Graduate Student Teaching and Some Common Suggestions on Teaching Assistant Evaluation Forms

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You all probably know that faculty members will be coming to your class in order to evaluate your teaching. I have gone through the comments on evaluation forms for the past few years and distilled the most common complaints. By knowing some of these common problems beforehand, you should be able to start improving your teaching methods long before the evaluations take place.

First of all, it might not hurt to review some very serious things you should never do:

1. In front of the undergrads, do not say bad things about faculty members or other grad students. You may have some negative opinions about some of the faculty/grad students. Of course it is OK to talk about these with other grad students, but never to the undergraduates. Never ask students who their favorite professors are and why, etc. In front of undergraduate students, you should always act as if each of the faculty and grad students is doing an absolutely perfect job. Doing otherwise is analogous to a salesman who criticizes his boss and coworkers in front of customers.

2. Do not think of your classes as dating pools. You should NEVER develop a romantic relationship with a student in your class.

3. Be very careful how you handle academic dishonesty. You should never make accusations in front of other students. Usually, the whole issue can be avoided. If someone seems to be cheating, go and stand or sit next to him or her without giving any reason why. They usually get the message and you don’t open yourself to a possible lawsuit by making accusations that you might have difficulty proving. Involve a faculty member if necessary.

4. Never allow food or drink in the lab. Obviously, this is a liability issue. You should understand that if someone ingests some toxic chemical you could be sued in addition to the university.

Some common suggestions on forms from earlier semesters are:

1. Rise above the lab manual. Remember that you are preparing your lectures as though you were a professor giving a course. The first time you teach a lab, you will probably have to read sections in the textbook to get a firm understanding of the topic. Don’t rely solely on the supervised teaching meetings to provide you with this information. As faculty members, one of our responsibilities is to make you self sufficient, and we expect you to show considerable independence when preparing your lectures.
2. Make sure that each student is active: i.e., circulate rather than focus on one student or group of students. At most, let only two students share a microscope and, then, make sure that one of them doesn't do all the adjusting. Walk around the room while the lab is going on and ask instructive questions.

3. Remember that there is nothing wrong with saying "I don't know the answer to that question, but I'll look it up and get back with you."

4. Write on the blackboard! Students remember things better if they are given visual aids. Drawings are also helpful. Also, the students will be able to keep up with you better if you are taking the time to write notes on the board. Remember to write large enough so that students in the back of the room can see.

5. Walking around and writing on the board keeps student's attention. NEVER lecture while sitting down. NEVER read from notes or, even worse, read directly from the lab manual. You should speak extemporaneously and memorize what you want to talk about before coming to class. To make sure you don't leave anything out, it helps to have an outline. Make eye contact with the students as you are talking. Be sure to look around the room rather than talk at one group. If you don't do these things you are boring; that's all there is to it.

6. Pause frequently and ask for questions. You have to be careful not to say "does everyone understand." Trust me; people who don't understand won't answer you. You might try asking individual students if they understand. Repeat complex/critical points more than once.

7. At the beginning of class, NEVER tell students how experiments are supposed to work. Let the students "discover" the results for themselves. At the end of lab, you should summarize the results. You might want to call on individuals, and ask what they found out. Then check with other groups to see if they encountered something different.

8. To be effective you must practice your lectures ahead of time. You should also come to lab before class to make sure that you know where everything is.