

TA Training Seminar: Activities to Choose From

(07 Oct 2005)

Introduction

This document describes the activities to choose from for the duration of the quarter. The short list here is expanded into a one-paragraph description of each activity further below.

These activities are specifically chosen to give you practice in some aspects of teaching and to encourage reflection on the teaching and learning process. Each of them addresses one or more of the learning objectives for the seminar, as discussed in class and outlined in a separate document on the course web.

Doing:

- Be a Tutor
- Mentor a New TA
- Lead (Part of) a CSE599A Session
- Organize a Role-Playing Session
- Practice Teaching Us (a.k.a. Microteaching)
- Observe a Fellow TA and Provide Feedback to Them
- Be Observed in Class and Discuss Experiences with Peers and/or the Instructor

Reading (and Writing):

- Read a Book and Write Your Reaction
- Do a Literature Review

Writing:

- Keep a Teaching Journal
- Reflect on Your Teaching Experiences
- Write a Learner's Autobiography
- Write Your Teaching Philosophy Statement
- Write a Short Research Paper

Constraints, Deadlines, etc.

1. To earn credit in this seminar, you need to select two of the above activities, in consultation with the instructor, and complete them by the corresponding deadlines. If you are passionate about an idea / activity related to the learning objectives of the seminar but not on this list, please talk to me.

2. Select your two activities from different groups (e.g., one from the "Doing" group and another one from "Writing"). I ask that students who are not TAs this quarter choose one of their activities from the "Doing" group.

3. Deadlines:

- **Friday, Oct 14 @ 6pm:** Email me (valentin@cs) which two activities you intend to do during the quarter. I will respond to you individually by email.

- **Friday, Nov 11 @ 6pm:** Intermediate checkpoint stage. Depending on what you have chosen to do, this will be a short report about what you have accomplished so far and what still remains ahead. In the case of writing assignments, this is the point where I'd like to see an outline and a very rough first draft of what you will write.

- **Tuesday, Dec 06 @ noon:** All writing projects and written follow-ups of other activities are due. The method of submission will be email (and attachments) unless otherwise arranged ahead of time.

Advice: You are strongly encouraged to do as much of your activities as you can early in the quarter since your graduate courses and teaching appointments will more than likely demand most (if not all) of your time as the end of the quarter approaches.

Description of Activities

Doing:

Be a Tutor

Every quarter there is a need for tutors to help undergraduate students in their 300 and 400 level courses – in this department and in others. A tutor selects which courses they would like to tutor in and typically meets with one or more students for 1 hour every week. The job is to serve as a facilitator to help students understand concepts and work through problems. You do not have to solve the problems, just point students in a useful direction.

As the quarter approaches its end, write a 1 page reflective essay about your experience tutoring. Here are some questions to address in your essay. Was tutoring more or less difficult than you anticipated? Why? Did it help you improve your teaching skills and, if so, how specifically? What would you do differently if you were to tutor again in the future? In addition to the reflective aspects, include some context such as which course you tutored, how many students there were, how many meetings, etc.

Mentor a New TA

If you have prior experience TAing, you are welcome to sign up as a mentor of someone who is new to the job. It can be someone in the class or someone who teaches, but is not enrolled in our seminar (e.g., there are many undergraduate TAs who may be interested). The idea is that you meet with the new TA several times during the quarter to find out what challenges they are facing as teaching assistants and to be able to give them useful advice while the challenges are still burning. I can help link you with TAs who are interested in being mentored. As the end of the quarter approaches, write a 1 page reflective essay about your experiences mentoring. Some questions to address are: What experiences does the new TA go through which you had encountered when you were starting? Do you feel that the mentoring process made you a more effective TA? Why or why not? What suggestions would you give to future mentors of new TAs?

Lead (Part of) a CSE599A Session

You are welcome to organize and help facilitate the discussion / activities of a CSE599A session of your choice. We will work together in preparing for this, so don't fear being left alone.

After the facilitation, write a 1 page reflective essay about your experience, both in class and during the preparation. Questions to address include: What were the difficult parts in planning the discussion / activities? Did the discussion / activity go as smoothly as you had hoped? Why or why not? What would you do differently if you were to lead this session again (say, during next year's seminar)?

Organize a Role-Playing Session

Organize a group of TAs, other students, and possibly some faculty members to get together for a role-playing session. A role-playing session provides opportunities for students to practice “challenging” situations involving professors, students, and other TAs. Some classical situations are disruptive classroom behavior, students challenging the instructor / TA for their grades, students who are caught cheating, etc. I am volunteering to actively participate in whatever role you put me in.

After the session, write a 1 page reflective essay about your experiences. How realistic was the simulation? Have you encountered some of these challenging situations in class before? What did you learn about resolving conflicts as a TA? What other challenging situations may a TA encounter?

(Note: Some of this may sound mysterious now, but we'll discuss the value, use, and technique of role-playing when we talk about classroom management and interacting with students.)

Practice Teaching Us (a.k.a. Microteaching)

Microteaching is a service provided by CIDR to help teaching assistants and professors improve their teaching. They videotape you (and other TAs) presenting a 3-5 minute lecture on a topic of your choice. We then watch

each other's taped presentations and discuss what worked well during the presentations and what could be improved. Although it may seem fearful, it is very useful to see yourself from a different angle. I did this when I took this seminar a few years ago and would love to do it again if I were in your shoes!

After the activity, write a 1 page reflective essay about your microteaching experience. Here are some questions to address. Was microteaching helpful for you? Why or why not? What did you learn about yourself as a teacher? What did you notice about the teaching of others? What are some concrete things you would try in order to improve your presentations?

Microteaching sessions will be scheduled for late October to early November. We'll arrange the logistical details once we know how many are interested.

Observe a Fellow TA and Provide Feedback

Attend and observe another (willing) TA's quiz section at regular intervals during the quarter. Take notes about what you are noticing. After the quiz sections, discuss your observations with the TA. Then, prepare a 1 page reflective essay about your experience as an observer and provider of feedback. This writing is not intended to discuss the TA's strengths and weaknesses, but rather to focus on what you have learned through the process of observation – about yourself, about teaching, about providing effective feedback. Some questions to discuss in your essay are: What kinds of things did you talk about in your discussion with the TA? Was it easy, hard, overwhelming, helpful? What did you learn that could be applied to your own teaching practice? Include the name of the TA you observed, the course they teach, as well as the dates of your observations.

A sign-up sheet will be available shortly after we know who wants to observe and who wants to be observed.

Be Observed in Class and Discuss Experiences with Peers and/or the Instructor

This is the flip side of observing someone else teach. You're in the driver's seat now; others are just watching and giving you feedback later on. This is one of the best ways to find out what works in your teaching (for real, not in a simulation) – through the feedback you will hear from your observers.

I am personally volunteering to observe as many of you as the schedules will allow.

After the "observation sessions", meet with your observers – peers and/or the instructor – to discuss what worked and what could be improved from your view as well as from theirs.

Then, write a 1 page reflective essay about your experiences and what you have learned through the process – about yourself, about teaching, about receiving feedback from others. Some questions to discuss are: What were some important (in your view) points that were raised in the discussion? How did it feel to be observed and then to discuss how things looked from the audience's viewpoint? Include the name of the observers, the course you taught, as well as the dates of observation.

A sign-up sheet will be available shortly after we know who wants to observe and who wants to be observed.

Reading (and Writing):

Read a Book and Write Your Reaction

Read a book (or chapters from a book) about teaching and learning that discusses a topic of interest to you. Then, write a 2-3 page essay summarizing your reactions. What did you learn? What recommendations can you make to other TAs and professors? In your experience in the classroom (as a student) are professors and TAs generally following the strategies suggested in the book? If not, why not? Did you learn anything about yourself during the course of reading the material? Please do provide the context of which book (and which chapters) you read, as well as who was the author.

Do a Literature Review

Review the existing literature on a specific aspect of teaching and learning (of your choice) and write a short (2-3 pages) report about your findings. This could take a number of different formats, depending on your interests. An annotated bibliography, a summary of the state of the art and practice in the area of your choice, an integrated view of what is known about the area and what open questions still remain, or a similar format that you feel you can derive the most value from. Before you embark on looking through books and articles, I'd like to know what specific topic you have chosen, so that I can be maximally helpful.

Note: This process is very similar to what you will have to do for your General Exam one sunny day. Trying out the process early on can only give you some invaluable practice and perspective.

Writing:

Keep a Teaching Journal

Keep a record of your experiences as a teaching assistant during the quarter. This journal does not need to be a polished piece of writing – just something useful for you. It requires that you start right away, since the more time (weeks) you cover, the more things of interest you are likely to notice. Updating your journal about once a week is a good rule of thumb. I will ask to see it once or twice during the quarter. No one else is going to view your journal, so it is safe to consider this piece of writing confidential.

Reflect on Your Teaching Experiences

Collect a set of notes about what you're learning through your practice of the art of teaching. Then, write a short reflective essay (2-3 pages maximum) about your experiences. Discuss the following aspects: What surprised you? Were there things you didn't expect that happened or things that you did expect but that did not happen? What are two or three main take-away lessons that you would share with TAs who are just beginning? Although this activity is similar to a teaching journal, the emphasis here is on a coherently written essay, rather than merely a set of informal notes to yourself about your experiences.

Write a Learner's Autobiography

Choose a subject or skill (preferably outside of the area of computer science) that you have spent time learning. Write a short essay (2-3 pages maximum) about your experiences. Address the following questions in your writing. How did you become interested in the subject? Did the learning occur in a classroom or outside? Was a teacher or mentor directly involved or did you do most of the learning yourself? What teaching style(s) and/or learning style(s) helped you advance? Would you do anything differently if you were to start over again (or learn a similar subject / skill)?

Write Your Teaching Philosophy Statement

Write a 1 page statement of your teaching philosophy. Discuss how you approach teaching in general, what you strive to bring out in your students, what you believe to be the most important aspects that a teacher can contribute to a classroom, how your personal qualities fit in. One good way to approach this mentally is to imagine that you are applying for a teaching position (either at this university or at some other). What would you like to tell the recruiting committee about yourself that would give them the best idea of who you really are and also convince them that you are the best candidate for the position? You can find many useful resources for writing a teaching statement on CIDR's web site. One is here:

[http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/7\(2\)Statement.html](http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/7(2)Statement.html)

Write a Short Research Paper

Pick a topic related to teaching and learning that interests you and write a short paper (3-5 pages) around it. Unlike most of the activity types, this one is not meant to be reflective or personal in nature. Your paper can discuss your experiences with some concrete aspect of teaching and learning, relate those to the existing literature, or propose an altogether new way of looking at the practice of teaching and learning, perhaps one that reflects your personal views and experience from a different area.

Writing a paper is an ambitious goal, but it is certainly something that can be done. It does not have to be perfect at the end of the quarter, but it can be improved after that and submitted to a conference or workshop. I have done it several times in the past couple of years, even though this wasn't (at the time) the topic of my research – it was, however, irresistibly interesting to me to explore so I did it. I will certainly be there to help you if you choose to write a research paper.