What are my responsibilities as a USC Teaching Assistant?

How does “acting as a professional” improve my classroom?

Working as a teaching assistant is a significant part of the professional development of many graduate students. Often, it is your first chance to polish skills that will be essential to your work as members of the professorate. However, the position is not merely an opportunity to learn the details of your field; it is also an opportunity to become familiar with the roles, expectations, obligations, and canon of ethics that are associated with the profession of teaching in general. In short, you will learn about “acting as a professional” as a teaching assistant.

There are many aspects to this professionalism, involving appropriate conduct and attitude both in the classroom and as a mentor to individual students. Five points will be emphasized here:

1. Preparing for Your Class;
2. Clarifying Your Expectations;
3. Minding Your Various Responsibilities;
4. Treating Students with Respect; and
5. Battling the “Friendship” Temptation.

Preparation for Your Class

Teaching requires hard work and careful preparation. It is unprofessional to believe that one can simply walk into a classroom setting and simply “wing” a lecture, discussion, or lab. Translating one’s knowledge of a subject into a framework that stimulates student interest and promotes understanding requires an instructor to think about familiar issues from a new point of view:

- What key concepts are likely to be unfamiliar to students?
- What order of presentation will be most effective in making complicated material more coherent?
- What examples will best illustrate important points?
- What questions will stimulate actual critical thinking (rather than mindless recitation of facts)?
- What handouts might be useful to students?
- How can I use PowerPoint and other forms of media as well as the blackboard effectively as part of my presentation?
Professional teachers always walk into a teaching setting with a well-considered pedagogical plan, and that plan must be more substantial than simply a belief that one will just start talking about a topic or will solicit questions from students. We all expect students to come to class prepared; but even more important is that teachers do the same. It is not uncommon for teaching assistants to spend upwards of 15-20 hours a week mastering course material and preparing lesson plans. Your preparation — and your willingness to adjust your teaching strategies in light of your ongoing experiences with particular classes — is central to your success as a professional. Moreover, students can tell when their teachers are working hard to help them understand (or not working hard), and your efforts will have an important effect on their willingness to do their share.

Clarifying Your Expectations

As you prepare your teaching strategy, please keep in mind that students must be very well informed about your expectations of them. This includes expectations about:

• subject matter mastery,
• graded assignments,
• class policies, and
• standards of evaluation.

It is part of your professional obligation to keep students apprised of these issues through every element of your work. Among other things, this often means:

• handing out your general expectations in writing whenever possible, but especially at the beginning of a class (in the form of a thorough, clear, and reliable syllabus or some equivalent document appropriate for your assignment);
• referring to these issues as you present and discuss new material in class; and
• helping students achieve a more specific understanding as you evaluate and provide feedback on their work.

Remember, it is their responsibility to work in accordance with your expectations, but it is your responsibility to make sure that they understand what exactly is expected of them. Always err on the side of being more clear and thorough, on syllabi, in classroom presentations, and in grading student work.

Minding Your Various Responsibilities

Being a professional also means attending to a variety of everyday tasks and obligations. Among them are the following:

• coming to class on time (and allowing some opportunity for students to approach you before or after class);
• holding scheduled office hours and accommodating students who cannot attend those hours; responding to student messages within a reasonable period of time;
• filling out paperwork on student attendance; cooperating with disabled students who are going through proper channels to arrange for appropriate accommodations; being mindful of academic integrity and (when necessary) reporting student misconduct.
Treating Students with Respect

The normal exchanges that go on in the classroom (and in one-on-one meetings) can evoke many different responses from teachers. But it is extremely important to realize that teachers cannot interact with students in the same way they would interact with friends or colleagues in other settings. The teacher-student relationship is professional and formal, not (primarily) personal and informal. It exists in an environment that is purposefully diverse. Students of all backgrounds and circumstances have a right to be treated with respect and to be evaluated in accordance with the prevailing norms of your discipline. This means that teachers must be both dedicated to their students and professionally detached – sufficiently detached, anyway, to be able to carry out one’s responsibilities in a manner that is consistent with the highest standards of professional ethics.

Respecting students means making every effort to get to know them as students:

- What are their names?
- What are their strengths and weaknesses as they relate to their abilities to master the course material?
- What kind of individualized assistance will best help them be successful?

It also means that teachers must be extremely mindful to avoid any conduct or comments that might be interpreted as disrespectful or even outright hostile. The classroom is no place for certain forms of sarcasm, incautious statements, or playful comments that are inconsistent with your position of authority and your professional responsibilities.

One of the more egregious mistakes in this regard involves behavior or commentary that are reasonably viewed as forms of sexual harassment. Obviously, purposeful harassment is inexcusable, but also be careful to consider whether comments that you believe to be innocent (such as compliments on someone’s appearance) are inconsistent with your position. You encounter these students because you have a job to do. Focus your demeanor on that goal.

Battling the “Friendship” Temptation

Finally, and relatedly, it is tempting for teaching assistants to try to win students over by making friends (or acting as a friend). In part this is due to the natural inclination of teachers to want to be liked by students, and being friendly is an obvious element of that strategy. The temptation also arises in cases where teaching assistants feel as though they are part of the same peer group as undergraduates (or at least not far removed) – not much different in age; sharing similar interests; etc. It is not uncommon to think that, in other settings, many of one’s students could instead be one’s friends.

It should be clear by now how important it is to maintain a sharp distinction between being a friendly professional and treating students like your friend. The teacher-student relationship is, inevitably, a structure of authority, and includes an evaluative component that absolutely requires a teacher to be able to offer fair, objective assessments of student work. One’s position as a teaching assistant is dramatically undermined when one sacrifices professional detachment for more personal and informal relationships; and students quickly lose respect for instructors who seem more interested in making friends than doing their jobs. Obviously, the most egregious and unforgivable case of this mistake would be the temptation to pursue more romantic relationships.
The converse of the temptation to treat some students as friends is the situation where a teaching assistant develops a personal dislike for a particular student. Needless to say, the demand that one maintains some professional detachment in such circumstances is the same as in the previous situations.

The bottom line: being a teaching assistant can be an extraordinarily satisfying part of one’s academic training, but it is also a job, and you must treat it as such.

Questions for Establishing Teaching Objectives...

A key to professionalism is the ability to set (and then successfully meet) teaching objectives. The questions below should help you determine how objectives can help you:

1. What are the course’s instructional objectives? How do you want students to be changed as a result of this class? What will they perceive, or be able to do, that they cannot do now?

2. What assessment(s) of student learning is (are) being used in the course? How are the learning changes measured? By what criteria of performances by students will you evaluate their progress?

3. What content/materials are used to achieve your objectives from questions (1) and (2)? What subject matter will be covered to help students meet the expectations in (1) and (2)?

4. What teaching strategies are you using? What sorts of formats or activities will you use to help students practice the abilities needed to meet (1) and (2)?

5. How are your expectations communicated to students? What is their picture of the objectives they will need to meet?