

Handbook for New Graduate Student Instructors

SOME PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE TEACHING

One: Good teachers are made, not born. Some people are naturally gregarious, others are more sedate; some are quick on their feet, others need time to think things through; some are comfortable in front of crowds, others are more shy. *All these types can be good teachers.* Teaching is a learned craft, and like any skill, it takes time and effort to master. So, plan to work at it. Think about teachers you've had, and pay attention to your current teachers and other public speakers—what do you like and not like about what they do? Similarly, as you gain experience, keep track of things you've done in the classroom that worked and didn't work. Make a conscious effort to improve.

Two: Find your own teaching style. While there are different teaching styles, as a teacher either you are helping your students understand something or you aren't. So be yourself—don't try to be clever and witty if that isn't you, and don't try to play the stuffy and serious scholar if you're naturally more relaxed. Find the style that works for you.

Three: Be organized. There are three keys to effective teaching: preparation, preparation, and preparation. Decide beforehand what you want to cover, what examples you'll use, how much time you want to spend on each topic, etc. Prepare some notes -- write them in as much detail as makes you feel comfortable. Some teachers only jot down a few general points and improvise from there; others prepare detailed outlines or even "scripts." Use whatever works best for you. Also don't forget to prepare your announcements, administrative matters, and the like.

Four: Be clear. Always think *clarity* when you speak or write on the board. Speak slowly and carefully, directing your voice to all parts of the room; write key names and terms on the board. When you write on the board, use large letters and try to be neat, particularly with graphs. Make sure the people in the back can see the board. Most important, when you use the blackboard, try to write fully thought-out

phrases (with correct grammar and spelling!); make it so a person who only saw your writing and heard nothing could get a general understanding of what you said.

Five: Be honest. If you don't know something, say "I don't know." Don't try to fool your students; you're not expected to know everything, and besides the students can tell when you're bluffing, just as you can tell on their exams. If you don't know something or realize you've made a mistake, it's okay to admit it and move on; simply make an effort to find out the right answer when you can. Ask another TA or the professor, and tell your students at the next section meeting.

Think about it in terms of comparative advantage: What are your skills vis-à-vis those of the professor? How can you complement the professor's teaching? The basic principle is simply to present yourself for what you are: a fellow traveler, a more experienced student with an enthusiasm for economics. "A great teacher never strives to explain his vision—he simply invites you to stand beside him and see for yourself."—The Rev. R. Inman

Six: Know your students. Try to learn something about the students in your class: where they come from, what they're interested in, what sorts of experiences they've had, etc. Some teachers schedule a private meeting with each student for a one-on-one meeting, particularly with the shyer ones. Post your office hours and encourage your students to use them. And do try to learn as many names as possible; it's easier than it looks.

Seven: Be prompt about grading. It takes no longer to grade problem sets and exams soon after they are taken than it does weeks later. A prompt response, however, is important to students, and it makes them feel that you care.

TIPS FOR GETTING STARTED AS A GSI

Meet with the course professor, early and often. If the professor or head TA for the course you're teaching has not yet contacted you, get in touch with

him or her. You must have a clear understanding from the beginning of what is expected of you. How should your teaching complement the professor's—are you primarily a discussion leader, a question answerer, a supplementary lecturer, or some combination of these? Should you cover new material in section or just review and answer questions? Are you responsible for writing problem sets, exams, answer sheets, etc.? How will grading be conducted?

Find out about the course. Spend some time before the first section going over the syllabus. The first questions students will have are “Do we have to write a paper?” “How much do the problem sets count?” and so on. Find out the exact course requirements: what the students have to do, if the course has any prerequisites, what books are required (and where they're sold), what material will be covered, how the sections will be organized, etc.

You should also have a feel for the *content* of the course, and hopefully you'll know something about the professor as well. Remember, many of your students will be debating whether to take the class, and they will weigh heavily whatever information they can gather from the first few sections. The TA's general knowledge, personality, and general attitude are crucial in this regard.

Prepare for your sections, even the first ones. Your first one or two section meetings will probably cover only introductions, administrative matters, and so on; nonetheless you should be organized and prepared even for these. Before your first section, try to do the following:

- (a) Find out when and where your section meets (check outside 508-2 Evans). Plan to arrive early for the first few section meetings. Remember that all classes start at ten minutes past the appointed time.
- (b) Print your class lists from Bearfacts (assuming you've done your hiring paperwork and are officially in the system. Student attendance at sections (except for the first week) is usually not mandatory, and you aren't required to take roll throughout the semester; still, you should check with the professor for your course.

- (c) Begin the first couple of sections by writing on the board your name, the course name and number, and the section number. *Explain at the beginning that you have nothing to do with adds, drops, or section changes.* Announce that anyone who wants to add the course or change sections *must* do so through TELEBEARS. If there is some reason they have not been able to add the course through telebears (e.g., they are a grad student) they should go fill out an application for a course entry code (door of 508-2 Evans.)

Introduce yourself and say something about your background and interests. Set some tentative office hours and give them out; after a week or so when the enrollment in your section has stabilized, poll your students to set office hours that are convenient for them as well as you. Tell the students about your mailbox, and tell them the best time and place to reach you. Explain what the course is about, who should be taking it, what the prerequisites are, if any, and the requirements. Go over the syllabus.

Find out about your students. After the first meeting or two you should pass out note cards and get your students names, addresses, and phone numbers in case you need to track someone down later. You might also ask them their major, hometown, favorite color, etc.—anything to help you learn their names, and to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

Don't worry if it seems hard at first. Learning to teach well takes time. Relax; you'll get better before you know it.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

For the most part this is *general* information for the department. It is always possible that the professor for your course has made alternative arrangements for some of these procedures, you should check with them to be sure.

1. Exams, Problem Sets and Photocopying

You are responsible for creating any handouts you want to give out in section.

Any course material that you need copied should be submitted to the assistant of the faculty member responsible for the class. Some individual classes have developed their own system for dealing with photocopies, so check with your professor.

Also, please do not send students to a unit assistant to pick up. You are responsible for making handouts available to your students. The unit assistant will be happy to provide *to you* enough copies for distribution.

2. Room Changes and Room Reservations

If you feel that the room you are assigned for section is inadequate in any way, you may request a permanent room change. You must wait until after the second section meeting. See Phil Walz in 545 Evans (2-2390).

You may also make a one-time room request for a makeup section or a review section before an exam by filling out a form with Joe Sibol in 549 Evans. (Note: It takes about two days to get your room assignment. You will want to announce your review meetings in section (not in lecture). You should make your request about a week in advance.) You are not *required* to provide special review sessions before exams, but students have come to expect them, and most TAs do hold them.

3. Office Hours

You are required to hold a *minimum* of two open office hours per week. Explain to your students what office hours are for; some of them may not know. Make yourself available for private appointments during other times; often students will be shy about discussing their problems with you during your regular office hours when other students are around. It is customary to hold extra office hours around exam times.

4. Questions About the Major and Other Classes

For all information regarding add/drop procedures and section changes, refer to the enrollment section of the Economics department's undergraduate program website.

For any further problems or questions you should direct students to the Student Services Manager, Phil Walz in 545 Evans.

5. Students with Special Needs

It is likely that you will have one or more disabled students in your section(s), and these students must be given special consideration. At the beginning of the term make an announcement like: "Anyone needing accommodations for a physical or learning disability should speak to me after class or in office hours." Direct these people to the Disabled Students' Program (230 Golden Bear Center, 2-0518). We are required to provide special accommodations only to students with an official letter from the Disabled Students' Program. Usually the accommodation is just a matter of giving some extra time, and/or a separate room, for exams; this should be specified in the letter. Phil Walz can help you with these arrangements. You should also provide a list of such people to the professor. In most cases, the professor will have received notification of students with special needs.

6. Handling Difficult Cases

Sometimes a situation may come up with a student or group of students that makes you feel uncomfortable, or you may have a student you think has problems you can't deal with. If this happens, *get outside advice*. Don't try to handle these cases by yourself. The earlier you talk about this sort of thing with someone else, the easier it is to solve the problem.

Obvious people to talk to are the Head TA, the TA coordinator, or the professor in charge of the course. You can also contact Professor Olney (molney@econ.berkeley.edu), the faculty member in charge of GSI training.

7. Changing Sections

Students change sections for a variety of reasons. If someone wants into your section, they are allowed in provided it does not increase your student load to over 30. Whatever section they ultimately are in

make sure you have them on your final roster for grading purposes.

Please know that after the 1st three weeks, enrollment in a particular section is not important so long as they are enrolled in the main lecture.

8. Other Information

Not getting paid. See Heather Read (539 Evans, 2-8043).

Getting your copy of the textbook. For Econ 1, go to the Econ 1 Head GSI in 508-2 Evans; for other classes, see the professor.

Signing up for office hours. Sign up for office hours in the main office 549 Evans with Joe Sibol (2-0822 or maindept@econ).

Absences. If you are ill, or must miss a section for which you are scheduled, please call the main office to inform the receptionist of the cancellation—the main office has an answering machine on the main phone line (642-0822). You are also responsible for scheduling make up sections.

Check your mailboxes. Be sure to check your mailbox in the 508 Evans hallway, *at least* twice a week. Even if you prefer to use a different location for students to turn in their homework, you must check your official boxes frequently for administrative information, announcements, and the like.

Course Evaluations. Course Evaluations will be administered somewhere around week 13. GSI's are expected to sign up and administer at least one course evaluation. This process is important and used in promotion, merit pay and re-hiring decisions.

Old course materials. The department maintains a file cabinet in 609 Evans containing old problem sets and exams for economics courses. The cabinet is kept locked, but the staff will open it for any economics TA. These files contain master copies only; please have copies made of the materials you want and return the originals to the file cabinet. As mentioned above, please do not send your students to the unit assistants to pick up copies of old problem sets or exams; have the copies made and distribute them yourself.

Economics 301. Any economics TA may sign up for Economics 301 (for 1st time TA's it's required), a six-hour, S/U "course" designed to help you keep your regular course load down while teaching. Regular participation in all TA Training activities is sure to guarantee you a grade of "S" for the course.

9. Know the staff

Phil Walz (545 Evans, 2-2390) Student Services Manager. Responsible for GSI Hiring, Course Scheduling, Student Advising, Academic Integrity issues, overall functioning of Student Services.

Jenny Cornet (543 Evans, 2-6674): Undergraduate Advisor. Responsible for all work pertaining to undergraduate economics majors. Maintains student grade records.

Joe Sibol (549 Evans, 2-0822): Handles one-time room reservations. Scheduling of TA Office Hours. All final exams and course evaluations are given to Joe.

Heather Read (539 Evans, 2-8043): Handles payroll and other university administrative and financial matters. The person to see for paychecks, insurance matters, and other problems.

CLASSROOM VIDEOTAPING

The cornerstone of the TA Training program is the classroom videotaping session. Each first-time TA is required to be videotaped once during section, and to view the videotape along with the TA Trainer. The videotaping is a self-improvement technique; its purpose is solely so you can see how you look in front of your class. *The taping is strictly confidential, and is not used to rate or evaluate you in any way.* You will soon receive a scheduling form that the TA trainer will use to set up the taping. The trainer will contact you afterwards to set up the viewing session.

DEALING WITH EXAMS AND GRADING

Grading exams is probably the least pleasant part of teaching, though it is surely one of the most important. Consistent, fair grading is essential; keep in mind that the grades you assign do greatly affect your students' futures. So take this responsibility seriously. At the same time, though, with a little preparation, some devotion, and practice, you can make the grading process go smoothly.

1. Exam Administration

Before the exam. Before every exam you should meet with the professor and the other TAs to discuss how the exam will be administered. Who will hand out and collect the exams? Will the professor be present to answer questions? What sorts of questions are the TAs authorized to answer? Exactly how much time is permitted? And so on. On the day of the exam, bring to class the exams, a few extra blue books, and a few extra pencils. Be sure that you and your students know where the room is (exams, particularly finals, are often scheduled in different rooms from the lecture). Try to arrive at least fifteen minutes early to prepare the room.

Seating. If you have the luxury of a large room, seat the students with an empty seat or two between them. Otherwise, don't let them sit too close to each other, and try to avoid having everyone sitting in the back of the room. Announce immediately that all books, notes, bags, etc. should be put away. When the room is quiet, hand out the exams and go over the format. Be sure everyone understands the instructions before you let anyone start.

Proctoring. During the exam try to be as quiet and unobtrusive as possible. (For example, don't sit right at the front of the room loudly shuffling the newspaper or whispering to the other TAs.) Be alert for students with questions. From time to time, walk around the room, both to make yourself more accessible and to establish that you are paying attention to what's going on in the room. Keep track of the time remaining and write it on the board; there is no need to announce it aloud. When the exam is over, be sure you have collected everyone's blue book before you leave the room. You have every right to tell people to stop writing in their books after time is up.

Cheating. The best way to deal with cheating is to keep it from happening in the first place. Keep your eyes open during the exam. If you suspect that something is going on, feel free to go to that area of the room and stay there a while, perhaps announcing loudly that one's neighbor's blue book is not a legitimate test resource. If the situation continues, ask one of the people in question to move to another seat. Reassure that person that you do not suspect them, but that you think someone else is looking at his test.

Cheating is a very serious offense, and if you think you may have found someone cheating, you need to have the best possible case. If you suspect something

is going on during the exam, ask the professor or another TA to verify what you see, so that you can have a witness. Of course, be sure to notify the professor as soon as possible if you suspect anything.

2. Grading

Preparation. Before you start grading, be sure you know what the authorized answers are, and how you are supposed to grade. You should have a meeting with the professor to this effect before you begin. Allow yourself a lot of time to grade, as soon after the exam as possible. Try to answer the questions on paper yourself, before you start, to get a feeling for their difficulty.

Strategies. Grade without looking at the student's name, so you don't bring your prior expectations about the student with you. It is a good idea to grade one question at a time, rather than one exam at a time, since there are significant economies of scale.

Consistency. Grading, short-answer or essay questions, is subjective. Nonetheless it is essential to be as consistent and fair as possible. There are several useful tricks that people use to make their grading as uniform as possible: (1) read several bluebooks until you find a very good one and a very bad one, to get a feeling of the range of answers you will get; (2) grade the exams twice, in a different order, marking them first with a pencil and putting the final grade in ink; (3) try to break each question into many parts, and assign a few points to each; and (4) read the exams once and make piles according to a rough first guess about their quality. Use as many of these tips as you like.

Flexibility. Be open minded and somewhat flexible. When grading essay exams, the key is to evaluate the general quality of the student's answer, and not to look for certain "buzzwords," or to check items off a list. Be sure to discuss essay questions in advance with the professor, so you know what to look for. In multi-part questions, be aware that a mistake in the beginning may lead to the wrong final answer, although the reasoning is correct after the mistake. Don't penalize someone twice for the same error. Finally, comments on the blue book are always appreciated.

Points. It is much better to write down the points earned, starting from zero, rather than subtracting points from 100. Use the entire scale of points. Do not separate good answers from bad answers by just a few points. This is sure to encourage grade

complaints because everyone will feel he is on the borderline.

Grades. Avoid announcing correspondences between numerical scores and letter grades, because such matters are seen by the students as binding contracts. Definitely give your students an idea of what the danger zone is, i.e., “If your score is below X , please make an appointment to see me in my office.” You should talk privately to students who perform poorly and try to find out what the problem is: are they having real difficulties understanding the material, or did they just not study very hard? Did they not understand the test format? And so on. Try to distinguish between the students who just aren’t working very hard—which isn’t your problem—and those who are having genuine difficulties. The latter should be steered toward extra office hours, help sessions, or private tutoring.

3. Grade Disputes

The best way to minimize such problems is to be sure that you have done a good job to start with. If you are confident of your grading, then you should start with the assumption that you are right and that the student may have missed the point of the question. Take the position that you are going to explain what the student did wrong, rather than reevaluate your grading. On the other hand mistakes do happen, so be prepared to admit it if you have overlooked or misunderstood something.

Teachers use several methods to minimize the number of people that come with complaints. You can explain that you are going to reevaluate the entire exam, and that you may end up taking points off from questions that you have graded too leniently. You can also ask your students to submit their complaints in writing. Finally, you could require that all grade complaints be made within a few days—say, three or four—after the exam.

The important thing is to be firm and consistent in the way you handle complaints. If a student insists on talking to the professor, be sure that you have informed the faculty member of your position.

