GTA Workshop

You have an important role in our department. Labs comprise close to half of the curriculum for many biology majors. We've given you an important role and we expect a positive attitude and your finest efforts. Most importantly, our students deserve your best. This workshop was designed to help you operate your labs with rigor and confidence from Day 1.

Note: Teaching is not for everyone. You may not ever teach again after leaving WKU. But teaching, and teaching well, is your responsibility in our department. Regardless, there are benefits (aside from your pay) to your teaching tenure here. Teaching experience is uncommon for many entering PhD students, and will help differentiate you when/if you plan to apply for those positions. Also, the traits that will make you a good educator are highly transferable to all skills sets and you will use them no matter which professional direction you pursue.

AUTHORITY IN THE CLASSROOM

Tolerates a wide range of behaviors
Tries to please everyone
Savvy students take advantage
←----------

Doesn't try to please anyone
Has "seen and heard it all"
Puts up with nothing and believes no excuses
----------→

Where are you on this spectrum? Where should you be?

You start with authority by default. However, it is easy to lose and difficult to regain.

- Decide ahead of time what you would like for you students to call you and be consistent in the classroom/ in emails/ and in other communications. Mr. or Ms. is recommended.
- Dress professionally – you do not want your clothing to be a distraction or a topic of discussion.
- Speak loudly and clearly and face your students. Do not be meek/mild.
- Use nonverbal cues that signal authority (remain standing, make eye contact).
- Arrive early to class and be well prepared.
- Start on time.
- Learn their names – this gives you the power, lets them know you know who they are. Also, that you care enough to bother.
- No social media sharing or social activities with your students.
- Do not use excessive curse words or slang and like, watch your vocal fry?
- Be consistent.
- Do not show favoritism.
- Return grades promptly (1 week at the most).
- Electronic communications: Proofread, do not use text-speak, use proper grammar, do not email/send announcements outside regular business hours.
- Do NOT abdicate your authority to your supervisor. Instead of "Let me ask Dr. X" say, "Let me think about it and get back to you" or "send me that request by email."
- Do not listen to/join in on student-bashing of other biology TAs, faculty or staff. If you're noticing problems that are coming up, encourage them to make an appt. with their professor/advisor as needed.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

- If students are talking while you are speaking do not attempt to talk over them. Pause, and wait until all students are quiet and paying attention.
- Ask the entire class to cease talking and pay attention.

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- Try not to publicly criticize or reprimand a student during class. Speak with individual students as necessary outside of the classroom and let them know that their behavior has been disruptive to you and to the class.
- When speaking to a student about inappropriate behavior, focus only on the behavior and not on other things about the student that you might not like. Be polite and respectful, do not chastise them. Bring it back to their grade as your primary concern.
- Stay calm – never shout or engage in verbal sparring with a student in or outside of class.
- Never make physical contact with a student.
- After any type of incident in class, make notes and alert your supervisor (preferably in writing).
- Be consistent with all of your students – do not give the appearance of "playing favorites".
- If you cannot resolve problems by the above means – bring the problem to your supervisor. Do not wait until the situation is out of hand.

PREVENTING/DEALING WITH ACADEMIC MISCONDUCT

- Be proactive and clearly state on the first day of class that you will not tolerate academic misconduct. Be clear about the consequences of misconduct, and make sure this information is clearly stated on your syllabus.
- Be attentive and move around the room while students are taking a quiz or exam. If necessary, request that an additional proctor be present.
- Arrange seating so that students are sufficiently spaced apart from each other. If this is not possible, prepare different versions of the same quiz or exam.
- Make absolutely certain that electronic devices are OFF and STOWED away during an exam. You may want to ask your students to place phones in backpacks and place backpacks at the front of the classroom during an exam.
- If a student has to leave the classroom during an exam, ask them to leave their cell phone with you (make sure the class is informed in advance that this is your policy).
- If misconduct is suspected, but you do not have documentation/proof – let the student know in private that their behavior appeared suspicious and ask the student to assist you in dispelling that suspicion in the future.
- If you have proof of the misconduct, prepare documentation (make photocopies of quiz/exam/paper/crib notes). Prepare a written statement with date/time/description of the offense. Follow through with the consequences specified on your syllabus. Depending upon your circumstances – you should also notify your supervisor ASAP about the situation and seek their guidance/instruction.

PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

- Know your audience.
- You are not teaching you.
- At the same time, you will be (most likely) be close in age. Make this an advantage. You understand how they think and prioritize. You know what strategies might be best. -AND- it's not been too long since you were in their shoes. Think about hacks that worked for you to remember weird biology terms/processes and share them. How did/do you study? Share your techniques.
- Incorporate real-world examples and context from your research. Popular science (e.g., Podcasts, Tedtalks, newsfeed, etc.) outlets are a great place to look for examples.
- Do not use personal electronic devices. This time belongs to your students, not you.
- Do not grade in the lab, instead…
- Join your students. Sit with them. Go around group to group. Spend your time with them. Questions come up this way and it builds social capital.
- Be kind, polite & respectful, always. Do not ever denigrate your students no matter how bad their choices may be. Praise personally but caution without personal investment.
- Leave the lab clean and prepped. Train your students from Day 1 to do this for you. If/when they do not, you must. It is your responsibility to leave the lab completely ready for the next section.

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GREAT ADVICE FROM PAST GTAS

- *There is no guide to being a perfect teacher.*
- *One of the most challenging and rewarding things about being a teacher is discovering your own teaching style.*
- *Always be willing to adapt and improve.*
- *Have fun.*
- *Even if you hate making eye contact (like me) you HAVE to. It's easier to make a more personal connection and/or establish dominance.*
- *Some TAs have a problem with the dominance bit, but others (like me) have issues with approachability and appearing disinterested. I'm not an expert, but I think now that both are bad equally bad and the latter might not realize it. I sure didn't. For the first half of the first semester I figured that since I wasn't letting my students run over me I was new-TA of the century.*
- *Teaching isn't as bad as people think; it's not intimidating once you're up there for a bit and get chatting with your students.*
- *Wear a lab coat just because you can, no one else is going to, makes you look and feel like the teacher. Also makes it easier for the students to find you.*
- *I liked teaching with a yard stick in my hand, serves as a pointer and makes me feel in charge. That might be a goofy one, but it helped me through my defense, too!*

HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THE FOLLOWING SITUATIONS?

1. Intoxicated student in class or on field trip.
2. Student sleeping in class.
3. Student who brings food/drinks into a laboratory.
4. Student who comes into a laboratory barefooted.
5. Student who persists in using cell phone / texting during class.
6. Student who brings children to class or lab.
7. Student who leaves before the lab or class period is over.
8. Student who repeatedly yawns or sighs loudly while you are trying to speak.
9. Student who is openly flirtatious / violates your personal space / attempts to make physical contact with you.
10. Student who asks TOO many questions during every class period and slows down the progress of the entire class.
11. Student who asks you a question to which you do not know the answer.
12. Student who wants to answer ALL of the questions that you pose to the class.
13. Unresponsive class – your students do not attempt to answer questions or participate in discussion.
14. Student who sends rude/offensive email.
15. Student threatens you verbally or via email.
16. Belligerent student who tries to incite the rest of the class against you, for example by protesting the importance of an assignment or the fairness of an exam or exam question, etc.

Best Practices

- **Review all provided materials.** Your supervisor may provide course materials, or you may source them from other TAs. Understand that once you have them, YOU are responsible the content. Always review for typos, inconsistencies, etc.
- **Read ahead.** You should read the lab one week ahead to make connections for your students and help them know what to expect.
- **Attend all Lab Meetings.** Be on time and prepared. Before each meeting, it is your responsibility to go over all materials to be covered in the coming week: quizzes, HW, PowerPoint, etc. Be ready to discuss any issues with the prior lab and any issue you foresee with the coming lab.
- **Observe.** If you are a new TA, observe one section before you teach.
- **Grades.** You should never be more than 1 week behind. The only exception here is for papers/poster, etc. You should download and save your grades in Blackboard every few weeks as back-up.
- **Exam grading.** The best way to grade exams is one page at a time. Grade all the page 1s, then page 2s, etc. This increases objectivity, consistency, and the likelihood you may recognize cheating. Do not enable student viewing of exam statistics in Blackboard. Show the students the class distribution and averages when you pass back the exams. Never pass back exams until all students in all sections have completed the test. Do not let students keep the exams. Let students make appointments with you if they want to go over the exam. If your exam mean is < 70%, you should speak with your supervisor.
- **Final grades are due 1 week after the lab final. No excuses.**
- **Participate in WKU assessments.** You MUST provide information as necessary for the 5th week assessments (and others) as it is requested from you by WKU. Not optional.
- **Careful correspondence.** Be sure your students know to only email you from their WKU accounts and to always include their course and section number. You should save every student email in a separate folder. Forward any problematic correspondence to your supervisor immediately. Understand that nuance does not come across in email. Be respectful and polite, even when you need to say no. Try to return emails within 48 hours. This can be difficult given the daily deluge. It helps to “flag” all student emails so you can go through them quickly when you have time.
- **Office hours.** You do not have keep office hours, but you should let your students know they can schedule a meeting with you via email.
- **Announcements & Reminders.** Use these options to help your students stay on track. Especially with freshmen. They are still working to establish the skills they need to succeed in a university setting. Only correspond with your whole class through the Blackboard announcements; these are permanent vs. personal in-boxes.
- **Missing Class**. The need to miss class is very rare. But if this is the case, email your supervisor and the other course TAs ASAP to schedule coverage. Pay back TAs who cover for you.
- **Learn more about Blackboard.** There are many useful tutorials online. Use them.
- **Learn the students’ names.** This is a game changer. Use a Lab Group Sign-Up sheet and student photos in TopNet to assist. The sooner the better.
- **Students should address you as Mr. or Ms.** On day one, introduce yourself and add, “…and you can address me as Mr. Smith.” Students appreciate the clarity and it separates you from them.
- **Be AT LEAST 10 minutes early to lab, every day.** The lab may have been left messy or items may be missing from prep. Spend this time finding everything you need, signing in, getting the projector ready, reading notes from other TAs about the week, etc. START ON TIME. Best to be 15-20m early.
- **Dress appropriately: business casual.** Nice jeans (no holes) are OK with business-style shirt. Wear closed toed shoes. Nothing dirty or wrinkled. Dress has nothing to do with your skills as a scientist or educator, but perception is important, especially because you are close in age to your students.
- **Student Accessibility Resource Center (SARC) Forms.** Check-in with your supervisor on their preferred method to handle these, BEFORE your first class. They are important and will come up in week 1!

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Blackboard Tips

MODES

- Edit Mode, Instructor View, Student View

SIDEBAR

- You can hide unnecessary items or rename them
  - Hover over area >> drop down arrow >> Hide/Rename or Delete
- You can add areas as needed (e.g., “References,” “Good Links,” etc.)
  - Hover over Gear Icon at top of sidebar >> Add Content Area, or other

COURSE MANAGEMENT TOOLS

- Course Tools >> Date Management >> Date Management Review
  - Here you can view all BB assigned content simultaneously. You can see all the availability and due dates. This makes finding errors easy and changing dates in bulk so you don’t have open each individual assignment.
- Packages and Utilities >> Course Copy
  - Here you can easily copy content from one section to another including assignments, assessments and gradebook categories

GRADEBOOK

- Course Management >> Grade Center >> Full Grade Center
- “Create Column” for any grade you will manually enter
  - Columns for assignments submitted/taken on blackboard will appear automatically
- “Create Calculated Column”
  - >> Create Average Column for showing their running grade percentage
  - You can decide which columns to include (under “Select Columns to Include”) for things like 5th Week Assessment
- Manage >> Column Organization
  - Order columns as you see fit
  - Hide, delete, freeze columns as needed
  - View all grade columns at once to check points awarded, etc.
- Top of each column >> Small Arrow >>
  - Send Reminder: Send assignment reminders, auto-generated by blackboard, only for those students STILL missing assignments
  - Quick Column Information: Basic stats
  - Column Statistics: Grade distribution etc.
  - Edit, View Attempts, Edit Column Information, Sort ascending or descending
- In each cell >> Drop-down arrow
  - Exempt grade
  - Quick Comment: Feedback to Learner OR Grading Note (for your eyes only)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Use this function to contact your class. It’s better than the email function because announcements stay up on BB unless you delete them
- Announcements >> Create Announcement
- Select “Email Announcement”
- If you reference BB content, you can add a link to it at the bottom under “Course Link”

ASSIGNMENT/ASSESSMENT SETTINGS

- Gray drop-down arrow >> Edit
- Directions, files, due dates, availability
- More if needed depending on supervisor and course set up

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