

## Teaching in a Team

*Jenn Weaver, PhD, CTLO Associate Director for University Teaching*

*Rebekah Silva, Former CPET Co-Director and Doctoral Candidate*



## **Communication Strategies + Course Meetings**

### **TA Team Meetings**

They should be about 1-1½ hours. Keep minutes. Run it like section--i.e., with room for discussion by everyone. Leave time for TAs to discuss their individual problems. Inform the group of the agenda for the next week. Check that TA's are holding effective office hours and recitations. Ideally, the professor should be present for at least part/some of these meetings.

### **First Meeting**

Clarify your roles and responsibilities as head TA. Clarify course policies and expectations of all TAs (ideally, do this together). Share your plan for the quarter. Discuss the following:

- **Are TAs expected to attend lectures?** Ideally, TAs will attend lectures to be well-prepared to assist students in recitations and office hours.
- **What is the protocol if a TA must miss a recitation, lab, or office hours session?** If a TA must be absent, most courses have them notify the professor and/or head TA in time for a substitute to take over. A TA should never just leave a note on the door of the classroom unless there is a sudden emergency and the head TA or professor can't be reached. If a long-term absence is foreseen, arrangements for a permanent replacement may be necessary.
- **What are the expectations regarding office hours?** Is there a certain amount of hours per week TAs are expected to be available? Should the hours be held during specific times to be easily accessible for students? Where do all TAs post their office hours (i.e., course website)?
- **How do TAs share preparation and grading responsibilities?** For a course to run smoothly, TAs should be sharing the work equally. Does each TA prep section notes/examples for a different week of the course? How is grading shared? What are the timelines for getting course prep and grading to each other?
- **What are the collaboration policies? Grading policies?** These are often in the syllabus, but what might be confusing for students? Clarify before the term begins and share with all TAs in the course.
- **What is the detailed course schedule?** If there isn't one, TAs can draft in before the term starts and get the professor's approval or edits. This includes when assignments are handed out to students, when they're due, when grading is to be finished, and when students get assignments/exams returned to them.
- **What are your standards as a team?** What is the policy for reaching out / dealing with a TA who is not meeting your collaboratively-decided-upon standards?

### **Assignments and Exams**

At least one TA (if not all) should see assignments and exams before they go to students – get feedback. Decide who will create solution set. Share work equally (over the quarter, not necessarily per assignment / exam).

## **Tips for Running Effective TA Meetings**

\*Adapted from *Harvard University, Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning*

Many Head/Lead TAs are responsible for the organization and efficient operation of both the course and its TA meetings. The tips below are designed to help you in those efforts.

- **You can never be too organized.** Before the quarter starts, sit down and figure out the frequency, time, and duration of your regular meetings, and what you hope to accomplish during each one. Timing may change toward the end of the quarter (fewer regular meetings), but be sure to schedule final grading well in advance!
- **Pick a good time to have a meeting.** Give TAs enough time between the meeting and recitation to implement suggestions. If it's possible to provide food sometimes (check with the option administrator or professor), it will be appreciated!
- **At the beginning of the meeting, go through a list of what you hope to accomplish.** (e.g., on whiteboard or chalkboard). This keeps everyone on track and models effective teaching. E-mailing TAs in advance about the agenda of the meeting also works well.

### **Possible agenda items:**

- **Have TAs run through their section of the course.** Divide the TAs into groups of 2 or 3, who are responsible for a specific week or a segment of the course. This includes handouts, preparation of slides, etc. Have the group lead the other TAs (particularly new TAs) through a sample section for that week. This means a) TAs will be prepared to teach section that week b) all TAs will be teaching approximately the same material (a great worry in a large course!) and c) TAs do not duplicate handouts and work unnecessarily, saving time for all.
- **Present all exams and assignments, along with solutions,** to the TAs at a staff meeting before giving them to students, in case they have suggestions or questions. This helps everyone answer student questions consistently, too.
- **Grade sample assignments as a team.** Hand out copies of an assignment or problem to all TAs. Have them read it and then mark it with a grade. Discuss what grades were given and why. From that discussion, come up with guidelines for grading that will be used consistently. You may only need to do this once or a few times, and revisit as needed.
- **Talk about student questions.** What are the main points of confusion? Maybe some TAs have found especially helpful examples or ways to answer. Share this information so all students can benefit.
- **Stay on track with returning work to the students.** Check on progress during meetings. TAs returning work late or inconsistently will be a major student complaint and it is not fair to have some TAs return work later than others. Undergrads have strict add/drop dates, and that students need to have some idea of their grade at all points in the course.

## Suggested Plan

Quarter	Head TAs (ideally before the date listed)
Pre-Week 1	Establish TA/Faculty meeting schedule, responsibilities, course policies, grading process, etc. Go over course syllabus with professor and establish plan for communication / meetings with professor and with TA team
Week 1	Meeting with TA team. Go over plan for quarter.
Week 3	Early feedback (surveys, observations, etc.). Schedule midterm review session. Make a plan for grading the midterm.
~Week 5	Establish who is finalizing & entering midterm grades; test access to REGIS. Reach out to students w/ difficulties.
Week 7	Schedule final review session. Establish grading standards, process, and timeline for seniors/grads.
Week 8	Establish who is finalizing & entering grades (you, Prof., combo); test access to REGIS. Adjust office hours schedule so TAs are available during study period.
Week 9	Establish grading standards, process, and timeline. Archive course materials and make plan for passing on to future TAs.

Further suggestions for this plan.... By Week, determine:

- What is going to be handed out to students?
  - Who makes it? Who checks it?
  - If problems, who creates solutions?
- What are students handing in?
  - Who collects it? Who grades it? When?
- What work is being returned to students?
- What else are TAs doing?
  - Recitation: Who preps example problems or activities?
  - Special events, e.g. exam review sessions?

## Tools and Resources for Organization and Communication

- **Caltech Moodle:** Caltech's learning management system. Use for overall course organization and communication. Students may submit assignments; grades may be communicated securely to students. Includes discussion forum function. <https://imss.caltech.edu/node/732>
- **Caltech Box:** Caltech shared document platform with secure login. <https://imss.caltech.edu/box>
- **Custom email lists:** For course-wide announcements and/or TA/instructor communication. <https://www.imss.caltech.edu/node/311>
- **Registrar Information Systems (REGIS):** log in through <http://access.caltech.edu>. Access enrollment lists, email all students (though some students report filtering out notices sent through REGIS), submit midterm/final grades.

**Plan Your Quarter**  
***TA Team Teaching Plan***

**Course:**

**TAs:**

- Head TA Roles and Responsibilities:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Course collaboration policy:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- TA Roles and Responsibilities:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Our plan for sharing routine TA work (e.g. schedule for preparing example problems, solutions, grading, etc.):
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Our plan for answering/helping students equitably, while maintaining TA boundaries (e.g. Who will be available when? Until what times? In what form and can all students access it? Will any tools be used for Q&A/sharing responses with everyone in the class?):
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Our plan for communicating among TAs:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Our plan for communicating with students: