

SOME SUGGESTIONS ON HOW TO MENTOR TEACHING ASSISTANTS

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At many colleges and universities, teaching assistants play a critical role in undergraduate education, but too often professors throw TAs into classrooms on their own without adequate preparation. This essay proposes a time- and need-sensitive way for professors to become mentors to help teaching assistants, who are essentially student teachers, to get the most out of their education and their opportunities to teach. The focus of this essay is to suggest some ways to help TAs prepare for life after graduate school in their own classrooms in a public school, community college, or university, while at the same time to ensure equality undergraduate instruction. By the end of their assignments, TAs should be able to do the following:

1. Command sufficient flexibility to lead full-class and small-group discussions, tailoring the experience to each class meeting;
2. Create high-quality interactive lectures;
3. Create a supportive, inclusive, yet challenging academic environment in which students are encouraged to participate;
4. Adroitly meet the challenges of teaching issues, such as plagiarism, as instances to instruct and inform rather than to respond with personal attacks;
5. Communicate critical thinking skills to a diverse group of undergraduates.

This article presents one approach to TA training, adopted by the author, in a Social Sciences Department with a master's level (MA) history graduate program. Emporia State University is a regional university of approximately 6,000 students. Our teaching assistants generally work for four semesters and usually are assigned to one professor for a full academic year. Thus, most TAs are exposed to the teaching style of two professors. The courses for which instructors use TAs at ESU enroll between forty and eighty students depending on the section. Given smaller class sizes, faculty can offer TAs intensive, focused mentoring, while at the same time meeting the goals of first-rate undergraduate instruction.

Upon completion of our graduate programs, some MA students go on to Ph.D. programs; others teach at community colleges or continue careers in secondary schools. Some chart wholly different courses for their careers. Regardless, upon graduation many begin teaching their own classes as instructors. However, the majority receive little to no training in how to teach beyond their first assignment as a TA in our program, even if they pursue further studies. Hence, the reality: If we are committed on the MA level to the overall success of program graduates, then we need to make sure TAs are equipped to be successful in all areas of professional life—as researchers,

colloquies, and especially as teachers.¹ My goal is to prepare my TAs to teach a U.S. survey class. What follows in this essay is the operational specificity that I follow to encourage the development of TAs for this teaching assignment on their own.

Over the past several decades, both graduate students and faculty mentors alike have pushed for more preparation for graduate students on how to teach history at the college level. In 1995 Donald L. Fixico wrote about creating a course at Western Michigan University to fill this need. His course consisted of videotaping student lectures, writing papers, reading from textbooks, and discussing issues related to teaching and the profession.² Yet in the 1997 National Study of Teaching Assistants, graduate students continued to ask for “more training in lecturing, in using technology, and in evaluating their teaching.”³ Almost twenty years later, graduate students still are asking for training in becoming effective teachers.

At the 2013 AHA convention in New Orleans, many panels focused on preparation of graduate students to teach. According to panelists, programs still are not preparing students adequately to be teachers.⁴ Graduate student comments reflect this belief. In “Let’s Do Lunch,” Leonard Cassuto suggests that we cannot be effective mentors without getting to know the students.⁵ Only then can we truly tailor our comments, approaches, and strategies to help each student reach his or her potential. To that idea Tapir33 commented, “How about talking with your graduate students about teaching?”⁶ Graduate students obviously want more training in teaching.

Among the United States’ top 25 Ph.D. programs, no standard training for graduate students exists. Even among programs that espouse some training, widespread

¹Cheryl A. Wells writes on the relationship between the assistantship and becoming tenured faculty in “From Teaching Assistant to Tenure-Track Faculty,” *Perspectives*, December 2008, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2008/0812/0812gra3.cfm> (accessed May 11, 2013).

²Donald L. Fixico, “Teaching College Teaching and the Professionalization of History,” *Perspectives*, September 1995, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1995/9509/9509TEC.CFM> (accessed May 10, 2013).

³“Teaching Assistants Still Want More Training, Survey Finds,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3, 1998, <http://chronicle.com/article/Teaching-Assistants-Still-Want/1005771> (accessed May 10, 2013).

⁴Colleen Flaherty, “Educator or Historian?” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 7, 2013, <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/01/07/aha-session-focuses-role-teaching-discipline> (accessed May 10, 2013).

⁵Leonard Cassuto, “Let’s Do Lunch,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 25, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/Lets-Do-Lunch/138083/> (accessed May 10, 2013).

⁶Tapir33, comment on Leonard Cassuto, “Let’s Do Lunch,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 25, 2013, <http://chronicle.com/article/Lets-Do-Lunch/138083/> (accessed May 10, 2013).

disagreement exists about the nature of that training.⁷ Some programs do a lot to prepare their students, others do very little. However, even in universities that champion TA training, exactly what and how much they will receive varies by department.⁸ Though significantly different, programs do seem to have one central commodity: To varying degrees, all of the programs that focus on helping graduate students become effective teachers seem to rely on mentoring graduate students by individual faculty members.⁹ Howard University offers a mentor program in which graduate students shadow a faculty member. The University of Minnesota's Preparing Future Faculty offers a "Practicum for Instructors in Higher Education" that centers on helping students create "a mentor relationship with faculty at any of the member institutions of Minnesota's PFF cluster." This mentor is charged with providing three teaching opportunities and "exposing the student to the rich array of faculty roles and responsibilities outside of the classroom in addition to the classroom experience."¹⁰

Hence, even for those institutions with centralized training programs, the crux of student preparation rests on students having time with an individual mentor. Yet, like Samuel Gorovitz, I "remain dissatisfied with what individual faculty are doing with their own assistants—as if this centrally provided training freed them of their responsibilities as mentors."¹¹ The central problem is this: More attention needs to be given to the mentoring relationship between a faculty member and a TA. Even in programs that have centralized TA training, mentoring faculty tend to believe that the specificity of training needed to equip TAs to be successful teachers will be (or should have been) done by someone else. In fact, the mentoring relationship remains the keystone in a TA's teaching preparation.

⁷Flaherty, "Educator or Historian?"

⁸Thomas Bartlett, "The First Thing About Teaching," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 26, 2003, <http://chronicle.com/article/The-First-Thing-About-Teaching/30437/> (accessed May 10, 2013).

⁹Katherine S. Mangan, "Colleges Expand Efforts to Help Teaching Assistants Learn to Teach," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 4, 1992, <http://chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Expand-Efforts-to/80057/> (accessed May 11, 2013).

¹⁰David Rayson, Edward L. Farmer, and Robert Frame, "Preparing Future Faculty: Teaching the Academic Life," *Perspectives*, January 1999, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1999/9901/9901TEC.CFM> (accessed May 10, 2013).

¹¹Samuel Gorovitz, "Mentoring Teaching Assistants," *Inside Higher Ed*, January 7, 2011, http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2011/01/07/gorovitz_on_mentoring_teaching_assistants (accessed May 10, 2013).

The General Premise

In order for mentors to teach “how to teach” effectively, TAs need to be invested in the outcome of the class. In a supportive atmosphere TAs can begin to brainstorm their own ideas regarding pedagogy, conveying content, and even assisting in classroom management. In the same way that Peter Monaghan has called for student investment, I encourage TA investment in the class. Monaghan has argued for better teaching of history, moving away from just memorizing facts and moving toward a more nuanced approach. Besides suggesting that students should be invested in the learning process, Monaghan advocates that instructors should strive to stimulate their students’ natural curiosity and engage them in issues currently being discussed among professionals.¹² Applying these principles to mentoring TAs, Monaghan suggests that in order to teach the TA how to teach, the TA needs to be encouraged to have part ownership of the process.¹³ The professor still retains ultimate authority as the instructor of record for a class, having the final say in decisions and being a reference for the TA, but the relationship between TA and mentor shifts to one of collaboration.

My TA first observes my teaching. Based on these observations, I work with my TA to create an active learning environment that accommodates a variety of student learning styles. Moreover, rather than focusing on covering “life, the universe and everything” over sixteen weeks, we focus on selected topics. Within these selections we explore differing approaches and concepts about the past. As David Rayson suggested in an essay on active learning and theory, instructors should select focused topics of study. This approach enables students “to regard history as a critical and creative process of imagining a plausible past, based on fact that would help us understand our present and enhance our future.”¹⁴ Through interactive lectures, Think-Pair-Share activities, a host of collaborative and cooperative techniques, debates, and discussion, the history survey also focuses on developing critical thinking and critical writing skills. The TA gains experience leading all of these activities.

To look at another important need for teachers, in pre-class meetings we brainstorm ways to encourage more class participation. For example, after delivering an interactive-lecture to a rather reticent group of students, one creative TA employed a “four-corners” activity, in which he placed the signs “strongly agree, mostly agree,

¹²Peter Monaghan, “A Historian Devotes Himself to Urging, and Guiding, Colleagues to Teach Better,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2011, <http://chronicle.com/article/A-Historian-Devotes-Himself-to/126520/> (accessed May 10, 2013).

¹³Terry L. Seip, “Mentoring: Teaching Assistants and Other Issues,” *Perspectives*, November 2007, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/2007/0711/0711gra4.cfm> (accessed May 10, 2013).

¹⁴David Rayson, “Transforming the History Classroom,” *Perspectives*, January 1999, <http://www.historians.org/perspectives/issues/1999/9901/9901TEC.cfm> (accessed May 10, 2013).

mostly disagree, and strongly disagree” around the room. He then asked a series of interpretation questions in which the students moved to the various corners in response. Students then justified their positions. Ultimately, this TA’s discussion helped students think about evidence and its use as support. Thus, by being fully invested in the course, the TA becomes an active participant in the process of teaching critical thinking, while at the same time learning a variety of strategies to convey content. In this way all assignments—informal class activities and formal at-home assignments—build towards helping students develop their own unique interpretations about the past, grounded on sound evidence.

Leading Discussions in a Supportive Environment

Early in the semester the TA and I address the individual TA’s strengths and weaknesses in classroom settings so that we can tailor the experience to attend to both. One of the first goals we make is for the TA to gain confidence and sufficient experience to lead full-class activities such as lecture and discussion. As a direct corollary, the TA also needs to practice “reading” a class to be able to tailor discussion to meet the needs of a class. In our discussion of individual goals, for example, many TAs express nervousness and apprehension with regards to standing before students. One TA commanded content and performed admirably with small groups of students, but he felt paralyzed by the idea of addressing the full class. He needed more opportunity to practice full-class engagement. Thus, in his case, I had him take responsibility of some full-class discussions earlier in the semester than I might do with other TAs. This immersion approach allowed him to face his fears early so that he could move past the paralysis.

Leading discussions of short films (roughly 30-45 minutes) is another relatively gentle way for a TA to engage a class. I have the TA lead a thirty-minute film created by the American Social History Project, “Daughters of Free Men,” on the Lowell mills.¹⁵ One significant fear for most of my TAs is “what do I do when I ask a question and no one responds?” To help students evaluate the film critically, I ask them to complete a worksheet of guided questions. These questions also help prepare students for the TA-led discussion that follows. The TA’s discussion then connects to previously assigned reading and class lectures by asking questions such as “How did the film’s depiction of life in Lowell compare with the documents in Benita Eisler’s *The Lowell Offering*?”¹⁶

¹⁵For more information about *Daughters of Free Men* or for ordering information, see <http://ashp.cuny.edu/ashp-documentaries/daughters-of-free-men/>.

¹⁶Benita Eisler, ed., *The Lowell Offering: Writing by New England Mill Women 1840-1845* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997).

For this discussion and for others that follow during a semester, the TA and I brainstorm questions and topics to raise, and I do guide him or her to ask questions of observation, some of interpretation, and a few of application. However, the TA "owns" the discussion, ultimately designing the questions, determining the order in which they will be asked, and reinforcing "the point" of both the film and the unit section. The formula for the number of each kind of question (observation, interpretation, application) we ask varies on the needs of the class. After every discussion we discuss how the class meeting went and any possible problems or questions. In one of these discussions, for example, one TA observed that our two classes of U.S. history to 1877 were very different from each other. In one class students were engaged, prepared participants. They appeared to have considerable background information. Further, when we asked questions, they readily discussed their ideas. In the other survey class students were more reticent. Together the TA and I brainstormed how to respond to both. The next time he led a discussion, the TA asked observation questions of the reticent class and more interpretive questions of the other class. By tailoring the discussion to each class individually, he successfully enabled both classes to arrive at the significance of themes for the day.

Much more challenging, however, was addressing my TA's perceptions of the two classes. He was wary of the reticent class because of the silence that followed his questions. With the more reticent class, my TA initially allowed what he perceived as their lack of interest to dampen his enthusiasm for teaching the subject and his attitude toward the class—in fact, the students were just quiet. In short he began, by his own admission, to "psych myself out." I explained to him that this is a dangerous cycle, because, regardless of their existing attitude, a class often will mirror an instructor's attitude toward them. We then focused on ways to create a comfortable teaching environment in which students are encouraged to "take risks" by volunteering their thoughts, such as not being afraid to laugh at ourselves when we make mistakes, using humor to create a welcoming atmosphere, and praising students' contributions. In this example, this TA and I created a series of good-natured running jokes between himself and me, in which we invited in the students. In doing so we created a safe, jovial atmosphere in the classroom in which students felt comfortable wrestling with complicated, complex historical issues and their modern legacies, such as slavery and racism.

Responding to Student Issues

By the end of their assignment, my TAs gain experience handling a variety of student issues. Through these experiences the TA and I work together to determine the best course of action. By including my TAs in the process, they create a critical mass of examples from which they can draw in dealing with issues that might arise in their own classrooms. In yet another semester, a different TA struggled with how to respond to student issues such as plagiarism. The vast majority of students commit plagiarism

unintentionally. Thus, rather than regard these incidents as an offense against the instructor, I advise my TAs to view these as teachable moments. For most cases, TAs call students into their offices and explain to them again the rules of writing and how to incorporate citations. The student incurs a point deduction and fixes the error before resubmitting the essay. However, occasionally an instance of plagiarism will arise that clearly is not unintentional. In these situations I work with my TA to brainstorm approaches. For example, at the end of one semester, my TA received two essays in which 85 percent of the material in one paper appeared in another. The TA and I arrived at the following strategy: The TA called both students to his office and showed both students their papers with copied sections highlighted. He gave them a choice: Split the grade or do it over, arguing a different position. We surmised what most likely had happened. The one student, who was in the top ten percent of his class, had allowed his fellow athlete to “see what I did” during study hall. In the end, the students chose to split the grade—but both young men learned valuable lessons. More importantly for the TA, however, by my working with the TA to formulate a strategy to follow, rather than simply handling the issue myself, I helped prepare him for possible future issues.

Mini-Teaches

In my survey classes, I employ a series of debates, such as “Was the American Revolution a true revolution?” Having a TA lead this group of assignments enables him or her to gain experience teaching critical thinking skills in addition to the content, while at the same time reinforcing general leadership skills (i.e., giving directions, explaining expectations, managing groups, ensuring quality data, etc.). All students participate in one of four or five debates during the course of the semester, depending on the size of the class. The TA is responsible for leading pre-debate meetings, usually held outside of class time, which help students prepare for the debates. These meetings usually are his or her first “mini-teaches.”

For this assignment the TA meets each side individually and thus has the opportunity to offer concerted instruction to a small group of students. The TA explains how the debate will be conducted and introduces grading criteria as based on my rubric. Much more importantly, the TA helps students realize they need to do significantly more than just prove a fact, such as that “Shays’ Rebellion happened.” They must use data to prove their thesis, which might look like this: “Shays’ Rebellion shows that some people were left out of the legacy of revolution. The Shayites were taxed, without their consent, and found their farms being seized by a new American elite. This suggests that instead of a radical change, the revolution simply resulted in a changing of the guard.” The TA challenges each student to answer the question of significance for each of his or her three points. Hence, the nature of mini-teaches allows us to focus on one of the main goals of the survey, which is strengthening critical thinking skills.

The Lecture

After every lecture the TA and I meet to discuss the content, the craft, and any questions he or she might have. About midway through the semester, the TA delivers his or her own interactive PowerPoint or Prezi presentation that incorporates many of the points we discuss. A PowerPoint presentation is not essential for a successful delivery. Some fine instructors choose not to use this technology. However, I have found that my TAs are much more comfortable having “talking points” on the screen and the visual aids (maps, images, graphs, etc.) help keep undergraduates focused and interested.

Thus, over the course of the semester, we focus on the mechanics of creating PowerPoint presentations—making sure an image is on every slide, making sure the font is large enough, and reducing the amount of text on a given slide. We also cover the overall big picture of a lecture—how to structure the narrative flow, selecting topics, what to include, what to leave out, etc. Then we discuss how to keep students interested and engaged—by interjecting anecdotes, funny stories, humor, and metaphors to help them relate to the past, the use of music and clips, etc. We also talk about the intangibles of delivery, including tone and body language. Toward the end of the semester, I attend the TAs presentation and we debrief after. I offer to buy a soft drink or coffee, and we together discuss avenues for improvement, making sure to celebrate their successes.

The Review Sessions

The TA is responsible for creating a review guide, leading review sessions, and proctoring exams. Assuming this responsibility allows the TA the experience of creating assessment data and then making adjustments in response. After every class meeting we discuss what identifications and essay questions were generated that day and should be included on the review guide. Though I take the lead on this in the beginning of the semester, gradually the TA takes increasing responsibility in this area, every day practicing how to make good exam essay questions and create fair identifications. Then, when the TA leads the review session, this allows for another instance of communicating critical thinking skills as the TA instructs students to create mind maps. The mind maps help students marshal and evaluate evidence in preparation for possible essay questions. Eventually, I also train the TA to grade exams. Independently, we both grade the same ten exams. Then we talk about our grades and our reasoning behind them. Once we are calibrated, the TA can then begin grading. We check our calibration again once the TA has finished half and again once all exams are graded. Rather than feeling as if they are being “checked up on,” most TAs express relief in knowing their exam grades are “correct.”

Conclusion

We need to conceive of the teaching assistantship more like an intensive independent study whose final exam comes in the TA's own (not too distant) classroom and less like cheap (should-have-been-trained-by-someone-else) labor. With this mindset, we should create activities and lessons tailored to addressing their strengths and weaknesses and building towards their becoming capable colleagues. One of the larger hurdles facing the professor as mentor is the lack of ability (or lack of desire) to relinquish some control to a TA. However, for the sake of our graduate students, we have to "get over ourselves." Before having a class of their own, they need opportunities to experiment with different teaching styles and pedagogical approaches. They need to see that we too can make mistakes and sometimes deal with issues that flummox us. They need to observe how we deal with balancing the demands of teaching, research, and service, how we deal with difficult students, and how we deal with failing (or missing) technology. They need us to share with them our past successes and failures. They need us to ask them hypothetical "how would you respond in a given situation" questions—such as when a young freshman told me she wanted Canadian bacon in the middle of my lecture—so they are somewhat prepared to respond should the need arise. Training TAs takes considerable time and, more importantly, patience. They are going to make mistakes; they are going to do things differently than their mentor might. How much better to do so when they have access to a mentor—someone to answer their questions, help them find solutions, and give direction.