

Teaching assistants' viewpoints powerfully confirm not only how they will teach but also how they will respond to programs for developing teaching skills.

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The Teaching Assistant's Point of View

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In the view of some graduate students, the job of TA is the apprenticeship to a lifelong career. For others, it is simply a convenient way for the university to disburse financial aid. This contrast illustrates the variety of ways in which TAs view the job. More important, it underlines the fact that for each graduate student who adds the responsibility of teaching to the challenge of graduate study, the job is an individual experience. TAs decide for themselves what importance and meaning it has, and in doing the job, they strive for effectiveness when they find it personally meaningful to do so. If they realize their potential as teachers, it is by expressing their individuality in the TA role.

Deans, professors, department heads, teaching consultants — those who would help TAs increase their effectiveness — need to recognize TAs' points of view and respond to their individual experiences. They need to provide TAs help that both supports learning and fosters the development of each one's own teaching voice. For the most part, when they begin, TAs do not know how to teach. They need help, but they do not want or need just to be told how to do it. Learning to teach is, after all, like learning anything else: less a matter of accumulating information than of acquiring skills and solving problems in pursuit of some personal goal. The challenge for anyone who would help TAs

is to make effectiveness rewarding and possible by helping them learn and develop through teaching itself, rather than attempting to impose some paradigm of good teaching on them.

In this chapter we begin by considering the TA's view of the job, what is typical of that view, and what different kinds of meaning TAs tend to find in the experience. Next, we explore the TA's interaction with the institution and the students involved. Finally, we turn to the experience of teaching itself, the ways that teaching assistants develop in the job, and the use they can make of any help they receive in that development. In examining their perspectives, we devote attention to several issues that confront TAs as they make the transition from graduate student to teacher. Among these are the adequacy of their knowledge and teaching skills, their exercise of authority over others, their responsibility for the learning of others, the stress of critical self-evaluation, the isolation that characterizes their experience, and the challenge of developing their own teaching voices.

The illustrations we use come from conversations with graduate students, both in consultations with them about their teaching at Harvard and in separate interviews with TAs from other institutions. We refer several times to the words and experiences of three individuals, whom we call Kevin, Cynthia, and Rachel. All three were very thoughtful about teaching, but their experiences of the role were different, and they varied in their enjoyment of it. Kevin, who always assumed he would be a teacher, took to the role with relative ease. Rachel had more success with teaching than she had anticipated, but confirmed her expectation that she would not like teaching or want to pursue it. Cynthia, who expected to teach only while she was in graduate school, took great satisfaction in making science accessible to her students.

The Individual Point of View

The individual point of view originates in each TA's personal background. Previous schooling (often at institutions unlike the ones where they are doing graduate work), perceptions of role models (which they shun as often as emulate), and expectations about their own teaching all influence TAs' experiences of the job. Individual perspectives are strongly determined by the reasons for coming to graduate school in the first place: A graduate student may focus primarily on studying psychology, with the expectation of going on to combine research with teaching at a university (as Kevin did), or social science, with an eye toward a role in public policy (as Rachel did), or geology, in hopes of working for a mining company (the course that Cynthia pursued). Katz and Hartnett (1976) found that more students went to graduate school to pursue an interest in a subject than to carry out career intentions. They also found that most graduate students (85 percent in biochemistry and psychology; nearly all in English) expected to teach some time after leaving graduate school. In any case, graduate study is the central activity of TAs at the univer-

sity. Even the most dedicated TAs, in their own eyes, are graduate students absorbed in completing course work, passing generals, or writing theses.

Significance Attached to the Job. Whether the TA views the job as the first step toward a professional vocation or as source of subsistence, teaching is inescapably a significant responsibility that challenges one's sense of adequacy. Many TAs anticipate the semester with panic, wondering if they know enough to teach. When they actually start teaching, their doubts may grow as they realize that students are treating them as authorities. Uncertainty manifests itself in persistent questions: What am I supposed to be doing? Am I doing it right?

Whatever previous tasks TAs have undertaken, including caring for others, they probably have been responsible primarily for their own performance. As TAs, they take some responsibility for the performance of others in complex and difficult intellectual endeavors. It is a thoroughly adult role, very often the first one the graduate student has taken on. While Kevin welcomed teaching his first psychology section as "a real opportunity, since it was a small piece of the course that was mine," another TA, who had complete charge of a seminar, said, "Those who are on their own feel responsible for getting students fascinated with the material."

In several facets of their role, TAs are highly exposed. They are delegates of authority and instruction for the institution, surrogates for the faculty (whom students sometimes find inaccessible), and leaders in the pursuit of knowledge (and good grades) for students. It is small wonder, then, that graduate students who are comfortable writing about the subtleties of Shakespeare or experimenting with particle physics may shudder upon walking in to teach a class. Speaking in front of a group, which most people find frightening, is just one of their routine activities. Worse still, as one put it, they are frequently teaching "at the limits of our knowledge." They often must deal with material outside their own specialties — material that, along with their students, they have just encountered in the previous week's lecture. Teaching also demands energy, attention, and time. One of the most frequent complaints among TAs is that no one told them how much time teaching would take. It may be just a job, but it is not the same straightforward economic exchange as alphabetizing a card catalogue for the library or operating a slide projector for the fine arts department.

Impact of the Job. Even when it is not an intended career direction, teaching rivals graduate study as an influence on self-esteem. Although graduate students may regard teaching as a subordinate activity, it is difficult to escape the outlook that graduate study is still preparation, while teaching is actual performance, and the quality of his or her performance is likely to register strongly on the individual. Distress and exhilaration are more common than indifference.

Many graduate students have high ideals about teaching, as well as high expectations of themselves as teachers. In the opinion of a junior professor who

works with many TAs in her own undergraduate course, they are the people in her university who care most about teaching. Their desire to do well at what they have spent years criticizing others for doing poorly can be intense, and doing it well can have a powerful impact on them. Cynthia, for example, talked about how she loved to see the light of understanding come into her students' faces. Kevin said that just having an audience to talk to about his field of interest was like hearing applause. He added, "If you do in fact impart any learning to them, then you have affected their lives forever."

Discouragement can just as easily result, although its sources are more bewildering. Self-doubt can arise from struggling to get students to participate in discussion, from seeing them perform poorly on an examination, or from watching attendance dwindle as the semester drags on. Perhaps the worst aspect of such discouragement is that it is often endured alone. The guilt Rachel felt for having reprimanded a student in her first class plagued her until the end of the semester, when a chance conversation with the professor in the course persuaded her that she was incapable of doing the harm for which she had been blaming herself. Rachel said, "You can really carry with you this whole burden of what terrible things you're doing to a student."

➤ Inadequate performance rarely causes a graduate student to lose a teaching assistantship, but self-censure for doing a poor job can be severe; those who excel academically typically possess high expectations of themselves. Similarly, although rewards for excellence are only slightly more common than penalties for inadequacy, personal satisfaction derived from one's own good teaching is also significant; some TAs develop entirely new career intentions because of it. A former TA, now an assistant professor of history, said that since only a few graduate students were selected to teach in her department, those who did felt "anointed." That perspective shaped her expectations, and through the experience she discovered her love of teaching. Cynthia, who thoroughly enjoyed her teaching assistantship in geology, now plans to spend several peripatetic years in mining exploration and then return to teaching as a means of achieving the stability necessary to raise a family. Although such experiences are not uncommon, the TA job is less often a turning point on the graduate student's career path than it is an opportunity to discover and test personal qualities and develop a repertoire of skills that may be relevant to many intended professions. In carrying out their responsibilities, TAs typically reveal that, however they regard the job, the experience is seldom devoid of personal meaning, and it is frequently the stimulus for some important self-discovery.

Interacting with the Institution. Some graduate students regard the teaching assistantship itself as evidence of institutional ambivalence toward teaching. They point out that while TAs make better teacher-student ratios possible, they also give faculty more time for research. The importance of research, and of their own graduate work in particular, looms large for TAs. Inevitably, the focus on research influences their efforts to be effective, and

sometimes even undermines effectiveness. Subtly or directly, TAs often receive the message that teaching is not the top priority. A dean at a western university tells beginning teachers, TAs and faculty alike, "Aim for a B in teaching. Get your research started. Understand the rules of the game. You can work on teaching later."

Course heads and academic departments communicate their attitudes toward teaching through their hiring practices. Even within a single department, attitudes can vary between the almost casual assignment of teaching duties in the process of awarding financial aid and the most careful, competitive selection procedure. Whatever the process, it colors the TA's whole experience of the job.

A political science professor at one university personally interviews graduate students from throughout his institution to select only those TAs who meet his standards. As a result, they feel they are part of an elite group. They are informed about the professor's goals, and they have access to him when questions come up in their teaching. In contrast, Kevin reported that he learned of his teaching assistantship in psychology by receiving a letter and a reading list from his department. When he arrived in the fall to begin teaching, the course head and the senior TA were away at a conference. He had to greet his students on the first day of class without any additional guidance about the course.

Timing alone can contribute significantly to the impact of the hiring experience. One TA complained that his department did not assign him to teach a seminar until after the term had begun, even though the students had registered for the course the previous semester. He was demoralized about teaching and felt that he could have done a much better job had his department given him time to prepare. In contrast, another TA in the same university felt that she taught effectively in her first semester because she had met all the students the previous spring and designed learning activities according to their particular backgrounds and interests. She was excited about continuing to sharpen her ability to tailor her teaching to the students' intellectual abilities.

Often it is apparent to TAs that there is only a tenuous relationship between aptitude for teaching and teaching assignments. More often, availability, eligibility for financial aid, familiarity with the course staff, and past performance as a student are the most prominent factors in matching TAs with courses. Only rarely does a course head have the time, inclination, and number of applicants to consider their individual suitability for teaching, although some do recognize that the TA selection process is the last chance for quality control.

Hiring without much concern for teaching ability places a burden on the more competent TAs. Kevin complained that he should have been assigned both sections in an introductory course his second year. "Someone else needed the money and got the job. I ended up doing her work and not being paid. It's not fair to the students, the professor, or the other TAs to give someone a job

based on need. If graduate students are not capable of teaching, the university should find another way to disburse financial aid."

One course head who relied on good hiring to ensure good teaching confessed to being "frankly puzzled" about whether to provide teacher training activities. Such activities might divert energy and attention away from research. Further, the distance many professors keep from their teaching assistants' work reveals an uncertainty about how best to give guidance. Experienced teachers and administrators know that beginning teachers need the freedom to take personal positions on the issues teaching raises for everyone. The question is always this: How much neglect is truly benign? Rachel recalled being aware of her course head's dilemma. She said, "Even the professor who was trying his best to give us what we wanted couldn't quite decide what we should get." At the same time, she and her fellow TAs still wanted the guidance. Their constant question was: "Why aren't they giving us more?"

While some professors hesitate to interfere with their TAs' work, others give it considerable attention. Individual course heads sometimes issue written guides to their TAs or visit their classes. Regular staff meetings take place within many courses. Some deans offer incentives to generate discussions of teaching within departments, and departments themselves often conduct teacher orientation and training sessions at the start of the semester. The impact of these efforts on actual teaching effectiveness is difficult to assess, but the more specifically they apply to immediate experience, the more useful they are likely to be. A course head who gives graduate credit to TAs for participating in weekly training and discussion sessions emphasized that instructional development must be offered within the context of actual teaching because people do not like to read about or discuss teaching in the abstract. Her meetings provide an opportunity to talk about classroom experiences that participants are actually having.

The major benefit of many of these attempts to focus on teaching may be the sense of concern they convey. The professor's presence in the classroom can make a TA nervous, but most appreciate the attention. One who had been feeling worried and inadequate about dealing with some particularly difficult students was relieved by her professor's understanding words: "Now I know what you're up against."

Despite these signals of genuine concern, TAs routinely report that they receive little or no guidance either before they begin teaching or while they teach. One said she simply felt abandoned: "I was thrown into teaching. I didn't know what I was doing and I still don't. How can I, when I don't get any feedback?" In fact, the question of their effectiveness often remains uncomfortably open for TAs. End-of-course evaluations may offer some indication of performance, but during the semester, when feedback would contribute directly to their teaching—and to their self-esteem—it is typically unavailable. "We can afford to be really irresponsible with our teaching," one concerned TA pointed out to a group of his peers. "What difference does it make? No one is evaluating us. No one tells us how we're doing."

A casual observer might expect overworked graduate students to appreciate such loose supervision, but TAs also can understand it to mean that, from the institution's point of view, their teaching is not important, and that perception can be discouraging. Clearly, an institution—through its stated policies, public pronouncements, and actions of administrators and faculty—has an obligation both to acknowledge the importance of the TA's work and to provide guidance in developing strengths and correcting weaknesses.

Interacting with Students. In contrast to the intense, private intellectual pressures of thesis writing that preoccupy many graduate students, classroom teaching offers the possibility of lively interaction with students. Nevertheless, the classroom also presents complexities that can be as demanding to resolve as a thesis is to write. One usually becomes a graduate student, and a TA, by being good at a subject. That achievement can result from hard work, but aptitude for learning almost always accompanies the effort. Watching students ponder what appears easy to grasp, TAs discover that students' learning does not necessarily mirror their own, either in extent or in style. When he began to teach, Kevin was surprised to find that he overprepared for class. "Since I had just read for the first time the same material they had for homework, it was hard for me to think that I should teach it to them. We both had the same book. It seemed presumptuous to assume I understood it better." Yet he soon realized that he did not have to think up new insights for each week's class; his students were still trying to understand the material at a more fundamental level.

A still more disquieting discovery is the fact that teaching a class is much more complex than tutoring an individual. Inexperienced TAs frequently report that they can help a student who comes individually, but they feel lost in front of a class. The problem is partly that, while they interact naturally with other individuals, most TAs have to learn how to interpret and respond to the feedback they get from a group. In addition, few TAs will have classes in which the variety among students themselves is not a constant problem.

In his study of undergraduates at Harvard, Perry (1968) saw that the intellectual development of college students ranges from the early insistence that to all questions there are right answers (which they expect the teacher to know), through the later recognition of diverse opinion and the acceptance of reasonable disagreement, to the mature stage of commitment to ideas generated from one's own thinking and values. Since college students represent the whole range, it is necessary for a TA to be prepared to cope with a bewildering mixture of student expectations.

TAs have to press students to think independently because, as Perry points out, students tend to associate authority with textbooks and teachers. Many graduate students have exercised authority in such earlier contexts as camp counseling or student government. When they become TAs, however, they suddenly acquire authority far more extensive and less defined than what most of them have yet encountered, and they have to figure out what to do with it. Speaking about the experiences of new TAs, Rachel said, "When we're

beginning to confront what's expected of us, authority hits us so clearly. It's one of the things we have to decide for ourselves; what it means and how to use it."

The TA role requires one to choose among many possible stances on issues that range from discipline to grading. TAs have to decide how forcefully to maintain order in the classroom, how closely to monitor assignments, how persuasively to advocate their views of a subject, how deliberately to act as role models, how profoundly to influence their students' views of their own capabilities and aspirations, and how rigorously to evaluate student work. They must even decide, sometimes, how deeply to get involved in their students' personal lives.

The stances that an individual takes are personal, and the sense of authority they reveal can vary considerably with the issue. An undergraduate in a sociology course asked his TA to pester him about his term paper so that he would hand it in on time. She declined, telling him he would have to take responsibility for doing his own work. Relating the incident later, she recalled, "I just didn't want to be his mother." In conducting her classes, she attempted to foster her students' intellectual autonomy as well and often gave them the task of leading entire discussions. At the same time, she counseled her peers to be active in encouraging gifted students to pursue advanced study. "I don't know about the rest of you," she said, "but I know I wouldn't have considered graduate school if someone hadn't taken me aside and suggested that I had the ability to go on."

TAs' decisions about authority often involve considerations of how justified they feel in exercising it and how readily their students will respond. During an orientation session, TAs in a biology course listened to a senior professor's admonition to urge students to think (Westheimer, 1982). He said, "One has to ask students in laboratory again and again what it is they are trying to do and question them, not tell them what they're doing. Make them tell you." After hearing this, an inexperienced teaching assistant agreed with the reasoning of his approach, but she also expressed her nervousness about asking students to tell her what they were doing. "What if they don't answer?" she wondered.

Of all the requirements to exercise authority, evaluating student work is the most daunting. When asked about her first experience grading examinations, one TA in political science recalled, "It was awful, for three reasons. The first was a question of competence. Did I know enough to be an authority? The second reason was that I felt I was responsible for all the blanks and bored handwriting in the blue books. Third, I didn't have any standards. An A really stands out, but I couldn't tell an A— from a B+."

A colleague in social studies concurred. "I was so afraid of being arbitrary," he said. "The first time I marked exams, it took so long! I put them in piles, and I kept revising the rank-ordering. I longed for an absolute standard that didn't exist." He went on to say, "The most unpleasant part of teaching is having students come to challenge a grade. Not being confident enough to

stand by the grade, a TA is really caught. I sat there for three hours the first time arguing."

Subjective judgment, which plagues TAs in grading students, is still virtually all they have to rely on in their efforts to determine how effective their teaching is. In the absence of clear criteria, any reaction to their performance makes a powerful impression. One beginning TA felt severely demoralized when some disgruntled students walked out of his third economics class. He was elated at the end of the course, however, when those who had stayed gave him high ratings. "That was the real reward," he said, "for all my hard work—far beyond the small amount of money I was paid."

As reassuring as they may be, student evaluations of teaching are often inconsistent and difficult to interpret, since individual students react so differently to the same teaching effort and express themselves in judgmental rather than informative terms. This inconsistency, coupled with lack of clear guidance and supervision, makes it difficult for TAs to know how they are doing. The resulting need to generate and satisfy their own criteria of effectiveness is a major source of stress. A former chief of psychiatry at a university health service, reflecting on this uncertainty in the TA's experience, said, "It is impossible to succeed using conventional terms. You must move your source of self-esteem to within. When you teach, your self-esteem takes a beating like nowhere else" (Walters, 1982).

The Experience of Teaching

Assumed Competence. Within many academic departments, acceptance into a graduate program conveys an automatic license to teach. The extrapolation from academic to teaching ability does not apply only to graduate students, of course; college and university instructors, lecturers, and professors at all levels get their positions by proving research ability, not by preparing to teach. Unlike doctors and many other professionals, most college teachers practice on their clients without benefit of formal training. Almost inevitably, TAs adopt the prevailing view: If one can learn the subject, one can surely teach it. For the newly appointed TA, possibly the most immediate threat to self-esteem comes from the discrepancy between this assumption that one knows how to teach and the discovery that one does not.

Rachel reported that during her second semester as a TA in political science, she felt frustrated by well-intentioned advice from her colleagues about what she should have been doing to create productive discussion among her students. The advice described the desired result, but left out how to obtain it. She held her hands apart to illustrate the gap and said, "That's right where I need the help. I'm supposed to be able to get from here to there, but I don't know how to do that."

Knowing and Telling. A common corollary of the assumption that teaching ability flows automatically from successful study is the view, preva-

lent in many universities and shared by many TAs, that teaching is simply telling others what one knows. This view breeds expectations of knowing all the answers and fears of being caught without them. Graduate students approaching a first semester as TAs regularly anticipate, with anguish, the question they cannot answer. With experience, they begin to realize that teaching is something more than telling, that knowledge is necessary but not sufficient, and that it is more important to encourage students' learning than to display their own.

In the very telling of what they do know, TAs often discover that knowing something does not guarantee that they can teach it. Neither is communicating one's understanding of that idea to a patient teacher—as TAs have done in the role of student—the same as leading a willing student to a new understanding. Kevin said that what he learned from teaching was very simple: “You must decide what you want students to know, and then construct sentences in the right order to convey that knowledge. It takes a lot of work to find the best way to present a topic. Writing papers is not the same thing. Your audience is different. When you write, you are writing for someone who already knows.”

In fact, telling what one knows can be complicated by the knowledge itself. Having advanced to graduate study themselves, TAs sometimes mix the essential with the esoteric or tell everything they know, to avoid what they regard as a misleading oversimplification. According to a TA in physics, “Many graduate students suffer from a misplaced idealism that they must be true to their subject in its purest form. It is easy to go over the undergraduate's heads.” Because TAs typically teach in lower-level courses, they may also be bored. Both the oversophistication and the boredom result from focusing on the subject matter instead of engaging oneself with the students' own struggle to master the material.

The Teaching Role. The principal irony of the TA's situation is that of occupying the teaching role because of having been a successful student. Teaching, however, depends not just on one's own ability to learn, but also on such skills as diagnosing others' thought processes, skills that have little apparent connection with gaining entrance to graduate school. The essence of teaching is to facilitate rather than display learning.

Facilitating learning implies interpreting students' questions and comments. The TA's instinct may be simply to respond on cue, to answer the question or reply to the comment. That may be the appropriate action, but what students say also leads back to their thinking and presents an opportunity to find out what guidance or challenge they need. A TA in psychology who watched a videotape of her own teaching reflected that while her students talked she was preoccupied with what she might say next and was inattentive to indications of reasoning, interest, learning, or confusion coming from them. She traced her preoccupation to being a graduate student: “If I'm walking through my department and I run into someone who mentions a theory or the latest

experiment, I'm supposed to have something to say about that.” Upon deeper reflection, she said that her teaching role called for something different: listening to her students and being concerned with what was going on in their minds.

In interpreting what students say, TAs are likely to teach to the students that they themselves once were. For TAs to retrace their own steps does focus needed attention on students' learning, yet TAs are often unaware that focusing on their own learning styles results in communicating with only part of the class. Some of the students may indeed be on the same path to advanced study the TA has taken, but others have less aptitude, interest, confidence, or preparation and little intention of pursuing the subject beyond the basic level. Cynthia deliberately pitched her teaching of geology to the students who had always found science most intimidating; she demystified it by relating it to their familiar surroundings and took great pleasure in their growing confidence. That kind of appeal to students' learning processes requires an appreciation for experiences unlike one's own and a willingness to learn how to unlock knowledge for others.

Responsibility for Student Learning. A professor of education, whose own teaching is very well received, posed the central dilemma of teaching: “You cannot learn for someone else.” As TAs, graduate students can confidently use their abilities to master a subject in preparing for teaching a class. Depending on their talents and perceptions, they can develop presentation and discussion-leading skills that offer their students good access to knowledge and understanding. Unlike graduate study, however, teaching presents TAs with the unnerving fact that, whatever their efforts, students' learning is beyond their immediate control. Pressure of responsibility for an outcome they cannot control, together with uncertainty about how to teach, can cause TAs significant anxiety. Often, TAs respond by maintaining whatever control they can. One strategy is clinging to the known role of student. Any number of TAs are their own best students, showing up their classes with superior answers and sophisticated points. A TA in history persistently corrected small errors in her students' comments, which she detected with ease. In doing so, she inhibited participation when she might have focused instead on the more appropriate task of understanding her students' remarks and building discussion. “The first principle of teaching,” according to Fairbank (1982), “is to get on the same level of enterprise with the people you're talking to.... Don't tell them so much as question them.”

Discussion typically confronts TAs with the difficult choice of taking over the conversation themselves or allowing students to grope. A TA in a literature course discovered that when he tried to generate discussion with an open question, he was confounded by his students' unrelated responses. To avoid this kind of discomfort, TAs often adopt such strategies as talking much more than listening, dispensing answers instead of proposing questions, drawing conclusions rather than letting students reach them, or simply lecturing.

Reflecting on why she stood at the head of her class dispensing infor-

mation when what she wanted was to engage her students in discussion. Rachel acknowledged that her need to exercise control came from fears that her attempts to lead a discussion would result in a chaotic, insubstantial conversation. She allowed that she might sit down and talk with her students—the advice she was being offered—if she thought it would work, but she said she did not see how she could get them to talk purposefully about broad questions of political and social history.

The class that Rachel was reviewing on videotape with a teaching consultant had been about the labor movements in several European countries. When the teaching consultant suggested that she imagine what questions she might actually ask her students, she finally focused on the knowledge she personally had to offer on the subject; information about working-class life in those countries. She realized that it would be productive and interesting to ask her students to think about how the contrasts in daily living from country to country contributed to the differences among the labor movements that grew up. She also discovered that she was now imagining an actual discussion, one that would give expression to her genuine interests and allow students, with her guidance, to work toward conclusions. She left the consulting session excited about trying out her ideas.

The Individual's Own Voice. Some TAs try at first to teach like professors they have admired; others respond fully to the varied influences of students and other TAs. With experience, they learn to perform the role in an individual voice, to speak from a position of personal autonomy and express an authentic personality in teaching. As they decide how to exercise authority and gain confidence interacting with students, they begin to relax. When newly acquired teaching skills become part of the TA's repertoire and no longer seem artificial, teaching grows more spontaneous (Kasulis, 1982). The TA matures in the job, the initial question of adequacy gives way to a concern with the accuracy of content and then to an interest in how well the students understand. When the TA begins to experience being competent in these ways, the central question can resolve itself into new questions about oneself: What does this have to do with me? What and how do I want to teach?

In his third year as a TA in astronomy, a graduate student observed, "Now I am teaching the way I want to. I know who I am in the context of the course. I used to feel overawed by the professor, and last year I tied myself down with detailed notes on what to cover in class. This year I know how all the pieces fit together, and I have thought out the material well in advance. Now I can be more myself. I feel free to put my own personality into teaching." Another TA discovered that she had taught her best class one day when she felt totally unprepared. Not being constrained by a set of written notes, she was teaching in her own voice. Trusting herself with the material and listening genuinely to what students were saying, she was free to manage the discussion gently, without forcing it to fit a preconceived structure.

Asking for Help

TAs who have begun to recognize their own teaching voices can respond to feedback that is reflective and challenging and that helps them examine their experiences of teaching and develop according to their own strengths and interests. Earlier, when they are just starting to encounter the complexities of the teacher-student relationship and orient themselves to the classroom, they may seek more directive and confirming advice that tells them how to perform specific teaching functions and lets them know they are performing acceptably. Even then, as lost as they may feel, many TAs do not want simply to be told what to do. Reflecting on what TAs go through, Rachel said, "They need someone there with them to help them process the experience and offer support. You don't want someone to tell you what's right. You want what you do to be yourself."

At every point, the appropriate focus for anyone who would help TAs is not only their observable teaching performances but also their personal experiences of teaching. An observer may notice that a TA who is having difficulty explaining chemistry problems needs to organize the presentation better. The TA's view, however, may be that he or she does not know enough chemistry to teach it, that students do not ask questions when they are confused, or that elementary chemistry is just too boring to explain. Again, the TA may be less concerned with clear presentation than with covering enough material or handling a difficult student. To give help effectively, the observer must address the problems the TA perceives and considers worth solving. Not until those problems have been heard will the TA be open to exploring the issues the observer raises. The TA still may not pay attention to the observer's suggestions if these issues do not seem interesting. Similarly, even if the observer has only praise, the TA may need to bring up some difficulty before hearing it. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the TA's strengths and respond to the TA's individual voice; too much advice can smother enthusiasm and spontaneity.

The TA's own perspective is crucial, not just for solving problems but also for getting help in the first place. Rachel's progress with her problems concerning discussion depended on her willingness to work on them. She had her class videotaped and reviewed it with a teaching consultant, on her own initiative. Assistance is often extended to TAs through orientations, training sessions, and classroom visits, such as are available at Stanford (Fisher, 1981). Even so, TAs are frequently reluctant to ask for help when they need or want it, and their reluctance may be completely independent of any difficulty or ease they are experiencing. Unlike a paper written for a course, teaching is never meant to be a finished, public performance; rather, it is a spontaneous, private interaction with students. TAs make themselves particularly vulnerable if they invite anyone to observe them. Cynthia, who thrived on the freedom

her department allowed her in teaching and who found success and satisfaction in her performance, still reported at the end of her three-year stint as a TA that she had always felt too inhibited to ask for feedback, even though she had always wanted it. In her view, TAs are typically too fearful, proud, or stubborn to seek help, even when it is readily available. As a result, teaching can be as lonely as graduate work.

To reach TAs, help must come in flexible and varied forms. Whether it is an independent center, like the one Rachel consulted, or a departmental resource, like the teaching-support committee Kevin served on during his fourth year as a TA, a potential source of help must be both inviting and tactfully persistent in its approach, as well as accessible and responsive to spontaneous requests. TAs benefit most from getting help with problems that arise in the immediate context of actual teaching. Such help can accelerate learning from experience and empower the TA to do a satisfactory and satisfying job.

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