

How to earn good TA evaluations without sacrificing your values (or your sanity)

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In the first week of every quarter, amidst preparing for new classes, a new TAship, and other new obligations, I always encounter that bone-chilling moment when I remember that I can now view my TA evaluations from the previous quarter. This moment is an anxiety-ridden one for me. I remember all the mistakes I made, the problems that were completely out of my control, and I wonder how many students will make me doubt my chosen profession. Not that my TA evaluations are usually bad; actually, I take pride in my teaching and think that they are usually pretty good (certainly not the best, but pretty good nonetheless). But in that moment, I wonder why I am a TA at all. The self-doubt creeps in, and I spend hours dwelling on the one disparaging comment that I receive instead

of looking at the overall picture. And I wonder whether I should have just taken the easy way out—the golden ticket to shining, perfect (and, did I mention, EASY) TA evaluations: grade inflation. This nail-biting process has led me to the age-old conundrum: To grade inflate, or not to grade inflate?

That is the question... Now first of all, let me just say that I am by no means arguing that the only way to get good TA evaluations is by inflating grades. Plenty of people have gotten stellar TA evaluations by just being their charismatic selves. However, I would argue that some TAs either engage or are at least tempted to engage in this practice. And it does have several advantages. First of all, it's a time saver. You don't have to spend your whole weekend grading papers if everyone falls into the A and B categories. Nor do you have to spend office hours pouring over every detail of a student's paper who just can't understand why you gave her a D. This allows you to focus on your own research and course work, which, let's be honest, is really the reason you came to grad school in the first place. Second, it's likely to ensure students will like you. Good evals, here I come!

However, despite these advantages, I would argue that it does nothing for the students, or for the TA in the long run. Giving students (and yourself) the easy way out does nothing to help prepare them (or you) for the job market. Instead, it gives you both an unrealistic arrogance about your abilities, which are likely to be shattered once you both reach the real world. Therefore, I would like to make some suggestions for the TAs out there, who, like me, want to try to do it the "right" way. It's not quite an exact science, but in my experience, there are a few relatively easy things that TAs can do to



improve evaluations without sacrificing their integrity:

- Give the appearance of organization. I do this in my sections by making a powerpoint for every section. Even if there is very little information on it, even if it only contains discussion questions, even if it contains the exact information that I would tell them without a powerpoint—the fact remains that students like visual aids. They make you look organized, even if you legitimately were organized before. I also like to start every section with an “announcements” slide, letting students know about upcoming homework, papers, assignments, exam dates, etc. and reminding them of my office hours.

Caveat: Don't put EVERYTHING on your powerpoint. If you do, students will ask you to post it on iLearn and then stop showing up to section. You should use it as an outline, not as a script.

- Use some interactive learning techniques. This is not the same as asking “any questions?” after every slide (although that is probably good practice too!). Ask them what they think about an idea or theory. Does it relate to their lives? Do they agree or disagree? Ask them to come up with some criticisms or limitations. Not only does this help the students to foster critical thinking skills, but it also limits the amount of preparation that you have to do before section.

Caveat: Resist the temptation to answer your own questions. Usually, when asking

discussion questions, students will be taken aback since they are usually just lectured at. If they remain silent, beat them at their own game. Wait 10 or 20 seconds before giving them a hint. Most likely, the silence will be so awkward that someone will say something to get the conversation started.

- Whenever possible, try to pepper in some pop-culture references. Is there anything going on in the news/celebrity gossip that even tangentially relates to the topic at hand? Doing so grabs their attention right from the start. Now, this may be easier as a sociologist—Lindsay Lohan's latest encounter with the criminal justice system may more easily dovetail with a class on criminology than a biology class. But if you can make it work, do it!

Caveat: Make sure not to let the students get you too sidetracked. I could talk about Lindsay Lohan all day, but at some point I have to start talking about criminological theory, or I'm not doing my job!

- And, finally, the most important point: Talk to other TAs about how to be a more effective teacher! As much as I might like to take credit, I certainly did not come up with the above points all on my own. I have found that the single most helpful tool that TAs have are other TAs. Talk about how you deal with problems, how you keep students engaged. Talk to TAs both inside and outside your department. While these tips might not result in receiving “World's Greatest TA” coffee mugs from all your students, learning how to do these well can help us all become more



effective teachers. And, as an added bonus, those TA evaluations should improve too. Remember, though, that becoming a successful teacher is a lifelong process. However, working on these above strategies is certainly a good start, and good practice for the future.

