight and clarify your discussion or lecture. Used wisely, the board will enhance and underscore your presentation, not diminish it.
FIND OUT IF YOU ARE USING THE BOARD EFFECTIVELY. (a) At some point, ask your students if they can read or make sense of what you have written. Don’t do this every five minutes—an occasional check, however, is in order. (b) After class, without prior notice, request one of your good and one of your average students to lend you their notes. If the notes seem incomplete or incoherent, ask yourself what you could have done to make your presentation more clear. (c) View a videotape of your presentation, putting yourself in the place of a student taking notes.

PART 6: OFFICE HOURS

As a TA, you are expected to hold office hours for your students. Your department should provide you with office space for this purpose. Generally, TAs are asked to schedule between two to four hours per week for student consultations. It is likely that you will be asked to share your office with at least one other TA, so it is advisable for the two (or more) of you to get together early in the semester to attempt to arrange non-conflicting office hours (it’s usually much easier to keep your mind on helping a student when there isn’t another conversation occurring simultaneously in the room).

Varying hours may be a good idea. Rather than scheduling your hours MWF 1-2:00, you might set up hours like: M 1-2:00, TU 10:00-11:00, and F 11:00-12:00. That way, you may avoid having to schedule individual appointments with students whose schedules conflict with your 1-2:00 time slot.

Some TAs have found it desirable to require their students to make at least one visit during office hours. If you can get students to show up once and they find the experience pleasant and useful (rather than painful), chances are that you’ll be seeing students regularly during your office hours. Realistically, visits are likely to be cyclical. You can expect anxious faces at your door right before exams and as deadlines approach for papers or assignments.

Office hours can be used to peruse mistakes on papers and tests, to discuss strategies for future assignments, to clarify confusing points in last week’s lecture, to demystify a demonstration given in class, or to help you get to know your students better. The rapport that you establish with students during office hours is likely to carry over into your class.

PART 7: LECTURING AND THE TA

“Tell ‘Em What You’re Going to Tell ‘Em, Tell ‘Em, and Tell ‘Em What You’ve Told ‘Em”
The above phrase contains most of what you need to know to deliver a good lecture. You may remember that similar components were listed (phrased slightly differently) for being a successful TA. They were:

1. Plan what you’re going to do.
2. Implement what you’ve planned.
3. Evaluate what you’ve done.

In this overview, each of these three components is discussed as they relate to delivering a basic lecture.

**PLANNING THE LECTURE:**

1. **DETERMINE WHAT YOU WANT TO ACCOMPLISH DURING THE CLASS PERIOD.** Figure out the number of points or principles you want to cover and consider examples for each. Experts figure about 15 minutes per major point; more than 15 minutes and students do not seem to retain the material.

2. **USE YOUR LECTURE TO DO MORE THAN PRESENT FACTS.** Share complex intellectual analyses, synthesize several ideas, compare and contrast known ideas with new ones, and tell of recent studies. Since you want students to be prepared for class, give them a reason to be so. To simply restate what they have read for homework is to encourage them not to do their homework.

3. **ESTABLISH YOUR TIMING.** How long will it take to cover each of the main points? How far along should you be halfway through your class? If you seem to be running out of time, what will you leave out? How much time will you allot for student questions? Will you ask questions of the students? How long do you estimate that taking?

4. **ANTICIPATE PROBLEM AREAS.** What information may be difficult for your students? How can you make that information easier for them to understand? How can you aid student note-taking? Careful planning of your lecture will lessen the likelihood of experiencing common TA problems with respect to getting through the planned material, running short of time and experiencing disruptions in the lecture which might have been anticipated.

**IMPLEMENTING WHAT YOU’VE PLANNED**

3. **LET STUDENTS KNOW,** at the beginning of class, what you will cover during that period by putting a brief outline on the board, by providing a handout, or by any other appropriate means. This will help your students to follow your lecture in their notes or in their heads (as you speak).
WHERE APPROPRIATE, RELATE THIS WEEK’S WORK TO LAST WEEK’S so that students begin to develop some sense of the structure of the course content.

BEGIN SLOWLY AND GRADUALLY SPEED UP, watching your students for signs of life or loss of attention. In the 15 minutes you’ve planned for each major concept, spend no more than 10 minutes on straight lecture. Lecturing for more than 10 minutes is inadvisable, because of the strain on the listener. After 10 minutes, ask a question, tell an anecdote, or do whatever is necessary to relieve the tension of listening.

KEEP STUDENTS’ ATTENTION with your voice and maintain contact with your students. If there is room to do so, move around the room so that you can make eye contact with people in various parts of the room.

EXPERIMENT WITH ALTERNATIVE TEACHING STYLES. You do not necessarily have to stand at the front of the class (somewhere between board and podium) droning at 30-500 students for 45-50 minutes. Even if this has been your experience, it is not necessary for you to perpetuate this tradition. Other possibilities for supplementing a lecture include:

1. Spending the first 15 minutes having students discuss their reading in small groups.

2. Lecture for 15-20 minutes on new material then spend the rest of the period utilizing students’ questions and encouraging students to answer one another.

3. Have students write down questions about the professor’s lecture on a slip of paper, ask them to give these to the professor after class (or place a shoe box at the front of the room which you can retrieve after class). You can then prepare your lecture around student questions or around any issues which seemed unclear to you.

4. Pay attention to what techniques seem to work well in your class. Do them again to see if they really work. If they do, add them permanently to your repertoire of techniques. See what doesn’t seem to work. Experiment with different styles, questioning skills, and so on.

5. Deliberately try to add more polish to every session. Improving your teaching can be a process which never ends.

EVALUATING WHAT YOU’VE DONE
**END YOUR LECTURE AT LEAST 5-10 MINUTES BEFORE THE END OF THE PERIOD.**
This allows you to recap what you have covered, using the outline from the board or handout, etc. During this time students may ask you questions or you may ask them questions. In addition to reviewing what you have done, it is a good time to find out what THEY learned from what YOU presented.

**DEPENDING UPON YOUR STYLE, YOU MAY WISH TO HAVE STUDENTS EVALUATE THE CLASS SESSION WITH REGARD TO WHAT THEY LEARNED,** what helped them learn, what hindered their learning, and what both they and you could add to the next section to facilitate teaching and learning. This may be done through informal verbal solicitation or you might run off a short sheet of questions to encourage student feedback.

**SELF-EVALUATION IS VERY USEFUL.** After you leave class, take a few minutes to assess for yourself what you liked and did not like about the lecture that you just gave. What will you continue to do? What could you do differently next time? Evaluating in these ways allows you to informally assess what your students are or aren’t learning. In addition, it allows you to improve your teaching style and, therefore, your effectiveness as a TA. Students quickly see and respond positively to TAs who are interested in being good teachers.

Later in the semester, or any time the mood hits, look back at this section for tips on planning, implementing, and evaluating your lectures. And look at the other resources that are included in this packet. Perhaps you’ll find ideas to help you when you feel that something isn’t going right and you are not sure what that “something” is.

The following section is adapted from the Penn. State Center for Teaching Excellence Handbook: Learning to Teach and Teaching to Learn.

**PART 8: "PROBLEM" STUDENTS**

A sensitive approach to your work with your students can save you from many problems. If you phrase questions and criticism carefully, you can generally avoid defensive or hostile responses. If you are supportive, encouraging, and respectful of student ideas in class, then you can correct wrong answers, point out feeble arguments, or highlight weak points in a positive manner without discouraging your students. Rather than asking what is wrong with a written paragraph or a problem solution, ask how it could be improved. Instead of asking what the weak point of an argument is, ask how well it applies to or uses the material for the session. Rather than dismissing an idea immediately, ask the student to clarify it using the material for the session. Don’t, on the other hand, respond to student questions with "good point" when the idea was in fact poorly presented. Always show students the courtesy
of attending to their answers when they offer an idea; don't be writing on the blackboard or scribbling on a note pad.

You are also more likely to work smoothly with your students if you resolve for yourself feelings that you may have about your authority as a teacher. Students are confused by and often alienated from a teacher who alternately acts as a friend or peer, then as a stern authority figure. You will also want to be careful about teasing or sarcastic humor since these are all too easily misinterpreted.

However careful you are, you may still run into some students who present problems. A few recurrent types—and ways to work with them—are discussed below.

**The Arguer**

If a student insists that you are not "allowing him his opinion" (or her her opinion) when you disagree with a statement he has made, point out that you disagree because the statement does not correlate well with the session's material. If the student begins to disrupt the discussion, offer to talk privately after class or during office hours. Remain calm and nonjudgmental, no matter how agitated the student becomes. Always use evidence when disagreeing with a student. Using the authority of your position as teacher rarely proves anything in a disagreement and can inhibit discussion. You can largely avoid having students feel that you are putting them down by not beginning critical statements with "I". Phrase criticism with reference to the material for the session or other commonly shared information from the course.

If a student is stubborn and refuses to postpone a disagreement until after class or office hours and completely disrupts a class, remain calm. If the student is agitated to the point of being unreasonable, ask him or her to carry the grievance to a higher authority. Make apparent your willingness to discuss the issue calmly, but do not continue trying to reason with a student who is highly agitated. If you remain calm in the presence of the group, the student may soon become cooperative again. In an extreme case, you may have to ask the student to leave the classroom, or even dismiss the section. Seek to make your response as calm as possible and avoid making an issue out of a small incident. The hardest part of such a situation is to maintain your professionalism and not to respond as if personally attacked.

**The Overtalkative Student**

Overtalkative students can deaden a class. If a student is dominating a section, try to elicit responses from other students. Call on someone else even though the overtalkative student volunteers a response. Emphasize to the group that it is the quality, not the quantity, of responses that most interests you. Make sure they see that you consider the group's project a communal and not a competitive activity. If the student does not recognize the importance of listening to what other members of a group have to offer, talk with him or her about it privately. If the problem continues, talk to the student's advisor, dorm resident fellow, or both to try to develop a strategy for dealing with the overtalkativeness. Do not ridicule an overtalkative student or make comments to other students in the group, but try as tactfully as possible to keep the group's activity going without reinforcing the talkative behavior.
The Silent Ones
The student who never speaks out in class also presents a problem. By making sure that all members of a class (if small enough) know each other by name and by trying to create a safe environment, you can sometimes overcome the silent student’s fear of speaking. Occasional small group activities—where the students discuss issues in pairs, for example—can also make it easier for a shy student to open up. As with the overtalkative student, do not ridicule or put the silent student on the spot, but do try to elicit answers from him or her at first once every session and later more frequently when he or she begins to appear more comfortable responding.

Talking with the student privately can also help. Reasons for being silent may vary. One silent student may merely enjoy listening. Another may lack confidence to contribute. The latter is very common among first year students. Some students simply have quiet personalities; others may be undergoing personal stresses that inhibit their speaking in class. Some may be unprepared. Even after you gently encourage them to speak, they may remain silent. This is their right, and ultimately you must respect their privacy.

Requiring all students in your sections to come and talk with you during office hours at the beginning of the quarter and a second time during the quarter can help alleviate both overtalkativeness and silence by putting students more at ease.

The "Grade Grubber"
You may find that some students will unrelentingly pursue you if you give them a lower grade than they expected. Many faculty and TAs complain that they have had even A’s vigorously contested! There are ways to minimize such incidents. Make it entirely clear from the beginning exactly what you expect in papers or tests. If possible, hand out guidelines for a good essay or examples of a superior exam answer. When you do put the grade down, note in some detail weak or strong points of the work and suggestions for a better performance next time. With papers, you can give students the option of initially handing in a draft that you will not grade but that you will criticize.

When students actually come to you to contest their grades, indicate that when you reconsider their marks, you retain the right to adjust them up or down. If you are the TA, advise students that in the case of unresolved differences, the professor will make the final decision. (Be sure to discuss this with the professor beforehand, however.) When no resolution is possible, brief the student on which office to turn to (such as the chairperson of the department) to pursue an appeal.

Although grade grubbers can discourage you and appear to undermine the academic enterprise, remember that this generation of students is under pressures you may not have had as an undergraduate. Competition for graduate and professional schools is fiercer than ever before. You will have more success if you listen to and respond to their anxieties as well as their complaints.
PART 9: THE TEACHING PORTFOLIO

Another method to evaluate, improve, and reflect on your teaching that has recently gained attention is the teaching portfolio. Through the portfolio you collect materials documenting your strengths and accomplishments as a teacher. Peter Seldin, author of The Teaching Portfolio (Anker, 1991), says that "The portfolio is to teaching what lists of publications, grants, and honors are to research and scholarship."

The contents of a portfolio vary, depending on the capabilities and course responsibilities of the faculty member or TA. Typically, however, portfolios include a brief table of contents, a personal statement, supporting material from others including peers who have observed you or letters from professors you may have TAed for, and such evidence of teaching effectiveness as student evaluations, student papers, or a videotape of you in action.

While most of the documents in a portfolio may sound familiar, the personal statement is probably new to many instructors. It is generally four to six pages long and may include the following items: 1) a reflective statement of your pedagogical philosophy, strategies, and objectives; 2) a summary of your past and present teaching responsibilities; 3) a description of steps taken to evaluate and improve your teaching, including changes resulting from attending teaching workshops, being videotaped, or talking to a teaching consultant; 4) an explanation of appended supporting material such as syllabi, exams, or handouts.

Experience shows that teaching portfolios are best prepared in consultation with others. As you put your portfolio together, seek the advice of colleagues, your academic advisor (if you’re a TA), and Center for Teaching and Learning consultants. One great benefit of assembling a teaching portfolio is that it helps you become more articulate about your teaching strategies as you review your work and clarify your pedagogical aims. Not only will the process prove enlightening, but your portfolio is likely to be useful for the academic job market or the tenure review/promotion process.

PART 10: SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY ON COLLEGE TEACHING


Brookfield, Stephen D. *The Skillful Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990. Brookfield reflects on the challenges of effective teaching, arguing for the importance of a personal vision and sharing possible approaches to a variety of difficult teaching situations.


Erickson, Bette LaSere, and Diane Weltner Strommer. *Teaching College Freshmen*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991. Teaching first-year students presents particular challenges, and this book offers valuable insight into students' intellectual development and strategies to promote effective learning.

Feldman, Kenneth A. and Michael B. Paulsen, Eds. *Teaching and Learning in the College Classroom*. Needham Heights, MA: Ginn Press, 1994. This sourcebook is for anybody who wants to go well beyond the introductory level in a variety of topics related to postsecondary teaching and learning.

Fuhrmann, Barbara Schneider and Anthony F. Grasha. *A Practical Handbook for College Teachers*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1983. One of the best and most thorough of the now many books on university teaching, this work includes both a review of some of the most pertinent research and very practical suggestions.

success in learning. This is a comprehensive guide to better examination design, analysis, and grading.

