

Working With and Supporting Teaching Assistants of Asynchronous, Online Courses

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Individually and collectively, teaching assistants (TAs) play important roles across institutions of higher education (IHEs) all over the world. The U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics

(2022) estimated that in 2020 there were 121,290 teaching assistant jobs in the United States, with 104,070 of those in college, university, and professional school settings. A significant investment is made



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to develop, train, and compensate them, though the level of training and compensation varies from IHE to IHE. The investment seems to pay off. For instance, researchers (Huffmyer, & Lemus, 2019; Philipp et al., 2016; Wheeler et al., 2017) have investigated the impacts of trained TAs on undergraduate student achievement (Philipp et al., 2016, Wheeler et al., 2017) and found positive significant effects. Additionally, Wheeler et al. (2017) determined that "TAs may play an important role in other student outcomes such as scientific practices and affective characteristics" (p. 487). Although TAs play significant roles supporting teaching and learning in institutions of higher education, it is unclear how many and under what conditions they serve in online courses. This article provides important considerations for both TAs and their supervising instructors, as well as some suggestions for working with and supporting TAs teaching online courses. We hope this helps supervising instructors cultivate more intentional engagement from TAs in the design, development, and teaching of online courses.



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BACKGROUND

The authors worked as the instructional team for an online TA preparation course required of all newly hired TAs at George Washington University. When the authors took over the course, they redesigned the curriculum, pacing and assessment tasks to better align with the universitywide TA preparation program objectives. The instructional team managed the course for the first time in the fall of 2019 and then again in the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The TAs enrolled in the course as students saw their traditional responsibilities morph to accommodate the university's emergency switch to exclusively online courses. For instance, TAs working as lab assistants were asked to perform labs online; TAs in the humanities pivoted to facilitating online discussions; many TAs became the technical point-person for their cooperating professor who was unfamiliar with online platforms. Some salient issues voiced by these TAs were how to support their cooperating professor from a technical standpoint, how to engage their students in online activities, and how to navigate the balance of being flexible with students but not giving so many individual accommodations that the TA becomes overworked. The TA preparation course became a medium of support through this transition, offering strategies, advice and a communal space for sharing challenges and emotions.

The experience of working with these TAs through the start of the pandemic offered the authors an opportunity to articulate how TAs of online courses can be better prepared and supported which ultimately leads to a more effective learning experience in a given course. Even as the pandemic winds down, many universities have decided to retain online course offerings making TAs of online courses a more common occurrence than the pre-COVID era. The following section provides some insights and recommendations for

effectively preparing and guiding TAs of online courses.

INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ESTABLISHING A STRONG INSTRUCTOR-TA RELATIONSHIP PRIOR TO THE COURSE

As is the case with in-person classes, a strong instructor-TA relationship serves as a solid foundation for online courses. It is particularly important in an online setting for the TA(s) and instructor(s) to present as a coherent unit. Due to the lack of face-to-face interactions in online courses, students need to see that there is a unified team supporting their success, and this team needs to seem “real” to them. Some strategies for presenting as a united team can include posting the instructor and TA’s photo, identifying everyone’s pronouns, including several means of contact information, as well as using the collective “we” in posting announcements to the course.

Before the course begins, it is important for the instructor and TA to meet. As managing an online course is usually done from remote locations, it is helpful for all members of the instructional team to discuss their respective availabilities and plans for participating in the course. For example, will everyone on the instructional team be online at a predetermined time on selected days of the week? Or will each person take a different time frame? Or will participation be more constant as students send emails and submit work? Clear communication of everyone’s boundaries is essential to not only a successful working relationship, but also for ensuring that there is “coverage” for meeting student needs within the course. This is especially important if the course includes discussion boards that require regular moderation.

In addition to discussing the respective availability of the instructional team from a logistical standpoint, the instructor should

understand the TA’s positionality to online learning, including but not limited to their: theories, experiences, perspectives, teaching disposition, and overall approach. A TA’s approach to supporting online courses is likely affected by the online courses they have taken in the past: the experiences (e.g., successes, failures) the TA has had as a student in the online classroom will shape their perspective of what online courses should be (or not be). If the TA has never completed or supported an online course before, it may be especially productive to begin with an open conversation about their preconceptions, successes, and failures common to online learning. The instructor’s vision of their online course may be at odds with their TA’s. To communicate this vision—what the learning experience will look like, what the students will get out of the course—to their TA should be a top priority of the instructor. Alignment on this vision *before* the course begins will ultimately improve the student experience.

DEFINING THE TA’S ROLE IN THE COURSE

Along with understanding the TA’s perspective of and experiences with online coursework, the instructor should be aware of how many hours per week the TA is contracted to work in the course. Online courses, especially those with asynchronous components, pose challenges for time management as they are “open for business” around the clock. The instructor and TA should discuss expectations for how to make the most out of the TA’s contracted hours. It is helpful for the TA to have a time management plan for meeting personal coursework and research demands in addition to TA obligations, all while ensuring time for self-care.

The instructor should then decide how they envision the TA’s involvement in the course within the parameters of the contracted hours. Some guiding questions for the instructor might be:

- Will the TA be presented as an instructional peer, negotiating knowledge with students and scaffolding learning? Will the TA be more “behind the scenes,” managing the course site or grading using a rubric?
- Will the TA field emails from students in the course as a first point of contact or will the instructor handle all communications?
- Will email communication with students be shared among the instructor and TA(s)?

These expectations must then be shared between the instructor and TA for other course logistics to fall into place.

For larger courses that involve more than one TA, the instructor should connect the TAs, define each of their roles and responsibilities, and encourage regular communication, especially if their respective duties overlap. Communication between TAs should be a top priority even if their duties differ. For example, a TA who grades should communicate the common issues they encounter to a TA who moderates discussions, so the latter might be able to adjust their approach accordingly. If multiple TAs are responsible for grading, regular communication will boost consistency and fairness. Effective grading practices like having a rubric are even more important when there are multiple TAs grading. They might even consider having a shared document of templated comments to make giving feedback more consistent.

As with in-person courses, late submissions from online students are to be expected. If the TA’s role involves receiving or grading assignments, the instructor and TA should establish their policy surrounding late coursework before the beginning of the course. The syllabus is a great place to detail late submission policies and can serve as a solid foundation for the TA to enforce them. Based upon the authors’ collective experience, students often contact

the TA first about a question or concern so as not to “bother” the lead professor. Should the TA not be well-versed in the course’s policies, miscommunication and misinformation could occur which would undoubtedly compromise the integrity of the instructional team. In designing and enforcing late submission policies, the instructor and TA should acknowledge how submitting assignments in the online classroom differs from the in-person environment. Are announcements made to remind students of upcoming assignments? Does the learning management system used for the course issue any notifications about upcoming assignments (perhaps via an integrated e-calendar)? Are discussion prompts structured in a way to get students thinking about upcoming assignments?

COACHING THE TA FOR SPECIFIC COURSE TASKS

The tasks that a TA will take on for an online course may be familiar or very foreign depending upon their previous experiences with online education. An online course may have lectures, homework, assignments, tests, and discussions, but how are these handled in terms of TA-student/instructor-student interaction in an asynchronous, online setting? Consideration should be given to the role of the TA in this environment based on factors like the expected deliverables or level of expected engagement from each student or group.

Discussions are an integral component to student learning in any classroom setting. Most TAs know what a class discussion in a physical classroom looks like, so they likely already have some insights on how to moderate or when to comment in an asynchronous online discussion. An online class discussion is likely to be less intuitive for a TA. The asynchronous nature of most discussion boards lead many students to post once, then disengage from the

conversation because they fulfilled their posting obligation. This is one of the reasons for the TA to first consider the level of engagement that will be expected of students in the course. The instructor and the TA should open a dialog about the goals, expectations, and design of the online discussion, then review sample responses or co-author responses to define what it means to participate/contribute in a meaningful way. Once the TA has an understanding of the TA instructor presence they are expected to have in the discussion boards, they will feel much more comfortable knowing that they are “on the same page” as their instructor.

During a discussion, silence from the TA can mean different things in an in-person class than it does online. In class, silence from the TA is more likely to be perceived by students as acceptance or approval of the way the discussion is going. Verbal silence might be accompanied by nonverbal forms of affirmation such as a nod or smile. In the classroom, when the TA nods and maintains silence after a discussion point is made, the rest of the class is receiving the message “this is a point that is worthy of discussion or consideration, so we should dive deeper into it.” In the online environment, silence (in the form of not posting) does not have the same affirming (or corrective) effects. Silence from the TA could be equated to a classroom full of students with no instructor at all. A TA has to be intentional about their comments in a discussion board and the intended effects of those comments. Commenting during a discussion is a form of informal feedback, and it is a great way to reaffirm the direction of a discussion, or suggest a new train of thought. A comment that begins on a positive note (validating a thought), then suggests a new direction or clarification (by posting a question) is often an effective, smooth way to moderate and extend a discussion forum.

In the same way the TA may need specific coaching to moderate online discus-

sions, the process and content of grading assignments and exams needs to be articulated. Depending on the Learning Management System of the course, there are different tools and submission processes for students. If the TA is responsible for grading written submissions (such as essays, lab reports, etc.), how should the student receive the TA’s feedback? Does the instructor have a rubric or should the TA create one? Should the TA use the comment feature to offer in-line feedback? Should the TA offer a holistic feedback paragraph? Grading is typically the main responsibility of a TA and even with in-person courses, the instructor’s expectations can be very vague. It might even be more important for the TA to have targeted coaching in grading and giving feedback in an online setting because the feedback is not often being received by the student in real-time. Moreover, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, the instructor and TA need to present as a united team to the students which can be upset if the TA is grading counter to the instructor’s expectations.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As with any course supported by a TA, the instructor and TA need to collaborate and maintain a unified instructional team to provide the most effective learning environment for students. Online courses necessitate clear, direct communication which cannot be accomplished if the TA and instructor are not on the same page in both theory and in practice. Instructors of online courses need to first understand the TA’s perspectives and experiences with online learning before articulating the TA’s role and responsibilities in the course. Coming together on logistical expectations is also of high importance as online instruction can impact one’s personal time if boundaries are not set. Logistics such as work hours, responding to student emails and grading timelines should be discussed

prior to the start of the course. Finally, it is likely that the TA will need targeted coaching and frequent communication with the instructor to be successful in their role, particularly when it comes to moderating online discussions and grading student work.

As online courses are gaining a solid foothold in higher education, TAs working in an online setting will become more and more commonplace. This article offered insights into some of the primary roles and responsibilities of TAs, as well as guiding questions for instructors to better support them in their asynchronous, online courses. As online learning in a post-COVID era continues to take shape, it is important to develop the skills of TAs to work with students in asynchronous, online courses.

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