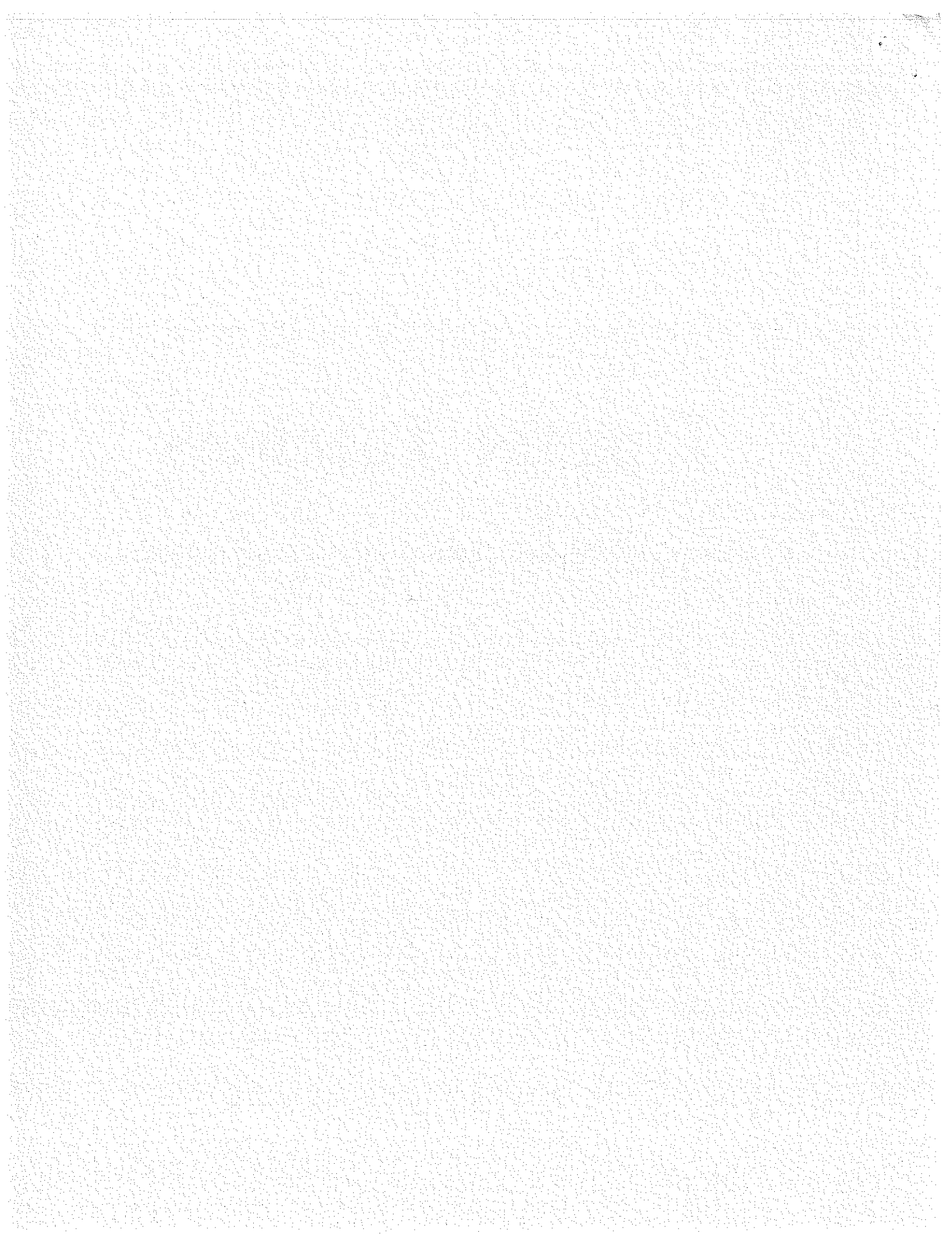


# **Tips for Teachers**

From the 2008 College of Letters and Science Teaching Fellows





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*The Heart of a Great University*

***Balancing Your Teaching & Other Responsibilities***

Tim Bagshaw, Political Science Department

A common problem facing every T.A. is how best to balance the demands that teaching places on our time with our own academic and life responsibilities. In particular, how can T.A.'s maximize their teaching potential and serve their students well without sacrificing quality in other aspects of their lives? Don't worry, this is possible! And in fact, the techniques that you will use to reduce the time costs of your T.A. responsibilities are also great for your students pedagogically. While there are many techniques that you can use (and each T.A. will develop her own), here are some time-tested principles and strategies that I have found very valuable:

**Communicate, Anticipate, and be Organized!** Be sure to communicate regularly with your faculty supervisor and your students alike. First, with proper communication, your faculty supervisor can be your most important time-saving ally. Try to set up a meeting before the beginning of the semester, or at a minimum ask to see the course syllabus. You may find that exams or papers for the course conflict with some of your own important deadlines. More often than not, faculty will be happy to change things around a bit in order to accommodate their T.A.'s. It also makes sense to talk frequently throughout the semester. Be proactive by asking about what sorts of themes or concepts the professor intends to emphasize as this can help you to prepare your discussion sections, especially if you are able to prepare a several weeks' worth of sections in advance. Second, it is essential to communicate clearly with your students. For instance, I find it useful to distribute a section syllabus in both hard copy and over email. This syllabus should include your contact information and office hours, your expectations and grading scheme etc. If you hand it out *and* distribute it electronically, students are less likely to misplace it, and you can probably save a lot of time by heading off the emails you would otherwise receive asking where and when your office hours are.

**Structure your schedule, and use your time, efficiently.** Try to schedule your discussion sections in blocs and on as few days as you can. This can be difficult because

you are at the mercy of the registrar, but to the extent that it is possible, scheduling in this way decreases the amount of time you spend on your T.A. responsibilities. You can lose hours a week, just in terms of transit time to and from campus, when you have sections on days that you otherwise would not have to be on campus. Always try to schedule your office hours right before or after your sections or the course lecture for the same reasons. Another technique for time saving is to use the little bits and pieces of time you have throughout your day efficiently. You will often have fifteen or twenty-minute periods throughout your day that are open but not long enough to get any substantive work done, so why not purposively schedule this time to answer student email? Set aside two or three such intervals each week and dedicate them solely to this purpose. You might also consider setting aside the same time each week to prepare your section for the following week. It is much easier to get your other work done when you know that a certain interval of time each week is dedicated to developing your lesson plan for the week. Finally, lag your discussion topics one week behind the lecture. This is important because it will help you avoid developing different lessons for different discussion groups (a time-consuming practice), depending on where they fall in the lecture cycle. If you prepare just one lesson on the topics from the previous week, it cuts down your preparation time, as well as ensuring consistency across all sections. In addition, lagging a week gives your students time to complete the readings, which tends to be a problem as the semester goes on.

**In the classroom, mix things up strategically.** Mixing up your routine in the classroom is a useful way of keeping students interested. Students will get bored and tune out if they are subject to the same routine again and again. While structure is important, this can be accomplished while still bringing some variety into the classroom. Examples of this include group work, problem sets or hypothetical scenarios that motivate the course themes, and exam review sessions. Try to schedule these events strategically for times when you may have a lot going on, such as your own papers or exams. If you know you have a big presentation due during a certain week, try using a game or group activity during sections because these typically involve less preparation. And don't forget that students love exam review sessions. But don't schedule these outside of the scheduled class time. Hold review sessions in section the week before the exam. It is less of a time commitment for you, but it's great for the students as well: their regularly scheduled section time is likely to be the only time that everyone is guaranteed to have the review fit into their schedules.

**Use technology when possible.** Technology can be a very useful tool for reducing the time costs of teaching. I would advise experimenting with how comfortable you are with the variety of resources at your disposal as well as consulting with your faculty advisor about how comfortable she is with its use. While I do not do this myself, I have colleagues who have had success with real-time online office hours in a chat room, or who schedule individual meetings over I.M. instead of in person, reducing the transit time sometimes needed for individual appointments. Technology can also be a great solution for what is likely to be one of the most time-draining exercises you will face as a T.A... grading. Many of you will have essay exams and/or papers. Discuss with your professor the possibility of making the essay exams take-home, and have students submit their

assignments to you over email. The advantage here is that you can type your comments, and even create comment templates, greatly reducing the time needed to grade. In addition, you have a built-in time stamp so you can be certain that assignments are handed in on time.

## ***Teaching Controversial Topics***

Angela Barian, Sociology Department

Having to teach a course with controversial ideas and content can be daunting for both new and experienced TAs alike. In addition, it's not always obvious when, or if at all, controversy will crop up in a classroom setting. Sometimes, TAs can become nervous about handling controversial topics and situations in a way that is calm, fair, and sensitive to the students and the TAs own needs.

Fear not. Controversial classes/topics *can* be done, and they can certainly work out very well. Here are some tips that have helped me as a teacher of controversial topics:

1. **Getting the Ball Rolling.** One of the issues in teaching controversial topics is the problem of getting shy or nervous students to participate in the class activities. In order to get students to interact with the material, the trick is to ensure a comfortable environment where students feel protected and free to share.
  - a. Ground Rules - One tip that has served me well is to lay down some ground rules at the outset.
  - b. Question of the Day – As a way to get students more comfortable speaking, I often ask them an attendance proxy question that has nothing to do with the course material.
  - c. Rotating Cards – When students are hesitant to share personal experiences, I often ask them to write them down on a card, without signing their name. I then shuffle the cards and pass them out again.
  - d. Role-Playing (Sort of) – Role playing can be embarrassing and make shy students feel even worse. But I do often coax responses from students by simply asking them to imagine “what the President might say about this,” or “what someone who disagrees might say.”
  - e. Cold-Calling with Kindness – This one's sneaky: learn their names as fast as you can, and in a lull, say, “Prita, you look like you're thinking hard about this... what are you thinking?” Sometimes they refuse, but you'd be surprised how often they respond.
2. **Managing Student Interactions** (the dreaded “hot moments”)
  - a. Acknowledge the Awkwardness – You know it's awkward, and so do they. But you're the teacher. So if there's a chance someone could be hurt

by what happened, don't sweep it under the rug. Acknowledge what occurred.

- b. Stay in Control (or look like you are) – If at all possible, try not to contort your face into horror or surprise, either accidentally or in an effort to show your students that you feel a certain way. The calmer you can seem, the faster you can keep the situation from spinning out of control.
- c. Recognize the Diversity of the Class (without singling out people) – Repeatedly acknowledge that people could disagree with what was said, and encourage divergent viewpoints – but don't ever ask a student to speak as a perceived member of a group.
- d. Make it a Teaching Moment – Stop and ask the students (and yourself), “what can we learn from this?”
- e. Follow Up – If a situation gets heated, it's a good idea to contact the student(s) involved after class and make yourself available to talk. You could also contact your supervisor /chair to let them know what happened and how you handled it.

### **3. Managing Your Own Emotions**

- a. Take a Breath – Unless someone is in danger, you can give yourself a second to collect your emotions and thoughts, in hot moments and just generally. It's not like TV – dead air is okay once in a while, if it lets you collect yourself.
- b. Don't Take It Personally – Try not to be personally hurt when people say things that offend you. It's not about you – you're the teacher. Students articulate themselves clumsily sometimes, and it's our job to teach them how not to do that.
- c. Know Thyself – Think about whether you want to reveal hidden identities, or whether you want to address visible identities as you teach.
- d. Use Your Resources – Remember to consult your supervisor, chair, deans, etc. And discussing issues with other TAs can be invaluable.
- e. Cut Yourself a Break – You're a human being, and so are they. Things will definitely go wrong sometimes; every day isn't an “O Captain, My Captain” moment. That's okay; the best you can is all you can do.

Above all, it's important to remember that teaching controversial topics can be a fascinating, rewarding, and even a fun experience for both teacher and student. The ability to introduce people to issues they might not normally think about is an amazing experience!

## *The (Almost) Paperless Classroom: Using Technology to Track Student Progress and Streamline the Grading Process*

Matthew Capdevielle, English Department

Most personal computers contain software that can help streamline the tracking and grading process. Here are some tools and techniques for using technology to streamline this part of your teaching.

### Accepting Electronically Submitted Work

- **Establish clear guidelines for the formatting of electronically submitted work, and state these guidelines on your course syllabus.** Specifying the e-mail subject line and the file name can help with sorting batches of student work. Using the student's last name and the assignment name/number works well. For example, student Mike Jones would submit his essay three draft one as a *Word* document named "JonesE3D1" in an e-mail with a subject line of "JonesE3D1." Later you can search for all "E3D1" files and move them as a batch to a folder for commenting and grading.
- **Consider using an e-mail client (e.g. Outlook, Entourage, Thunderbird, or Apple Mail) to manage your e-mail so that you can use rules to sort incoming messages and signatures (AKA "quick-text," "templates," or "boilerplates") to reply quickly to common student queries.** Most personal computers ship with some form of an e-mail client, but you can also download one of the many free e-mail clients, like *Thunderbird*.
  - *Rules* are handy filters that can be set to perform certain actions on incoming messages. For example, you could use a rule to automatically move all incoming messages from students in your 8:50 discussion section to a particular folder.
  - *Signatures* can be predefined to generate simple messages like, "Thanks for sending this. I'll get it back to you next week. See you in class!"
- **Create a hierarchical file system on your computer to store your students' work.** Start simply with a folder labeled with the course name (e.g. "CommArts 100"), and fill that folder with sub-folders for all of your course materials (e.g. "Assignments," "Handouts," "Student Work," "Teaching Resources," "Lesson Plans," etc.). Make this filing system *before* classes begin!

### Evaluating and Commenting on Student Assignments Electronically

- **Use Microsoft Word's built-in Commenting/Reviewing feature to respond to your students' electronically submitted work.** By activating the "Reviewing" toolbar in *Word* (View>Toolbars>Reviewing), you have at your disposal a set of tools for making comments appear in the margins of your students' homework. These comments appear as little bubbles. There are several advantages to this mode of responding to student work:
  1. Typing is generally faster than hand-writing comments,

2. It provides a durable record of all the feedback you've given a student,
  3. You can re-use comments sparingly (either by cutting and pasting or defining AutoText entries to be triggered by key words), and—
  4. It looks nice!
- **Use Microsoft Word's AutoText function to automatically generate commonly-used comments.** By activating the "AutoText" toolbar in *Word* (View>Toolbars>AutoText), you are presented with a set of tools for storing commonly-used comments that can be triggered by a typing a word or two and hitting the return key. For example, if you find yourself repeatedly typing the comment, "This is a brilliant observation!" you could define it as an AutoText entry that could be triggered whenever you type the word "brilliant" and hit return. (Of course, this technique should be used sparingly so that you don't appear to be just a grading machine!)

### Using Electronic Gradebooks

- **Experiment with different types of e-gradebook to find the one that works best for your purposes.** The *Learn@UW* course-management system contains a built-in gradebook function, but there are other inexpensive standalone e-gradebooks available for purchase. Many of them provide extensive *reporting* options for analyzing trends in student performance over the course of the semester. They're also handy for tracking attendance and even generating seating charts to help you memorize your students' names. *Gradekeeper* ([www.gradekeeper.com](http://www.gradekeeper.com)) is a very flexible, lightweight, and inexpensive tool that is easy to learn and implement. Other options include *EasyGradePro* ([www.orbissoft.com](http://www.orbissoft.com)) and *MasterGrade* ([www.maxium.com](http://www.maxium.com)). If you are comfortable working with Microsoft *Excel* or Apple *Numbers*, a simple spreadsheet could do the trick.
- **Be sure to back up your electronic gradebooks regularly, and occasionally print hard copies of the gradebooks to ensure against data loss.** As with all important and sensitive information, be sure that your gradebooks are stored securely and can easily be recovered in the event of a computer failure of some sort.

Of course, we all have our own organizational styles and tendencies, but a little thinking and planning *before* classes begin can help you establish a system that will save you a good deal of time and energy down the line, once the student-generated paper deluge begins.

### *Navigating the web of relationships at graduate school from both sides of the desk*

Mary Claypool, French and Italian Department

### **Relationships with Students**

Now that you're looking out over a sea of new faces, what do you do? On one hand, as a young TA, students will find you more approachable than professors. You will have smaller classes and ample time to get to know your students, unlike the faculty members who teach 500-person lectures. And you're not so far removed from the university experience that you can no longer recall what it's like to be an undergrad. On the other hand, you may be perceived as inexperienced. Students may view you as a new friend, instead of as the person who will be determining their grade. What problems should you anticipate, and how can you handle them when they do arise?

### **Teacher or Friend**

- As the TA, you are the one in control. You set the tone for the class on day one. It's easier to start the semester with an authoritative presence and gradually soften than to start out as a friendly face and demand more from students as the semester progresses.
- To Facebook or not to Facebook? Students will try to friend you. You can determine what is best for you, but I have found that waiting until the end of the semester, once grades have been posted, works well.
- Think about how friendly you will be with students outside the classroom, keeping your role as teacher in mind. Meet with students during office hours or at departmental events.

### **Dating Issues**

- You may get asked out on dates, and if this is the case, respectfully decline. If you are interested in dating a student, either wait until the end of the semester, or in coordination with your supervisor, arrange for a section change. You are required to inform your supervisor if you and one of your students have a relationship that develops beyond the teacher/student relationship. Bottom line: Don't date your current students!

### **Refusals to Participate and Confrontations**

- Remain calm and professional, and don't take overly hostile students personally.
- Communicate with your supervisor to determine the appropriate course of action (i.e. take the student aside after class to try to get at the root of the behavior, supervisor intervenes, conference with the dean)
- Remember that you have a responsibility to provide a positive learning experience to the other members of the class.
- You also have the right to feel safe in your own classroom.

### **Late Homework and Academic Misconduct**

- Set out your homework and academic misconduct policies on the syllabus. Enforce them accordingly.

### **Parents**

- You are not obligated to inform parents about grades or performance in class. According to FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act), once a child turns 18 or enters a post-secondary institution, rights to that information are transferred to the student (unless the student is a dependent for tax purposes).

### **Taking Care of Problems Before They Start**

- A first-day questionnaire helps you to better get to know your students and tailor your teaching to student interests.

- A six-week survey gives students the opportunity to air concerns anonymously and helps you to have a better idea about their experience.

### **Relationships with Faculty**

- Communication with your course chair is KEY!
- Seek out a mentor early in your program. Faculty WANT to share their expertise and help you become the type of professor you want to be.
- Your intellectual development is just as important as your own students'!
- Remember: professors are professionals AND people

### **Relationships with Colleagues**

- Collaborate on articles, and prepare for major exams.
- Cultivate relationships with more advanced students.
- E-mail alumni from your program to find out about their career paths following the program.
- Get involved with GSC and other groups on and off campus.

### **You!**

One of the most important things to remember is taking time for yourself. Achieving the work-life balance will make you a better student, a better teacher, and a better person. All work and no play make the TA dull... and just isn't tenable anyway. So go for a run, have a beer at the Dane, see a movie, and keep in touch with family and friends. Your work will be all the better for it!

## ***We Interrupt this (Conventional) Program: Inspiring High Degrees of Student Involvement through Collaboration***

Kathy DeMaster, Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies

### **Synopsis:**

Motivating student participation and engagement in discussion groups and labs can be a particularly challenging component of teaching. This session emphasizes ways that collaborative approaches can transform a conventional classroom into an engaged learning community. Explore how you as the instructor can set the tone for collaboration on day one and throughout the semester with your students through innovative techniques, such as facilitating student involvement in actual course/discussion group design. This session will discuss successful models for removing barriers between you and your students, while still maintaining professionalism. These include inviting students to participate in syllabus design, promoting student-led discussions, encouraging topic-relevant classroom guests invited by your students, and helping students become familiar with and embrace their own learning styles. This session will conclude with a discussion about how you and your students can interrupt the conventional paradigm around education by actively cooperating with one another.

## Teaching Tips:

How can we, as instructors and assistants, create a classroom community that is collaborative and participatory, one that motivates students to learn and actively engages them in their own learning process?

This session suggests that we might begin by examining our own assumptions about our roles as “teachers,” as opposed to facilitators of the learning process. Paulo Freire has some interesting things to say about this—he suggests that we attempt to resolve what he terms “the teacher-student contradiction” in our own minds by aiming to jettison the “banking concept of education [in which] knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.” We can respect our students and ourselves by first adjusting our ideas about learning, fully embracing a model that assumes all members of the classroom community—student and teacher alike—are involved in a conversation in which all are learners.

Following from this idea, innovative approaches and techniques to course/section design can emerge that are appropriate to each specific context. Some discussion section format courses, for example, might benefit from encouraging students on day one to be actively involved in setting up some of the parameters of the course, even including, perhaps, the section syllabus. Suggesting that students dialogue with one another and with the teaching assistant about their own learning styles, about what kind of discussion section activities they find engage them the most, and about how they would like to address particular classroom management issues can set the tone for reflective students who take more responsibility for their own learning. In this context, we as teaching assistants might also discuss our own styles, hopes, and priorities in a dialogical approach.

For example, students in one discussion section might determine collaboratively that they enjoy debates in section as a learning technique, while other groups might find the approach combative and unhelpful. Dialoguing with students about how they might challenge themselves in situations that might be uncomfortable but good learning experiences, while at the same time respecting and embracing individual learning styles, can help those of us who are facilitating discussions become more familiar from the beginning with the nuances of each group. With respect to classroom management, students themselves can creatively discuss how they would like to see the learning community address common disruptions or distractions such as perpetually late fellow classmates, discussion section “bullies”, those who discuss more or less than their fair share, and unprepared fellow students. This can help ease the conventional good student-bad student dichotomy that can develop in some classes and set the tone for involvement by as many members of the learning community as possible. Regular “check-ins” throughout the semester can maintain that important tone.

Finally, as we will explore in a concluding discussion in this session, involving students in their own learning process often results in highly creative specific approaches to learning—we will discuss several practical examples of these approaches and explore

ways for individual teaching assistants in this session to help facilitate (and manage) that creativity.

### *A Day in the Life: First Day Preparation for Teaching Assistants*

Kori A. Graves, History Department

Standing in front of a new group of students can be a daunting undertaking whether you are a new or experienced teaching assistant. This session will help you come up with practical and useful strategies for the first day that will allow you to set the tone for the semester. We will focus on three types of preparation to help you feel confident and relaxed.

You will learn how to:

**1. Be yourself and present your teaching style and personality as an asset in the classroom.**

Are you reserved and work best when you have your ideas clearly organized and documented? Do you prefer a more open-ended approach to teaching where you follow the flow of ideas as they come up? Are you a high-energy teacher and feel most effective if you can move around the room. Or are you a combination of these traits and more? Good! We will talk through strategies to avoid the pitfalls that may accompany any style and how to use the first day to prepare your students for the type of presentation they can expect from you throughout the semester.

**2. Communicate your expectations and establish your authority early.**

You do not have to be a rigid disciplinarian to impress on students the role they play in section and ultimately the grade they will receive. By stating and/or restating your expectations you reinforce your role as a facilitator and you remind students that they are responsible for their education. Making clear and consistent demands on students also allows you to avoid confusion concerning your role in and outside of the classroom. You can be friendly but there is a very real power differential that you have to acknowledge in order to successfully teach.

**3. Establish a working relationship with your professor/lecturer and other teaching assistants who can be important allies throughout the semester.**

There really is something comforting about hearing how other teaching assistants work through challenging classroom dynamics and the experiences of others will give you ideas to help you work with the range of students you will encounter. When you need to know how to draw out the quiet student or tone down the enthusiastic talker, find a teacher you admire and ask for suggestions. You can also learn a lot from teachers who have styles dramatically different from yours and you can observe their tactics in a visit to their section. You are not expected to know everything and developing comfort with admitting that you are learning too will free you up to enjoy teaching. With the suggestions of others, you gain

opportunities to address mistakes and change the course of a section throughout the semester.

## ***Realizing Your Personal Teaching Style and Adjusting It to Suit Classroom Dynamics***

Josh David Jackson, Communication Arts Department

### **Develop your own personal teaching style**

All teachers—novices and veterans—should relentlessly strive to create a constructive, supportive, and challenging learning environment through:

- coming across as knowledgeable in the subject matter.
- effectively and clearly describing class expectations and assignments.
- being positive, confident, and enthusiastic.
- maintaining language and a teaching pace appropriate for each individual section.
- attempting to capture and renew students' attention and interest with each new topic.

In order to reach these objectives, you must consciously and continuously develop a teaching style that reflects your strengths as a leader/facilitator and compliments the educational goals you set for yourself and your students. To do so, try pulling from a variety of practices and resources. First, look inward: How do you define learning? What teachers from your own time as a student did you find particularly effective? What tactics, approaches, and activities did they employ? Second, consult your colleagues: What techniques do they favor? What positive and negative experiences have they had with similar classes? Finally, consider what methods might be most useful with regards to your specific course and students: What kinds of instruction (prescriptive, confrontational, informative) might be most useful? What learning techniques (summarization, mnemonic devices, collaboration, visual aids and clips, guided writing, games, presenting material, teaching others) would best lend themselves to the topic?

### **Generate a teaching philosophy statement**

One of the most productive ways of articulating your beliefs about the teaching and learning processes is by writing a teaching philosophy statement—a document you might find useful in the future when applying for teaching positions, awards, and grants. While statements should be between one and two pages in length, there is no fixed format for what you should write, and you are encouraged to express your ideas about your teaching goals, beliefs, inspirations and methods in any way you see fit (such as by utilizing illustrations from your own teaching experience, quotes that have inspired you, descriptive imagery, or a Q&A-like arrangement). Regardless of which format you chose make sure to use concise, concrete language and logical organization. Samples of and more information about teaching philosophy statements can be found online at

<http://ftad.osu.edu/portfolio/philosophy/philosophy.html> and <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/teaching/philosophy.html>.

### **Customize and involve your students in the process of learning**

Get to know the names, goals, and pursuits of your students as quickly as possible in order to create a personalized teaching experience. Arm yourself with a diverse inventory of educational techniques and learning exercises, and determine which of these methods your students might find most stimulating, thought provoking, and effective. Allow students to participate in the process of educating each other. Adapt the material (questions, examples, assignments) to their interests and encourage them to bring in their own experiences and concerns to the topics or readings. Make them feel like the learning process is self-determined (that their needs and desires, at least in part, shape the lesson) and personally relevant (allowing students to evaluate and consider the issue within a frame that includes their personal interests and prior experiences).

### **Keep things dynamic by asking questions**

One of the best ways of adapting your teaching style to suit class dynamics is by asking probing, thoughtful questions as a means of summary, developing a rapport, gathering information about your students' interests, opinions, and experiences, and, finally, gauging how well they've understood and interpreted what they've learned in class. Well-worded and open-ended questions allow students to evaluate, scrutinize, apply, or otherwise articulate a response to the material. Moreover, questions can be useful in clarifying student responses ("So what you're saying is . . .") for yourself and others in section. Be sure, however, to allow an adequate amount of time for students to prepare an answer—experienced teachers wait as long as twenty seconds before offering additional prompts.

### ***Get Them Comfortable and Get Them Communicating: Some Tips for Encouraging Participation in a Foreign Language Classroom***

Rachel Klevar, Spanish and Portuguese Department

One bit of advice you will most likely hear at some point during your training to be a foreign language teaching assistant is that you should rely on the textbook to help you plan your lessons. While it is true that there is no need to "reinvent the wheel" for every lesson, you may find that relying primarily on textbook exercises does not generate excitement or promote much participation from your students. In order to encourage communication in the target language and increase participation, it is important to supplement the textbook with some adaptable communicative activities that are fun and help the students feel more comfortable in the classroom.

The easiest, and I think most effective, way to help your students feel comfortable in the classroom is to begin every class session with three to five minutes of informal

student announcements in the target language. These announcements can cover the gamut: cultural or current events, happenings around campus, personal stories, etc. I have found that announcements in the target language not only help students practice their language skills but also allow them to get to know one another better. Follow-up questions by the instructor encourage more dialogue and help keep other students engaged.

In addition to daily announcements, I would strongly suggest developing supplemental communicative activities. It is important to vary the activities so that some are done in pairs, others in small groups and some involving the whole class. Paired interviews, when personalized and relevant to students, are more interesting than working on exercises from the textbook. To make it more interactive, have the students try to predict their partners' answers and keep track of how many they guess correctly. For vocabulary practice, students can work in small groups and describe the words to each other in the target language. The group member who correctly guesses the word first receives a point. Activities such as these that strive to be both fun and communicative will help your students feel more comfortable and therefore more willing to participate.

### ***Small Group Work and Active Learning in the QR Classroom: Points to Think About***

Dan McGinn, Math Department

Teaching effectively in an active learning classroom is a difficult task that takes plenty of experience. Further, this classroom model might not be the most appropriate choice for many of the QR classes that new TAs are asked to teach. While I don't pretend to have all of the answers, here are a few points to consider if you are considering trying systems other than the all too common 10 minute quiz/10 minute lesson review/ 30 minutes of answering questions about the homework system.

**\* What are your goals for the course?** It might sound obvious, but I've found it very helpful to write down a very explicit list of goals before trying a new teaching style with a class. If, for example, having your students work on their justification skills is a goal, then that should be reflected in all that you do - from the kinds of questions you assign for homework, to how you respond to student solutions during class discussions, to how you grade exams. There are many different variations on the small group work/active learning/open-ended problem solving/discovery learning theme, and which you choose to implement should depend on the goals of the course. For example, solving complex problems in small groups may not be the most effective use of discussion time if your professor bases the students' grade entirely on multiple choice exams. Also, a class emphasizing creating a community of learners and a class emphasizing mathematical communication and evaluation skills might both employ small group work, but would probably look very different.

\* **What materials do I use?** When assigning work to the class, try to choose 'group-worthy problems'. There are many criteria by which to decide if a problem is group-worthy. Open-ended questions are great, but can be the hardest to manage in the classroom. Questions with multiple solution strategies, or questions where you ask the students to solve the problem in three different ways are good choices to enrich the whole-class discussion after group work. For larger projects, it might be helpful to assign problems where tasks can be broken down and assigned to group members (data collector, figure drawer, computer user, etc). This kind of classroom experience may be unfamiliar and perhaps even uncomfortable for students, especially in courses where students are used to answering  $x=7$  and moving on. Whatever method of assessment you choose, be sure that your expectations are clearly spelled out, and are repeated often throughout the course. You and your students should be on the same page about what constitutes a complete and correct answer.

\* **How do I run the classroom?** The role of the instructor in a discovery learning classroom has been described as a Guide on the Side as opposed to a more traditional Sage on the Stage. In most situations, you want to refrain from giving the answer, or perhaps even from identifying a correct answer that has been given. This means you need to be prepared with hints and leading examples if the class gets stumped on a problem. As the students are working, circulate the room, answering questions that come up and making sure that students are on-task and not off on a non-productive dead end. Don't be afraid to call the whole class together to stop and talk about common sources of confusion. In any small group setting, it is crucial to leave time at the end of the class/worksheet/unit to have some sort whole-class discussion. You should guide the discussion (though not necessarily lead it), and be sure to draw out the threads that the work was intended to cover. You might want to have a few canonical errors or solutions at hand should no groups stumble across them. Be ready to think on your feet and look ahead - will discussing that student's creative solution lead to interesting content and make connections to other parts of the course, or will it only confuse other students who aren't even sure if their own strategy works?

### ***Spicing Up Section: 15 Tips for Keeping Your Students Engaged***

Jason Shepard, School of Journalism and Mass Communication

The First Day. Goal: Students leave feeling reassured and excited about the course.

1. Visualize a successful day. If you're new, visit your classrooms ahead of time. Feel comfortable in the space.
2. Get students talking to each other. Plan an ice-breaker that allows them to meet others informally and formally. If they know a little about their colleagues, they're more apt to be more talkative as the semester goes on.
3. Distribute a section syllabus. Lay out your expectations. This forces you to set out a vision of your teaching approach at the start. You want them to leave feeling that you're in charge and know what you're doing.

Vary Activities. Make sections something students WANT to come to. Figure out what students want and what students need. Make the 50 minutes whiz by rather than drone on. Will you have something to offer the brightest student who's already mastered the reading and attended all lectures as well as the student who hasn't bought the books and skips lecture? Three possibilities to structure your section:

4. **Concept Review:** Get to class early and write on the chalkboard key lecture themes, terms, readings, questions, concepts, etc. Talk through them as students write them down. They appreciate having this extra review in their notes.
5. **Small Group Work:** The goal is to have everyone talk at every section, even if it's not to the whole class. Some options: Distribute a handout with hypothetical scenarios or review questions and ask groups to work through them, using a full-class discussion at the end to review. **Think-Pair-Share:** Have students talk with partners or group members about questions before full-class discussions.
6. **Leading Discussions:** Create high-level questions; be flexible; don't be afraid of silence after you ask a question ("wait time" is your friend). Have specific themes, angles, issues you want to tease out so the discussion as purpose.

Keys to Success: Plan, Execute, Reflect.

7. Use e-mail class list servs to tell students what to expect and how to prepare for next week's section. This forces you to plan ahead of time, but the dividends of better student preparation are worth it.
8. Plan more activities than you'll use. If something is a bust in one section, tweak it for the next section. Be overly prepared.
9. Execute your classes with enthusiasm. If it takes two venti coffees from Starbucks to get your energy up, slam them before class. Your excitement rubs off, and students will be more engaged if you are.
10. After each class, reflect on what worked and why. Don't beat yourself up over failures, but use them to make modifications.

Other Tips:

11. Talk informally to students before and after lecture and before and after section. Let them see different sides of you as you become more comfortable as a teacher.
12. Get to know students as individuals. This is particularly challenging, given that you may have 100 students. Have them fill out notecards on the first day. I've even taken digital pictures on the first day that I print out and staple to their notecards. Flipping through them before or after section helped me learn their names.
13. Write on the chalkboard an agenda for each session. Students like to know what they'll be doing.
14. Conduct a mid-semester evaluation. This is an invaluable tool to see how you're doing from the students' perspectives.
15. Find other TAs who you're comfortable talking with about your teaching. Talk about teaching over a beer or coffee. Ask a successful TA to observe you

teaching and provide feedback on your strengths and weaknesses. This may sound scary, but it's tremendously helpful.

## ***No More Silence! Talking about the Humanities***

Michelle Sizemore, English Department

Creating a vibrant discussion involves more than generating good topics and questions for conversation—it means creating a classroom environment in which students feel comfortable and compelled to talk. T.A.s in the humanities face unique challenges since students in intro-classes are frequently unclear on (or unconvinced of) the value of humanistic studies. Inexperienced students, moreover, don't immediately comprehend the forms of critical, analytical, and speculative interpretation and communication required in our disciplines. Recognizing some of these underlying reasons for student silence will put you in a better position to avert lackluster classroom participation. The tips below aren't sure-fire solutions, but I've found that these strategies increase class participation.

### **1) Talk about the Humanities; Talk about your Discipline**

What are the Humanities? Why are the Humanities important? Why is Discipline X important? I recommend raising and addressing these questions very explicitly and as soon as possible. Like most people, students aren't motivated to do things "just because." A classroom of students going through the motions—who have no clue why the university has required them to take your class and could care less about being there—makes for unbearably dull discussion. If possible, try to integrate the subject of the humanities or your discipline into a conversation about a topic or a text from the syllabus. Don't underestimate your students' ability and willingness to talk about disciplinary significance: they may not have the vocabulary for precisely articulating their thoughts, but I think you'll find they've given it some thought. For example, to the question of "Why do you think history is important?" you may get the answer of "studying it makes us better people." With a little digging, you'll have an exciting discussion on your hands. I suggest having as much fun as possible with the conversation: "What would we be missing if we erased literature from the planet?" You shouldn't expect to reach an agreement about the value of the humanities (after all, it's been a vigorously debated topic in academic circles for over forty years); it's worthwhile to hold the discussion to get them thinking self-reflectively on their education and to expose them to a range of viewpoints. Throughout the semester, try to reinforce the cultural relevance of your discipline with the aid of outside materials. Without being too obvious or insistent, challenge them to consider their study of discipline X in relation to a current cultural problem, debate, or issue. For example, in a literature class you might ask students to reflect on the nature of reading and writing in light of the recent debates about literacy in the digital age (e.g., *The Atlantic's* "Is Google Making us Stupid?" and *NY Times'* "Online, R U Reading?"). This last point brings us to #2 below.

## 2) Compare and Connect

Developing a comparative perspective helps students connect what they're doing in your classroom to other contexts; it not only helps students to avoid insular thinking, but also enables them to overcome the feeling that a particular subject of study is remote or removed from their experience. While a comparative framework facilitates a richer, more active discussion, you have no choice but to be efficient when building this framework into a fifty-minute class. One strategy is opening class with a hook—a brief, accessible discussion that stimulates student interest and leads to the main discussion. In my experience, just about any outside lens, text, or context will do, but popular culture is a particularly skillful way to jump-start discussion because it engages student interest and expertise. A brief conversation about Halloween in Madison, for example, can nicely set the stage for the role of disguise in text X and draw even the most reluctant students into the discussion.

## 3) Prepare Your Students for Discussion

Sometimes students are quiet for more obvious reasons: they're not doing the work or they're having trouble keeping pace with the discussion. Unfortunately, students sometimes get the impression they can cruise on BS in humanities classes, wrongly perceiving discussion to be so subjective or so lax as to allow them to get away without careful reading or without reading at all. Despite my initial reservations about monitoring the work of college students, I've discovered that students actually want extra motivation to complete their work on time (whether they enjoy it or not). Response papers and quizzes are useful strategies for ensuring timely completion of work and thoughtful participation. If you decide to implement these strategies, it's best to start at the very beginning of the semester: make it a policy in your syllabus. Finally, for students who need extra time to gather their thoughts, it can be very difficult to enter the conversation. Send discussion questions to the class a few days in advance to ensure that everyone has equal opportunity to contribute.

## *Acclimating International TAs*

Sainath Suryanarayanan, Zoology Department

1. **An interactive performance-** From one perspective, you as a TA in a classroom are a key part of an interactive performance. Hence not only is the teaching material (content) important, but the *way in which you communicate* it (form) is of at least equal importance. The form comes even more sharply into focus in the case of an international TA, presumably from a different culture. Unintended postures, gestures or tones of voice could be easily misconstrued as intimidating or hostile. Here are some guidelines that will help-

- i) **Be aware (and beware) of your body**, of the way it stands, moves, talks and/or

reacts to students in the class setting. Project your voice. While listening to a student speak in a discussion/question-answer setting, smile rather than presenting a knotted brow which could be mistaken as a sign of disapproval.

ii) **Inter-personal space-** Culturally conditioned differences in perception of inter-individual space can be another source of tension, especially in settings requiring facilitation of hands-on activities. Maintain a distance of at least one foot from the nearest student(s) with whom you are communicating.

iii) **Language issues-** Do not be afraid of your accent (the most spoken language in the world is English with an accent!). Acknowledge the differences without feeling ashamed. At the same time, take care to articulate clearly. Use multi-media and/or the blackboard to ensure that content delivery does not solely depend on your accentuated voice.

### ***How to Teach Writing in Five Minutes or Less***

Shannon Withycombe, History of Science Department

One issue that can cause a lot of stress in a new or experienced TA is how to teach writing skills. In many of the Humanities and Social Science classes available at UW, our students are expected to pump out essays with little or no instruction. So how do you integrate writing instruction into a section that is already full with course content?

#### **1. Utilize course readings as examples of good and bad writing.**

- It's very difficult to be a good writer if you're not made aware of what makes good writing, and can see it in action. You have a wealth of writing already built into the course with the readings, so use them to model writing.
- Very often you'll come across an article used in the class that has a clear thesis and well-researched evidence. Point this out to your students. Direct them not only to the content of their readings, but also to how they are written. Pointing out articles that aren't as clear in arguments or evidence also gives students an opportunity to work on fixing bad writing.
- Try to get your students to pick out the thesis statement in readings from the beginning of the semester. Sometimes, asking "what's the thesis of this article?" can be an intimidating question, so try more informal question in the beginning ("what's so great about this article?") and work your way up to getting your students to realize they've been identifying a thesis all along.

#### **2. Integrate quick writing exercises into sections.**

- You don't have much time to devote to writing, so devise short exercises that can make a clear point.
- If you plan on doing more than one or two of these exercises, start out simple – identify a thesis statement in a paragraph – and work your way up in difficulty – write a thesis statement based on this evidence.

- Mix up how you do these exercises to keep your students engaged. Do some as individual exercises, some as partnered or small group ones. Giving your students a chance to talk it over with each other before having to give you an answer can ease the tension that many students feel about writing.

### 3. Use **grading rubrics and other ways to set expectations that work.**

- For many students, much of their tension over writing stems from a sense of frustration over not knowing what makes good writing. You can ease some of this tension by being very clear about what you expect for each writing assignment.
- Show your students your grading rubric before they have to turn in the paper. This can be a very detailed chart of everything you'll be looking for in their paper, or a list of a few main points that are necessary for achieving a good grade on the paper. Whatever kind of rubric you decide upon, stick to it. Nothing will increase the tension associated with writing faster than a TA who changes grading criteria after the papers have all been handed in.
- Give your students a chance to run ideas or small parts of the paper by you before they hand in the assignment. You can identify a lot of misunderstandings and problems just by having all your students run their thesis statements by you. Beware of telling your students that you will read drafts (having to read 80 papers twice is not a fun activity), but talking through an outline during office hours can do a world of good.

### 4. Give **useful and efficient feedback**

- If you gave your students a rubric or some sort of criteria for getting a good grade, stick to that! It will make it easier on yourself and make the grading clearer if you focus your comments on the three (or four, or twelve) points you communicated to your students.
- If you have more than one writing assignment during the semester, start out with fewer criteria and work your way up. For example for the first paper of the semester I might only grade on the thesis statement and the evidence, but by the end of the semester I might have added writing, originality, and historical context to that list.
- Your students will not feel better about writing if all the feedback they receive is negative. Remember to always incorporate at least one thing each student does well when you discuss his or her performance.

5. Finally, **remember that there are other resources out there for your students who want to improve their writing.** Refer students who are struggling to the Writing Center (<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/>). This is a great place for quick tips and in-depth writing instruction, both online and in person.

## *Teaching with Visual Materials & Technologies*

Beth A. Zinsli, Art History Department

Incorporating visual materials into the discussion of a text:

**\* Select an image or set of images that correspond in some direct and meaningful way to the course material.** Often images that relate on an historical or cultural level to a topic or that visually describe or refer to concepts in the reading help encourage discussion. Photographs, paintings, videos, charts and graphs, models, and maps help to initiate the discussion of a required text. See the list below for some visual material resources on the web that are easy to include in a PowerPoint slide or to print out as hard copies.

**\* Introduce the visual materials to the students by suggesting the connections you see between the images and the larger course subject or specific discussion topic.** Provide a bit of context or background information about the image (without giving everything away) and use (seemingly simple) leading questions like, “What is happening in this image?” or “Describe this image,” which will often elicit multiple points of view from students. Then move into more targeted questions like, “How does the image relate to today’s topic or reading?”

**\* While visual materials are an excellent way to prompt fruitful discussion** (and avoid blank stares and long, awkward silences from students), **they can also distract from the required materials.** Be contentious about steering the conversation back to the reading and hitting all the major points in the lesson plan. Phrases that require specific answers from the text work well, such as “What would the author say about this image?” or “Pick out one quote from the reading that you think applies to the ideas presented by this image.” Cues like these will often serve to refocus the students’ attention on the reading once the discussion is flowing freely.

The practical side of teaching with visual materials and technologies:

**\* The type of visual materials available to TAs often depends on the resources in the classrooms to which they are assigned.** Not all buildings or rooms are equipped for digital A/V presentations (see the list below for places on campus resources for such equipment), but there are low(er)-tech options, including printed images (even black and white), transparencies, posters, even drawings—most classrooms at least have a chalk or marker board. For a small group, a laptop screen can serve as well. TAs can even send students web links to images or videos before the class meeting and ask them to come prepared to discuss what they saw on the web.

**\* When using A/V equipment in the classroom, be sure to test it out well before the class meeting time.** A PowerPoint file that won’t open, a digital projector that won’t project from the laptop or a missing cord or connector will waste valuable classroom time and the students will completely lose focus, making it even more difficult to get a discussion going once things do work. If unfamiliar with a piece of equipment, read through the manual or consult the A/V staff person of the loaning department. Remember the power cord, too.

A few Internet resources for visual materials:

- \* Google Image Search--<http://images.google.com/>
- \* Library of Congress Digital Collections--<http://www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html>
- \* University of Wisconsin Digital Collections-- <http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/index.shtml>
- \* Wisconsin Historical Society photostream--<http://www.flickr.com/photos/whsimages/>
- \* Web Gallery of Art--<http://www.wga.hu/index.html>

UW Campus resources for visual technologies:

- \* Department of Information Technology (DoIT) for software training--  
<http://www.doit.wisc.edu>
- \* Center for Instructional Materials and Computing (CIMC)--  
<http://cimc.education.wisc.edu/services/equipment.html>
- \* L&S Learning Support Services (LSS)-- <http://babel.lss.wisc.edu/facilities/av/>
- \* UW InfoLabs equipment check out system-- <http://laptop.library.wisc.edu/>