

## Opportunities for Professional Development as an Instructor (even at a Research Institute)

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I can still remember exactly how I felt walking into my first section as a TA - like a total fraud. The only thing in my head was a snippet from a lecture one of my undergrad sociology professors gave. When we take on new roles we use our cultural understanding of that role to inform our behavior. In his words, we “fake it till we make it.” So I did. I stood in front of the class and pretended to be a teacher as best I could. I was in my second year of graduate school, had completed the brief training our university provided, and didn’t have a clue what I was doing. My only hope was that the students wouldn’t figure out what a fraud I was. How was I going to learn to be this person I was pretending to be?

In graduate school, especially at a research institute, we are constantly bombarded with resources for professional development as researchers. Unfortunately, the opportunities for professional development as instructors are harder to come by. Depending on your department, they may even be non-existent. This means we are faced with a choice. We can simply “fake it till we make it” and go through the motions until we’ve slowly convinced ourselves and others that we are, in fact, legitimate instructors OR we can actively seek out opportunities for professional development. Below are some of the opportunities I’ve found valuable in my own development as an instructor (or failed to take advantage of and wish I had):

### **Observe Others.**

Most of us have to do this because we are required to sit in on the classes in which we are a TA. I know many TAs (including myself) are guilty of using this time to catch up on emails or other work and completely tune out what is happening in the classroom. If we actively observe and think critically, this is an opportunity we can use to become better instructors. How could the instructor be more effective? What seems to be working? How are the students responding? We can also seek out professors in the department that have a reputation for being excellent teachers and observe their lectures.

### **Challenge Yourself. Guest Lecture. Invite Feedback.**

We may be relatively comfortable in front of 30 students in a section, but what would it be like to give a lecture in front of over 500 students? I actually contemplated running out the back door the first time I faced a lecture hall of this size. Instead, I took a deep breath, had a surprisingly fun time, and



grew as an instructor. Many professors offer TAs the opportunity to lecture if they'd like. Take it. If they don't offer this opportunity, ask for it. Invite feedback from others when you have the chance. If you can't find a place to lecture, invite observers into your own section. Even when it's painful, the more feedback we can get from peers and professors, the better.

### **Organize a Panel of "Top Teachers"**

We were lucky enough to have a professor in our department organize a series of presentations on teaching. It provided a chance to discuss various topics and hear his opinion on issues we have in the classroom. If something like this doesn't exist in your department, feel free to organize it yourself. Ask professors that have a reputation of being the top teachers in your program to share their tricks of the trade with graduate students. This is particularly useful for discipline specific teaching issues.

### **Explore Existing Opportunities.**

I can't tell you how many times I've heard graduate students complain about the ways in which we are "thrown into the fire" with little or no training as TAs. Many of these complaints are justified, but there are opportunities out there. For example, on our campus the University Teaching Program provides advanced training for university level teaching. Search out these opportunities and make time to take part in them. If you're like me, programs such as these will make you realize there are many important aspects of teaching you haven't even thought about.

### **Think. Be Aware.**

With all of our other responsibilities as graduate students, it is easy to start going

through the motions as a TA. I've caught myself doing it, especially at times when my own coursework is challenging or I'm extra excited about the research I'm working on. How much have you thought about exactly what you're doing. What are your goals for the class? How are you approaching the material you're teaching? What are you hoping students take away from your lesson? When I stop and think about these things, I often realize I need to make changes - changes that are clear only when I stop going through the motions. It is difficult to improve at something we are not thinking about or focusing on.

We can find and create resources for professional development as instructors even if they aren't handed to us. In creating them, we not only help ourselves grow as instructors, but also contribute to an environment that is more conducive to the professional development of other graduate students. Like I said, we have choices. Actively seeking out opportunities for developing as instructors doesn't mean there won't still be moments and situations where we feel like a fraud, but it does mean we'll be on a much straighter path to "making it" than if we simply continue to "fake it."

