Twelve Easy Steps to Becoming an Effective Teaching Assistant

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What does it take to be an effective teaching assistant in political science? This is a subject of interest not only to first time graduate teaching assistants, but also to the professors who make use of them, the directors of undergraduate studies who must live with their results, and the directors of graduate studies who must help prepare them for their first teaching jobs. But while the subject of training graduate students to teach is of live interest to numerous people, comparatively little direct attention has been accorded it. While 83% of graduate students say that "enjoyment of teaching" was one of the factors that lead them to enroll in graduate school, a significantly smaller percentage believe that their departments adequately prepare them to serve as teaching assistants, much less to take up the responsibilities of full-time college professors (Golde and Dore 2001). And while research on teaching has exploded since 1998, the chief focus of this research and publication has tended to be on civic education, curriculum development, and the use of technology in the classroom (Kehl 2002). Indeed, no article in *PS* since its inception in 1968 has ever directly taken up the topic of what sort of characteristics and practices, in general, contribute to making an effective teaching assistant.

Some may respond that such advice could be of only limited value since one usually learns to teach simply by doing, not by reading about it. There is considerable sense to this response. One becomes an effective teacher mainly through trial and error, not through the memorization of a list of do's and don'ts. Furthermore, what works for one person may not work for another. Still, I submit, there is a dimension to effective teaching that is reasonably universal and that can be summarized and expressed to others. Indeed, the very suggestion that one should not apishly follow the teaching style of another is a good example of one such generally applicable principle. The art of great teaching goes well beyond the scope of this or any comparable article, but the basic guidelines of effective teaching can, in my experience, be communicated.

Others may say that the same elements that make an effective teaching assistant make an effective teacher in general. And the subject of what makes an effective professor has received considerable attention. But while there is undoubtedly significant overlap between the characteristics and practices of effective professors and their teaching assistants, the teaching assistant running a discussion section for the first time faces a distinct set of challenges and opportunities that the professor of the course does not. Thus it seems that there is some room for reflecting upon how the general guidelines for effective teaching apply specifically to the unique circumstances of the teaching assistant.

This article grew out of a recent invitation extended by the Kaneb Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Notre Dame, a center on campus devoted to improving the quality of teaching among faculty and graduate students, for seasoned teaching assistants to discuss with new teaching assistants some effective strategies involved in leading discussion sections. As I reflected upon my two years of experience as a teaching assistant, I was able to organize my insights into what had and hadn't worked around the framework of a 12-step program. Following this 12-step program may not quite move you from a position of powerlessness over alcohol to spiritual awakening (although it might, especially if your alcoholism is a result of poor teaching evaluations), but it may help to ease the somewhat difficult transition from long-time student to first-time teacher. The first five steps concern the general characteristics every teaching assistant needs to effectively perform their daily tasks throughout the semester while the last seven steps concern the more specific practices needed to make discussion sections run smoothly.

1. Be Yourself

Who can forget the impressive knowledge, speaking skills, self-possession, and sense of humor of our favorite professors from college or graduate school? And who doesn't occasionally worry that the students know more than we do, that our speaking style leaves something to be desired, that our cool is too often lost, and that our sense of humor is something only a mother can love? The shining memory of a great professor coupled with normal self doubt often lead teaching assistants to think that the best way for them to teach is for them imitate the great professor of their memory. While this is somewhat understandable, it is often a recipe for failure. For one thing, since we are different people from our beloved professors, what worked for them may not quite work for us. Teachers tend to display greater enthusiasm and be more effective when their teaching style flows naturally from their interests and personality (Baum 2002). Furthermore, teachers are often at their best when they are thinking less about themselves as teachers and more about their students as learners (O'Leary 2002). It is paradoxical but nevertheless true that the more we try to emulate others the more we find ourselves thinking about ourselves, our style, and the frustrating gap between ourselves and the models we hope to emulate. Finally, it is helpful to remember that you would not be in that classroom if people like your favorite professors did not think you belonged there.

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2. Be Available

Ask yourself whom you consider to have been your best teaching assistant in college. Before I started teaching, I asked myself and various roommates and friends that same question. The answers I received varied in certain ways but they all shared one common denominator: they all mentioned a graduate student who went out of their way to assist them in a class. Usually they described a teaching assistant who had met with them before or after an important writing assignment and had given them extensive suggestions for ways in which they could improve their writing. It is helpful to recall that from the perspective of a student the primary values added by a teaching assistant over a professor are those of approachability and availability for one-on-one interaction with students. Make sure the students sense that you are available for help, and they will greatly appreciate your presence in class.

3. Be Organized

Being organized is the single most important factor that determines the effectiveness of a teacher. This was the finding of Reynold Watkins and Ramani Durvasula (2003), two psychologists from California State University, Los Angeles, who recently studied the factors that affect teacher course evaluations. Their initial hypothesis was that students would tend to prefer those teachers who were unstructured, spontaneous, funny, and charismatic. After all, weren't we all somewhat impressed by the character of the teacher played by Robin Williams in *Dead Poets Society*? But what these researchers discovered is that students mostly wanted a teacher who is organized, has a clear sense of the overall goals and requirements of the class, and has a plan for how each class in the semester will fit into that overall plan.

While these findings applied primarily to professors with full responsibilities for a course, in my experience they apply with even greater force to teaching assistants. While brilliant and learned professors can sometimes get away with an element of disorganization, the teaching assistant, whose wisdom and contacts with world leaders is still in the development stage, cannot. Simply put, if a teaching assistant is disorganized, the students will likely view the discussion section as a waste of their time. But if the teaching assistant is well organized, situates the discussion section in the context of the overall class, structures those discussion sections well, and presents the material in a clear and orderly fashion, they will have done their job effectively and will likely reap the rewards at the end of the semester with higher evaluations.

4. Learn Your Role

A critical aid in becoming an organized teaching assistant is learning the role your professor expects you to perform. Are you expected to attend all of the lectures? Are you to hold office hours? Are you to simply review the material from the previous week and answer any lingering questions? Or are you expected to cover an additional reading assignment and make that assignment the centerpiece of the class? Beyond these more mechanical sorts of questions, it is also important to get a sense of whether the professor wants you to present the material as they have presented it or hopes that you will put your own unique signature on it. There are potential advantages and disadvantages to both strategies. Presenting the material as your professor has presented it cuts down on cognitive dissonance among the undergraduates, but may deprive them of hearing a potentially legitimate alternative. Providing an alternative perspective helps initiate students into the real world of genuine academic disagreement, but may leave them confused when it comes time to write papers or study for tests. Learning from your professor in advance which approach they favor will at least cut down on the cognitive dissonance between you and your professor and help you plan your discussion sections accordingly.

5. Learn Your Students' Names ASAP

One of the chief limitations of a large lecture class is that the professor rarely gets to know the students on a first-name basis. Few words in the language sound sweeter than one's own name. And yet one can be reasonably sure that the professor of a large class will never learn it. Or, perhaps even worse, will only learn the names of the one or two most vocal students. While some scholars have offered thoughtful suggestions about how to personalize such large classes (Hensley and Oakley 1998), the fact remains that few professors, even those with the best memories and intentions, can be expected to acquaint themselves with the names of all the individuals in a large class.

This is one area in which the teaching assistant can make a significant difference. Since he will preside over a discussion section in which there will be fewer students, the teaching assistant has a much better opportunity to learn the students' names. And since she will need to greet students outside of class, take attendance, facilitate discussion, and grade the tests and papers of students in the section, the teaching assistant has numerous incentives to learn students' names as well. Furthermore, learning students' names helps to establish the teaching assistant as a liaison between the students and the professor. This is especially helpful for those students who are less likely to seek out the professor during office hours and thus more likely to slip through the cracks of a large lecture class.

The task of learning 50 new names can be a daunting one and can rarely be achieved in one or two weeks. One way to accomplish this is to distribute tent cards to the students with their names clearly printed on them and to ask them to display these cards on their desks for the first few weeks. Another way is to obtain and memorize the "face sheet" for the class from the registrar's office. While this approach can allow you to prepare in advance of the first day, it should be employed with some caution. An undergraduate once told me that on the first day of a discussion section he arrived at the class, opened the door, and was greeted by a graduate student whom he had never met or seen before who looked at him and said "Hi, Billy." Billy said that he always appreciated it when teaching assistants learned his name, eventually, but that he found this approach a bit unnerving. Thus, while you should make every effort to learn your students' names, even before the first day of class, there is no need to distress the poor Billy's of the world with the tools of Big Brother.

6. The Three Goals of Discussion Sections: Nuts and Bolts, Challenge and Excitement, Fun and Games

There are three basic goals of every discussion section that you should keep in mind as you face the prospect of meeting your class for the first time.

The first and probably most important goal, at least from the perspective of your students, is to cover the nuts and bolts of the class. Simply put, you need to know in detail the course requirements and show them how to successfully meet them. Your students, needless to say, will be eager to succeed in the class. And since the professor cannot walk every student through the steps toward success in the class, the effort you put into showing your students how to succeed, by clearly teaching them the course material

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and instructing them in how to write papers and study for tests, will be greatly appreciated.

But you should not turn yourself into a full-time spoon feeder. Thus the second goal of the discussion section is to challenge and excite your students about the content of the course. Challenging your students to think critically and independently about the material you are covering encourages them to take seriously what they are studying and ultimately helps them learn the material better. Don't be afraid to raise the bar fairly high in the discussion section—at first the students may be unsure of themselves, but they will most often rise to the occasion. As the expectations of the teacher rise, the performance of the students usually rises as well (Cronin 1991). In addition, take the opportunity to explain why you find the material they are studying interesting. Your students probably do not quite share your enthusiasm for your subject. This is your chance not only to tell them that you are interested in the subject but to explain to them why you find the subject so intriguing, if not compelling. Since you are generally closer in age and experience to the undergraduates than the professor, the students may find your enthusiasm for the subject particularly contagious.

If your discussion sections are on Friday morning, keep in mind two things. Thursday nights on college campuses are not always the best nights for studying and Friday mornings are not always the best time to absorb volumes of new information. So in addition to showing them how to get an 'A' in the class and why they should consider devoting their lives to the subject, it never hurts to occasionally mix in a little fun and games. Your students will definitely appreciate a graduate student who brings an occasional light touch to discussion sections (Cox 2003).

7. Provide a handout or agenda

All of us have sat through discussion sections in which the teaching assistant rambled on, one or two students dominated the flow of discussion, and precious little was accomplished. In fact, my impression is that many undergraduates perceive that most of their discussion sections run this way. If you would like to avoid being remembered as the classic example of an unsuccessful, disorganized teaching assistant, bring a handout or at least provide an agenda for what you intend to cover in class. Providing an agenda for the class forces you to plan the meeting ahead of time, prevents one or two students from dominating the discussion, and reassures the rest of the students that the discussion is going somewhere. Creating a handout also allows you to communicate more information than you usually can with a dry erase board, gives the students a handy study aid which they are unlikely to receive from the professor of the class, and provides you with an opportunity to have some fun and be creative (Race and Brown 1993, 82–83). On numerous teacher evaluations this was something that students consistently described as being helpful and even comforting.

8. Provide a Mini-lecture

At the outset of every discussion section I found it helpful to provide the class with a brief and organized "mini-lecture" that highlighted the main points from the readings and lectures of the previous week. Frank Boyd (2001) has found that APSA's award-winning professors tend to make fairly extensive use of the lecture format, even in classes in which discussion is the primary goal. While extensive lecturing would be inappropriate in a teaching assistant's discussion section, some reliance upon it at the outset of the class can be quite helpful. For one thing, it forces the teaching assistant to synthesize the main points from the readings and class lectures into a coherent whole. Furthermore, it helps the students focus on the subject at hand. With four other classes, extracurricular activities, and the normal distractions of undergraduate life, your students should probably not be expected to have the course material at the front of their minds at all times. Providing a summary statement of the previous week's work also gives students an excellent opportunity to ask questions. While asking for questions at the outset of the class is usually a good idea, you will often find that students are more likely to ask the really good questions once they've been "primed" a bit.

9. Provide an Opportunity for Students to Ask Questions

But are you certain that you want to be asked the really good questions? Nothing feels quite as uncomfortable as being publicly asked a question you cannot competently answer. Occasionally this sort of question induces the proverbial "out of body experience" in the new teaching assistant. There you are, floating somewhere above the classroom, looking down on the poor teaching assistant who was just asked the one question he hoped would not be asked. The situation can be awkward, but you should know that there is a way of turning such a potentially embarrassing situation to your advantage. So pull your disembodied ghost back down from the ceiling, take a breath, and simply tell the student that you don't know the answer. Most students will accept that as a legitimate response (Cox 2003). But don't just leave it at that. Also tell them that you will get back to them with the answer to their question by the next discussion section, if not earlier (Nilson 1998, 101–102). After the class, do your research and find the answer. And start the next discussion section by answering the question(s) you couldn't answer the previous week. This will show your students two things. First, it will let them know that, despite the aura of authority you may enjoy because of your role in the class, you are not perfect and don't have all the answers. Second, it will demonstrate your willingness to go the extra mile to answer their questions. If you accept the fact that you will not know the answer to every question but plan to answer every tough question by the next discussion section, your stress level will decline, your knowledge of the subject will increase, and your rapport with your students will grow strong.

10. Work to Stimulate Discussion

"In 1930, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives, in an effort to alleviate the effects of the . . . Anyone? Anyone? . . . the Great Depression, passed the . . . Anyone? Anyone? The tariff bill? The Hawley-Smoot Tariff Act? Which, anyone? Raised or lowered? . . . raised tariffs, in an effort to collect more revenue for the federal government." Who can forget Ben Stein uttering these words as he portrayed the devastatingly dry high school economics teacher in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*? This little moment in classroom disaster illustrates that knowing everything about your subject is not even half the battle when it comes to stimulating discussion. And since your primary responsibility as a teaching assistant will usually be to encourage discussion, besides doing all the reading for the class and organizing your thoughts about the material in advance, you will need to think a good deal about how you plan to stimulate class participation.

Ben Stein's character provides an object lesson in how not to do this. The

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questions he poses to his students are all fact-based and all have only one possible correct answer. His students, unsurprisingly, are unresponsive. Now some students will be unresponsive because they have not done the reading for the day. This happens more than we may like to acknowledge. But those students who have done the reading may also be unresponsive to these kinds of questions because they will doubt that they have done the reading thoroughly. Thus asking fact-based questions that have only one possible correct answer, while occasionally useful, does not tend to stimulate much discussion. Instead, it tends to clam people up (Nilson 1998, 96). Those students who have not done all the reading will fear being found out while those students who doubt they fully understood the reading will similarly hold back.

By contrast, I have found four approaches that do tend to get students to speak up. The first may be called the "red meat" approach. At the outset of the class, state a succinct and potentially controversial thesis about the material, give your students a few minutes to jot down whether they agree or disagree with it and why, and then open up discussion. By giving your students a thesis they can sink their teeth into and by allowing them a minute to collect their thoughts, you lay the foundation for a good discussion. The second approach involves close reading of a text. Select a passage that is difficult to understand, illustrative of the main issues being grappled with, and capable of being agreed or disagreed with. By selecting such a passage and preparing some open-ended questions about it, you eliminate the problem of students doubting whether they read or read carefully enough the reading for the day and put the entire class literally on the same page. The third approach involves organizing a class-wide debate. Select the topic for the debate, assign students different positions ahead of time, and open up discussion by calling on the different parties to state their claims and respond to the claims of the other parties. Since many political science majors enjoy debating, this approach usually has positive results (Guliuzza 1991; Hensley and Oakley 1998). The fourth approach involves breaking the class up into different groups for 10 to 15 minutes to have them discuss different slivers of the day's material and to answer specific questions you'd like them to address (Appleton 1995). Once they've wrapped this up, have them present their findings to the larger group. While this approach, like the class-wide debate, can be effective, it should be used only sparingly throughout the semester. If the teaching assistant is constantly putting the onus of responsibility for discussion primarily on the students, a suspicion may form that the assistant is not adequately preparing for the class.

11. Have Fun

Discussion sections can be painful. Sometimes they are painful because the teaching assistant is woefully unprepared, disorganized, and incapable of eliciting discussion. But on other occasions they can be painful simply because the teaching assistant refuses to occasionally lighten up and enjoy the class (Cox 2003; Cronin 1991). Teaching is ultimately a serious business, but it is helpful to remember that students often learn the most when they are enjoying themselves. So while you should probably avoid becoming chummy with your students, it is a good idea to try to interject some fun into your discussion sections when possible. Bringing props (pictures, newspaper articles, posters, etc.) that somehow symbolize the topic of discussion for the day to every discussion section is one such way to lighten the mood. Another way is to occasionally show a clip from a movie or television show that captures a point you are trying to make (Beavers 2002). Students love movies, and if you can even show a 5- or 10-minute clip once during the semester, they will appreciate the change of pace. Finally, if you have the time and the willingness to ham it up a bit, you might consider developing a course-related game or simulation to play once or twice during the semester. Two such games that have worked well for me have been what I have called "Judicial Jeopardy" and "Who Wants to be a Political Scientist?" in which I have posed questions to students using the basic format of these popular game shows. I have also found role-playing simulations in which students take on the roles of various players in a complex political situation to be both fun and useful in illustrating the dynamics of a variety of political phenomena. The trial of Socrates, the formation of an iron triangle, and the contending opinions of a Supreme Court case can often be better brought to life in the context of a well-conceived simulation than through mere lecture or discussion.

12. Mid-Term Course Evaluation

An excellent way to gauge your performance in the class and to make improvements upon what you have already done is to ask your students to fill out a brief, anonymous mid-term evaluation of your performance in the discussion section (Angelo and Cross 2003, 3–4). You could have them answer two simple questions—what has been going well in the class and what could be improved upon. Before having them fill out these forms tell them that you are prepared to incorporate one or two of their concrete suggestions in the second half of the semester. This will motivate them to think specifically about how the class could better meet their needs. Once you've reviewed the evaluations, make a note of one or two of the most common and sensible suggestions, tell your class about them, and then put them into effect. I have received and implemented such suggestions in the past as putting the chairs in a circle rather than in rows, holding regular office hours, and providing more opportunities for student participation and debate. By getting this kind of feedback midway through the semester instead of only at its conclusion, you not only learn what students like and don't like (they're usually more honest than you might want or expect!) but you also give yourself an opportunity to actually make some changes in response to these likes and dislikes.

These 12 steps for becoming an effective teaching assistant are only suggestions. Learning how to teach is not easy and takes time and practice. And what works well for one person may not necessarily work well for another. But if you love what you are teaching, care about how well your students are learning, and persist through the inevitably bumpy initial experiences, you will eventually discover what works best for you.

Note

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