

Dealing with Challenging Situations as an International TA

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International Teaching Assistants face two challenges—the challenging teaching situations that every TA must learn to cope with, as well as situations caused by intercultural differences.

While these might sound like difficult challenges, **don't worry!** Notre Dame is committed to excellence in education, and has chosen you to be one of the people teaching its undergraduate students. Moreover, there are a number of techniques and strategies you can implement to prevent and solve classroom problems.

The first step is to be aware of what situations might arise in your teaching experience that result from cross-cultural differences. Some TAs face difficulties related to communicating in English. And the American classroom has unique characteristics that might differ from your own background in the classroom.

When English is your Second Language:

- Be honest about your ability.

- But never apologize. You have these skills!

- Acknowledge to the students that you are always seeking to improve.

- Speak slowly.

- From the first day, create an atmosphere where the students feel comfortable asking you to clarify or repeat yourself, and where you feel comfortable asking the same of students.

 - Do this directly, by encouraging them to ask you questions, and to ask for help when they do not understand.

- If students ever just say, "I don't understand," ask them more questions until you both have a more specific understanding of what they are missing.

 - Do they find the content hard? Is your voice too soft? Do they have trouble understanding an accent? Are they doing the necessary outside reading?

Effective Strategies for Class Preparation

- Practice your students' names, and any difficult vocabulary, before class.

 - If a student corrects your pronunciation of their name, make a note, and try to improve.

- Practice giving your presentations and discussion questions to a friend, or in front of a mirror. Also consider recording yourself.

- Create handouts and/or PowerPoint presentations, and write on the board if appropriate, so that students will be presented with key ideas visually as well as by listening.

- If you have trouble understanding a student, ask them to restate the question, repeat themselves, or speak more slowly.

American Students:

- Tend to expect a more informal environment
 - but that does not mean that you have to accept rude behavior.
- Enjoy having a rapport with their instructor
 - Tell the students about yourself, and your background—academic, nationality, pastimes, etc.
 - Learn your students' names as soon as possible, and use them.
 - Having the student fill out an information card at the semester beginning is a great way to get students to start talking to each other, and for you to know them better.
 - Try to talk to them informally before and after—studies have shown that this increases student learning and retention of material.
 - Make eye contact, and use positive body language, such as smiling, posture, etc., while leading class
- Are encouraged to ask questions, and even challenge an instructor's ideas
 - Listen, but maintain control of the classroom.
- Expect a qualified instructor—WHICH YOU ARE!
 - Be confident in your knowledge and level of preparedness.
 - Be open to learning new teaching methods.
 - For instance, through Kaneb Center events

Further Benefits of Building Rapport with Students

- This mitigates fears about your English proficiency, or subject area knowledge.
- Students will feel more comfortable asking you to repeat yourself in class, or to seek help outside class.
- Students will be more interested in participating and asking and answering questions.

The Kaneb Center offers workshops, a pedagogical library, online resources, and personal consultations. Find their resources geared to international instructors at:
<http://kaneb.nd.edu/rsracs/resources-for-international-faculty-and-tas/>

Other Potential Challenges for TAs

- Complaints and Questions about Grading
- Cheating/Plagiarism
- Managing Controversial Class Discussions

The best practices for dealing with these situations is to create a classroom environment in which they are unlikely to come to pass.

Prevention of Complaints, through Grading and Attendance Policies

Set out expectations clearly in your syllabus, for grading expectations and attendance.

- Present this information positively, as “How to Succeed in this Course.”
- Develop a rubric or otherwise consistent grading system—this helps you grade fairly, and also gives you a concrete standard to discuss with students.

American students also expect notes on their work in addition to a grade.
Treat all students fairly, and be consistent in grading, and in penalties.
If you are co-TAing a class, coordinate with the other TAs and the supervising professor to have a consistent grading system across instructors.
If there is a complaint, examine if it is fair; if not, explain your grading system and do not undermine your standard.
You can also allow the student to have the option of having the whole work regraded by you or someone else, but warn them that their grade could go up or down.
Institute a 24-hour waiting period before any grade complaints or change requests will be received.

Problems Regarding Class Participation

Start off the semester (and the class) with participation activities—it is hard to make students do something new, partway through the semester.

Pair and Share activities

If students participate too much or too little, talk to them privately first, in person or over email.

Explain to more talkative students that you need to hear more from other students.

For quieter students, encouraging them to talk more by linking it to praise of their work can be successful.

For rude or inappropriate behavior (sleeping, texting, asking personal questions), remember that you are the authority.

Call out the behavior privately first, then publically, if necessary, and expect the student to change the behavior.

Make them aware that their grade could be affected.

Plagiarism

Familiarize yourself now with Notre Dame's policies: <http://honorcode.nd.edu/the-honor-code/>

If you suspect a student of plagiarism

Remind yourself of the policies and procedures

Talk to your supervising professor

Before you approach the student

Managing Controversial Discussions

Set up and maintain a civil environment, and encourage students to listen to one another

But intervene if the conversation takes a hostile turn, or if it is a diversion from the class material.

Further resources:

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/hotmoments.html>

http://www.worcester.edu/Currents/Archives/Volume_1_Number_2/CurrentsV1N2WingertP4.pdf