

Negotiating the TA-Student Relationship and its Challenges

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A TA'S ROLE IS A COMPLEX ONE

1. Teaching Assistants are both teachers and students at the same time, called upon to stay focused on their students' needs as they grapple with their own personal, professional and academic concerns.
2. Teaching Assistants may be in dual roles with their students. Some may take other classes with the same students they teach. Some may work in the same department, or have mutual friends.
3. Teaching Assistants are in parallel relationship with their students. They face similar or parallel struggles at a different level (Bruscia, 2001, in Forinash, Ed., 2001, p. 291)
4. Teaching Assistants come to teaching with their own unique life-views, life histories, strengths, and challenges.
5. Teaching Assistants are learning at a different level than they teach. They must switch their focus, and their whole way of viewing and communicating material every time they change from student to teacher.

BALANCING THAT COMPLEX ROLE CAN BE DIFFICULT

1. Teaching Assistants may feel scared and inadequate, especially when they are new to the role, or new to a class.
2. They may over-identify with their students, and lose appropriate boundaries, or create overly-rigid ones.
3. They may lose sight of what their students need and give them what they themselves need or want from those who teach them.
4. They may be so focused on building good relationship, and being liked, that they forget to stay focused on what the students need to learn, how, and why.
5. They may work so hard to be a 'good teacher' that they burn themselves out and fail to do their own work.
6. They may let assumptions, biases, blind-spots, and personal issues affect how they relate to students.
7. They may struggle with finding a way to clearly teach to the level and needs of their students, especially if they are new to teaching undergraduates, and immersed in their own deep, advanced learning

NEGOTIATING YOUR ROLE AS A TA

KEEPING PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR LEVEL OF SKILL

Excellence in teaching is something to strive for over an entire career in academe. You are a teacher, but you are also a 'student in teaching', so be patient with your level of skill, while consistently striving for excellence. Ask for supervision when you need it. Be honest with yourself, self-reflective, open to and responsive to feedback. Allow yourself to learn from your students, and your teachers, and allow them both to learn from you.

UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTIONS

Consider the lens you're looking through. What are you making this interchange mean? Are assumptions adding to your fear, discomfort or anger? Are you treating this situation as new, or coming in with every prior conflict with the student foremost in your mind? Are you affected by your own stress or exhaustion, or the struggles you yourself are facing in your academic work, or struggles with professors.

Consider the lens your student is looking through. What might be going on for the student? What might he or she be making the interchange mean? Are there assumptions adding to his or her fear, discomfort or anger?

Consider how you might differ from that student in life view, culture, and expectations.

Consider parallels and similarities. If you are struggling with something in your own work, or needing something from your professor, spend a bit of time exploring whether your students are struggling with something similar, or needing something similar from you. If you are having particular difficulties with a student, explore if that student is a mirror for you. Does he or she have qualities you have a difficult time accepting in yourself or others close to you? (Bruscia, 2001, in Forinash, Ed., 2001, p. 291)

OWNING YOUR ROLE

Remember that you are in the position you are in because you are the one who has something to teach the student, not the other way around. Students can be pretty intimidating – especially if they are older, have a lot of life experience, tune into your own insecurities, or challenge you on points you make, but they want to make as good an impression on you as you on them. They want to look smart. They want you to like them, believe in them, and help them. They have a lot to lose if they don't make it in their classes.

Be respectful of your student while you also remember that your student needs you to remain in the teacher role. It is not an equal relationship. You can be yourself, and still be solid you are the teacher, and the student is the student. If you strive to be a friend at the expense of being a teacher, you do the student a disservice.

Allow yourself to be a mentor. Be solid in your role as teacher, but do not lose who you are. Allow the qualities that make you unique to shine in the way you teach and respond to students. Allow them to know you as a teacher, who is also a student going through his or her own struggles in the learning process. In other words, be transparent in ways that promote a deeper learning for your students, while still maintaining appropriate boundaries in the classroom.

COMMUNICATING CLEARLY AND HONESTLY

Don't be afraid to communicate your stance. Say what you really mean. Call a student on something you know they are doing wrong. At the same time, don't be afraid to be wrong yourself, and don't be afraid to apologize if it turns out you have judged the student unfairly, or made a mistake. You are human, just like your students are. You don't have to be perfect, and you can't be. They don't have to be perfect either.

MANAGING HOW YOU COMMUNICATE

Become aware of your verbal and non-verbal communication (voice tone and body language). Center yourself before and as you encounter a challenging interchange: as cheesy as it may sound, breathing deeply and slowly, and feeling your feet solidly on the ground works, because the heart races and people lose their center when challenged. Changing the physical state changes the mental state. Know that raising your voice, or using blaming language will escalate a situation, reflecting what a student has said, trying to listen and understand, and stating your beliefs and expectations, in a calm respectful manner will tend to de-escalate a situation.

KEEPING YOUR FOCUS ON THE STUDENT IN YOUR INTERACTIONS

Listen: really listen. If you are planning what you are going to say next, or chomping at the bit to say it, you aren't listening.

Stay tuned to body language. Notice the student's words, but especially notice the way he or she communicates them.

See past the behavior. Try to discover the need or feeling behind the behavior. At the same time, deal with the behavior. Remember not to personalize the behavior.

Relate and resonate. Be empathetic, not sympathetic. Sympathy is disempowering.

Choose the quality of your response carefully. Support where necessary, and confront when necessary. Do both, with compassion.

Know when enough is enough. It's important to genuinely try to help your students, but they have to also want to help themselves. You can only do so much. Don't rescue them from their own actions, but guide and empower them.

Know when you need to refer them for outside help. Know who to refer them to.

CARING FOR YOURSELF

Give yourself what you need. That means asking for help and supervision when you need it, taking care of yourself, and making sure you balance your life enough to fit in time for your academic work, and personal life. It's easy to swallow up your whole week doing teaching prep and marking. If you balance things more consciously—less hours for each task, more days of the week—If you take care of yourself, you will be less likely to be resentful. If you give to yourself you will have more energy to give to your students.

References

1. Bruscia, K. E. (2001). A Model of Supervision Derived from Apprenticeship Training. In Forinash, M. Ed. (2001). *Music Therapy Supervision*. Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.