

Preface

“What if my students don’t respect me?”

This question came from a smart, accomplished young woman. She was the first in her family to earn a degree—a Bachelor of Science in Biology—and was entering the master’s program to study ecology. She was also about to teach her first class—a lab section that was part of a large introductory biology course—and she was anxious, leading her to question her qualifications and abilities.

I was leading a graduate seminar intended for new teaching assistants (TAs). We had just finished our first session and I thought it went well. I had covered how many office hours to have, how to access your course web page and roster, how to deal with students trying to “crash” the class, and institutional policies about privacy, discrimination, and amorous relationships. I had projected images of my own teaching notes and described my own preparation for teaching. A few brave students had volunteered to share some of their first-day concerns, and I had done my best to address those concerns.

When the student approached me after class with her question about respect, I was surprised. I knew she had a lot to offer her students as a guide and a role model. I knew that she had achieved a high level of academic success and had content knowledge that far exceeded what would be covered in an introductory level course. I knew she had observed many different biology teachers and participated in many lab classes during her years as an undergraduate. Yet her knowledge and experience hadn’t translated into confidence in her ability to teach a class. I hoped to respond to her question about respect with something reassuring and helpful, but I was at a loss to answer.

I realize how naïve it was of me not to anticipate the extent to which young graduate students would doubt their ability to succeed as teachers. No one is born knowing how to teach a college-level class. It is not trivial to jump from being a student in a discipline to being a *teacher* in that discipline. And then there’s the age factor; many of these new TAs were only a year or two older than the students they would teach, adding a layer of social complexity on top of everything else. It’s hardly surprising that imposter feelings would take hold as these young TAs prepared to teach their first college classes.

The students in my seminar had questions and concerns about their new roles as teachers that went beyond the details of course rosters and institutional policies—they

needed advice on more pressing concerns. They worried about being unable to answer questions from their students, and how they would recover if they made a mistake. They worried about how to teach a subject for which they felt they had little or no expertise. They wanted guidance on navigating the moment-to-moment interactions that come up during teaching—what the appropriate boundaries were and how to maintain them. They worried about how to balance the time commitments of teaching with their other commitments—research and their own classes. As they gained experience, their concerns evolved. They wished their classes were more interactive. They worried about how to help students who stopped showing up for their class or who were struggling with the material.

I'm grateful to the students in my seminar who raised these important concerns. The material for this book emerged from my attempts to provide help and guidance for my current and future students. The suggestions presented here reflect my own ideas about teaching, the literature on teaching and learning, and insights from observing and interviewing experienced TAs.

There are many excellent books about college teaching—and journals, *and* conferences. But these are mostly intended for faculty. Faculty and TAs are positioned differently relative to the students they teach due to age, experience, and role within the university. TAs need a different sort of book for several reasons: TAs are younger and, therefore, closer in age and experience to their students; TAs are usually not creating a course and are instead delivering a course developed by someone else; TAs simultaneously occupy multiple territories at the university—teacher, researcher, and student—and the boundaries between these territories can blur; TAs teach primarily in small-group settings like laboratories or discussions; and TAs are very likely to be novice teachers.

I've enjoyed the challenge of writing a book of advice for TAs that take these factors into account. Teaching style is personal. I acknowledge that the advice in *The Teaching Assistant's Guide* is influenced by my personal teaching philosophy and might not resonate with everyone. Because there's no right way to teach, I'm sure some readers will disagree with some of my ideas and suggestions. If criticism of the ideas presented here leads to productive discussions about teaching, that's great. Ultimately, I hope readers—especially those about to teach their first college-level class—find something in this book that they can use to help themselves and their students thrive.