Engaging First-Year Students in Large Lectures: The Teaching Assistant Experience
Project Goals

- Understand the experience first-year students are having in large lectures from the perspective of the teaching assistants.

- Triangulate data gathered from faculty interviews in same courses
The Subjects

Since the fall of 2009 we have interviewed 20 teaching assistants working in large first-year courses.

Time on Campus: Average four years  
(range from one semester to eight years)

Referred to CFYE by faculty in the faculty interview pool

- Chemistry (6)
- Economics (4)
- English (4)

- Mathematics (2)
- Philosophy (2)
- Sociology (2)
TA’s Undergraduate Background

• Attended colleges with small undergraduate populations and no teaching assistants
• Attended college as a commuter student
• Earned an Associates Degree before transferring to a Big 10 university
• Attended large universities with large lectures and TA’s
• International students who did undergraduate work in their home country
The Interviews

• Conducted by CFYE professional staff
• 30-120 minutes
• Held in location of TA’s choice, typically their office, the Union or a coffee shop
• Introduced office, project, how we got their contact information
• Areas of discussion:
  1. Training
  2. Working with departmental staff & faculty
  3. Teaching experiences
  4. Interaction with undergraduates
Themes from the Literature Review

- Training for TAs needs to meet multiple needs.
- TAs have a learning curve, training should be developmentally timed.
- TA teaching techniques are just like any other form of teaching, particularly high school teaching.
- TAs and faculty have different expectations about what should be done in discussion section.
Theme 1: Teaching Assistants are AMAZING Teachers

- “Discussion is where the bulk of the intellectual work takes place”
- “I try to do more in section than create lecture part 2”
- “I let the first-years ramble less - I keep them on a tighter leash”
- “Discussion section should be about discussion, not review”
Theme 1: Teaching Assistants are AMAZING Teachers

Classroom Innovations

• Get-to-know-each other activities
• Student led discussions
• Peer review of writing
• In-class group quizzes
• Pop culture videos
• In-class group problem solving
“My first semester enthusiasm was the only tool in my toolkit”

“I was tremendously awkward. There is a large gap between being good at math and being able to teach others”

“I try not to think about how bad a teacher I was in my first semester”

“I was terrified”
Theme 2: Formal Preparation to Become a Teaching Assistant Varies Dramatically by Department

• **Traditional**
  – college level orientation for new TAs
  – department specific administrative training

• **Hybrid**
  – & TAs leading panels, Q&As, example class activities, “what to do if” scenarios

• **Supportive**
  – & Extending training; encouraging observation and feedback among TAs and from faculty
“As an undergrad I took a lot of large lectures and I draw on my experiences for ideas”

“I want to give students in my sections the personal touch that I felt as an undergrad”

“I based my discussions on what I could recall being difficult when I first took Chemistry”

“Teaching for the first time was trial by fire”

“We organized a grading party for the first paper. It was an opportunity to ask questions and get feedback from the other TAs – it was helpful”
Theme 3: Informal Preparation and Mentoring is Critical to TA Success

- TAs rely on their own undergraduate experiences as a guide
- TAs rely on the suggestions and support of other TAs
- TAs rely heavily on trial and error
- Teaching in residence halls helped TAs better understand student life
Theme 4: TA and Faculty Relationships Vary

• “My role in lecture is to laugh at his jokes”
• “It’s a dictatorship, but a benevolent one”
• “I like a professor who is willing to handle a problem, who will step in on a difficult case”
• “Some of them we hate because they aren’t prepared for their lectures, but most come prepared”
Theme 4: Faculty and TA Relationships Vary

- There is no standard, every relationship is completely different
- TAs prefer faculty who provide some parameters and support, but also allow for independence and professional development
- TAs view faculty as employers rather than mentors or teachers
- Many TAs are left to fend for themselves
- TAs are confused by how they are assigned to teaching assignments
Theme 5: TAs are Intentional and Thoughtful about their Relationships with Students

• “I know my Midwestern background is an advantage for me”

• “My first semester I put too much of myself out to the students and they took advantage of it”

• “I know my accent is intimidating for some students, especially first-year students who are unaccustomed to working with international instructors”

• “I become friends with students on Facebook; my sections form Facebook groups; I suggest they form study groups”
Theme 5: TAs are Intentional and Thoughtful about their Relationships with Students

- TAs are intentional about their persona and their boundaries with students
- TAs go above and beyond what is expected to assist students
- TAs like working with first year students in particular and want to see them succeed
- TAs have a variety of creative ways to encourage students to attend office hours
• TAs provide the backbone of the undergraduate educational experience
• Most TAs do not receive very much formal preparation and support to perform their jobs
• Informal preparation and collegial support are critical
• Most TAs are working far more hours per week than their contract specifies
Our Favorite Ideas and Techniques

• Anonymous Stereotype Discussion
• Student pairs lead a portion of discussion
• Small groups with note taker; have groups turn in notes
• Renamed an assignment “the take home part of the exam”
• Do mid-term evaluations
• Class contact box on syllabus
Ideas for faculty and departmental interventions

• “I like it when the Professor introduces me on the first day of lecture and says ‘Our TA is going to be great!’”

• Develop training based on TA developmental needs, “need to know”

• Encourage and facilitate community building among TAs
Next Steps- Continue the Conversation

- Brown Bag in September- 9/22/10
- First Year Conference- 11/12/10
- CFYE can help with TA training
- DELTA- Expedition in Learning- First-Year Experience
- Visit our website for more information
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