Wondering where to start with your new TA?

Based on course specifics and individual faculty preference, each department requires TAs to perform a variety of duties. Moreover, each TA arrives with differing levels of skills and experience.

How can you, as the instructor, work within these constraints to create opportunities that benefit everyone involved - yourself, the TA, and your students?

In the following pages, you will find some suggestions to guide you through the process of working with TAs. Not only will it work towards helping graduate students become reflective, independent, and collaborative teachers, but will also assist in your responsibility to mentor and prepare future colleagues. These suggestions can provide a framework to help you determine how best to work with the TAs you will be interacting with over the coming years.
Responsibilities of the TA Supervisor

According to Sprague and Nyquist (1989), anyone who is responsible for TAs (senior lab instructors, professors, or other designates) take on three roles: as a manager, as a professional model, and as a mentor.

Manager

As a manager, consider doing the following:
1. Make sure that you have a well thought out plan for what TAs will be doing in your course.
2. Make your expectations clear and don’t assume that TAs know anything.
3. Be visible, accessible, and visit tutorials and labs.
4. Keep TAs informed. For example, if there are professional development opportunities on campus or in the department related to TA work (such as the TA Consultant program in your department), notify TAs and explain why it is important that they attend.
5. Be collaborative and open to feedback. TAs know what is working or not in their classroom.
6. Give regular feedback, this way TAs can know how they are doing and what to improve instead of guessing what the students and you are thinking. Make it clear how the department evaluates their work.

Professional model

As a professional educational model, you demonstrate how TAs should act. As a model you want to relay the complexity of teaching to TAs. This includes codes of conduct associated with a teaching role at the university and exposure to all of the policies that TAs should be aware of.

Mentor

Help TAs understand that learning how to teach is a developmental process that takes time. You may want to try a cognitive apprenticeship approach. This is when you talk out loud your decisions related to the course, which makes your decisions and reasons for the way a course and its components are designed transparent to the TA.

Additionally, let TAs know that they need to be aware of the values and ideas they bring with them about teaching and learning. Most importantly, help TAs realize that teaching is not the same as learning. Therefore, their ideas about how they learned best are only valid and applicable to a few students and that they have to learn how to take a teacher approach to teaching, not what worked for them approach. As soon as they take on a TA role, TAs need to understand that they are taking on a new role, which comes with a whole new set of responsibilities.

Communication is key

Contact the TA as soon as he or she has been assigned to your course. The majority of TAs, especially new graduate students, are very anxious about their performance, duties, and responsibilities as a TA. By contacting the TA early and offering to meet him or her before the course begins, will help alleviate a lot of his or her fears and anxieties.

To get a sense of the type of experience your TA has, consider sending him or her the following questionnaire:

1. Have you had any formal course work or training in how to teach?
   ___Yes ___No
   • If yes, how long did that training last?
   • About which topics?

2. Have you had any past teaching (including grading) experience?
   ___Yes ___No
   • If yes, at what levels have you taught?
     ___Elementary (Gr K - 6)
     ___Secondary (Gr 7-12)
     ___College/university
     • And for how many years?
       ___Less than one year
       ___One to two years
       ___Three to six years
       ___More than six years

3. In thinking about upcoming TA assignments, what are the three biggest concerns you have?
   □ What students will think of me
   □ Preparing for class
   □ Establishing and maintaining credibility
   □ Teaching students
   □ How to grade students
   □ Understanding what is expected of me
   □ Teaching in English or with students who have a different educational culture from my own
   □ Managing time effectively
   □ Handling potential conflicts with students
   □ Doing a good job
   □ Encouraging students to think critically
   □ Mastering content well enough to teach
   □ Working with students of diverse backgrounds
   □ Other
   What are your strengths?
   ___Writing papers
   ___Study habits
   ___Reading papers
   ___Working in groups
   ___Organizational skills
   ___Time management
   ___Other, please explain

Adapted from:
http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/resources/supervisor/resources/needs/index.html
Try to be as detailed as possible. Even though grading is second nature to you, TAs often do not have a clue how to approach that stack of marking. Providing marking keys and rubrics are excellent, but again, a new TA may need some guidance and examples to help him or her understand your expectations.

Refer to the TA Checklist (beginning on page 7). These are the type of questions that TAs may want to ask. Often, TAs will not ask for fear of seeming naïve about their role. Please use this checklist as a guide to address what TAs are too afraid to ask.

Encourage attendance at workshops and programs. Educational sessions offered by the Learning and Teaching Centre will benefit the TA. Discussion about the importance of professional development will highlight how important the TA role is on campus.

Check in with your TA. Check in often to ensure that he or she feels confident with his or her work and to provide the opportunity to engage in questions.

Offer to conduct an observation. If the TA is in a classroom or lab situation, offer to observe his or her interactions with students. At the Learning and Teaching Centre, we have many resources on how to approach teaching observations. Please do not hesitate to ask for guidelines and suggestions.

Encourage the TA to request feedback from students. Mid-term feedback will help TAs reflect on what they are doing in the classroom. Please provide a copy of the Learning and Teaching Centre’s publication, Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic, which contains many useful ideas on how to gather feedback from students and colleagues.
When the course ends

Review the course and provide feedback

Provide the TA with some constructive feedback about his or her performance as a TA. Not all departments incorporate feedback for TAs into their program and therefore any feedback that you can provide the TA will be extremely helpful for future appointments. At the Learning and Teaching Centre we always encourage providing positive feedback so that the TA understands what worked well, then constructive guidance as to what to work on and where to access resources to help in that area, and close with another positive attribute of the TA as a teacher. Review the resource Formative Feedback for Teaching Assistants (TAs) at UVic. It provides many ideas on different ways to provide feedback to TAs.

The Manager of the LTC Professional Development Programs and TA Training has many resources and handouts that can assist TAs with their duties.

Please do not hesitate to refer your TA to Cynthia Korpan at local 4798 or through email at tatrain@uvic.ca for information, program schedules, or workshop listings.

Don’t new and experienced TAs differ, and require different types of support?

Your TA may have years of TA experience. In order to provide the support most appropriate for your TA’s skill level, ensure that you find out what experiences your TA has. Despite having years of experience, TAs may not have had the chance for instruction about the work they are performing or may have never benefitted from reflecting on their work. See the next page for the barriers that prohibit TAs from learning and if not addressed can lead to TAs repeating habits that are detrimental to students’ learning.
The diagram above and this discussion originate from research\(^1\) conducted with TAs as the sole instructor in the classroom. Despite this limitation, the results are applicable for other TA positions. The \textbf{first} barrier to TAs’ learning how to teach is their past experience of being a student. TAs have ideas about learning and teaching that forms their strong disposition about teaching. This disposition, however, is narrowly focused and based on what worked for them. \textbf{Secondly}, since TAs have never been in a ‘teaching’ role, they default to approaching their work from a student subject position. Taking on a new role is a difficult transition so TAs need support to recognize that teaching is completely different from learning. This is extremely important because TAs typically have a lot of autonomy and make many teaching judgments. These judgments can be very detrimental to students’ learning if TAs are not given the support they need through affordances – instruction about teaching, and ongoing mentorship. This \textbf{third} barrier to learning how to teach, affordances, determines whether a TA learns deeply or has a surface learning experience. Even if a TA is highly motivated to learn how to teach, if not provided with instruction and ongoing mentorship and support, the TA will have a surface or even non-learning experience. But, if a TA is given ample instruction and ongoing support and mentorship, they have a deeper learning experience. Because of the nature of teaching, TAs go through an embodied learning process; learning while teaching. In order to recognize what has been learned through an embodied learning process, TAs need guidance on how to reflect on their learning. Knowing how to reflect on their learning process is the \textbf{fourth} barrier to learning how to teach. All of these barriers need to be addressed in order for TAs to learn how to best support students’ learning.

The TA will be responsible for:

working ____ (number of hours) per week


- holding office hours
- attending lectures
- keeping class records
- creating/selecting class materials
- presenting new material/lecturing
- leading discussions/answering questions
- conducting review sessions
- holding tutorial sessions
- duplicating materials
- preparing/collecting solutions to questions
- grading/providing feedback on assignments and exams
- assigning course grades
- ordering, obtaining AV equipment/materials
- setting up the lab
- running recitation or lab section(s)
- demonstrating procedures or setting up demonstrations
- cleaning the lab
- others (see following pages)

It is important that TAs determine how many hours they should allocate for class time, laboratories, office hours, preparation, grading and other duties. By reviewing these pages, and determining which duties they will be taking on, you will be able to better help your TAs plan their time and perform their responsibilities.

Overview of Primary TA Responsibilities
Questions TAs may want to ask:

**Course Overview**

- What are the course goals/objectives?
- Who are the students (background with subject, level, class list, etc.)?
- What are the names/emails/phone numbers of other TAs assigned to this course?
- What is the procedure to follow if you are ill or must miss a class/lab?
- What is the workload distribution among TAs assigned to the course?

**Initial Tasks**

- What are you expected to do prior to the first class meeting?
- Are you expected to attend the first class meeting?

**TA/Supervisor Meetings**

- How can you be contacted by the professor/supervisor?
  
  __ office phone: ________________
  __ home phone: ________________
  __ e-mail: ________________
  __ note on office door: ________________ (office number: ______)
  __ note in laboratory: ________________ (laboratory: __________)
  __ note in box ________________

- How can the professor/instructor be contacted?
  
  __ office phone: ________________
  __ home phone: ________________
  __ e-mail: ________________
  __ note on office door: ________________ (office number: _____________)
  __ note in laboratory: ________________ (laboratory location: __________)
  __ note in box ________________

It is advisable to take home the contact info for the supervisor and other TAs (if there are any) so that you know who to get in touch with in case of illness or emergencies.
Questions TAs may want to ask:

**Materials**

Textbook/laboratory manual:
- How can you obtain a copy?

Other materials:
- If you are responsible for putting materials on reserve, what procedure do you need to follow?
- Will the course have Moodle or another Internet site? (If so, make sure you have access to it.)
  - Find out who maintains and monitors it and who to contact for technical problems.
  - In what way are the students expected to use it?
- Are you expected to read all class materials and answer student questions regarding these materials?
  - Find out who to contact for course content problems.
  - If you are responsible for putting material online, remember that you can only use 10% of copyrighted material.

**Class Meetings**

- How often are you expected to attend class?
  - ___ every class
  - ___ exams only
  - ___ not required to attend any classes
  - ___ other
- If you are expected to attend classes, at what time are you expected to arrive?
- What responsibilities will you have with respect to the class meeting?
  - ___ answer questions at the beginning, middle or end of class
  - ___ distribute/collection assignments and/or handouts
  - ___ take notes on the lecture
  - ___ lead discussion(s), facilitate activities
  - ___ notify students of class cancellations
  - ___ set up/run AV/lab equipment
  - ___ lecture/present material (will professor be available for assistance?)
  - ___ clarify class/university policies (lateness, assignment/test make-up, cheating, etc.)
Questions TAs may want to ask:

Office Hours

• Does the professor/instructor hold office hours? __ yes __ no
  ▪ If yes, where and when?
• Are you expected to hold weekly office hours? __ yes __ no
  ▪ If yes, where and when?
• How will students be notified of the location and times of your office hours?

Assignments

• What kind of assignments are students expected to complete?

Other Student Contact Responsibilities

• How will students contact you?
• Are due dates and late-acceptance policy specified in the syllabus?
• If you are working in a lab, it is not always wise to give out your lab phone number. We strongly recommend that you never give out your home phone number.

• An email list or Moodle bulletin board is an easy mechanism for building community/answering questions.

• Are you expected to:
  ___ conduct review or help sessions?
  ___ tutor individuals or groups (beyond office hours)?

• If so, when and where?

How can you obtain a copy of department policies on grading, plagiarism, and so on, and a copy of university policies that directly affect instruction?

Technology

• Are you expected to reserve, obtain and return AV, computer or laboratory equipment?
  ▪ If so, what equipment will be needed and when will it be needed?
  ▪ Where is this equipment located?
  ▪ Is there a charge, form or project number that should be used when reserving equipment?

Photocopying

• Are you expected to photocopy materials for the course?
  Remember that only 10% of copyrighted material can be used.
  ▪ If so, what materials will need to be photocopied and where are they located?
• Are you expected to bring photocopied materials to class?

• If you are responsible for photocopying, where should it be done?
  ___ in departmental office?
  ▪ Will you be provided with a code?
• Are you required to bring the photocopying to:
  ___ a departmental secretary?
  ___ a duplicating service on campus?

• How much lead time is needed?
• What is the procedure?
Questions TAs may want to ask:

Assignments

• What kind of assignments are students expected to complete?
• Are due dates and late-acceptance policy specified in the syllabus?
• How can you obtain a copy of department policies on grading, plagiarism, and so on, and a copy of university policies that directly affect instruction?
• Find out who is responsible for marking schemes and grading rubrics.
• Make sure you know the mechanism for grade complaints and articulate this to your class.
• With respect to assignments, what responsibilities will you have?
  __ preparing
  __ collecting
  __ grading/recording scores
  __ giving feedback
  __ instructing students about specific formats

Exams

• When will exams be held?
• Approximately how many questions and of what type will you be expected to create for each exam? By when?
• Will the professor/instructor review the questions you create?
• What resources are available to assist you in preparing questions (e.g.: sample questions, old exams, test banks)?
• Are you expected to score/grade exams? By when?
• Who establishes grading criteria?
• Are you expected to invigilate exams?
• Will the professor/instructor attend exams?
• Are you expected to bring exams to the exam session?
• Are you expected to bring other materials to the exam session?

Administration/Grading

• What responsibilities will you have with respect to administration and grading?
  __ enforce academic misconduct rules
  __ assign grades/make recommendations for grading
  __ keep class records. If so, when must they be turned in?
  __ tabulate grades. If so, when must they be turned in?
  __ fill out and/or submit grade sheets. If so, when must they be turned in?
  __ post scores /grades. If so, when and where?
Questions TAs may want to ask:

**TA Performance Evaluation/Feedback**

- What manner of performance evaluation can you expect?
  - ___ formal observation/evaluation from faculty/instructor
  - ___ peer observation
  - ___ student ratings

- When will evaluation(s) be given?
  - ___ at mid-semester
  - ___ at semester’s end
  - ___ at the TA’s request
  - ___ when there is a problem
  - ___ informally during the semester as part of regular meetings

- Student evaluation of TA’s performance will be:
  - ___ When? Who will receive copies?

**Course Evaluation**

- What manner of evaluation will be conducted regarding the course and the instructor/professor?
- Who gets copies of the results?

**Other**

_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________________
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Reference:

Questions TAs may want to ask was adapted from The Center for Teaching and Learning Services. (2008). TA Responsibilities Checklist. Retrieved July 6, 2010, from the University of Minnesota website:

The Resource Centre for Students with a Disability has kindly provided the following information to assist faculty.

Faculty should encourage TAs to become familiar with UVic’s Policy AC1205 and Procedures on providing access to students with disabilities. Students may approach a TA to request or confirm a need for accessible course materials, such as captioning for videos, extra time in a lab, or to sign off on an exam form. Instructors will have received a confidential memo of accommodation for students.

- Students need to expressly permit the sharing of this information with TAs. No further personal information should be requested from the student. If students approach TAs directly for accommodations, they should be referred to the RCSD.

Please refer to www.rcsd.uvic.ca for more information about accommodations and support.

Built in curriculum accessibility (universal instructional design) is the key to reducing the need for individual or “one off” accommodations. Please refer to the booklet: University Instructional Design: Creating an Accessible Curriculum at the University of Victoria

http://ltc.uvic.ca/servicesprograms/publications/documents/___UVicUIDBook.pdf

Checklist for Accessibility:

- The course curriculum has been designed in an accessible and usable way and learning outcomes have been established.
  - Instructor faces the class when speaking and avoids standing in front of windows or light sources.
  - A variety of presentation formats to reinforce or emphasize important points have been used, and discussion questions have been repeated.
  - Tour labs and discuss safety concerns, including special issues related to disability. Verbal and written lab instructions were provided.
  - Course materials, both printed and electronic, are usable, accessible and available in different formats, such as e-text, or on line.
  - Students were informed about willingness to reasonably accommodate and clear expectations for performance were communicated.
  - Any request for reasonable accommodation communicated to me by faculty was respected, and referrals to the RCSD were made when students requested accommodation.
  - Students who used services and technologies in my class such as notetakers, interpreters or transcribers or who used audio recorders were accommodated appropriately.
  - All student disability-related information was kept confidential.

Examples of possible accommodations if there are barriers to accessibility:

- Audio-recording the class
- A copy of notes and PowerPoints
- Missing some classes
- Extra time for exams and in-class assignments
- Extensions (with prior approval) to assignments
The TA Consultant Program at UVic positions TA mentors (known as “TA Consultants” or “TACs”) in most departments throughout campus. The TACs develop discipline-specific seminars designed for TAs in the departments they are responsible for, taught in the fall or over the academic year, that cover a range of practical topics, approaches and issues most pertinent to TAs at UVic and complemented by supporting materials. Below is the list of departments that have a TAC and the name of the TAC. Please feel free to contact the department for the TAC’s contact information.

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