



East Asian Languages and Cultures TA Handbook

PREFACE

Each and every one of us will become a TA at a certain point of time in our graduate career. Three years ago, just like all the other students who came before us, we found ourselves coming face to face with the pressures of teaching: leading our own sections, grading papers, and working with the professor. Teaching is a great experience, but can nevertheless be demanding and stressful at times. We encountered several roadblocks along the way and had to find new solutions to novel situations. Many a sleepless night was spent preparing for classes. But everything ended in a flash, ten weeks to be precise. Then we went back to the daily grind of attending classes and doing research. This left us with numerous teaching-related questions unanswered and a gnawing sense of unsettlement. Most of us would put that (nightmarish) experience aside and not think of it until we find ourselves on the job market and fret about preparing a teaching portfolio. We will then realize how much we can learn from our teaching experiences and how new methodologies out there can transform teaching into an exciting experience both for the students and for us, the teachers.

As previous CTL (Center for Teaching and Learning) liaisons, we not only met amazing people who are passionate about teaching, we also talked to PhDs from all around campus who have their own unique set of TA experiences. In sharing our experiences with others, we began to realize that teaching does not stop when our TA responsibilities end, on the contrary, it was the starting point where the idea of teaching can be further contemplated and crystallized. Through this handbook, we want to share an important message with junior PhDs who have yet to teach, or who are currently TAs: teaching matters.

Moreover, we will like to take this opportunity to thank the people who have made the publication of this handbook possible. First, we would like to thank people from the CTL, Jennifer Schwartz Poehlmann for facilitating the MinT program, Mariatte Denman for sharing her experiences and expertise, and Tim Randazzo for his advice on the grant application. We would also like to thank all faculty members of our department, especially Ban Wang, Chao Fen Sun, John Wang, and Ronald Egan for supporting and endorsing our grant application. Finally, we would also want to thank all contributors, Aragorn, Gabriel, Luciana, and Yanshuo, who graciously agreed to write articles for the handbook despite their busy schedules.

As a parting shot, we want to reiterate and emphasize that this is only the beginning – a small step towards a better structured and more comprehensive TA training program in our department.

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INTRODUCTION

In this handbook, we invited five experienced senior graduate students from both the Chinese side and Japanese side to share their experiences in teaching. Although it is impossible to cover everything, we hope that this handbook can stimulate departmental discussions on teaching, and serve as a platform for future communication.

The handbook is organized into three main parts: 1) ways to get feedback for teaching; 2) links and references to useful online and print resources; 3) articles contributed by experienced TAs in our department. The articles cover a wide range of courses a student may TA – Japanese civilization (Aragorn), Japanese literature (Luciana), and Chinese civilization (Tingting and Yanshuo). Lastly, for good measure, we also included an article on how to prepare a teaching portfolio (Gabriel).

OUR TWO CENTS

CHINA

Unexpected Things as a TA – Sophia Tingting Zhao

As graduate students, we often myopically focus on our research at the expense of other academically related areas. There is nothing inherently wrong with spending graduate school like this. However, when we enter the job market as potential professors, we start to realize that the ability to do research is not the only thing that matters. Our higher goal is a trinity: research, teaching, and service to the greater community. The following are some points I extrapolate from my own teaching experience, and I hope it will be beneficial to both current and future TAs.

Expected: The TA's responsibilities include:

1. Attend all weekly classes offered by the professor so that you can keep up with the pace of teaching.
2. Before teaching your own section, do discuss with your professor how you plan to organize the discussion session and the questions you will raise. See if the professor wants to emphasize any additional points he/she did not have time to mention in class.

Unexpected: As you start teaching your own sessions, you may find certain things surprising.

Adjust your Identity

1. What if you are not ready or think you are too young to teach?

When I started TA-ing classes, I was also taking courses at the same time. As such, I encountered great difficulty in switching my role from that of a student to a teacher. Later, I realized that I had no reason to panic, because as a TA, not only do we impart knowledge, but more importantly, we also teach

various methodologies needed to acquire the knowledge. Therefore, we should be confident that students can always learn something from us.

2. What is the TA's role with regard to the professor and the students?

Being a TA is tricky because even though we might have our own section, we still need to be consistent with the larger goal of the class. That is to say, even though we are independent educators in our individual sections, we are at the same time assisting the professors. As such, I would like to think of the TA as a bridge between professors and students. Compared to professors, TAs should be more approachable to students and is someone who can respond to all kinds of questions with straightforward and clear answers. A TA should also encourage students to interact more with the professors (undergraduate students sometimes look upon the professor as a star figure, they admire but might also be intimidated by the professor). So part of a TA's job is to bridge the gap between the professor and the students.

3. Besides completing the task, what is the higher goal of being a TA?

To prepare for a teaching portfolio in order to enter the job market in the near future. The TA experience is most valuable because we can test out various teaching methods and find out what are the most effective and creative ways of teaching. Also, the more you teach, the more likely you will establish your own teaching philosophy and establish your own signature in teaching. This will not only help you in writing your teaching philosophy, but will also prepare you and save you a lot of time and much heartache in your later teaching career. Since the teaching philosophy is a new genre that every graduate student needs to master if they wish to get an academic job, it is wise to accumulate more experience and gather more examples of good teaching during your stint as a TA.

Time Management

4. What if you spend too much time and energy in preparing the TA session?

It can be nerve racking to teach your first session. Even though the class may just be 50 minutes long, the preparation usually takes hours, usually right up to the very last minute. I believe this is the right direction to take as the more we prepare, the clearer we are able to explain the subject. However, a downside is to prepare so much that it eats up your own research time. Be aware that in a tenure-track job, an assistant professor is not only expected to teach more than one unfamiliar class, he/she is also expected to publish more several articles (or even a book) in the first few years. Thus, it is of utmost importance to strike a balance between teaching and doing research. Preparing for class is important, but enough is enough, we need to know when an appropriate point to stop is.

5. What if you prepare too much and want to cover everything in class?

Do plan ahead for the discussion session, but be flexible with your plans. Prioritize the questions in terms of their significance and relevance to the class that the professor taught previously. If the professor has something important to say, prioritize that point before the points you want to make.

6. What if you did not prepare enough and run out of questions before a section ends?

It happens. Time management in class is very important but can also be a very difficult skill to master. It will be helpful to time yourself so that you will not waste too much time on one issue or push too fast for the questions. One way to solve this problem is to always prepare more questions and more slides (if applicable) than you think necessary for the session. Another way is to encourage students to brainstorm the different implications of the knowledge they had recently learned in their respective disciplines. This will help foster a community that examines issues comparatively.

Engaging with Students

7. What if students' answers are not exactly what you expect?

You might have model answers for the questions, but then again, do remember to be flexible. If students offered you different answers, try not to criticize them or ignore the answers. See if you can extract key points from their answers that would lead to a more complex picture. In other words, value students' contributions.

8. What if students did not read the materials?

Of course, you need to urge the students to read the materials prior to class, but you will also need to carry on with the discussion session even if they did not read the materials. You can summarize the materials and generalize main discussion points at the start of the session so that students can contribute even if they have not done all the reading.

9. What if only a few students actively respond to the questions, and some students do not speak up in class?

I have tried doing small group discussions in class, and they have met with much success. Students will be less anxious in giving their opinions in a small group and are more likely to speak up. After which, you may ask each group to summarize their answers. This way, more students will have opportunities to engage in classroom discussion.

What can you get out of the TA experience

10. Use the quarter proactively and wisely. In our department, TA-ing content courses usually happens during your third year of graduate school. You will still be taking courses and will no doubt be busy. However, remember to treat your TA experience as a positive experience.

11. Students' Evaluations. Be familiar with the evaluation criteria, as you will be judged on these aspects by the students at the end of the quarter. It usually includes criteria ranging from preparation, clarity, and leadership to availability. For instance, "Was the TA well prepared for section?", "Did the TA present the material clearly?", "Did the TA help develop students' thinking skills in this discipline?", "Did the TA provide helpful comments on

assignments, papers, and exams?”, “Did the TA give explanations appropriate to the students’ level of understanding?”, “Was the TA an effective discussion, review, or lab leader?”, “Did the TA answer questions clearly and concisely?”, “Was the TA available for consultation outside of class?”.

12. Establish a Portfolio. The real work starts when the teaching work is done. You need to gather all the teaching materials in order to prepare for the teaching portfolio. This way, you will save a lot of time and energy recovering them just before you go on the job market. The materials include, but are not limited to: syllabi, handouts, powerpoint presentations, notes, mid-term evaluations, students’ comments and evaluations at the end of the quarter, video recordings of your teaching, and so on (See Gabriel’s article for more advice on the teaching portfolio).

During the autumn quarter of 2012, I had the honor of serving as Prof. Ron Egan’s teaching assistant for the Introduction to Traditional East Asian Civilization: China class. This was a great experience that tremendously enhanced my knowledge in the subject area and helped cultivate my critical skills as a teacher. Prior to Prof. Egan’s class, I had already served as a TA for first-year Chinese over a period of three quarters. Both experiences combined, I gained a lot and grew from a graduate student to a student-teacher capable of communicating with students from different fields and helping them understand China. In this essay, I will share my experience and offer some practical tips for being a successful TA for the EALC department; by way of personal reflections, I hope to be of some help to future TA’s when they navigate their way through the teaching experience and to encourage them to enjoy their role as much as they can.

In EALC, Chinese PhD students are generally expected to carry out a certain amount of teaching for both the Chinese language and some content courses. The language course’s teaching duty will be decided in consultation with the language instructors in our department, while the content course is usually split between modern literature and pre-modern, or traditional, Chinese literature and civilization. In the summer of 2012, Prof. Egan was just joining the EALC family, and I was fortunate to be chosen as his first teaching assistant for the traditional civilization course at Stanford. Even though my major field is modern Chinese literature, my interest for traditional literature and culture dates back to my childhood, and I have enjoyed the classical Chinese literature classes taught at Stanford by its sterling faculty, such as Profs. Mark Lewis and John Wang. Therefore, I was deliberately challenging myself to “cross teach” in a field somewhat different from my own. It turned out that this was a surprisingly fulfilling experience: as a TA, I not only taught some part of the class, but most importantly, learned crucial lessons about how to handle diverse students in a class as “specialized” as the traditional Chinese civilization course.

As we know, Stanford’s undergraduate student body is incredibly diverse. In the two discussion sessions that I led, there were engineers, computer

scientists, and public policy makers; there were also students who had spent four or five years in China with superb Mandarin skills, and those who confessed that they knew nothing about China and was drawn into the class out of curiosity. How to handle this dazzling diversity and turn it into an advantage? As a first-time “student-teacher,” this was the core question I had to tackle.

For the traditional civilization class, there were two lectures given by Prof. Egan each week, both of which I was required to attend. Thereafter, there was a Friday session that I was in charge of. The Friday session was designed to enliven the discussion of the class materials covered by the professor and answer any questions students might have. For the TA, the Friday discussion session is where we not only provide a succinct summary of the week’s lectures, but also organize an engaging and effective discussion to bring class materials to life. Prof. Egan, despite his erudite learning of traditional Chinese culture, allowed incredible flexibility for me to organize the sessions and encouraged me to come up with my own discussion questions. This proved to be a great way to do it, as I had to urge myself to master the class materials before students formed any questions, and think critically about class materials after each lecture. To make sure that I could provide a credible summary of the weekly lectures, I not only carefully reviewed my class notes and slides, but also, from time to time, consulted outside resources such as *Chinese Civilization: A Sourcebook* edited by Patricia Ebrey. Therefore, to organize effective weekly discussions, it is important to start early: the TA could start reading the main textbook or literary texts before his or her actual quarter of teaching; when the quarter begins, it is also wise to finish the week’s assignment yourself before leading any discussions.

But how to encourage students to not only master class materials on a conceptual level, but also think critically and creatively about China, especially its distant past and cultural traditions? This was where I, as a TA and a student of Chinese culture, had to put extra care and engage with students more imaginatively. Here again, I thank Prof. Egan for trusting me and allowing me enough room to design the session, even though his advice always came in timely and proved critical.

To bring ancient China closer to students' own learning, upbringing and cultural background—this is how I helped my mainly American students learn about China. In the class, Prof. Egan was conscious of using an interdisciplinary approach to teach about China: literature, art, science, and cultural texts... All kinds of materials were introduced to class. In my session, I also combined a variety of media to encourage students' thinking. For example, when we were reading excerpts from *Dream of the Red Chamber*, I showed a video clip of the Chinese TV drama *Hongloumeng* with a focus on Baoyu's attitude toward the girls in the garden. After watching the video, students found it more interesting to talk about the novel, and they were able to locate the textual evidences of Baoyu's personality more easily.

Another time, when we were talking about traditional Chinese art and its multi-perspective depiction of natural sceneries, I showed slides with some well-known images of Chinese ink-and-brush paintings and compared them with well-known images of Western art. Students were able to discern the differences immediately, and they enjoyed the comparison because it was an interesting mental exercise. When it came to more sophisticated topics such as China's cultural history in the late imperial period and its formation of ethnic consciousness, I stimulated students' thinking by making a contrast between the Western/Darwinian racism based on one's biological traits and the Chinese universalist/cultural racism based on how much one aligned with the "civilized" Chinese culture. Students, after being exposed to two perspectives and materials close to their own upbringing (such as American racism and the Civil Rights Movement), found it much easier to understand concepts such as cultural racism particular to China. This China-West comparison and ancient/modern cross analogy could help explain crucial aspects of Chinese culture and make the class content more inviting, engaging, and interesting for students familiar with American culture. As a result, they learned effectively and kindly provided me with great feedback and favorable ratings.

Without saying, being a TA also brings about certain challenges. How to handle a relatively silent session where students are all reluctant to speak? How to answer the unexpected questions students may have during a session and admit that we do not know everything as a TA but refer students to

useful resources instead? These are all questions a TA would face. Instead of keeping these questions to yourself, it is crucial to seek help from the professor whose class you are assisting and the language instructors as well as former TAs for their suggestions.

In general, I enjoyed being a TA for our department. As an EALC TA, we have the wonderful mentorship of instructors and professors, who will not only make sure that we complete our work, but also nurture us in the process of mastering the subject field and becoming an excellent teacher, such as my own experience with Prof. Egan. Beyond this departmental care, Stanford also offers a variety of help for graduate student TAs, such as the workshops that tackle issues of handling student feedbacks and writing teaching statements. EALC TAs could take advantage of these resources and should not hesitate to seek help whenever they feel like it. I hope future TAs will enjoy their experiences, and that my essay provides a small starting point for them to navigate their journey.

Thoughts on My Content TA-ing – Aragorn Quinn

Like many of us on the Japan side, the content course I TA'd for was the Japan civilization course (Japangen 92). I worked with Professor Takeuchi, who was wonderfully supportive and provided a model of teaching excellence towards which I could and still do aspire. And while every teaching experience varies—not least because we work with different professors in different classes with different students—I stumbled across a few approaches that can transfer to different courses and contexts and might be helpful points of departure for the new teacher-who-was-recently-a-student.

Every section that I designed contained an opening exercise for the first five to ten minutes of class in which the content was new but the form was familiar. Since Professor Takeuchi approached Japanese civilization from the perspective of art history and religion, the course required a mastery of a wide variety of images. At the beginning of the discussion section, I scattered images from the textbook and lecture powerpoint on a table in the middle of the room. As students arrived, I had them choose an image, and then when they sat down I had them compare and contrast their image with that of their neighbor. We then went around the room and very quickly had them share their insights with the class. The exercise was very short, but it provided effective review and prepared students for the topics we would discuss for the rest of the session. I repeated this exercise often throughout the quarter, and once they became familiar with the pattern, I could provide new images and different questions at the beginning of classes with very little class time spent on the logistics of explaining the exercise. Further, it allowed students who were a few minutes late to unobtrusively join class and quickly get up to speed. Variety within a familiar framework was a very effective method for getting classes started.

A second principle I grounded my lesson planning on was that less is more. In our pedagogy training, we are often encouraged to move away from the “sage on the stage” model of teaching and to become the “guide on the side”.

This was true in one of my most popular sections, modified from an idea passed on to me from Joanna Sturiano. A little over midway through the quarter I designed an exercise to help the students synthesize the large mass of new information that they had encountered in the previous six or seven weeks. When students came into class, I had scattered note cards on a table in the middle of the room with color coded names, dates, places, and cultural works. My only instructions to them was that they were to make sense of the cards without referring to notes or textbooks. They quickly understood that the best way to organize the material was in a timeline. Yet while no single student in the class could have organized the material correctly, working together they were able to successfully re-construct the chronology on the cards. After a short discussion about what they had learned, they left the class energized and feeling like they knew much more than they had realized. My role in this exercise was minimal, and the effectiveness of the class was at least partly due to the light touch that I employed. This class reinforces what we are taught in our pedagogical training that it is often more effective to set the stage for the students to learn and then step back out of their way while they take the lead in figuring out what they need to know.

These were two principles that made preparing for and leading my discussion sections a little less stressful. Every TA will cobble together their own student-centric model of teaching that works for their specific context. In my own teaching, I have found that these principles are flexible enough to use in a wide variety of contexts, and perhaps they will be helpful as a jumping off point for new TAs as they prepare for their first content course.

After sketching the basic structure of the class I TA-ed for, I will describe some concrete methods I used in teaching, and conclude with some more general statements on the role of a TA.

Class structure

I TA-ed for Professor Reichert's class on romance, desire and sexuality in Japanese literature. The class met twice a week, once for lecture and once for discussion. There were two discussion groups, with 15 and 35 students respectively. For most of the quarter, I was in charge of the discussion groups, but I also had the opportunity to deliver the last lecture. Of course, the skills of coordinating a discussion and giving a lecture are different, and will be treated separately. The materials for the class were selected by Professor Reichert. In the first lecture, he clearly explained how he structured the class. He focused on three topics: love suicide, same-sex sexuality and female desire, as treated in the early-modern, modern and contemporary periods.

Response papers

Every week the students had to read a research article, a literary work, (and occasionally watch a movie). Then they were required to write a short weekly 250-word response, which had to be submitted before the day of the discussion. The students were prompted some guiding questions on the class blog for the weekly response. The questions gave the students an idea of the most important topics that would be tackled in class. Writing the response paper also allowed each student to clearly formulate his/her ideas about the text. Moreover, the response papers gave the teacher a preview of what to expect from the students in class. The response papers were key in structuring the discussion class.

How to use the response papers: Have a double spaced list of all the students in the class. Next to the name of each student, write down a key phrase or idea from his/her response paper. Some of the answers will be rather bland, but each week there would be at least a couple of insights that you want to

make sure get mentioned in class, especially since some students do not realize that their observations are extremely valuable and would fail to speak up unless prompted to do so.

On top of the questions featured on the blog, Professor Reichert gave me every week a very long list of questions to use in class. I recommend that for each question, you write down phrases from relevant response papers, and the names of the students who gave those answers. In case nobody wants to react to a question, you can always look at your list and ask a specific student to answer the question.

In order to do this, you have to know the names of the students (I admit it was very hard for me to learn the names of forty students or so). In order to memorize the names of the student, you should look online at the names and pictures of the students who registered for the class. Unfortunately, the TAs at Stanford do not have automatic access to this list, so you have to submit a HelpSU request to receive access to that list. Mention specifically that you want access to both the names and the students' pictures.

Discussion

Ideally, the discussion should appear as natural as possible. You can expect an amount of digression on each topic, but it is also easy to envision how the flow of the discussion will eventually go. Before the class, anticipate how and when to steer the discussions from one topic to another. For instance, issues of gender can easily transition into sexuality, than family and class issues. As Professor Reichert told me on several occasions, you should ideally leach onto some previous answer of a student, and use that to change topics. For instance, say: "Earlier you mentioned money being a prominent theme. What else can you say about the role of money in this work?" Of course, you won't always get the answer you want, but if you are patient and wait for two or three students to react, you will eventually get the most important/ relevant points out.

A couple of times, I did go mechanically through the questions, but I finally came to realize that more important than asking all the questions on the list is getting all the answers. The questions are the tool to make students engage with all aspects of a text in terms of both form and content. In order to do

that, start with some general, simple, warm-up questions like “did you like this work?,” “what did you think of it?,” then move on to the more specific questions relevant to your class, in this case “how is sexuality treated in this text?”

Finally, there should be some close-reading in every session, which would allow students to carefully engage with the language of the text, or be it in translation. Close-readings are a great opportunity for group work. As a student, I did not appreciate the importance of group work. I always felt that one person would be dominating the rest, and when it comes to presenting the ideas, the leader of the group would inevitably fail to summarize all the students’ input. But from a teacher’s perspective, group work is a blessing. First, it gives the teacher a couple of minutes of break, during which the students get to discuss the text among themselves. Also, it gives the students time to better formulate their ideas. It is also an opportunity for shy students to interact with other students in the class. And, as a TA, you can insist that each member of the group speaks up, ensuring equal participation in class for all students.

Some group-exercises can be really short. For instance, you just pose a question, then ask each student to discuss the issue with the person next to them for two or three minutes. At the end, you have several groups report their answers. Not all students need to speak.

However, in the class I TA-ed for, Professor Reichert encouraged me to use more elaborate group exercises that occasionally would take most of the session’s time. (Professor Reichert designed most of the exercises for me.) There are also numerous books that list in detail group exercises. Group exercises are particularly useful when dealing with a large number of students. Here, I will give one basic example only.

You select several passages from a text (depends on the size of the class). Each passage should be directly relevant to an issue you want to discuss (gender, sexuality, money, class etc). Divide the students into groups of three. Each student has to comment on one aspect of the text: form, content, character. After the students in a group finish their short presentations, you ask a more general question and invite all the students to participate. Then you move on to the next group. Depending on how many students you have

in the class, you can spend between five to ten minutes on each group. Exercises like these help to structure the class really well and make it flow. Some students complain that they don't like group work (I used to be one of them), but most students like it. For the first two weeks, I did not use any group exercises, but later on I used a different exercise every week. One day, on week eight or so, I did the group exercise in the first section, but decided to revert to straightforward discussion for the second exercise. Well, it was a boring class, and I very much regretted not using the exercise. My conclusion is that you simply cannot go wrong when you divide students into groups. The quality of the discussion just gets better.

Lectures

Every week, I also had to deliver a mini-lecture of five to ten minutes in which I would give the background of some author, or work, and on a couple of occasions, introduce basic critical concepts from film or animation. These mini-lectures should both introduce new information, and review key terms from the lecture that would be useful to the discussion. For instance, if you are going to analyze a *manga*, or comic book, quickly go through key words such as panel frames and gutter.

It was relatively easy to put together a ten-minute lecture. The real challenge was the one hour-long lecture I had to deliver in the last week of the class. It was a great experience. I basically had to give background information on Japan that would help contextualize the novel we were reading. It sounded simple enough, but all of a sudden I felt lost. What aspects of Japanese culture was I supposed to emphasize? Of course, Prof. Reichert gave me many suggestions – talk about politics in Japan, the Emperor, social media etc. So then I realized that I should just first ask myself – what is the novel about? What issues does it allude to that the students might not know? But even after I figured that out, I was still facing a hard task ahead. I was supposed to talk not only about literature, but also about a variety of issues that I was not an expert in – politics and social media in Japan. I myself had only just begun reading academic articles that talked broadly about these problems. I was not sure how to summarize the information, what to include and what to leave out. After the lecture, Prof. Reichert mentioned that on a couple of instances I should have explained in more detail some issues that seem obvious to me but not necessarily to the students. He says that it is

better to over explain rather than risk not getting your message across. This does not mean overwhelming students with tiresome details, it means carefully explaining the basics.

About delivering the lecture – there are several things that I wish I had done slightly differently. First, I ended up mostly reading from a script – of course I occasionally looked up – but I feel that relying too much on a script makes the atmosphere tense. Of course, it was my first and only time teaching an entire lecture – so I thought having some kind of script is better. But then I also ended up talking too fast. I think that it is best to first have a script, then discard it. Just have a list of main points and some dates/quotes you want to mention, and just speak freely. Also, it is probably good to review all the main points at the end of the lecture, to round up the lecture.

I took advantage of the CTL and had a discussion section filmed, but now I believe it would have been better to have them film the lecture. I also benefited from CTL workshops on how to teach, and mid-term evaluations. Definitely stop by CTL!

Role of teacher

Lastly, I would like to talk about the role of the teacher in a discussion session. Before teaching for the first time, think about classes you have taken in the past, and try to analyze what your professors were doing. What was their teaching agenda? What did they want to accomplish in the class and what methods were they employing in order to achieve their goals? What do you want the class dynamics to be like? Of course, the student body is a dynamic, living organism, and no teacher can perfectly control every aspect of a discussion. But a teacher can instill some direction to the class discussion. The role of a teacher is that of creating the right atmosphere in class, so that students can have a meaningful, fruitful conversation.

On the other hand, it is very important that the TA does appear very authoritative, in the manner of a benevolent tyrant. I came to the conclusion that all students crave authority. Although in literature there are no absolute answers, and that students at Stanford are very smart and confident, they nevertheless want to feel that the TA knows more and is ultimately more experienced than they are. My initial attitude had been one of *laissez-faire*,

meaning that I wanted to interfere as little as possible in the discussion. I believed that I did not need to share with the students my interpretation on the text, because I did not want to impose my ideas on them, and because sometimes their ideas were fresher and unexpected. However, this might not always be the best approach. The students want to be given the opportunity to speak and share their understanding of the text, but they seem to particularly enjoy it when you challenge them, and contradict them a little. So, allow them to do most of the talking, but at the end of the class try to show them an aspect of the text they had not thought about in the least, and leave them with that.

PREPARING A TEACHING PORTFOLIO

Thinking Ahead: Creating a Teaching Portfolio – Gabriel Rodriguez

Teaching and the Job Search

Graduate school is many things – teaching, learning, taking classes, meeting requirements, scholarly research, and crafting manuscripts. But I firmly believe that at its core, graduate school is also a job-training program. We spend the better part of a decade working to be competitive on a very specific job market that will hopefully lead to a faculty position at a college or university.

Faculty positions come with a whole host of responsibilities, but we usually think of these positions as having three components: teaching, research, and university service. The reality of faculty positions, however, is that teaching will take up the largest chunk of your time. As such, academic departments scrutinize your teaching history and teaching methods, both during the job search, as well as during the tenure process. And the teaching records of potential hires have become even more important in recent years due to the fact that tenure-track positions have become so much more competitive. A good teaching portfolio, therefore, can make or break a candidate, and you should start thinking about how you will compile one from day one of your graduate career.

What is a Teaching Portfolio?

A teaching portfolio is a collection of materials that act as a record of your strengths, experiences, and accomplishments as a teacher. In this way, it is similar to curriculum vitae, but unlike your CV, your teaching portfolio will include physical artifacts from your years as a teacher – things like syllabi, student evaluations, or letters of recommendation from colleagues or assistants. (More on this later.)

By contributing to your portfolio, you are forced to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate what and how you teach. By being selective about your portfolio's content, you must face things that have gone well in your courses, as well as things that could use improvement. In this way, your teaching portfolio is more than a record of your teaching – it is also a professional

development tool. Therefore, what kind of teaching portfolio you create goes a long way in showing how dedicated you are in your growth as a teacher.

What Should My Teaching Portfolio Include?

There is no set format for how a teaching portfolio should be prepared. It is a good idea to ask your adviser or colleagues to see their teaching portfolios, or to go and speak with someone at the Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). You should also check with the institutions to which you apply what they expect to see in a candidate's portfolio so that you may tailor your portfolio to suit each potential job. Because there can be variation, ***it is important that you save every artifact of your teaching that you can***. There is no worse feeling than realizing you discarded something that could have been useful for a potential position.

In general, teaching portfolios begin with a personal teaching statement. These statements are generally 2-4 pages in length and include the following:

- A summary of your teaching experiences
- An overview of your teaching philosophy, strategies, and objectives
- A description of the ways you have actively sought to grow as a teacher
- A table of contents or outline for the rest of your teaching portfolio

In addition to the personal statement, you must also compile actual evidence of your teaching experience. This may include:

- An audio or video recording of your teaching
- Course syllabi (even of courses where you served as TA)
- Sample assignments, tests, or other assessments
- Course slides, or course handouts that you have used
- Statements from your TA mentors
- Statements from teaching assistants and others who have observed your teaching
- Student evaluations
- Evaluations from teacher development services, such as those provided by CTL

This is by no means an exhaustive list, and we all have different teaching experiences. You must therefore tailor your portfolio to highlight your individual accomplishments as a teacher.

How Do I Go About Acquiring These Materials?

First off, keep everything. Some materials (like syllabi) naturally come to you, and you should not throw anything away. You should even consider keeping the syllabi for any teacher development courses you take while a graduate student (such as Professor Bernhardt's class, which is required for our department.)

CTL also provides a host of opportunities for graduate students to generate material for their portfolios while at the same time engaging in professional development activities. When you do a video consultation with CTL, you not only receive the video recording of your teaching, you also receive feedback from a CTL consultant along with a feedback form that you can include among your evaluations. CTL also does Small Group Evaluations (SGEs) in which a consultant comes to your class and interviews your students about what is going well in the class, and what can use improvement. An official report is generated, and you may keep this report for use in your teaching portfolio. Doing these types of activities will go a long way in showing that you are committed to your development as a teacher.

One piece of advice I have regarding teaching evaluations in our department: I know that when I TA-ed Japanese language, I did not receive all student evaluations because my teaching mentor did not sign me up to receive them. Therefore, I only had about 20 evaluations per quarter when I should have had close to 90. Make sure that you are proactive and aggressive in getting your teaching mentor to sign you up for all of the evaluations that you are due. This will help you have a wider variety of evaluations to choose from when it comes time to select which ones you wish to include in your teaching portfolio.

Although as a TA you may not have much power or control over the direction of the course, you do have control about what you get out of it. Insist upon things like video recordings and SGEs even if your teaching mentor seems reluctant. And if you have problems with obtaining any of the materials you need, talk to your adviser or to our department's CTL liaison.

Summary

There is no standard when it comes to teaching portfolios, and they really are what you make of them. If you put in the time and effort, you will produce a fantastic dossier. And something to keep in mind is that your portfolio can and should become part of your tenure materials later on in your career.

Therefore, compiling these materials now will save you time and energy in the future.

GETTING FEEDBACK ON YOUR TEACHING

The WHEN, HOW, and WHY of getting feedback on your teaching:

WHEN to do evaluations

You can get feedback either mid-quarter or at the end of the quarter.

HOW to do evaluations (the following information is taken from the CTL website)

There are many ways in which you could get feedback:

1) Simply ask

Talk to some students informally after class or during your office hours about how the class is going. Ask them what's gone well and what hasn't worked. Choose students who you think will be comfortable giving you feedback. Even then you will have to be careful that they don't feel "on the spot."

2) In-class paper-based evaluations

Pass out your own carefully thought-out questionnaire for students to fill out anonymously during the last few minutes of class. Focus on those issues that are of most interest or concern to you. Follow up on the students' feedback; consider discussing the feedback in class and letting the students know what changes you will be making. To assure that students respond candidly, leave the room while they complete the questionnaire anonymously, and ask a student volunteer to collect the forms and return them to you or the department assistant.

Sample questions for evaluations:

Open-ended question

- Indicate what the instructor does well (please be specific and generous):
- Indicate what the instructor could do differently and/or better (please be specific and constructive):

Rating items

(use a scale of 1-7 where 1 = disagree strongly and 7 = agree strongly)

1. The instructor is approachable and helpful _____

2. I am learning a lot in this class _____

3. I would recommend this class to a friend _____

3) Online evaluations (can be administered in class)

To get mid-quarter student feedback, you can create an Online Evaluation on the CTL website. The CTL will give you its URL to share with your students; after it's closed, they'll send you the anonymous results. Link: <https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/teaching-services/midterm-online-evaluations>

4) Classroom observations

Ask a friend, a colleague, or a consultant from the Center for Teaching and Learning to observe your class. CTL has trained consultants who have learned specific observational techniques and have considerable teaching experience. If you invite a friend or colleague in, brief them carefully on what specifically you would like them to look for. Colleagues, especially, tend to focus exclusively on content unless you also ask them to attend to how ideas are presented and how students respond.

5) Do a video recording

Be videorecorded. This is the only evaluation method that lets you see your teaching more or less as your students do. Although teachers generally feel great anxiety about having it done, most feel reassured and motivated afterward. You can arrange free videorecording through the Center for Teaching and Learning. Its also a great addition for your teaching portfolio.

6) Small Group Evaluations

Last but not least, have a small-group evaluation (SGE) conducted by the Center for Teaching and Learning. At your request, CTL will send a consultant to your class during the last twenty minutes of the period. Once you have left, the consultant will divide your students into groups of six (or

fewer if it is a small class). Each group is given ten minutes to select a spokesperson and agree on what they value about your course, what areas need improvement, and what specific suggestions they would make for change. At the end of the allotted time, the consultant canvasses each group and makes a record of their comments. He or she then summarizes the results, identifying patterns of agreement and clarifying areas of disagreement. The information is given to you later in a private consultation.

For more information on getting feedback, please visit the CTL website (see Resources section for link) or simply talk to your CTL liaisons!

WHY do evaluations

- Mid-quarter evaluations allow your current students to benefit from any improvements you make. You will also be more likely to get better ratings for your end-quarter evaluations.
- You improve your teaching.
- It's a great addition to your teaching portfolio.

USEFUL RESOURCES FOR GRAD STUDENTS

ONLINE

- *Stanford Teaching Commons* is your one-stop resource for teaching and learning at Stanford and beyond.
<https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/ctl>
- *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is the No. 1 source of news, information, and jobs for college and university faculty members and administrators.
<http://chronicle.com/section/Home/5>
- *Harvard University Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning*
<http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/>
- *University of Michigan Center for Research on Learning and Teaching*
<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/>
- *The Ohio State University Center for the Advancement of Teaching*
<http://ucate.osu.edu/>
- *UC Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning*
<http://teaching.berkeley.edu/>

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